

HEGEL'S THEORY OF TRAGEDY

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HEGEL'S theory of tragedy, like that of Aristotle, is an integral part of his whole philosophy. Aristotle's idea of *katharsis*, for example, is characteristic of his philosophy of art: art imitates nature both in its purpose and in its method, continuing where nature leaves off. Hegel's theory of tragedy is even more closely integrated with the entire structure and nature of his thought; it is so basic a part of his system that it is found scattered throughout his works rather than contained in a single volume. The essence of tragedy consists of a diremption of the Spirit arising from the second stage or moment of the dialectical process. Our purpose is to examine the validity of this ethical division as the substance of tragedy, a task which can be accomplished only after we have sketched the theory in its contextual setting.

Tragedy is not a phenomenon peculiar to literature; its counterpart is found in metaphysics, religion, and in daily life as well, for every phase of reality reveals the dialectic at work. But whatever may be the context, the nature of tragedy is always the same.

In life, as in literature, tragedy signifies that the Spirit is divided, that it is suffering from an inner dissonance due to the conflict of universal and particular. This tragic conflict always ensues when an individual part negates a universal. Self-alienated by the necessity of its own nature, this particular spirit becomes too assertive and feels the overpowering force of the universal. Thus human sorrow reaches its greatest depth when the opposition between the particular and universal makes itself felt.

A tragic character, accordingly, is one estranged from his complete self, one who feels the pangs of isolation and the insufficiency of a divided nature. Mindful that his spiritual life has been torn in twain, he seeks to escape that painful feeling of *otherness* by which he is possessed. His unconscious endeavor is to return to his estranged self, for when one stops short of the *Notion* one learns tragedy. Tragedy, then, is the penalty paid for individuality.

The nature of tragedy is now clear; it consists of a heroic negation of the universal, which eventually leads to a synthesis. It is

always to be understood as the middle term of a triadic unity, the medial part of a cycle of the dialectic. To attempt to explain tragedy independently of its thesis and synthesis is to falsify its nature and misunderstand its purpose.

Hegel found many examples of this triadic movement in the history of religion. In Indian philosophy, for example, Brahma was originally everything, self-sufficient and complete. This pantheistic nature of Brahma constituted the thesis, symbolized, perhaps, by the statues of Brahma gazing at his navel. But there came a time when Brahma tired of this monotonous solitude and desired something other than himself, something that might contrast with his eternal quietude and infinite ennui. Whereupon he is said to have made this world, a world of illusions called the veil of Maya. He breathed it in and out, forming a cycle of illusions; the world became a process that *staggered and reeled*, life a senseless journey in this merry-go-round of eternal recurrence. This was the antithesis or negation. The reconciliation lay in the understanding that this life was something other than Brahma; to be saved one had to renounce this life and return to the consciousness of Brahma. If this reconciliation was deemed inadequate and weak, it contained, nevertheless, a powerful thesis and negation.

In the colorful life of Jesus, Hegel found the perfect thesis, antithesis, and synthesis and therefore the most perfect example of tragedy outside of the drama. The unusual birth of the Saviour and His divine nature constituted the thesis. To Jesus the realization that He was the Son of God constituted His greatest joy, and the consciousness of His mortality, symbolic of His finitude, His greatest sorrow. The negation and diremption was dramatically portrayed by suffering death on the cross for His death was a denial of His divinity and an expression of His separateness from God. The poignant utterance of this disunion and sorrow is contained in the words of dereliction and despair, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The Resurrection is the synthesis. Here again we have the reinnion of flesh and spirit, of the human and divine.¹

¹This is only one of the many ideas of the Christian trilogies. The vaguest is that of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, existing somewhere in the skies. Then we have that of God, Satan, and Jesus: God who made the world, Satan who sunk it in sin, and Jesus who redeemed it. We have also that of God, man, and Christ: God as divine, man as human, and Christ as the union of these two. The example given above seems to show this trilogy in the life of Jesus himself.

In art, tragedy is depicted as a conflict between forces that ought to be in harmony. Tragic situations arise from a transgression of balance, from a collision of interests between an infinite power and a finite one, between a universal claim on the one hand, and a particular assertion on the other. This collision destroys the harmony by throwing the ideal Spirit into dissonance. The task of art, consequently, is to keep the ideal from perishing, and at the same time develop the opposition so that harmony will appear again at the denouement.

Suitable examples of such collisions restoring unity to the spiritual world exist in dramatic art alone, for painting can portray a single time or moment, and sculpture embodies only completed action.² Dramatic poetry, however, presents a whole development: the original serenity, the discord, and the reestablished harmony.

In the *Phenomenology of Mind* Hegel attempted to give something of an historical treatment of this triadic movement as it made itself manifest in literature: first as epic, then as tragedy, and finally as comedy.

In the first stage the universal consciousness was undifferentiated and unfulfilled; the individual as such counted for little. The Greek gods and heroes were so much alike, their deeds and purposes were so commingled, that they could hardly be separated. In Greek history the universal content consisted of an assembly of national heroes; in literature it existed as epic. The minstrel was the individual actual spirit; it was not his own self that was of any account, but that of his Muse, his universal song. In the epic, where the poet effaced himself from his work, destiny was portrayed as the result of forces outside of the hero: the personal will was at the mercy of destiny.

The antithesis was tragedy. Here the specific nature of the

²It is true that painting, for the most part, gives us only one moment of action. *Christ Delivering the Keys* by Perugino and Leonardo's *Last Supper*, which deals with the moment that Jesus says someone will betray him, illustrate this fact. And even when a complete story is attempted, such as Masaccio's *Tribute Money*, Botticelli's *History of Moses*, as illustrated by the several scenes, each deals with a single moment, and the picture as a whole is static. But Hegel's statement that sculpture gives us completed action is not necessarily true: sculpture does not necessarily give us completed action any more than painting does. Works of sculpture like Myron's *Athena* and *Marsyas*, *Apollo Belvedere* attributed to Loechares, Donatello's *David*, or the *Laocoön* do give us completed action. But many statues, the *Discobolus* and Michelangelo's *David*, to mention two, deal with a single moment, the moment just before the action is performed.

hero affirmed itself, came into conflict with its own universality, and, forgetting its real and dependent nature, deemed itself self-sufficient. But this assumed independence was dominated by the unity of the Notion, causing the individual to feel the strength of his life broken, and to mourn his fate. Yet he was sublime in his separateness from the Gods, since "sublimity involves on the side of man the feeling of his own finiteness and his insuperable remoteness from God." Eventually this universality, opposed by its specific nature, has to be unified and reconciled with itself.

When the incompatible demands were finally cancelled and the ethical substance was victorious in its struggle for harmony, we had comedy. Comedy began with the implied reconciliation found at the close of tragedy, and gave us a self-certainty and cheerfulness that nothing could disturb. Aristophanes is said to have written such comedies, and Falstaff is supposed to be a good example of the *Absolute hero* that comedy demands. The self-consciousness of the hero must be united with the universal consciousness in order to have comedy. "The self-consciousness of the hero must step forth from its mask and be presented as knowing itself to be the fate of the gods of the chorus and of the absolute powers themselves, and as being no longer separate from the chorus." In tragedy the individuals destroy each other because they do not have a true and solid basis; in comedy individuality is no longer something assumed, it is something concrete.

If we leave this quasi-historical approach and go to the dramas themselves we find a specimen of this avowed cycle in the Orestean trilogy. The first play of the trilogy, the *Agamemnon*, opens with marked suggestions of serenity and calm joy. This serenity, however, is soon broken by the murder of Agamemnon by his wife Clytemnestra. Her pretext was the death of their daughter Iphigenia whom Agamemnon had sacrificed before he sailed for Troy.

In the *Choephoroi*, the second play, we have a strong picture of the division and diremption. Apollo orders Orestes to avenge the death of his father. Yet Clytemnestra is his mother, and to kill her is to committ matricide. He is confronted with this dilemma: either he must avenge the death of his father by matricide, or disobey Apollo and permit the unholy crime to go unrectified and unpunished. In either case, he will sin. Orestes has no passion for vengeance, yet, driven on by the remorseless decree of Apollo, he kills

his notorious mother and is claimed by both Apollo and the Furies. Now he feels the "bitterness of soul-diremption," for he realizes that he has done both good and evil at the same time. This is suggested in the drama by madness stealing over his mind soon after the crime has been committed.

In the *Eumenides*, the last part of the trilogy, we have a reconciliation of the conflicting powers by a happy ending; the situation is peacefully resolved by Athena, the arbitrator. The Furies are appeased and Orestes absolved. Again we have that calm serenity characteristic of the unity of the ethical substance.

Let us now attend to *Antigone*, Hegel's favorite tragedy, which he thought portrayed his dramatic theory most adequately. Here Creon represents the power and authority of the state; he is not a tyrant, but a moral power seeking to do what he thinks is right. Antigone, on the other hand, stands for the time-honored rights and customs that traditionally belong to the family. Her actions are in accordance with her family obligations and not in defiance of the state. Yet, living within Creon's domain and civil authority, Antigone is bound to render obedience to the sovereign's command, while Creon, a father and a husband, should respect the sanctity of blood-relationship and not command that which violates this family piety. Thus we see how both are equally right and equally wrong in what they do, why, though justified in their actions, they are "seized and broken by the very principles that belong to the sphere of their own being."³ Antigone must learn that while the family has its place in the state, there are civil rights outside of it. Creon must learn that the family, too, has its rights and claims. Antigone, consequently, precipitates her death unwedded, and Creon, urged by the chorus, admits his error and is made to suffer the destruction of his home by the death of his wife and son. At the close of this impressive tragedy we, as spectators, feel the weight of each side, and realize the need for a broader and more inclusive view of life.

Antigone clearly illustrates a basal point that Hegel never tired of stating, namely, that there is always spiritual value on both sides. Pure evil is empty and unfit for dramatic tragedy. The conflict must

³This fits even the action that has gone before in *Antigone*. Both of Antigone's brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, fought for their father's throne; both are subjectively right in their demand, and yet wrong. Hence both found their destruction reciprocally through one another.

be one between powers that are good and noble: a good tragedy always exhibits the ethical substance in a state of internecine warfare. It is like a house divided against itself, a contest between the family and the state, or one ideal against another, represented by a struggle between two people, or even within a single individual. When the conflict is between two people, which is usually the case, both are dominated by ethical principles such as duty or honor. The blind devotion to this principle brings on the fatal catastrophe.

The resolution of a tragedy is achieved by a destruction of the exclusive claims of provincial individuality. Such individuality imperils the whole community by its isolated self-sufficiency, and must be dissolved. Its subjective, self-seeking nature brings on its own destruction, since its adherence to a single interest is both its weakness and its strength. The denial of the one-sided claim is generally expressed in the drama by the death of the characters, but the value of the particular interest is sublated into the whole. What is denied is the absoluteness of any single position, for the purpose of tragedy is to show the necessity of a universal and all-inclusive view.

If we turn from a consideration of tragedy as a whole to some of its dramatic elements, we find that individuality is represented by the actor's mask; it is by wearing a mask that a character experiences tragedy: what makes him unique and separate from the universal spirit is the mask. And consequently it is by discarding the mask that the tragic situation is resolved.

The actor appears in a double rôle: he represents the impersonated hero and his own character, his assumed self, and his true self. Or, to use Hegelian language the hero appearing before the onlookers breaks up into an actor and a mask. This distinction between mask and actor is an enlargement of the Aristotelian position: the particular characters of the actors are included in a tragedy as well as the *dramatis personae* and the spectators.

The chorus represents the totality of sentiments, ideas, and passions of the drama: it is the moral or meditative consciousness commenting on what is going on; its ultimate purpose is to preserve the serenity of the drama and the true thought in the audience. Although it cannot take an active part, since its members are passive and deedless, nevertheless it does make itself felt by conveying its judgment to the spectators.

The audience, awed perhaps by the spectacle, and looking to the

chorus for consolation, feels the futility of any one-sided view of life. The spectator allies himself, then, not with the hero as Aristotle held, but with the chorus. The onlooker "drinks from the cup of absolute substance," learns the doctrine of selflessness, and leaves the theater calmed by his lesson, his personal woes overshadowed by the terrible struggle of the hero.

Yet in another sense we do ally ourselves with the hero, for the chorus also represents the subjective side of the hero. Thus the witches in *Macbeth*, reminding us of Greek tragedy, are objective representations of the secrets and purposes of his own heart; observe how they even repeat his own words. The ghost in *Hamlet* can also be said to be an expression of the hero's own suspicions and desires. By revealing the hero's soul, the chorus brings him and the audience closer together, and is reminiscent of the time when the audience was included within the circle of the stage.

This introduces the question whether it is the hero or the audience that experiences the reconciliation. Theoretically it is always the substance that is reconciled. This may be realized either by the audience or the hero: ultimately the two are one. When the reconciliation is experienced by the spectators it is called objective; and when it is experienced by the hero or antagonist, subjective. The *Orestean Trilogy* is an example of the objective, and *Oedipus Colonus* an example of the subjective solution. It is true that art is primarily for the audience that contemplates and enjoys it, but we must not forget that Hegel does not want the relation between the issue and the character who represents it lost. In fact, he maintains that Orestes and Antigone have significance only in so far as they represent a power. Tragedy must have a purpose; otherwise the tragic is lost, and the end is one of complete frustration.

Most of our tragedies end with the sacrifice of the persons who identify themselves with some power; occasionally we have a tragedy wherein a character lives and suffers a change of heart, where there is an internal reconciliation in the mind of the hero. Since the tragic character must expiate the crime in his own heart, an act which must be objectified in a drama, this inner change appears more as outward purification. One cannot help but feel that the aged Oedipus has attained something of a reconciliation by his own condemnation, mutilation, and austere life. It was with true insight that Jebb said of him, "Thinking, then, on the great facts of his life, his defilement

and his innocence, he has come to look upon himself as neither pure nor yet guilty, but as a person set apart by the gods to illustrate this will, as sacred."

Hegel's notion of guilt is unique. To act is to dirempt the Spirit, to act is to incur guilt. All action is laden with guilt and suffering; innocence is merely the absence of action. The antagonist should realize his wrong-doing beforehand; he is sublime in that he knows what is good and what is evil.⁴ It should be evident to everyone that this is often not the case; Hegel himself admits that Oedipus did not recognize his father in the man he killed, nor his mother in the woman he married. Ajax was mad when he slew the sheep, and so was Hercules when he slew his children. Hegel is right in maintaining that the heroes do not hesitate to accept the consequences of their actions, for guilt, however acquired, must be punished. Oedipus readily accepts the culpability and punishment for the patricide and incest which he unwittingly committed.

In summing up, then, we may say that metaphysically tragedy is an inner conflict of the ethical substance which has temporarily lost its unity and serenity, though retaining the germs of an inevitable harmony. Dramatically, tragedy is a story of a conflict of noble and equally justified interests so opposed as to produce a deadlock. A resolution takes place when this deadlock is dissolved by the destruction of the particular claims and interests that have caused it.

We have seen that Hegel's theory consists of three elements: (1) a conflict (2) a division of the ethical substance so that both sides are justified (3) the implied reconciliation. His theory stands or falls on the validity of these three basic elements. Since it is apparent that all tragic plots display a conflict or struggle, we pass it by without further mention.

The element of reconciliation can be defended because it pertains to the ethical substance rather than to the hero; the resolution of any conflict permits a case to be made for the advent of harmony. Romeo and Juliet die, but the play achieves the desired reconciliation if we emphasize the fact that both houses long enveloped in a deadly feud have lost their animosity. Cordelia locked in the arms of the

⁴On the strength of this, one might say that Macbeth is a better tragedy than Oedipus, because Macbeth knew what he was doing. It is true, however, that it does not portray the ethical division as well.

aged Lear, she dead and he mad, may present a hopeless picture to some, but Hegel would maintain that what is proclaimed is the devotion and the filial relation of father and daughter. Thus almost every tragedy can be so explained as to reveal this ultimate harmony.

The element of ethical division, however, cannot be accepted so readily, because it is more an accidental and occasional feature than a necessary one. It would be no difficult matter to enumerate a host of recognized tragedies that do not display this ethical division. Should one wish to defend Hegel on the grounds that such dramas are poor and imperfect specimens of tragedy, let us examine *Antigone*, Hegel's model.

Hegel believed that both contestants in this drama are equally right, that Sophocles intended to display a balanced opposition of just forces, and that the spectators consider Creon as justified as Antigone, thereby dividing their sympathy between both characters. If this were true we should expect to find that their guilt and punishment is the same, assuming, of course, that they suffer in proportion to their crime. But their guilt is not the same, and their punishment is strikingly different.

First of all the imputation that Creon is not entirely noble is not without some justification; his condemnation of Antigone for transgressing his mandate is an example of inexcusable tyranny. It is less than a day since he has been made king of Thebes, the two heirs having killed each other the day before. Antigone, moreover, the daughter of Oedipus, is his ward and niece, and betrothed to his son, Haemon. Small wonder that dramatists such as Alfieri and Dryden have made him out to be a scheming tyrant who has the edict proclaimed that Antigone and her sister Ismene could be destroyed. This is an interpretation, as we shall show, that can be supported by the text of Sophocles.

Creon enters the scene by acquainting the chorus of elders with the content of his edict. They give no indication that they are not going to respect his mandate. In fact, they say that they think that it is in his power to so command. He says to them:

Creon: See, then, that ye be guardians of the mandate.

Chorus: Lay the burden of this task upon some younger man.

Creon: Nay, watchers of the corpse have been found.

Chorus: What then, is this further charge that thou wouldst give?

Creon: That ye side not with the breakers of these commands.⁵

But why, we may ask, does he suspect that they will be broken? Why does he command them not to side with those who are going to transgress his first law? The answer is evident. In Greece burial was a family obligation, a rite performed by the nearest of kin. The only living immediate relatives of the unburied Theban are Antigone and Ismene; if anyone were to commit the forbidden act it would be they. By making death the penalty for transgression it seems that he hoped to wipe out the last survivors of the royal family. That may be the reason why he was so ready to accuse Ismene despite Antigone's denial of her sister's complicity. He releases Ismene only when it is apparent to everybody that she is innocent; and he changes the sentence of death which he has passed upon Antigone to one of imprisonment, not through compassion for the girl, but because he learned of the awful results that would follow her death.

The attitude of each contestant is also significant. Antigone asserts that the elders sympathize with her even though they dare not as yet express their views. She never admits that she has done wrong; Creon does. This difference becomes more apparent when we pause to consider and compare the fate of each.

Antigone does not think that it is a sin to give burial to a brother. Before she executes her resolve she says to her sister, "I shall rest, a loved one with him I loved, sinless in my crime; for I owe a stronger allegiance to the dead than to the living: in that world I shall abide forever." Proudly she tells Creon that human laws cannot supercede those of the gods. "Yes, for it was not Zeus who had published me the edict; not such are the laws set among men by the Justice who dwells with those below; nor deemed I that thy decrees were of such a force, that a mortal could override the unwritten and unfailing statutes of heaven." She is not sorry for what she does, and never repents: "So for me to meet this doom is trifling; but if I had suffered my mother's son to lie in death an unburied corpse, that would have grieved me; for this, I am not grieved. And if my present deeds are foolish in thy sight, it may be a foolish judge that arraigns my folly." Strangling herself with her veil she dies as she had lived, convinced of the justice of her act.

⁵Based on Jebb's translation.

When Creon learns of the punishment that is in store for him he yields, although it is too late. He admits his error and seeks to rectify it with his own hands. He first humbles himself to give burial rites to Polynices and then approaches the tomb to release Antigone. Here he meets with Haemon who, refusing to listen to his father's entreaties, spits upon his face with scorn, and stabs himself when his attempt to kill his father has failed. Creon realizes the folly of his mandate. He laments: "Woe for the sins of a darkened soul, stubborn sins, fraught with death. Ah, ye behold us, the sire who has slain and the son who has perished. Woe is me, for the wretched blindness of my counsels. Alas my son, thou diedest in thy youth by a timeless doom, woe is me—thy spirit has fled, not by thy folly but by mine own." Eurydice, his wife, hearing of the unhappy fate of their son, takes her own life, cursing Creon with her dying breath. Creon is completely overwhelmed: "Lead me away, a rash, foolish man; who hath slain thee, my own, unwittingly, and thee my wife—unhappy that I am. I know not which way I should lead my gaze, or where I should seek support; for all is amiss with that which is in my hand—and yonder a crushing fate hath leapt upon my head."

Creon is condemned by everybody. Haemon has told him that the Thebans, with one voice, deny that she has sinned. More eloquent are the words of Tiresias, the blind and infallible seer, who informs him that the gods are angered by his double crime: "the detention of the dead among the living, and the imprisonment of the living in the abode of the dead." The punishment that follows adds weight to this contention. Finally, the Chorus says that Creon has seen his mistake only when it is too late, adding that wisdom is the supreme part of happiness and that reverence towards the gods must be inviolate.

All these facts show that the guilt and punishment of Antigone and Creon were radically different, that the sympathy of the chorus and the audience is not equally divided. Our pity is for Antigone and not for Creon; we feel that he richly deserves his fate, while Antigone commands love and admiration. The conflict between the human and the divine laws results in the condemnation of the human laws.

Blind obedience to this ethical theory, patently false in many cases, kept Hegel from applying his distinction between classic and

romantic art to tragedy. He failed, consequently, to notice a distinction that made its first appearance in *Antigone*, and which has grown ever since, namely, that there are two kinds of tragedy, that of victory and that of defeat.

Creon leaves the stage a culprit sunk in despair, a victim of circumstances; Antigone dies a heroine, confident that she has acted wisely and consistently with her own character. We, too, as spectators, feel that the strength of Antigone's life is marked by a sense of victory, and that Creon's life is one of complete frustration.

This difference may be said to have reached its fullest expression in O'Neill's *The Great God Brown*. Brown, the character of futility, is outwardly a successful architect, but inwardly uncreative and utterly defeated. Dion, on the other hand, is outwardly defeated, yet inwardly successful; his inner life is full of vigor and marked by triumph. Brown feels the sterility of his life very keenly, donning Dion's mask after his partner's death. He is cheated and vanquished while Dion dies having had his fill of life.

We have seen that the concept of ethical division, paramount in Hegel's theory, prevented him from giving a true delineation of tragedy; his attempt to balance the opposite forces of a tragic conflict so limited his analysis that it excluded most of the recognized tragedies. It was his object to interpret all known phenomena in the light of his basal principles. His philosophy is undoubtedly the work of genius; but one wonders whether he was not too literal in his adherence to his plan, and a slave to his concepts by depriving tragedy of any individuality or character of its own, and by making it just another of the many manifestations of the Spirit.