

## TRAGIC FIGURE, TRAGIC FORM

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AT THE core of the tragic experience lies a duality, equally composed of what the play presents and how we react to that presenting. Tragedy purports to show us the terrible, yet we are exhilarated by it. It shows us characters subject to necessity, yet we feel they are free. It shows us man destroying himself, yet we sense that in some way he triumphs, that value has emerged from self-destruction.

Strictly speaking, there is no "Tragedy." There are only tragedies, works we call tragic due to our response to them. Behind the word lies a long tradition, and behind the tradition lies the familiar process by which each age reinterprets the past to serve its own sensibilities. For the Greeks the concept seems to have embraced *Philoctetes* and the *Hippolytus* as well as the *Oresteia*; for Chaucer's Monk it included the fall of Peter of Cyprus; for the seventeenth century it apparently meant *Cymbeline* and Dryden's *All for Love* as well as *Lear*.<sup>1</sup> That we deny many of these the name their time gave them is due to our different sense of the tragic, our own editing of the past. And for the same reason the tragic experience of other ages is not fully recoverable for us. Sophocles' unsystematic necessity is neither Shakespeare's Macrocosm nor our fragmented and inward-turning universe. We no longer see the individual as unknowable and identity as established solely by class, status-symbol, or unalterable character-type, and the concept of a surface personality which bears the whole meaning is very strange now. The probable effect for their original audiences of Oedipus as self-existent-only-in-action<sup>2</sup> and Hamlet as an apparent embodiment of melancholy adust<sup>3</sup> is not our effect, and we look behind these bare presentings, behind the *Tyrannus*' masks and the Prince's soliloquies, for the philosophy we must put there to find them intelligible.

Yet we find that philosophy, and the success of that finding reveals basic continuities in the tragic tradition which make differences largely irrelevant. We do respond to *Hamlet* and the *Tyrannus* in a way we call "tragic"; and what we respond to is our own sense of the tragic in them—a feeling that "tragedy" is basically metaphysical, a coming to terms with the beast at the core of life, the disproportionate suffering and undeserved death epitomized by Stephen Dedalus as "the secret cause":

## RENASCENCE

Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer. Terror is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause.<sup>4</sup>

In fundamental ways "the" tragic experience is our tragic experience, to which the tragic models we retain provide valuable keys.

Using *Hamlet* and the *Oedipus Tyrannus*—still our most widely-accepted tragic models—as vehicles for analysis, this article attempts to isolate a single dramatic shape and some accompanying values within the larger tragic tradition. No pretense is made that the analysis advanced describes the only way to create tragedy or evoke a tragic response. For form is more vital than formula, and it is in the immediate reaction unabstracted to principles—the discrete response to the fluid tensions of a recreated existence—that tragedy ultimately resides. But better understanding of one tragic shape may illuminate others, and perhaps provide a basis for recreating them as well.

We may begin by attempting to trace the sources of the tremendous stature which is felt to surround the central figures of *Hamlet* and the *Tyrannus* and to invest their actions with potent significance, the sense of something working through the people on the stage. In part that stature comes from the bare dramatic presence of Ghost and Oracle, since the superhuman never converses with nor prescribes for those who are small. In part it comes from the central figures' participation in a narrative that echoes forms eternally repeated within the family unit: son seeking parents and through them his identity, son seeking father and a vanished paradise by casting beyond the grave. In part it comes from the immense responsibilities which coalesce in the person of the tragic hero: Oedipus' duty to end the plague is simultaneously his duty to honor his unknown father; Hamlet's responsibility to the Ghost is also his duty to purify his family, Denmark's royal house.

In part it is derived from imagery and dialogue. The characters of both plays consistently treat events as more than mere happenings: the *Tyrannus'* plague is not just a disease but a god's anger, the sign of an imbalance in the universe which must be set right; *Hamlet's* Ghost is an omen as well as a spectre, an augur of "foul deeds" that trumpets Denmark's rottenness. And what is true of events is also true of people: "Some god breathed" in Oedipus to free Thebes from the Sphinx; Teiresias need not ruin him, "Apollo is enough"; the climactic blinding is Apollo's act as well as his own.<sup>5</sup> So too for *Hamlet*: "Heaven will direct it" (I.iv.91); Hamlet is heaven's "scourge and minister" (III.iv.175); and the Player-

## TRAGEDY

King's "Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own" (III.ii.208) begins a thread conspicuously carried through Ophelia's "We know what we are, but not what we may be" (IV.v.41) to the Prince's explicit formulation that "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (V.ii.10-11). This peculiar double vision, in which events are seen as both complete in themselves and as manifestations of superhuman will, lies close to the source of the stature these plays create for us. And it is reinforced by the kind of accident that is no accident: by the chance that Oedipus' wanderings should have brought him to the fatal crossroads and to Thebes, that the Messenger should be his former savior; by the luck that a Hamlet should be tangled in the Elsinore-situation rather than a Laertes, that a pirate ship should arrive to return him to Denmark, that the Queen should drink, that the poisoned rapier finally be exchanged.

MORE importantly, that stature arises from the inscrutable fact that each figure fulfills the divine request, yet each is apparently destroyed by the effort needed to fulfill it. Oedipus finds the murderer and terminates the plague, and Hamlet takes vengeance on Claudius, with the Ghost presumably laid; yet the one ends in blindness and exile, and the other in premature death. If this is justice, what have they done to merit it? The first answer is that the world contains no poetic justice, that the good necessarily end well only in fiction and it is part of tragedy's strength that it does not shirk this truth. "Some innocents 'scape not the thunderbolt."<sup>6</sup> The second answer is that suffering is not necessarily punishment in these plays, though it certainly may be. More often it is spiritual currency, coin of the realm, the price some men pay for what they must do. Neither figure's purpose tallies with that of "the deity": Oedipus' initial objective, the finding of the murderer, is progressively surrounded by a larger purpose, the search for his identity, and enveloped by a still larger purpose, the driving need regardless of pain to find out the truth: "It's time / that this was found out once for all" (II. 1050-51). And if dramatic character is significantly itself only in what it does, then Hamlet's purpose is significantly steadfast: his every action is aimed not at vengeance, but at severing the skin of appearance from reality's bone, the "candied tongue" and "trail of policy" from the "carp of truth." Their suffering is in part the cost of this divergence.

It is at this point that "the gods" really enter our picture, for we are now concerned with the dramatic vitality of their impingement on the characters' lives rather than their technical presence. The vexed problem of whether prophecy means predestination must be mentioned

## RENASCENCE

here, but it seems clear that in terms of dramatic impact there is no such problem in either play: the god does not make what will be, he merely sees what will be. In the first place, that god is neither jealous nor absolute, and no blind allegiance is owed him. "[W]hat the Lord Teiresias / sees, is most often what the Lord Apollo / sees" (ll. 284-86): they are almost on the same level, almost partners. The god requires human champions; it is his responsibility to end the plague, since he has caused it; it is not blasphemy to hold him to account. And however much the Ghost impresses, its "command" is in fact a plea:

If thou didst ever thy dear father love . . .  
Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

Adieu, adieu, adieu! Remember me. (I.v.23, 25, 91)

If it does something for Hamlet by exposing some partial truths of his situation, Hamlet is also to do something for it, and this sense of mutual dependence is reinforced by the preliminary catechisms of Horatio and the Prince, which take the form "What should *we* do?" (I.ii.130-39; I.v.45-57).

In the second place, the god may be omniscient, but the oracles may also be wrong; that they turn out to be right does not alter the substantial dramatic fact that the characters doubt and it is possible for them to do so. Apollo's prophecies, Hamlet's Ghost—these "bird-flights" and this "spirit of health or goblin damn'd"—are suffused with ambiguity; they are manifestly things to be pondered and tested, not swiftly obeyed. And the meaning of that testing is that "the gods" forfeit allegiance when they fail to speak truth—that the choice of belief or disbelief is projected in the theatre as free, and that the divinity's intermingling with the human in that freedom lifts the latter to the former's height.

Belief is not the only choice that is free. What, after all, is Apollo's "command" in the *Tyrannus*? It is simply that Thebes should exile Laius' murderer, not that Oedipus should take the bit in his teeth, place a formal religious curse on that murderer, seek out the further truth of his relation to Laius, and drive his Queen to suicide and himself to blindness. And the Ghost's request is not that Hamlet should torment the King with uncertainty, harrow Gertrude's personal hell, and generate the deaths of eight people, but simply that he should take vengeance on Claudius and leave his mother to heaven. Alternatives yawn at every step. Oedipus could ignore the Oracles at the very beginning, or institute a private search for the murderer, or acquiesce at any point in the re-

## TRAGEDY

straint urged by Teiresias and seconded by Creon, Jocasta, and the Chorus. Hamlet could certainly let the Ghost go without breaking free to follow it, or adopt some of the discretion he admires in Horatio, or raise a populace so easily whipped up by Laertes, or dismiss the Ghost as "the devil" and refuse to act at all. But neither does so: each seems deliberately embarked on a course both different from that endorsed by heaven and calculated to collide most violently with what will apparently destroy him. If there is a "box of fate" in these plays, it is largely of the characters' own making; their free acts carry out the divine "command." And those acts take place in the light of an open and undetermined future, though the past presses their enactors hard.

Most importantly that stature arises from the traits with which the central figures are endowed. Neither Hamlet nor Oedipus is a prince because he requires a sufficient height from which to fall: Oedipus is "first of men," almost a god; and so is Hamlet, with his ability to command allegiance, his mental agility and immunity to sham, his impressive powers of verbalization. Their stature is merely the outward sign of surpassing merit: they are princes because they are masters, the office is not added to the man but part of him, and the concept of level equality is utterly foreign to either play. Neither possesses a trace of humility: Oedipus, always Oedipus the King, addresses Thebes paternally and exacts from its inhabitants the father's prerogative of unquestioning loyalty and obedience; Hamlet scorns Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Osric, the parvenu manifestations of a "pick'd age." Each identifies his ends with those of the state: Oedipus' plea to Teiresias is "save . . . the city, / save me" (ll. 312-13; cf. 630-31); Claudius to Hamlet is a "canker" from which Denmark must be freed, as well as the object of vengeance. Each appropriates the situation completely to himself, Oedipus in his declaration that once again "I must bring what is dark to light" (p. 9), Hamlet in his assumption that he alone can correct the disjointed time. Each is at times devoid of compassion, inordinately hard on himself and others: Oedipus does not hesitate to attack Teiresias and Creon, flay Jocasta, order the aged Shepherd tortured—or demand his own exile; Hamlet convulses his mother with repeated portraits of lust, denounces Woman through Ophelia in no kind terms, sends Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "to't" without compunction—and runs the course most likely to incense the King against him. And each over-reaches, assumes that like the gods he can see everything and control events: Oedipus in his belief that he is "a child of Luck, and will not be dishonored" (p. 56; ll. 1080-82), Hamlet in his desire to perform heaven's function by damning the King as well as killing him.

## RENASCENCE

IN this combination of proud superiority, harshness, and over-reaching each is presented as ab-normal, un-"like ourselves," potentially explosive. Each in fact is dangerous, and the most striking images with which their plays leave us are those that convey this aura of danger: the Chorus' dances of anxiety and pleas for moderation, Teiresias, Creon, and the Shepherd recoiling before Oedipus, Jocasta's mad rush into the palace; the Prince tearing free to pursue the Ghost, Gertrude shrinking from a son apparently bent on matricide, the sudden thrust through the arras, the King laying plot upon plot to rid himself of a nephew whose liberty is "full of threats" to all. And each is dangerous because each is gifted with an almost inhuman singleness of purpose, a Swiftian indignation that cuts to the situational bone to divide duty from comfort and throws him into sharp relief against the patter of evasion, self-seeking, and hypocrisy by which he is surrounded. Once started, Oedipus' sweep to the truth will not be thwarted, he "will not be persuaded to let be / the chance of finding out the whole thing clearly" (ll. 1065-66). And Hamlet consistently carries art's quest for essential reality into life, as the continuity between the Player-Speech (III.ii.1-34) and his praise of Horatio (III.ii.55-72) explicitly demonstrates: his ferocious attack on Laertes (V.i.233-78) is due not so much to the accusation that he is responsible for Ophelia's death as to his anger at Laertes' rhetoric, which like the inept player's strutting and bellowing obscures the situation's truth. The "flaws" of these central characters, their penchants for the painful and difficult, are a major source of their greatness for us: Oedipus' proud confidence may destroy his kingship, but it also enables him to end the plague as he promised; Hamlet's need to get to the bottom of things may lead him to the fencing-match, but it also permits him to plumb evil's full nature and exact a public vengeance that, like Oedipus' discoveries, is meant to be seen as impossible to achieve in any other way. These plays are rather lessons on the virtues of judicious obsession than moral *exempla* which dissect the characters' "faults": like Job on his ash-heap,<sup>7</sup> Hamlet and Oedipus respect nothing, question everything, and enfold the deity within moral responsibility, and the answers they generate call "normal" contextual values—the prudence of Creon and Teiresias, the Chorus' conforming piety, the conventional honor of Fortinbras and Laertes—into doubt.

Each acts, and his acts are creative: they result in neither passivity nor a return to the status quo. Hamlet in death cures Denmark; Oedipus' anguish makes Thebes whole. Their activity places them firmly in the center of their respective plays, for the onstage action of other characters is largely a reaction to them. Moreover, those plays are structured to show

## TRAGEDY

that their acts consist of a series of moral choices of increasing intensity, each of which is free. Oedipus *decides* to send for the Oracles and the Shepherd, decides to interrogate Teiresias and Creon and ignore Jocasta; Hamlet *decides* to pursue the Ghost, decides to stage the Murder of Gonzago, decides not to murder the praying King and to enter the duel. The chance that the Messenger should be who he is, that the pirate ship should arrive when it does, is independent; but the use to which the central figures put them is their own.

Each suffers. Each is in fact distinguished for us by his capacity for suffering, his sensitivity to the horrors of the situation in which he is involved. And each play makes it clear that his suffering arises from the attitudes which prompt his actions: Oedipus' because he must drive to the truth; Hamlet's from his acute perception of the disparity between *schein* and *sein*, the aching realization that his mother is not "Niobe, all tears," that "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain" (I.ii.149, I.v.108). On the most fundamental level, each suffers both for what he is and for what he does, since what he does defines him: Oedipus, the riddle-solver who must solve his last riddle; Hamlet, the student of evil who learns the scope of its treacherous contagion in the duel. They make their sole "mistakes"—if that is the right word—in the realm of knowledge, not morals, by assuming that things are what they seem. Their stories are concerned with human limits, not human weakness.

Each endures his suffering, remains true to himself to the end. Life does not seem terrible to Oedipus, though it has wounded him. His wish for his daughters is still "give me a life / wherever there is opportunity / to live"; he even blesses (ll. 1513-14, 1478). And if Hamlet asks Horatio to forego death's felicity, he also glories in his identity, and his activities, like Oedipus', are suffused with a kind of fierce joy in action, a driving need to explore implications that largely mitigates any reluctance "to be." "It is no matter" (V.ii.201-10) does not mean "nothing matters," but merely that Hamlet's foreboding does not matter: it is enlightened stoicism, a frank acknowledgment that he is involved in something larger than himself, and as such parallels Oedipus' realization that "I would not have been saved from death if not / for some strange . . . fate." *Que sera, sera*: "These things are as you say" (ll. 1336, 1457-58).

Finally, each learns. Oedipus after the initial anguish of his blinding, Hamlet on his return from the pirate-ship, exhibit what seems to be an integration of personality beyond surrounding standards of good and evil, a calm acceptance of the pattern beneath events. It is self-discovery in a special sense, a deeper understanding not of their psyches, but of the full implications of the situation in which they are involved. For Oedipus,

## RENASCENCE

the god speaks truth and must be trusted; for Hamlet, evil's poison is ineluctable but a divinity shapes our ends. This final flash of understanding tends to justify their actions, for in it a beleaguered world-order is newly affirmed. Jocasta's mockery of the Oracles, Hamlet's glimpse of the infernal contagion of evil, raise the frightening possibility that life is at bottom unregulated, that man cannot hope to order existence and anything sufficiently powerful may triumph. By publicly exposing the full horror of their situations and correcting it, they demonstrate that the universe is ultimately rational, that events have turned out "right." Far from being requital, their suffering is paideutic, the means by which that understanding is acquired.

**B**UT tragic stature is not created by gods, language, and character-trait alone. For an audience to know that a character is dangerous, it must see other characters retreating from him; for the spectator to realize that a person is an individual with unique standards, he must be able to measure that person against a consensus of other personages with different standards; for the playgoer to see that a character is true to himself and that that self is good, he needs reference points—other characters who are not true to themselves and a higher duty, who are not good. Nothing in theatre takes place in a vacuum: the stature of Hamlet and Oedipus is fundamentally situational and collective, generated by the pattern of which they are a part. And in both plays, that pattern sets them on a metaphysical quest for the essential truth of a life-situation—a quest which is communicated by predominantly visual means and which takes the form of a ritual combat of opposing forces, conducted through intermediaries who progressively embody those forces and are sequentially stripped away, leaving them ultimately free to collide.<sup>8</sup>

This concept requires an analogy to the Spanish bullfight for clarification, and it should be understood that the reference is not to the casual butchery which passes for a *corrida*, but to the ideal form the *aficionado* carries in his inner eye. The bullfight is transcendently visual, and it is ritualistic because 1) it takes place in accord with a formal and pre-arranged plan; 2) that plan consists of a series of clear confrontations between matador and bull which occur at regularly shortening intervals through symbolic intermediaries; 3) those intermediaries by their interposition give form to flux, producing the fight's deliberate stateliness, its peculiar sense of "beyond-time" in which action is not adjectival but exists with the brilliant clarity of something complete and meaningful in itself.<sup>9</sup>



## TRAGEDY

The bullfight opens and closes in ritual: the matador's *paseo* or formalized introduction, his victorious tour of the ring. In that *paseo* the future conflict is visually joined: matador *versus* the door from which the bull will emerge. The combat that follows constitutes a duel with the bull through intermediaries who progressively resemble the matador, decreasingly screen him from the bull, and are forced aside: mounted *picadors*, then unmounted *banderilleros*, then the unmounted matador separated from the bull by the large cape, which shrinks to the small *muleta*, which shrinks to the naked sword. The fight's emotion comes partly from this formalized "zeroing in" of matador and bull on each other and partly from the matador's courage, his testing-through-action of what opposes his will so that he can control it, force it to meet him on the grounds of his choosing. That meeting in the "moment of truth" takes place visually, as its participants are visually defined: if the fight has gone well it becomes a sort of dreadful ballet instinct with purpose, the culmination of an esthetic whole which presents three irreducible primaries in bare deed become "the thing itself": the bull's power, image of Minotaurian nightmare; the courage and skill of the man; death.

The analogy is not exact: in these plays the intermediaries are all human, they may act for the bull rather than the matador, and both bull and matador are swallowed up in the "moment of truth." But the following similarities emerge. Both plays open and close in ritual—the hieratic Suppliants of the *Tyrannus*' beginning, the military and chivalrous protocol of Watch and Court; the procession of Creon, Oedipus, and his children into the palace, the duel and dead-march of *Hamlet*'s end. Each contains a *paseo* in which its opposing forces—Oedipus and his polluted identity in the guise of the plague, Hamlet and the King's evil of hypocrisy and deception—are defined: the *Tyrannus*' prologue, *Hamlet*'s first act. In each *paseo* the conflict is visually joined at a distance: Oedipus *versus* what prostrates the Suppliants; Hamlet in his inky cloak, his concern with the disparity between seeming and being reinforced by the Ghost's revelations, *versus* the panoply of Claudius' court. From this point, their central figures launch a series of increasingly direct assaults on appearance which comprise the core of each play for us: Oedipus facing and questioning Teiresias and Creon, facing Jocasta, the Messenger, the Shepherd, facing the truth; Hamlet facing Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern and challenging them by his presence, facing Gertrude and Ophelia, thrice facing and finally compassing the King. In both plays those confrontations are a visual interrogation-through-action, the central figure's symbolic testing of what opposes his will: by the rigor of the course they have chosen, Hamlet and Oedipus

## RENASCENCE

compel the intermediaries who block them to exhaust their resources, render up their secrets, and step aside. In both plays that interrogation forces what opposes the central figure into the open, makes it come to him on the terms he has chosen. In both, the inevitable collision is quintessentially visual: Oedipus unites with his true identity in the sightless mask that now can see; Hamlet's "moment of truth" with the King's evil takes place in the quasi-trial of the ritualized duel. And in both plays a visual image supplies the central figure's "reward." The *Tyrannus'* plague is one of sterility and death of children; the appearance of Oedipus' children (pp. 75-76) lays it to rest. And if Claudius' poisoned cup is indeed a "union," a collision of *Hamlet's* opposed forces of truth and deception in a meeting prefigured by the visual pattern all along, it is also a kind of justice rather than vengeance, from which Hamlet is borne in honor off the stage.

Oedipus' first visual confrontation sets the pattern for subsequent ones: his attack on what opposes him forces it to make an existential statement, makes Teiresias reveal what he knows and is against his will. The issue here remains the broad one of saving Thebes, and the intermediary through whose resistance it is evoked both represents Oedipus' identity in his blindness and stands farthest from it, a stranger to Labdakos' line. In his second confrontation that issue narrows to Oedipus as a political entity, "high-way robbery of my crown," and the intermediary through whose resistance it is evoked is no longer an outsider, but Oedipus' uncle and brother-in-law. This confrontation sparks his next one, with Jocasta: the issue narrows to Oedipus' possible identity as self-cursed murderer, and the intermediary through whose resistance it is evoked is his mother-wife. His fourth confrontation is with the Messenger, his original "savior": the issue narrows to his possible parentage, and that possibility becomes probable with the brief reappearance of a Jocasta who resists him openly and is broken for her pains. Then the Shepherd appears, the ultimate links to Oedipus' origin face him together and are compelled to give evidence, the truth stands naked, and the final *agon* begins. Oedipus' self-blinding is the culmination of that *agon*, his full recognition of the identity his previous confrontations have sought.

IN the *Tyrannus* the intermediaries who screen Oedipus from his identity oppose him. In *Hamlet* they act first for the King's evil, then for the Prince. Hamlet begins by considering suicide, but rejects it for its lack of certainty, the "dreams that may come"; he finds his certainty instead by setting himself up as a truth-searcher, an irritant to which the response of others shows what they are. His first visual confrontation

## TRAGEDY

(II.ii.170 f.) exposes the Counsellor as a "tedious old fool"; the issue remains the broad one of the source of his "madness," and the figure through which it is evoked represents the King's evil only in his penchant for "indirections": in Polonius' simple inquiry there is little of the treacherous intermediary he will become. Hamlet's second confrontation, with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, narrows that issue to the betrayal of "fellowship" and reveals these intermediaries as hypocrites implicitly acting for the King. In his third confrontation, with Ophelia, the issue becomes the betrayal of romantic love as Ophelia's revealed innocence is shadowed by the background figures for whom she acts. His fourth confrontation narrows that issue to the betrayal of marriage-vows and brotherhood of the play-within-the-play; for the first time intermediaries act for Hamlet, and they establish for the first time Claudius' guilt. The theme of betrayal is reinforced by Hamlet's fifth confrontation (III.ii. 290 f.), in which his interlocutors openly act for the King and Queen, their motives are the explicit sounding of Hamlet's, and their characters are exposed by wind metaphors as standing which way the wind blows best.

Now Hamlet carries the quest for truth outward, where before the intermediaries were seen coming to him. His sixth confrontation, the Prayer-Scene, makes Claudius' guilt explicit, though too many intermediaries still hedge the King for direct collision. His seventh strips away two intermediaries at once: Polonius, caught in the moment of his betrayal of the mother-son relation; Gertrude, who symbolizes the King's evil in her lust that panders will, whose perversion of romantic love presents the more conscious parallel to Ophelia's innocent betrayal of the same. But Gertrude is converted to Hamlet's cause, and from this point the King's intermediaries begin to work against him: from this point the visual pattern shows us a Prince increasingly assured contacting with ever greater rapidity and impact the disarrayed forces of a King compelled to improvise with the trip to England, to cover up Polonius' death and "o'ersway" the state religion and Laertes' wrath, to demonstrate the depth of what he is until he is driven back to the poison from which he began.

This reversal of intermediaries begins with Gertrude's slanted report of Polonius' death (IV.i.5-27). It is briefly interrupted by two confrontations in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dismissed as King's sponges and the King's murderous fury is revealed. But it is forcefully continued in the reappearance of an Ophelia whose madness poetically links her to Hamlet's antic disposition, whose themes of mutability, betrayal, and death are his themes, who has learned as he learned that

## RENAISSANCE

"there's tricks i' the world," that things are not what they seem. And it is recapitulated in Laertes, who becomes Claudius' most representative intermediary in his enthusiasm for poison, but finally allies himself with Hamlet by publicly placing the blame. In *Hamlet's* duel this pattern's momentum reaches its inevitable conclusion: the surviving intermediaries turn on the King and are cast aside, the truth stands naked, and Hamlet's search for situational identity rests complete.

This movement to definitive collision produces each play's characteristic sense of inevitability by holding the visual prospect of that collision before us while approaching it through a series of sharp, increasingly intense confrontations that take place at shorter intervals through thinning ranks of intermediaries. By that inevitability this visual movement makes the supernatural dramatically viable, produces the feeling of a half-visible pattern beneath life without which references to "the gods" become bathetic. This movement generates each play's air of decisive completeness because through its deployment of intermediaries every aspect of what opposes the central figure is systematically presented, then systematically cleared away. It is the reason why Oedipus' harshness and Hamlet's brutal treatment of Gertrude and Ophelia do not disaffect us; these intermediaries are seen as steps in the central figure's path to the truth; they come between the "mighty opposites" (V.ii.60-62) and are attacked because that is the way truth lies. It is responsible for each play's consistent dialogue of interrogation: of the separate utterances of Oedipus and Hamlet, the proportion of questions explicit or implied is more than two-thirds. It is also the reason for both plays' peculiarly unmorbid fondling of fact, of Oedipus' repetition of his status and trespasses and Hamlet's dwelling on Gertrude's acts and his position as "the son of a dear father murdered," their worrying of truth as though the bare facts alone were talismans for salvation. Above all, this visual movement seems responsible for the two plays' fertile ambiguity, that richness that makes Hamlet and Oedipus seem both judged and not judged, guilty yet innocent, individuals who are also species. Through it they become archetypal, mythic seekers after truth whose "fate" is that they find what they seek, but whose triumph is that the pattern of that finding confers a definite value on their suffering, establishes Heaven as not only ordinant, but justified.

To conclude, the movements of *Hamlet* and *Tyrannus* have been called "ritualistic" and their central figures "mythic." These terms are meant in their primitive sense insofar as it is recoverable—"myth" as creation-story, the tale of an eruption of reality into the ordinary world which revealed meaning and purpose and made ordered existence possible;

## TRAGEDY

“ritual” as the formal re-enacting of that story through which man assures his reality by returning to its source—by becoming present at the creation again and repeating the passage from chaos to order the myth recounts.<sup>10</sup> The *corrida* is ritualistic in this additional sense, as a fixed iteration of the primal battle between life and the irrational in which the dark beast is slain. In this sense *Hamlet* and *Tyrannus* are metaphysical and deeply religious,<sup>11</sup> quests for the essence beneath appearance which affirm the self’s reality by granting it fugitive purpose, the power to make fixed points emerge about which life can be ordered, the world refounded, creative energy liberated, existence regrouped to press on. And in this sense their effect is religious as well—a brief glimpse at a pattern behind experience, which temporarily explains fate’s ways to man.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For two excellent short treatments of some of the sharp differences beneath the mask of tragic continuity, see Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 1-45; John Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), pp. 11-62. A useful discussion which focusses on tragic continuities, rather than the cultural differences which underlie them, appears in Richard B. Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy* (1959; rpt. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> Jones, pp. 11-46, 192-214.

<sup>3</sup> Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare’s Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion* (1930; rpt. London: Methuen, 1961), pp. 73-78, 109-47; M. C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy* (1935; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1960), pp. 49-70.

<sup>4</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916; rpt. London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), p. 209.

<sup>5</sup> Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, trans., *Oedipus Rex*, in *Sophocles, The Oedipus Cycle: An English Version* (1939; rpt. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1967), p. 5; David Grene, trans., *Oedipus the King*, in *Sophocles I*, Vol. III of *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (1942; rpt. New York: Modern Library, 1959), lines 377, 1329 ff. Subsequent *page* references in text are to the Fitts-Fitzgerald translation; subsequent *line* references are to the Grene translation. Act, scene and line references to *Hamlet* and other Shakespearean plays are to the *Tudor Shakespeare*, ed. Peter Alexander (London: Collins, 1951).

<sup>6</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, II.v.77.

<sup>7</sup> Sewall, pp. 9-24.

<sup>8</sup> In this and subsequent passages the term “visual” is used in a somewhat special sense. Every dramatic action is visual in part (see, for example, Timo Tuusanen, *O’Neill’s Scenic Images* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), and ritual may be visual, verbal, or both. Cf. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. G. Weidenfeld and Nicholson Ltd. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 217-44. The difference here is that these plays stress the visual element in ways which greatly surpass the effect of mere stage-groupings. Their movements not only insist on certain juxtapositions whose alteration risks ridicule; they reside to a peculiar degree in long series of such juxtapositions, which form a rhythm of interrogation and counter-interrogation that lies behind the verbal surface, and accretes an almost independent meaning, and becomes the spine of the action as a whole.

<sup>9</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (1932; rpt. London: Jonathan Cape, 1963), pp. 58-70, 95-97, 140-50, 167-70, 184-88, 196-201, 220-26, 233-34.

<sup>10</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (1959; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1961), pp. 20-113. Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche,

## RENAISSANCE

*The Birth of Tragedy*, in "*The Birth of Tragedy*" and "*The Genealogy of Morals*," trans. Francis Golffing (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 136-37: "Only a horizon ringed about with myths can unify a culture. The forces of imagination . . . are saved only by myth from indiscriminate rambling. . . . Man today, stripped of myth, stands famished among all his pasts and must dig frantically for roots. . . . What does our great historical hunger signify, our clutching about us of countless other cultures, our consuming desire for knowledge, if not the loss of myth, of a mythic home, the mythic womb?"

<sup>11</sup> H. D. F. Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama: A Study of Six Greek Plays and of "Hamlet"* (1956; rpt. London: Methuen, and New York: Barnes & Noble, 1960), pp. 199-295, 328-34, *et passim*.

