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Tragedy for Our Time

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Tragedy For Our Time

*Address by Associate Professor Joseph H. Meyers
on the occasion of the
Annual Century Club Dinner
held on May 17, 1966.*

*Mr. Meyers had been chosen by the faculty
as recipient of the
Century Club Award for 1966.*

ILLINOIS WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY
Bloomington, Illinois

TRAGEDY FOR OUR TIME

In an essay which he published in 1928, Joseph Wood Krutch said: "Tragedies in that only sense of the word which has any distinctive meaning are no longer written in the dramatic or any other form. . . . We can never hope to participate in the glorious vision of human life out of which they were created. . . . We write no tragedies today."

He was referring, of course, to the classic type of poetic drama associated with the names of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Shakespeare, which deals in a special way with the disastrous in man's experience. The hero of such tragedy is always a person of stature and dignity—"someone better than ourselves," says Aristotle. He struggles against adverse powers and is finally destroyed by a combination of his own human defects and the crushing force of external circumstances. Yet even in his downfall his great-heartedness reasserts itself, leaving with the spectator a feeling not of depression but of exaltation—the famous catharsis, or purging through pity and terror.

In the thirty-eight years since Krutch made this statement it has been echoed by other writers till it has become one of the platitudes of literary criticism. More recently we have had it pointed out to us that the hero has disappeared from contemporary fiction. In a sense, these two statements are merely different ways of saying the same thing, and both seem to be basically true. Tragedy of the traditional type has rarely been written with success since the seventeenth century, and for about a hundred years, but especially in the last forty or fifty, the hero *has* been in process of disappearing from fiction.

Krutch attributed the decline of tragedy to (I quote) "an enfeeblement of the human spirit . . . a gradual weakening of man's confidence . . . a loss of faith in his own greatness." And he implied that this loss of faith is a result of the discoveries and theorizings of Copernicus, Newton, Darwin, Freud, Pavlov and Watson, which have made it increasingly hard for man to accept (and here I quote again) those "assumptions that make tragedy what it is . . . that the soul of man is great, that the universe (together with whatever gods may be) concerns itself with him, and that [man] is, in a word, noble." Because of this loss of faith, Krutch tells us, we are incapable in our time of "that elation generated when the spirit of a Shakespeare rises joyously superior to the outward calamities which he recounts, and celebrates the greatness of the human spirit whose travail he describes. . . . God and Man and Nature," he continues, "have all somehow dwindled in the course of the intervening centuries. . . . We have come willy-nilly to see the soul of man as commonplace and its emotions as mean."

Whether or not he overstated his case, Krutch touches here on a human crisis which has not lessened since he wrote. There is little question that this scaling down in his own eyes of man's cosmic importance has occurred, and that it has affected every area of his thought, belief and action. Its moral and theological implications are crucial, but I will pass

over them for the time being and return to Krutch's point. He does not deny that the tragic masterpieces of Shakespeare and the Greeks still move us deeply, that they are probably the highest reaches literature ever achieved. But he implies that they succeed so grandly by creating an illusion, a beautiful and comforting one which modern man can still respond to as an aesthetic experience when it has to do with legendary figures, but which he finds it hard to credit, or create, when it concerns men and women of our own unlovely time.

To accomplish its cathartic effect classic tragedy required a protagonist of distinction, involved in affairs of magnitude, and speaking high poetry. In these and other details it was not hampered by considerations of strict truth to life. Because of these requirements, several factors that Krutch does not mention work against the effective writing of this traditional kind of tragedy in our time. As man's stature when measured against the whole scheme of things has diminished, his concern for his ordinary, undistinguished fellows has greatly increased. This is the Century of the Common Man, in literature as in politics. At the same time, in the writings not merely of the realists but even of the symbolists and expressionists, there has been a steady trend toward essential factuality, with an accompanying simplification of language. Naturally, these are standards which traditional tragedy finds it hard to adapt to. That is probably why so many of the best examples in this century—Shaw's *Saint Joan*, Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, and Anouilh's *Antigone*, for instance—have remote historical and mythological figures for their protagonists.

Is it possible to write an effective tragedy dealing realistically and in simple language with ordinary men and women of the present day? Seventeen years ago Arthur Miller made the attempt. *Death of a Salesman* was a popular success, but many of you will remember that it was condemned as an artistic failure by some critics on the ground that Willie Loman was so inferior a human specimen and the circumstances that destroyed him so lacking in dignity that the play failed to achieve a proper tragic effect. And ever since then *Death of a Salesman* has been the play most frequently cited to prove the impossibility of writing a true tragedy with a common man as its protagonist. Yet for years on Broadway, on the road, and in numerous revivals (including a recent notable one on television) it has held and deeply involved audiences of all sorts.

A comparison of Willie Loman and Shakespeare's Lear may seem far-fetched. Lear is a king, or rather an ex-king, and Willie Loman an exhausted, disintegrating salesman of we are never quite sure what. Lear speaks some of the greatest poetry ever written, and by degrees achieves a poignant self-knowledge which transforms him and strongly affects the reader or viewer; Loman talks much frantic, vulgar foolishness, and dies clutching his psychotic illusions. Yet both are in reality pathetic, absurd old men, no longer able to do their jobs effectively, miserably at odds with the children they have loved and misunderstood, and violently and extravagantly mad much of the time they are before us. Coldly regarded, there is not much to choose between them. The immense difference in the impressions they make upon us is due chiefly to the unsurpassable, earth-shaking eloquence with which Shakespeare endows

Lear in the great tempest scenes, and to the exquisite passages toward the end of the play in which the old king, like nearly all Shakespeare's tragic heroes, experiences the recovery which exalts and transfigures him. Lear is a gigantic creation but an unreal one. Willie Loman is all too credible. The king transcends the salesman to the same degree that the genius of Shakespeare transcends the talent of Arthur Miller. Beyond that the two plays are incommensurable, for their authors are trying to do different things.

In other words, if Miller failed, it was not because he was trying to write another *Lear* or *Oedipus at Colonus* and fell short. He was trying something quite different—to evoke deep emotion from an audience by exposing it to the agony not of a superior but of a mediocre man. "Pop! I'm a dime a dozen and so are you," Willie's son Biff tells him, speaking the truth that Willie cannot bear to face. "He's a human being and a terrible thing is happening to him," cries his wife Linda. "Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person." And audiences paid him that attention. Miller succeeded beyond all question, I believe, in proving that powerful tragedy *can* be written about ordinary people in the present-day world. If he failed in any way—and I believe he did—it was in the awkwardly contrived melodrama of Willie's suicide and the off-pitch lyricism of the concluding funeral scene. This failure was due, I think, to Miller's feeling that he must end his tragedy with something like the traditional destruction and simultaneous restoration of his protagonist. Here he was moving out of his class, challenging comparison with men with whom he simply could not compete. For as Krutch pointed out, Shakespeare and the Greeks achieved their incomparable effects in ways that are not accessible to writers of our time. Not only were their heroes men of stature and dignity, involved in enterprises of great pith and moment and speaking a resplendent language, but when they met their overthrow, it came to them under circumstances of surpassing exaltation which left their audiences rapt in awe. For the truth is that, in part, traditional tragedy, or at any rate Shakespearean tragedy, triumphed over the terrible and inevitable in man's experience by using all the resources of great art to disguise and transform the fact of death. While its spell lasts, that triumph is real—but no longer.

Consider a parallel case from a related art form. In *The Magic Mountain* Thomas Mann describes the last scene of Verdi's opera *Aida*. For loving the slave Aida and rejecting the Princess Amneris, the hero, Radames, has been condemned to be buried alive in an underground crypt. When the tomb is sealed he discovers that Aida has hidden herself there so that she may die with him. And here I begin to quote from Mann: "*Tu?—in questa tomba?*" (Thou?—in this tomb?) comes the inexpressibly sweet and at the same time heroic voice of Radames, in mingled horror and rapture. . . . Yes, she has found her way to him to die with him. They sang of heaven, these two, but truly the songs were heavenly themselves. . . . It was so beautiful that Aida should have found her way to the condemned Radames, to share his fate forever. . . . And what finally the listener felt was the triumphant idealism of the music, of art, of the human spirit; the high and irrefragable power they had of shrouding with a veil of beauty the vulgar horror of actual fact. What was it, considered with the eye of reason, that was happening

here? Two human beings, buried alive, their lungs full of pit gas, would here together—or, more horrible still, one after the other—succumb, and thereafter the process of putrefaction would do its unspeakable work, until two skeletons remained, each totally indifferent and insensible to the other's presence or absence. This was the real, objective fact—but a side, and a state of affairs quite distinct, of which idealism and emotion would have none, which was triumphantly put in the shade by the music and beauty of the theme. The situation as it stood did not exist for operatic Radames or operatic Aïda." (Here the quotation from Thomas Mann ends.)

Boito's libretto to *Aïda*, though better than most, is not great poetry; but Verdi's music is magical, and audiences respond to the closing moments of this opera very much as they do to classical tragedy, catharsized, uplifted by the composer's art far out of reach of the gruesome "actual fact" that Mann forces us to face. It is this same illusory transformation that Shakespeare accomplishes with his miraculous verbal music at the end of *Othello* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*.

The transfigured tomb of Aïda and Radames is a far cry from an Auschwitz gas chamber, yet the naked physical facts are not unlike. But what present-day playwright, having chosen a mass execution in a Nazi death-camp for his subject, would think of treating it as Verdi and Boito did the last scene of *Aïda*—or Shakespeare the last scene of *Romeo and Juliet*? There are subjects that defy idealization, and our times have abounded in them. In the past half-century mankind has probably experienced more *actual* tragedy—individual, national, racial—than in most previous ages combined. Perhaps this very *excess* of horror has been another check to the writing of the traditional sort of tragedy. Certainly it has led a great many dramatists and novelists astray. Trying to reflect and compete with the shocking events reported in each day's news, they have turned out whole pocketbook-storesful of literary Walpurgis-nachts in which the exclusive themes of cruelty and sex crescendo until the two become indistinguishable and scarcely an odd corner of brutality or perversity is left to explore or exploit. Others have turned to the novel of black comedy or the drama of the absurd to express their sense of the meanness and meaninglessness of man's fate. Most novels and plays of this type have been artistically inferior, and even the best have been minor—almost by intent, since it would be difficult to imagine a significant work which had insignificance for its subject.

Of course this kind of writing, no matter how popular and even eminent its practitioners, has nothing to do with tragedy and little, on the whole, with serious literature. Yet the most capable and conscientious dramatists and novelists who have tried to deal directly and earnestly with the awfulness of human experience since 1914 have usually failed, and failed as a rule in proportion to the scope and intensity of their undertaking. How could one dramatize Verdun, let alone Hiroshima? What is an objective correlative for the deliberate murder with every attendant cruelty of six million men, women and children?

At this point I recall the dramatic work which I think came nearest to finding that objective correlative, though it touched on the holocaust of a race only a few times, in flashbacks, and then briefly and allusively. It was not a play, but a low-budget moving picture based on a novel

by the late Edward Lewis Wallant. The central character of *The Pawnbroker* was a middle-aged Jew, a survivor of the death-camps; the film showed his tortured dealings with a doomed and sordid Harlem clientele. He was *not* transfigured at the end; or perhaps he was, in a strange, appalling way. And the stunned silence in which the audience left the theatre, though certainly not an Aristotelian catharsis, was perhaps its equivalent for our iron age. Here, in spite of flaws, was a drama of complete integrity, scene after scene of relentlessly real, powerfully mounting pain with no relief, no transcendence at the end, only a symbolic moment of climactic anguish. Was this tragedy for our time—the sort that MacLeish was reaching toward in *J. B.*, the sort that O'Neill meant to write and might have succeeded greatly with if he had had a surer taste and a larger gift of language? Or was it a unique *tour de force*, essentially unrepeatable? In any case it was strong meat—poison to some. Hollywood on Oscar night preferred to honor the male lead of *Cat Ballou*.

I think now of another and very different work, a small book, minor, unfinished, hardly intended as literary art, not written by a professional nor even by an adult. The diary of Ann Frank is the mere faithful chronicling, by a good and gifted child, of the acts, words and feelings of a small group of ordinary people forced to live together under difficult, confining and constantly dangerous circumstances. It has no bloody denouement; it breaks off short of the final, awful event. Yet it is profoundly and perhaps permanently moving as few consciously artistic creations of this century have been.

The dramatists who adapted Ann Frank's story to the stage avoided following her to Bergen-Belsen, thus showing much aesthetic tact. True, the effect of the diary and the play depends on our knowledge of how her story ended. To show that ending as it actually happened would be not tragedy but pure horror. To falsify it would be a moral as well as an artistic outrage. Both the diary and the play succeed artistically *because* they omit the final horror. What they achieve is not tragedy on the grand scale, but a lesser effect, of great pathos and dignity nevertheless, brought about by *implication of what is to come*. This use of implication instead of direct presentation has been brought to perfection in the dramas and stories of our century. The last scene of *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* shows Lincoln standing on the rear platform of the train that is to take him to Washington, making a farewell speech to the people of Springfield. It has strong tragic overtones because we know what awaits him at the end of that journey. It moves us as the precise enactment of the assassination in Drinkwater's *Abraham Lincoln* and Sherwood's own stillborn *Abe Lincoln in Washington* do not.

There is an early one-act play of Ernest Hemingway's called *Today Is Friday* which shows three Roman soldiers sitting in a small Jerusalem tavern late at night, discussing the Crucifixion, at which they were present that afternoon in line of duty. What Hemingway actually does is retell in his own way the early Christian legend of Saint Longinus. In the ancient version Longinus was the soldier who thrust his spear into Christ's side and was miraculously converted when a drop of blood fell on him. As Hemingway tells it, Longinus, whom he calls simply "1st Roman Soldier," has been immensely affected by what he has seen, but as yet does not understand what has happened to him. He buys the

Jewish tavern-keeper a drink and is unusually considerate of his two fellows. Nothing has happened to them. For them it was just a routine execution, hardly different from dozens of others they have had to attend. The wonder of the way Christ died is still with the first soldier, but he can find no words for it except "He was pretty good in there today." In the simplest language his admiration and compassion are beautifully implied. "Why didn't he come down off the cross?" sneers the second soldier. "He didn't want to come down off the cross," says the first soldier. "That's not his play"—surely the strangest statement of the doctrine of the Redemption in all literature. "You see me slip the old spear into him?" he asks a little later. "You'll get into trouble doing that some day," says the second soldier. "It was the least I could do for him," answers the first soldier. "I'll tell you he looked pretty good to me in there today."

This dealing with grave and tragic happenings by indirection and understatement is a purely modern device, in marked contrast with the traditional way of handling such material. In effect it cannot compare with the great climaxes of the classic dramatists, yet it achieves its own sort of quiet catharsis.

Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* defines tragedy as "whatever is grave and constant in human sufferings." Many novelists and dramatists have dealt with it in this broad sense, avoiding the obviously tragic event. They have written about aspects of suffering that are universal, as fatal calamities are not—the continuing sort of tragedy experienced by the most ordinary men; the tragedy that does not kill; the little daily soul-draining, *areté*-destroying half-deaths; the erosion of youth, hope, self-respect; the pain of loss; the cost of a neurosis, one's own or another's, or of some other weakness. Such familiar griefs are unromantic, and unspectacular by comparison with the downfall of an Agamemnon or an Anthony. But they are the true tears of things.

The writers I speak of present characters who bear no resemblance to Prometheus, Antigone, or Hamlet, unless we can imagine a Prometheus who has merely been fired from his job, an Antigone who is cut by her classmates because she is loyal to a disgraced friend, an inarticulate Hamlet whose father was killed by a drunken driver. These writers recognize that the same tragic forces are at work in the quiet desperation of their commonplace characters' lives as in the splendid catastrophes that destroyed the heroes of traditional tragedy. Death at the end of the great classic dramas provides the necessary catharsis by forever releasing life's tensions, erasing all problems, canceling all debts. "Eternal sleep, let Oedipus sleep well." "Good night, sweet prince,/ And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest." "Vex not his ghost. He hates him/ That would upon the rack of this tough world/ Stretch him out longer." Part of the deep sadness of the bloodless tragedies I speak of is that they do not end in death. Their commonplace heroes must die someday, they know, but not yet. Meanwhile they must manage to go on living, with their problems still unresolved, their accounts still unbalanced and to be paid.

Chekhov, I believe, was the first great writer to sound in a few plays and many stories this muted minor key that so perfectly expresses the diminished stature of modern man, his lost sense of identity and direc-

tion. James Joyce sounded it again in his *Dubliners* stories, and in *Ulysses* gave the world a supreme example of the anti-hero, Leopold Bloom. *Ulysses*: the very title of the book is a mockery. To set up as a modern counterpart of Homer's formidable, much-traveled Odysseus this half-educated, not very intelligent advertising canvasser, socially negligible, financially unsuccessful, sexually ineffective, repeatedly cuckolded by his wife Molly, moving for a day and part of a night through the stagnant streets of a second-rate capital; and to make his trivial encounters parallel and parody the shining adventures of the unsubduable Greek—this was calculated irony. Yet in the course of his labyrinthine wanderings Bloom becomes an unexpectedly sympathetic figure, often comic, occasionally repulsive, respect-compelling at times, at times somewhat tragic, and, take him all in all, more likeable than the coldly brilliant Stephen.

The plays and novels that deal with minor sorrows are likely to be minor themselves, oftener than not; yet one remembers the best of them with extraordinary clarity and a special kind of regard. Among plays of this kind I particularly recall Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, William Inge's *Come Back, Little Sheba*, Sidney Howard's *The Silver Cord*, George Kelley's *Craig's Wife*. And in the last few years three rather short, completely unpretentious novels have moved me deeply: Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*, Peter De Vries's *Blood of the Lamb*, and especially *The Human Season*, Edward Lewis Wallant's first novel, which preceded *The Pawnbroker*.

It deals with an old theme: the undeserved suffering of a good man. This new Job figure is a fifty-nine-year-old plumber, a man of the deepest lifelong piety, who loses his wife with whom he has lived in love and mutual dependence for thirty-two years. The loss is so sudden and unbelievable that he turns in hatred on God—"It's a terrible thing He did to me," he tells his daughter—and night after night curses him as he lies awake and alone in the double bed. At the end of five bitter months he learns a kind of acceptance and begins to understand God in a new way. (I quote.) "' . . . it wasn't a God with a beard just out to get you,' he said. . . . 'It's a thing past what you can imagine.' He had no words then for the thing he was sure of. . . . But he phrased it in the hidden eloquence of his brain. . . . 'It's like a light that don't last long enough to recognize anything. But the light itself, just that you seen it . . . that's got to be enough. . . . It is enough.'"

I have discussed three possible substitutes for the traditional method that writers can use in dealing with the tragic in the life of modern man. The first is a direct confrontation of mounting anguish, with no relief. This is difficult to bring off almost to the point of impossibility, and shattering rather than cathartic when it succeeds. The second is the use of indirection and implication when dealing with the same brutally intractable material. This method can produce fine effects, but much less powerful ones than the classic catharsis. The third, avoiding the overtly tragic, deals unsentimentally but compassionately with the sort of wounds that all men sustain, not mortal but often terribly crippling. Franz Kafka has made use of all three in his master-nightmares, *The Trial* and *The Castle*. The latter is even symbolically unfinished.

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Jewish tavern-keeper a drink and is unusually considerate of his two fellows. Nothing has happened to them. For them it was just a routine execution, hardly different from dozens of others they have had to attend. The wonder of the way Christ died is still with the first soldier, but he can find no words for it except "He was pretty good in there today." In the simplest language his admiration and compassion are beautifully implied. "Why didn't he come down off the cross?" sneers the second soldier. "He didn't want to come down off the cross," says the first soldier. "That's not his play"—surely the strangest statement of the doctrine of the Redemption in all literature. "You see me slip the old spear into him?" he asks a little later. "You'll get into trouble doing that some day," says the second soldier. "It was the least I could do for him," answers the first soldier. "I'll tell you he looked pretty good to me in there today."

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I began. Man in our time, he believes, stands self-stripped of his delusions of grandeur. We are no longer heroic figures, spotlighted in the exact center of Ptolemy's theatre-in-the-round. No *deus ex machina* descends in our most need to rescue and resolve. Biologists inform us that we are the end-products of soulless natural selection. Psychiatrists report that unmentionable savageries and obscenities are enacted in our individual psychic oubliettes. Neither statement should surprise us, in view of man's long history of blood, filth and folly, culminating in the present state of the world. This new candid picture of ourselves is frightening and humiliating. But it does not mean that the real truth about men and women is being told at last in those plays and novels which represent them as mindless brutes responding mechanically to their two master-urges, to copulate and to kill. Man, like Lear, has torn off his lendings and exposed himself to himself and the elements as a poor, bare, forked animal. Yet this very act proves that he is something more—the paragon of animals at least. His self-stripping is an act no animal could perform, rising as it does out of a will to know and face the truth, however unwelcome. This unique self-awareness and self-searching is the source of fear and humiliation, but also of the things we call conscience, responsibility, ideals.

"In the long run," says Goethe, "there is no such thing as a harmful truth or a helpful lie." The qualities that have always given man his worth are quite unchanged. His old virtues are still sufficiently manifest to disconcert the cynical. Evil is inevitable—built into this world where every life must prey on some other form of life to survive. The problem of evil is no problem beside the problem of good. If men are mere blind mouths, how did pity, relenting, generosity ever originate among them? How does common, everyday goodness, disadvantaged as it is, maintain itself down the ages unless there is a force for good at work in the universe? The fearful and humiliating truth which modern man must face is no different from the one with which the Voice out of the Whirlwind overwhelmed Job so that he answered, "Behold, I am of small account. I put my hand over my mouth." If the odds against man are, and always have been, greater than he supposed, then his accomplishments in the face of them are all the more impressive.

We have touched rock bottom. On it our novelists and dramatists can stand firm while taking a new view of man, which at the same time is a very old one, and expressing it in work less exalting than the old tragedy but perhaps truer to man's actual experience. "You have learned something," says the father to the daughter in Shaw's *Major Barbara*. "That always feels at first as if you had lost something."

If the writing of traditional tragedy has become difficult, even impossible in our time, that may be because the time itself is our tragedy, and set against such a world scene no imaginable personality can loom like a Hamlet or an Oedipus. The most fitting and fruitful response to such a time, then, lies in works which evoke, if not pity and terror, then irony and compassion, which affirm a sad fellowship of sympathy, and a wry admiration too for man's frequent goodness and persistence in the face of such continual discouragements. That goodness, and that persistence, give grounds enough, I think, for love and respect, however qualified, and even for a cautious kind of hope.