

Humanism and Tragic Redemption

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by Walter Stein

When George Steiner announced *The Death of Tragedy*, in 1961, it was already somewhat unclear whether tragedy was said to be dead or dying, or in fact on the way to being reborn. Since then, Leo Aylen's *Greek Tragedy and the Modern World* has challengingly affirmed the possibility of actual equivalents to Greek tragedy in our time. And now Raymond Williams flatly entitles his own critical diagnosis: *Modern Tragedy*.¹

These questions of course extend far beyond the theatre. Ultimately they concern the entire substance of our culture, and especially our age's increasing estrangement from religion. For Tragedy – whether Greek, mediaeval, Elizabethan or neo-classical – has, typically, sprung from societies rooted in religion; although the greatest moments of tragic art were precisely those moments when received beliefs stood under radical historical challenge. To ask why traditional tragic forms have increasingly been abandoned in the theatre of our time is thus, to raise questions we might otherwise not even be able to formulate about our epoch's relations to religion – and about the resources of humanist faith.

Raymond Williams' confrontation of these questions seems to me crucial, in several ways. Unmistakably at the growing-point of humanist consciousness, his work is at once a critique of tragic theory, a socio-critical map of modern tragic literature, and a re-assertion in depth of revolutionary imperatives in the face of objections to revolution truly wrestled with. Significantly, the book concludes not with any theoretical summing up but with an actual drama of revolution. However this play should be assessed as an imaginative creation in its own right (it was conceived before the discursive material), it certainly helps to define, and to bring to the test, the dialectical thrust of the book as a whole. There is every reason to think that *Modern Tragedy* will remain a living source of understanding and human choice, however we may, in time, live through these questions.

Williams starts from the recognition that, on the one hand, 'tragedy' stands for an imposing, complex tradition of art and theory, exacting tribute from any disciplined use of the term, and that, on the other hand, there is something strange and disorientating about the conventional academic gloss that would deny to 'mere suffering'

¹Chatto and Windus, 30s.

– ‘everday tragedies’ in private or social life – any claim to being ‘genuinely tragic’. Thus the event is absolutely dissociated from the response; life is, critically, stripped of the significances art professes to discover in it, and an age as deeply involved in tragic experience, and as rich and engrossed in tragic writing, as our own, is seriously in doubt whether tragedy has not died.

Williams’ refusal to accept this semantic schizophrenia as a necessary sacrifice to literary tradition is surely irreversible:

What is more deeply in question is a particular kind and particular interpretation of death and suffering. Certain events and responses are tragic, and others not. By sheer authority, and from our natural eagerness to learn, it is possible for this to be said and repeated, without real challenge. And to be half inside and half outside such a system is to be reduced to despair. For there are two questions which still need to be asked. Is it really the case that what is called the tradition carries so clear and single a meaning? And, Whatever our answer to this, what actual relations are we to see and live by, between the tradition of tragedy and the kind of experience, in our own time, that we ordinarily and perhaps mistakenly call tragic? (14–15).

We may wish to question Williams’ programme for bridging tradition and modern experience, literary and extra-literary claims; it should have become impossible to elude the need to bridge them. The tenacity with which he confronts this – at once academic and existential – need is perhaps the most deeply redirective achievement of his thought.

It seems to me that, in the last resort, Raymond Williams does not succeed in converting his pioneer bridges into viable reciprocities between these poles. But before I attempt to indicate the reasons for this, I am anxious to stress the enormous difficulties of the undertaking, and to acknowledge the crucial positive insights to be gained even from this ultimate failure (if such it be) to hold things steadily together. For these tensions can only be diagnosed, and lived through, by a kind of dialectical trial and error. (Williams’ critical strategy is itself essentially dialectical.) Not only have received tragic forms been increasingly displaced in the theatre of our time; not only is our culture engaged in a progressive, systematic confusion of tragic and comic experience; the very terms in which we think about the problem – including the word tragedy itself – ‘slip, slide, perish,/ Decay with imprecision’ as our thought gropes for a foothold. In such circumstances, Williams’ lucidity in posing the questions, and his struggle towards a humanism both faithful to tragic facts and truly revolutionary, will remain active powers in any further dialectic.

From the standpoint of criticism and critical theory, *Modern Tragedy* offers a range of concise, detailed responses to modern writing – always in real intimacy with their texts – forming themselves into a powerful structure of Marxist diagnosis. From the standpoint of

secular humanist self-orientation, it is a plea for commitment to 'revolution' – as against tragic despair, or resignation, or absurdist 'revolt'. And, directly from the standpoint of revolutionary humanism, it is a maturely inspiring programme for seeing revolution itself essentially 'in a tragic perspective' – lest the revolutionary purpose should, under pressure, become a new form of alienation, abstracted and 'set as an idea above real men' (82), or lest, conversely men failing to see revolution 'as the inevitable working through of a deep and tragic disorder' (75), should, in shock and disillusion, react against 'the tragic action' – which 'in its deepest sense is not the confirmation of disorder, but its experience, its comprehension and its resolution' (83).

Raymond Williams' commerce between 'tragedy' and 'revolution' vitally extends and enriches both concepts; but I do not believe it solves either of the original problems he raises: the problem of relating traditional tragic forms to modern forms, and that of relating the tragic in art and in life.

One reason for this is simply that, in the course of his explorations, these general problems increasingly *turn into* the special issue of tragedy and revolution. Thus the correct and important insistence that tragedy is too often dogmatically sealed off from social perspectives – and that the tragic in our time must prominently include the experience of revolution – unawares slides into more and more exclusively social determinations of tragic meanings – and especially into a tendency to equate the problem of 'modern tragedy' more and more totally with the problem of 'tragedy and revolution'. In place, then, of the promised active conjunction of past and present, of 'tragedy' and 'everyday tragedies', over the whole range of tragic experience, we arrive at a special defence of a special range of contemporary tragic significances. Inevitably, the effect of this two-fold shift, from an inclusive to a selective focus, and from one kind of partiality to another, is to leave the inclusive problem unclarified – the more so for seeming to have shifted into clarity.

We may locate the pressures towards this dislocation of focus in the procedures of *Modern Tragedy* in the underlying requirements of its vision – especially in the following major features of the argument: (i) its overstatement of discontinuities in the tradition of literary tragedy; (ii) its looseness of hold upon residual tragic necessities within the dimension of temporal redemption; and (iii) – by the convergence of these preceding features – its immanent, temporal displacements of absolute, transcendent significances in tragic experience.

The Tragic Tradition

Williams prepares the ground for his programme with a review of 'tragic ideas' from classical Athens to our own time. His discussion throws a concentrated light upon every phase of literary tragedy, and poses the general questions to which we have already referred.

Yet, by the end of this section, these questions have already suffered the shift we have noted. Classical and mediaeval, Renaissance and modern notions (especially those of Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche) are interrogated in relation to the problem of 'everyday tragedies'; and seen, if not actually to warrant, at any rate not to preclude, recognition of 'the tragedy of revolution' as the real legitimate offspring of 'tragic tradition' and 'everyday tragedy' in our time. Thus, what started as a firmly inclusive refusal to deny to ordinary human calamities – 'a mining disaster, a burned-out family, a broken career, a smash on the road' (13–14), as well as to social convulsions like war and revolution – the dignifying title of 'tragedy', actually ushers in an increasingly constrictive conflation of 'tragic' with 'revolutionary' meanings.

This potent semantic loading for which tragedy thus becomes simply 'a response to social disorder' (63) depends for its plausibility upon a prior erosion of traditional tragic meanings. It seems to me that Williams is right – and performs an important service – in insisting that 'the tradition' behind the concept of tragedy is far from carrying such a 'clear and single meaning' as is often supposed. After all, tragic art embodies tensions and developments in civilization over some 2,500 years, including the drastic passages from Greek into Christian, and Christian to secular thought-forms; whilst tragic theory, no less than tragic dramatic practice, necessarily reflects the special approaches and tempers of writers (like Raymond Williams himself) who have seen themselves as new pathfinders in a classic common pursuit. It is right and important to stress these creative diversities within tragic tradition, lest 'the tradition' should harden into a dead and deadening academic convention. But it is no less essential to keep in mind, to keep tasting, and re-digesting, whatever implicit coherence 'the tradition' may now embody for us, lest 'tragedy', the word, should be drained of the wine for which it is valued, to make it receptive of an altogether new substance, claiming the traditional virtues and privileges. Why, after all, if not because this classic long harvest is felt to be irreplaceably precious, should those 'half inside and half outside such a system . . . be reduced to despair'? Why should it be more than a verbal pedantry whether the 'long revolution' can assimilate 'tragedy', the word? It is not sufficient to say:

We are not looking for a new universal meaning of tragedy. We are looking for the structure of tragedy in our own culture (62). The problem is to achieve more than a verbal connection between 'the structure of tragedy in our own culture' and the 'universal meaning' – however complex, however elusive – in virtue of which an apparently merely verbal puzzle can threaten 'despair'.

The main tendency of Williams' critique of 'the tradition' is, however, to highlight – and, I believe, to overstate – existing divergences within it, in the interests of claiming a corresponding

licence for his own programme. Thus his challenge to the assumption of a 'common' cultural form as between Greek and Elizabethan tragedy involves both an over-emphasis upon Elizabethan secularism and a strangely arrived at undervaluing of mediaeval tragic achievements. Basing himself mainly on Chaucer's definitions in the *Monk's Tale* and its *Prologue* – and Lydgate's

It begynneth in prosperite
 And endeth ever in adversite
 And it also doth the conquest trete
 Of riche kynges and of lordys grete

– Williams concludes that mediaeval tragedy is radically at odds with the Greek inheritance. Whereas in Greek tragedy rank was 'at once public and metaphysical' – 'an involving and representative eminence', so that 'the action embodies a whole view of life' (22) – the mediaeval concern with Fortune or 'worldly condition' was narrowly restricted to princely anecdotes, largely irrelevant to life as a whole:

The effect of mediaeval tragedy, then, within what was doubtless felt as a continuity, was paradoxical. It was a drastic limitation of range, and an exclusion of conflict, under the pressures of what must be seen as the alienation of feudal society. The stress on a general condition became so attached to a single particular case – the fall of princes – that the general reference became largely negative: an abstraction defining a limited action (23).

Now, even within Williams' own range of references, is there, after all, such an essential break of direction between the *Monk's Tale* emphasis:

For certain, whan that Fortune list to flee,
 Ther may no man the cours of hire witholde.
 Lat no man truste on blynde prosperitee

and the final Chorus of *Oedipus*?

Sons and daughters of Thebes, behold, this was Oedipus,
 Greatest of men; he held the key to the deepest mysteries;
 Was envied by all his fellow-men for his great prosperity;
 Behold, what a full tide of misfortune swept over his head.
 Then learn that mortal man must always look to his ending.
 And none can be called happy until that day when he carries
 His happiness down to the grave in peace.

But since not only mediaeval theory but also its practice is in view here, one can hardly fail to ask how the Mystery Cycles (does their action not embody both immediate tragic perceptions and 'a whole way of life'?) fit into this picture? Or, for that matter, the indubitably 'representative' conflicts of *Everyman*? Williams, extraordinarily, does not mention the Mystery Cycles at all; whilst of *Everyman* he says that, since to pass through death is not only inevitable, but the only way in which Everyman can come to his Father,

'the later tragic voice cannot come.² When it does come, it is unmistakable: a man alone in his extremity' (89). But if Everyman's reduction to mortal aloneness seems insufficiently extreme, what of the voice that narrates the condition of Francesca da Rimini—or of Dante's enacted response: 'so that I fainted with pity, as if I had been dying; and fell as a dead body falls'? And can the mediaeval contribution to tragedy be soundly generalized without noting, in Chaucer himself, not merely the perfunctory omnium gatherum of the *Monk's Tale*, but *Troilus and Criseyde* – that humane, tragic appreciation 'that humanity is not self-sufficing'³ – or, further afield, the romance of *Tristan and Iseult*, which, according to Denis de Rougemont, activated the fatal equation of love and the death-wish, not only in mediaeval chivalry, but, with the cumulative potency of myth, throughout the subsequent stages of our civilization?⁴ The judgement that the effect of mediaeval tragedy is that of 'a drastic limitation of range, and an exclusion of conflict' under pressures whereby 'the general reference became largely negative', and lacking in metaphysical import, surely needs drastic qualification.

Similar serious question-marks have to be placed against other elements in Williams' account of 'the tradition'. Thus he maintains that 'the increasing secularization' to be found in neo-classical tragedy is reflected in 'an increasingly isolated interpretation of the character of the hero' and that 'the moving force of tragedy was now quite clearly a matter of behaviour, rather than either a metaphysical condition or a metaphysical fault' (26). No doubt, this is true of Dryden, to whom he refers, but could anything be further from the real centre of gravity of neo-classical tragedy, the achieved tragic creativeness of Racine, whom Williams does not mention? A critique of tragic tradition that, omitting to take cognizance of *Phèdre* and *Athalie*, sees the moving force of tragedy at that stage as 'quite clearly' *not* 'a metaphysical condition or a metaphysical fault' may help to open the way towards a complementary present-day secularization – towards an idea of tragedy simply as 'a response to social disorder' – but only at the cost of a critical and metaphysical removal from the relevant tragic centralities.

The tendency of Williams' approach can, however, perhaps, be most clearly grasped through his comments on 'liberal tragedy' – especially as exemplified in his treatment of Ibsen's *Brand*. There are some pertinent differences between Williams' analysis of *Brand* in his *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (1952) and his handling of it in *Modern Tragedy*. The former, whilst noting the importance of social themes in *Brand*, accurately fastens upon its metaphysical vision as the governing dimension of the play. It is, he says, 'essentially a statement

²It may be significant that even this qualifying 'later' seems an afterthought; it does not occur in the original version of the essay (*New Left Review*, No. 20, Summer 1963, p. 55).

³John Speirs, *Chaucer the Maker* (London, 1951), p. 80.

⁴Denis de Rougemont, *Passion and Society*, (London, 1940).

of the claims of vocation; and its significant conclusion is the impossibility of fulfilling the vocation of the ideal under "the load of inherited spiritual debt". Brand's mission is 'the restoration of wholeness', but although the call is absolute, so are the barriers. 'This tension is the whole action of the play.' Thus, whereas 'in the beginning, most of Brand's speeches are in specifically social terms . . . it is part of the design of the play that this emphasis should change, that the vocation should come to be defined, not as social reform, but the realisation of the actual self.' And self-realisation, through the realisation of his divine tasks, is limited by 'debt' – a personal liability to hereditary guilt 'which epitomizes original sin'. Only death releases the powers of mercy and love. 'It is, as Ibsen sees it, the essential tragedy of the human situation.'⁵

Williams does not repudiate this reading in his later account in *Modern Tragedy*; but there is now a framework of revolutionary theory and, going with it, a drastic contraction, and shift, of focus. *Brand* is now seen as a paradigm of 'liberal tragedy' – which arises at those points of modern awareness where difficulty and disillusion seem to show the impossibility of man's transforming his disordered existence. Thus, in its naturalist forms – corresponding to utilitarian and Fabian meliorism – liberal tragedy enacts a mechanistic conception of man, wherein suffering is merely passive, and wherein a sort of manipulated 'evolution' displaces revolution as the model of social change. In its Romantic forms, a more radical alienation in the face of unfulfilled revolutionary desires leads increasingly to a total writing off of the social world; so that man 'on the run from himself' – unable to find 'a home in the world' – is deadlocked in 'a desire that is beyond all relationships' (94–95), and 'even what begins as social criticism tends to pass into nihilism' (71). Yet also there is, by the time of Ibsen's maturity, an 'increasingly confident identification of a false society as man's real enemy; the naming, in social terms, of the formerly nameless alienation' (95). In *Brand*, aspiration and alienation are brought together in a necessary – and necessarily unavailing – struggle against this disordered order. For the aspiring individual cannot escape from his own shared inheritance of sickness and compromise. 'There is no way out, there is only an inevitable tragic consciousness, while desire is seen as essentially individual' (100).

While desire is seen as essentially individual. In this new, explanatory perspective, the essentially theological action of *Brand* is seen in essentially secular terms; so that the way has been opened to a direct assimilation of *Brand* to a post-theological 'liberal tragedy', both in Ibsen himself and in subsequent modern drama – and so also towards Williams' own passage from 'liberal tragedy' to its secular-socialist successor. Just and illuminating as much of this is – in its detailed textual pointers, as in the conceptual framework it helps to define – there are limits to its critical reach. Thus, the effect of such

⁵*Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, pp. 51–56.

a reading is to suppress the decisive metaphysical tensions generated between *Brand* and *Ghosts*, *The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm* and *When We Dead Awaken*, levelling them, one and all, to a uniform secular significance. The specifically theological pulse-beat of *Brand* comes to appear as little more than an epiphenomenon of the liberal deadlock; 'the impossibility of finding a home in the world' (a primary source of Shakespearean tragedy and Racine's – and indeed of much classical tragedy) is seen simply as a symptom of Romantic alienation; and even an incidental reference to Prometheus and Faust as heroes of Romantic rebellion does not register the depth of historical and metaphysical continuity this implies, but is merely related back to the 'contradictions' of 'bourgeois tragedy' (94–95).

The tendency, then, of Raymond Williams' account of 'the tradition' is to stretch its certainly important variations and transformations into essential discontinuities and disjunctions, and to tilt the balance heavily towards essentially secular emphases, even where specifically religious themes come into view. Speaking of the eighteenth century bourgeois tragedians, Williams notes an 'important loss . . . of dimension and reference' in their private humanitarianism. 'For the sources of tragedy were not, even in their experience, *only* private.' Pity and sympathy have, thus, little effective power in the face of crimes against property in Lillo's *The London Merchant*. 'Distress accompanies execution, and humanitarianism is at its limits. . . . What we then see, behind the loss of dimension, is a complacent affirmation of the existing social framework.' (93) A fair diagnosis. But the observation may be adapted to sum up the loss of dimension and reference in Williams' own emergent tragic perspective. For the sources of the tradition he surveys were, equally, not *only* secular-social. And the tendency of a purely secular tragedy of revolution can be seen in Williams' new-model tragedy, *Koba*, where distress accompanies the most 'superhuman inhumanities' (as Wilfred Owen wrote in another context), and humanism is at its limits. Behind *this* loss of dimension and metaphysical reference we can hardly avoid seeing, though certainly no complacent reaffirmation of Stalinist inordinacies, at any rate a distressed acceptance of their immanent tragic validity. The erosion of continuities defining the dimension of tragedy is indeed no mere academic exercise.

Secularized Eschatology

Raymond Williams' deepest, most central concern in his reassessments of tragedy is to affirm an inescapable unity between man's experienced tragic existence and his imperative self-liberation. Potentially, at least, 'the whole action' of tragedy (82, 242) is always, for him, more than the immediate disaster or deadlock: a stage in the process of human self-redemption. Conversely, he insists, it behoves us to take the weight of the cost, the real, human – past or present – cost of whatever degree of liberation is being reaped. To

acquiesce in history's tragic disorders – whether in despair, or resignation, or hopeless 'revolt' – is to fail our human potentialities of redemption. But, equally, to repress, or disown, our direct humane reactions against principled inhumanity amidst the redemptive 'necessities' of revolution is merely to transmit in new forms these alienating disorders – although these new evils are subject in their turn to redemptive transformation; so that the ultimate 'whole action' – the ultimate wholeness of the 'long revolution' – can yet endow even such newly emerging evils with an ultimate tragic validity.

The mature complexity of this poise, and the radical integrity of its demands, raise Williams' work to a classic stature. Despite its evident perils – which Williams does not always succeed in negotiating – his very personal fusion of Marxist and literary insights releases decisive powers of humaneness, which we shall do well to safeguard and extend. It is just because of this pathfinding importance that *Modern Tragedy* requires our most alert critical caution as we make our own what claims us among its perceptions and demands.

It seems to me that there are some crucial infirmities in Williams' vision of evil and tragic redemption – closely related to the treatment of tragic tradition we have been considering. Like Marx himself, Raymond Williams employs the religious concept of 'redemption' to define an absolute dimension of human hope, absolutely free of any transcendent reference. Thus he gives great prominence to Marx's early conception of revolution, as stated in his *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechts-Philosophie*:

A class must be formed which has *radical chains*, a class in civil society which is not a class of civil society, a class which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere of society which has a universal character because its sufferings are universal, and which does not claim a *particular redress* because the wrong which is done to it is not a *particular wrong* but *wrong in general*. There must be formed a sphere of society which claims no *traditional* status but only a *human status* . . . a sphere finally which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society, without therefore emancipating all these other spheres; which is, in short, a *total loss* as humanity and which can only redeem itself by a *total redemption of humanity*.

'So absolute a conception', Williams comments, 'distinguishes revolution from rebellion, or, to put it another way, makes political revolution into a general human revolution' (76). But here Williams' revolutionary optimism fuses with his tragic vision: 'This idea of "the total redemption of humanity" has the ultimate cast of resolution and order, but in the real world its perspective is inescapably tragic' (77).

But then I do not believe, as so many disillusioned or broken by actual revolution have come to believe, that the suffering can be laid to the charge of the revolution alone, and that we must avoid revolution if we are to avoid suffering. On the contrary, I

see revolution as the inevitable working through of a deep and tragic disorder, to which we can respond in varying ways but which will in any case, in one way or another, work its way through our world, as a consequence of any of our actions. I see revolution, that is to say, in a tragic perspective . . . Marx's early idea of revolution seems to me to be tragic in this sense (75).

The question, however, imposes itself how 'so *absolute* a conception' of 'the *total* redemption of humanity' – having the *ultimate* cast of resolution and order' about it – can come to inhere solely within the relativities, and limits, and necessary contingencies of human time.

It is only necessary to attend to this question to see it as – on the face of it – indicating a strict, logical impossibility. *Either*, it seems, these quasi-eschatological notions must therefore be seen as loosely focused metaphors – whose literal significance would need to be re-investigated from scratch – *or* they must be restored to a strictly eschatological context. One of the achievements of Williams' work is to bring this dilemma, inherent in any messianic secularism, to a sort of phenomenological test – beyond verbal logicalities: the evidences of the tragic imagination. Too often revolutionary humanists have been unwilling, or unable, to lay themselves open to such a test. There are always immediate realizable urgencies, tangible motivating objectives, to attend to; and, beyond these, a secularized eschatology of redemption virtually taboo from concrete, critical penetration. *Modern Tragedy* goes further towards meeting these problems than any previous enquiry.

But how far does it achieve a viable resolution of these problems? We have stressed the *prima facie* conflict, in verbal logic, between the absolutes of secular redemption and the inherent limitations of secular contingencies. Williams, however, neither elects to assimilate 'total redemption' to a kingdom beyond all time, nor to turn back, critically, upon these quasi-eschatological terms. Instead, he concentrates upon exposing himself, stoically and without blinking, to the reality of the difficulties, and the inevitable long-term duration, of the revolutionary process itself – and thence to assimilating 'the long revolution' to 'the whole action' of tragedy:

And all our experience tells us that this complicated action between real men will continue as far ahead as we can foresee, and that the suffering in this continuing struggle will go on being terrible. It is very difficult for the mind to accept this, and we all erect our defences against so tragic a recognition. But I believe that it is inevitable, and that we must speak of it if it is not to overwhelm us (78).

But how far ahead – *sub specie temporis* – is 'as far ahead as we can foresee'? Indeed is so 'inevitable' and 'tragic a recognition' tolerant of any conceptual assimilation to 'total redemption' at all? There are times when the ultimate fullness of revolution seems hardly more than an image, abstracted like Brecht's St. Neverneverday, from the

terrible beauty of living revolutions.⁶ Can the mind properly accept such an indeterminate finality, such an infinitely receding 'future', at all, as pertinent to the tragic, moral actuality – here and now – of 'the price of the future, the heavy but necessary price' (255: *Koba*)? It is not for nothing that 'the whole action' of tragedy is classically defined by an actually enacted beginning, middle and end. Such is not only a purely destructive action like that of *Hippolytus*; but tragic redemption, too, has traditionally always been either a process of finite timely achievements (like the emergence of civilized justice in the *Oresteia*) or of an absolute, transcendent salvation, finally at home beyond temporal limits (as in *Lear* and *Brand*). A conception of tragic 'redemption' which is neither a definite, finite historical process, nor a consummating infinity, for which history is only a beginning (and middle), cannot but be at odds with itself: it either claims too little or too much.

It is too late, in the perspectives of our decade – at any rate for a mind of Williams' resolute openness to the facts – to return to simpler, more determinate historical blueprints. Is there, then, any escape from these revolutionary contradictions if not either in some active socio-religious eschatology, or, alternatively, an active recognition that 'the total redemption of humanity' is merely a hyperbolic metaphor of limited historical hopes? How, after all, is one to understand a foreseen 'total' historical achievement, foreseen as remaining unachieved for 'as far ahead as we can foresee'?

Nevertheless, Williams declines either to name this total redemption of humanity as the fulfilment of the kingdom of God, or to retreat into less absolute – so to speak demythologized – revolutionary expectations. He merely insists that the long revolution is long indeed, and that, so long as 'the whole action' remains unfinished, its tragic course will have 'the ultimate cast of resolution and order', though not – not yet – the fullness of resolution and order, not yet the totality of human redemption. Not yet; and yet the totality of human redemption is totally a matter of history – and totally within the gift of men's own action in history. The evils of human existence, however enormous, are only fragments of history. And history – in travail for its ultimate mastery by men – must itself be the source, and arena, of their ultimate, total redemption.

Revolution and Evil

It is in the conception of evil requisite for such a notion of redemption that revolutionary theory and the tragic imagination confront each

⁶Compare the passage just cited with, for instance: 'We have still to attend to the whole action, and to see liberation as part of the same process as the terror which appals us. I do not mean that the liberation cancels the terror; I mean only that they are connected, and that this connection is tragic. The final truth in this matter seems to be that revolution – the long revolution against human alienation – produces, in real historical circumstances, its own new kinds of alienation, which it must struggle to understand, and which it must overcome, if it is to remain revolutionary (82). ("Overcome" – once and for all; or producing its own, new kinds of alienation "as far ahead as we can foresee?")'

other most sharply. And it is here that Williams, the literary critic, brings his commitments as revolutionary thinker most decisively to the test of the dramatized phenomenology of tragic art. If the fullness of revolution – however, whenever achieved – by definition involves bringing down the curtain on tragic existence, then the evils men suffer or inflict within our present, tragic dispensation, must be fully avoidable on the far side of revolution. However inevitable, however stringently ‘fated’, a given tragic pattern may seem – or indeed be – within past or present historical contexts, such tragic ‘necessities’ are necessary only relative to these contexts; they belong to the legion of symptoms of human self-estrangement which is to be remedied by revolution. There are no ‘absolute’ or ‘transcendent’ evils, no irreparable patterns of fatality, no historically irresolvable forms of catastrophe or affliction. Our widespread, ingrained assumptions to the contrary are rooted not in the facts but in ideology – that very ideology which orthodox modern tragedy and tragic theory since Schopenhauer and Nietzsche have been enacting with such completeness that it is hard to place oneself sufficiently outside its spell to recognize it as ideological – as merely a direct, conditioned reflection of a pre-revolutionary anguish and impotence.

Williams presses this argument with extraordinary resourcefulness, and a deeply disciplined humanist passion. Time and again he turns the tables on us as we prepare to counter his tragic optimism (with those very reflexes of conditioned alienation he is at pains to lay bare and re-train) by bringing into play his own thorough awareness of the depth and complexity of the evils to be surmounted. Above all, his literary analyses bring home the close integration of theory and immediate human responsiveness in his vision; and whilst he knows, and insists upon, the connexions between social and private evils, he also knows how elusively indirect these connexions can be, and is under no illusion that human anguish can be exorcised simply by revolutionary decree.

Nevertheless, what he proves is less – much less – than he needs to prove, though he makes decisive inroads into current conventional pessimism and reactionary rationales for social passivity. The ultimate requirements of his vision can be gauged not only from his insistent denials of what he calls ‘the mask of Fate’ (180) – of tragedy as somehow ‘inherent’ in the human situation (106), of tragic evil as some sort of ‘absolute condition’ (59, 181) – but, more positively, from such pointers as his comments upon eighteenth century ‘poetic justice’:

Tragedy, in this view, shows suffering as a consequence of error, and happiness as a consequence of virtue. . . . That is to say, the bad will suffer and the good will be happy; or rather, much as in the mediaeval emphasis, the bad will do badly in the world, and the good will prosper. The moral impetus of tragedy is then the realisation of this kind of consequence. The spectator will be moved

to live well by the demonstration of the consequences of good and evil. And, further, within the action itself, the characters themselves will be capable of the same recognition and change. Thus the tragic catastrophe either moves its spectators to moral recognition and resolution, or can be avoided altogether, by a change of heart.

It is customary, now, to condescend to this view, and to assume its inevitable shallowness. But what was weak in it was not the underlying demand, which is indeed inevitable, but its inability to conceive morality as other than static (31).

In other words, the only real objection to this view – which assumes an exhaustively explanatory connexion between tragic affliction and moral failure – lies in the inadequacy of its concrete moral background. The implication is that, in principle (given an adequate, revolutionary morality) there really is no type of human suffering that is not either capable of ‘resolution’ or of being ‘avoided altogether’. We could almost say that for Raymond Williams ‘the total redemption of humanity’ is, precisely, the ultimate ‘poetic justice’ – a poetry to be made flesh in history by our capacity for ‘recognition and change’.

Even, however, on the plane of social relations as such, that other human capacity, for changing from order to disorder, from ‘being’ into ‘having’, from community into alienation, must remain a permanent threat to poetic justice in history, since history is written in moral prose. This, of course, is no argument for depreciating, or despairing of, the imperative historical drive towards justice and real community. Indeed, Williams himself comes very close, as we saw, not only to recognizing that ‘in real historical circumstances’ the long revolution itself produces ‘new kinds of alienation’, but that ‘this complicated action between real men will continue as far ahead as we can foresee, and that the suffering in this continuing struggle will go on being terrible’. It is just that this deeply ascetic, factual recognition must somehow be brought to bear upon the imagery of ‘total redemption’ if this poetry is to belong not to ‘fancy’ but the ‘imagination’ – if both our human rootedness in tragedy and the divinity that shapes our total redemptive hopes are to be recognized for what they are.

Self-redemption

The problem is not solved by a human appropriation of divine titles, any more than by the secularization of eschatological terms. There is a great deal of talk in *Koba* about ‘man the creator’ (235, 274), about men ‘who cannot be mastered’ (22 ff.), about being ‘more than men, not less’ (233). But whilst Max (the play’s Trotsky figure) goes so far as to say:

It is God, surely? It is man as god. To create from chaos, having first created himself –

Jordan (Lenin) gives warning that 'man the creator, the towering figure on the crest of the hill', can

fall like a statue, the fists clenched in stone and the arms rigid in dignity; unable, at last, even to reach out and save himself, reach out and break his fall. (235)

The immediate reference is of course to Stalin – we think of the pictures of razed statues of 1956 – but the ultimate implications are much more far-reaching. Indeed, they may reach further than Williams had in mind – not merely directing us to the 'long revolution' (a new, youthful, revisionist 'Joseph' appears – an equivocal omen – at the end of the play) but returning us sharply to the problem of man's total self-redemption.

The danger is – and metaphysics apart, as *Koba* and its historical sources show, there are also serious *moral* dangers – that a totally self-redemptive reaching for Godot is merely the converse of waiting for him in total self-estrangement. This is as true, though of course in different ways, of revolutionary divinization as of the sexual absolutes of Lawrentian private salvation. The image of Godot lurks – a merciless chaos of infinity and limit – behind both types of man-made redemption. For man, as man, is finally subject to limit; not least in his absolute need of redemptive divinization. For men are men, and can fail; and even where they succeed, are subject to failure – and death. Man the creator *and* man the corrupter, human community *and* disablement from communion – the grandeur *and* misery of man – groan for perfections beyond human resources. It is radically necessary to man to transcend these resources; and tragically beyond him to transcend them. Beyond any given, redeemable human failure, there is always the grave, constant option of revolution; but beyond the redeeming Absolute with whom Job wrestled – and Christ, at the moment of death – there is finally only Godot.

The pointers to Lawrence and Beckett, in this context, are not arbitrary. For it seems to me that D. H. Lawrence's dedicated pursuit of an absolute totality in personal relations and the pursuit of a revolutionary, total communal redemption are the complementary growing-points of modern humanism; and that both, at one and the same time, tower prophetically beyond the jaded pusillanimities of liberal pragmatism – and Establishment Christianity – and fail to come to terms with the inescapable limits of their own, heroic visions. Both, moreover, are mutually aware that private and social relations are complementary and interdependent. And both meet their ultimate, indestructible challenge in the massive, multiple dead-end of Samuel Beckett.

It is not that Beckett's is the ultimate truth. Beckett's vision is no less partial, in its claims to a final universality, than theirs; and indeed if (impossibly) the choice were simply a choice between Lawrentian and Marxist commitments on the one hand and

Beckett's stasis of anguish on the other, I should choose to adhere to the former – if only in the name of primitive human imperatives. But of course our real choice is not of this kind. The confrontation is anything but simple. The challenge cuts both ways. Lawrence fails to reckon with inescapable irreducible human failure – or rather, in the end he refuses to *care* about such lives; whilst Beckett, conversely, refuses, or is unable, to recognize life's openness to real fruition. Raymond Williams is as deeply aware of the realities of human fruition as of radical failure and anguish – and affirms the ultimate hope of a total communal redemption; Beckett not only acknowledges no such communal hope but insists that, in any case, radical personal outrage must remain for ever unredeemed in the absence of personal salvation. Each of these visions safeguards essential human truths. So does the tension between them. We cannot, without violence to human integrity and human vocation, disown any of these perspectives. Yet they also seem truly exclusive – indestructibly in contradiction. Between them, they map out – in necessary, shifting interaction – the ultimate reaches and limits, and inherent contradictions, of post-Christian humanist bearings.

(Next month: *Redemption and Revolution*)

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