

## MR. BELL ON TRAGEDY

In his article on tragedy (*Diogenes*, No. 7), Mr. Charles G. Bell has offered us some provocative insights and opinions. I am compelled to question, however, some of the basic concepts he brings to the interpretation of tragedy.

It would seem that Mr. Bell, despite the depth of his thinking, has embraced several of the current clichés, which perhaps have their origin in the writings of A. C. Bradley. Critics adhering to this school hold that, for one reason or another, it is not possible to write tragedy in the twentieth century and that no work ending in bleak pessimism or despair is tragic. Mr. Bell, combining literary and historical criteria, is particularly severe in his limitation of the field of tragedy and the possibilities open to it. If I read him aright, only Aeschylus, Shakespeare, and the earlier Sophocles (before he fell from grace) have ever really earned admission to the exclusive realm.

From the viewpoint of history, tragedy is limited to a fragile cultural moment shimmering fleetingly between an untragic primitive sorrow and an equally untragic rationalization of reality. Mr. Bell's thesis is suggestive, insofar as tragedy must contain a deep intuition into suffering and yet a questioning awareness that is rational. Certain historical moments are undoubtedly more conducive to this outlook than others, but there is no evidence to show that exceptionally sensitive individuals may not possess at whatever time a truly tragic awareness—Alfieri, Lacos, and

Vigny, for examples. Mr. Bell's explanation, despite the truth it contains, does not strike at the heart of the matter. Tragedy is written (when it is not largely esthetic virtuosity and a mode of psychological analysis, as in seventeenth-century France) in periods of cultural crisis. When an accepted ordering of human destiny, be it cruel or joyous, explodes, then emotional security and the felt metaphysical basis of values, necessary to meaningful conduct, vanish at the same time. That is why the concept of a "Counter-Renaissance," treading on the high hopes of neo-Platonic optimism, is so illuminating for English and Spanish tragedy of the early seventeenth century. Montaigne, Galileo, and Machiavelli—following Luther, Calvin, and others—pricked the bubble of optimism that contained the early Renaissance ordering of man, the universe, and the State. Doubtless expressing a growing state of mind, they helped to create a complete revolution. By not grasping the full nature of this historical moment Mr. Bell is led to a dubious interpretation of Hamlet's melancholy.<sup>1</sup> Fifth-century Greece had been shaken by a similar revision; the untenability of the old religious outlook became apparent in the light of new philosophies, and the Peloponnesian wars later heightened the crisis. What of our own time? Has the setting for tragedy ever existed more clearly, more perfectly, than now? Never has there been a more resounding overthrow of the old order, a wider challenge to an inherited, patterned world-view. The nature of the universe, man's destiny, the worth of the individual, the role of the State, the transvaluation of values; man's principal activities—science, art, war; all is in a chaos of transition as we dance on the grave of our fathers' world. As in other such ages, ours is indeed a period of pessimism and doubt; but it is also a time of new affirmations, and of struggle to forge a new order and pattern. It is a bitter age, but heroic; not a bowed and cowed age. And it is to such a period that doctrinaire critics would deny the possibility of tragedy in the name of a rigid and arbitrary dogma.

The historical pattern Mr. Bell utilizes leads to other difficulties. At one point he tells us that tragedy of the individual is impossible now. Only the tragedy of all humanity can be written in a culture which drowns the personal element in mass-wars, mass-states, mass-education. But just four pages later, he finds that emotional depression is the inevitable effect of the

1. And in particular the sense of his soliloquy. "What a piece of work is a man. . . ." See my article, "Hamlet, Don Quijote and *La vida es sueño*: the quest for values," *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 1953. It is enough to state here that Mr. Bell's quotation from Schopenhauer, which he considers a perversion or misinterpretation of tragedy, applies precisely to Hamlet's experience: "We are brought face to face with great suffering and the story and stress of existence; and the outcome of it is to show the vanity of all human effort . . . we are . . . prompted to disengage our will from the struggle for life."

narrow tragedy of the *individual* that is being written in our time. In reality, all tragedy is a tragical history of humanity; and all tragedy is expressed through an individual experience, which symbolizes man and the world. It is indeed true that only tragedies of individuals are being written, and that only the tragedy of humanity is possible. But so it has always been, for this is precisely the nature of tragedy. Richard II, Hamlet, and Othello are most certainly individuals; Christine in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is an individual, but her story has universal implications. But Mr. Bell means perhaps that the individual has no importance today. It may be argued that in many ways the individual has far more importance than ever before in Western culture. This, we are told, is the period of hollow men, of romantic disillusion following romantic faith. (It is not very clear how Mr. Bell combines romanticism as an "inebriating" optimism with romanticism as a "fevered waste" and disillusion.) Well, what of Hamlet? Is he not the perfect embodiment of precisely this phenomenon? Certainly, Shakespeare rose painfully to affirmation, after the first tragedies. We have no Shakespeare, granted. But if O'Neill, Cocteau, Anouilh, and Camus express our disillusion, do not Montherlant, Malraux, Sartre, Anouilh, too, and the later Camus, rise painfully to affirmation? Do they not give full scope to the tragedy of the individual, an individual through whom we discover the tragic truth of the human condition?

Strangely, we find the twentieth century likened to the Middle Ages. In both that bleak time and our own, we are told, suffering loses its tragic quality and becomes comic. We are about to exclaim that the comic is only another perspective on human tragedy. On turning the page, however, we find that a grotesque laughter of pain is indeed admissible—since it is to be found in *Hamlet* and *Lear*—and must therefore have *droit de cité* into the walled enclosure of tragedy.

The historical framework is only the background and foundation for Mr. Bell's main charge against tragedy in our time. This phase of his assault is less original than his historical analysis, and is, as he says, an opinion commonly held by our critics. Tragedy will not admit to its halls any plays (may I doubt, parenthetically, the esthetic validity of considering tragedy as perforce limited to the theatre, at a time when great tragedies have been written in the novel form?) that do not end with the death of the hero and with his implicit spiritual triumph, the latter consideration being particularly vital. This formula is bound to lead to certain minor difficulties. *Oedipus rex* would be no longer a tragedy, nor perhaps the *Oresteia*. On the other hand, *Oedipus at Colonus*, where these

two conditions are satisfied, does not quite make the grade for Mr. Bell, on other grounds. Here there is too much “Socratic peace.”

Let us examine the matter more closely. There is no tragedy, we are correctly told, without questioning and pessimism; but pessimism must be conquered, even in defeat, by optimism. Questioning must find an answer—and the answer must be of hopeful confidence in man and the divine goodness of the world. What an arbitrary limit to tragedy! And a criterion difficult to apply. *Oedipus rex*, for instance, because of separation of time, may be considered independently of its sequel. What desolation ends it! Here are no answers, only the bleak tragedy of man’s aspirations that turn against him, the ironic blindness of action. But Oedipus has the greatness to stand up to his tragic destiny. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, however, he no longer accepts his existential responsibility (what Jaspers terms “tragic guilt”); instead he complains of injustice and shouts his ethical innocence. He is redeemed and deified at the end; but this is not compensation for his innocence, the righting of the “wrongs” of existence. It is a semi-mystical, semi-nationalistic *jeu* of the gods. No consonance is established between our human ethical world and the conditions of living. There are gods and an order of things, but it is an impenetrable order to us; if it represents an ultimate right, the “right” is one that contains much wrong. Sophocles’ outlook is very close to Shakespeare’s. There is a tragic cleavage between ourselves and the world, and we cannot feel at home in it. Aeschylus is certainly more encouraging, for he tells us that each guilty man is punished, and that the gods are working with us, helping us to rise out of the night of our origins. Euripides gives us no hope; but Aristotle calls him the most tragic of the three—which proves that Aristotle, at least, did not exclude radical pessimism as a tragic outlook. On the other hand, the twentieth century—in which tragedies cannot be written—has given us the greatness of soul of Orestes, in Sartre’s *Flies*. Here is fundamental redemption, in the face of a clear-eyed view of a tragic universe, as much as in Sophocles, more than in Shakespeare.

Mr. Bell shortly changes his phrasing: tragedy requires a tension of suffering and triumph. But Sartre’s Orestes and the heroes of *Man’s Fate* suffer, and triumph in the tragic sense; while Hamlet ends in apathy and wild revolt, unable to achieve his end by force of reason or will, but only through Claudius’ own scheming and excess of evil. Tragedy also requires, we are told, a tension of action and resignation. This again leads to difficulties. Hamlet is resigned—but he knows not to what, and there is no victory. Sartre’s Orestes does not find resignation, and seems the more heroic

and tragic as he faces his fate. But, Mr. Bell also interposes, some modern tragedies do not make the grade because the redemption is overt, not tacit as in *Othello*. But is *Othello* really redeemed, reconciled, or resigned? In the moment of denouement, he has a lucid perception of his true status. This is indeed of the essence of tragedy—as is his greatness of soul. But it is because of this very greatness that *Othello*, realizing his defeat by the forces of evil, in a universe without justice, unreconciled, and in the midst of a desperate crisis of utter despair, puts his rage against himself above his life. He is reconciled to his death, but not to the world, not to life. Is there not here one underlying similarity with the ending of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, which Mr. Bell condemns as the lamentable capitulation of an exhausted, bloodless creature? Of course, there are important differences in character and situation. *Othello* has been defeated by having been made to do evil; Lavinia because she has done evil to no avail. But tragic protagonists do not have to be ethically admirable. There is greatness in the slow suicide to which Lavinia condemns herself. Like *Othello*, she cuts herself off from life. Both protagonists defy the forces of life that have defeated them, and refuse a life that can be had only with submission to its terms. Both are invincible, as are the heroes of Sartre, Camus, Montherlant, and Malraux—far more so than Hamlet, who sits waiting to be plucked.

It would be possible, but unnecessary, to select other statements in Mr. Bell's article, and show the difficulties of applying them. Tragedy does not conform to his categories. Different kinds of tragedies have been written, at different times, and during a single epoch, because the tragic vision of man's estate, multiple and complex, cannot be simplified and narrowed by imposed canons. The principal defect of this approach, from Bradley to Bell, lies in its placing the emphasis on the wrong point of the trajectory, thus falsifying the true substance of tragedy. Tragedy is a particular type of experience, culminating in a view of the realities of human existence. It is possible to humans only, and essential to their condition, because as Niebuhr has said, they are finite and free. Man is an animal that is dissatisfied. Creativity is necessary to us, to free ourselves from anguished contingency and to affirm our existence; but all creativity is doomed by limit, as we are both free and bound. The cleavage we feel between the world and ourselves may spring from this existential limit to our will, or again from our being forced beyond existential limit by a circumstance (Fate) that sometimes makes us act where contradictory obligations are pressed upon us.

These are the conditions of tragic experience. But there can be no

tragedy without a tragic protagonist—that exceptional, heroic individual who accepts the challenge. An exception, separating himself from the universal, he is whirled centrifugally to experience life at its extreme limits. The contripetal force of larger laws, which he has transgressed, hurls him back to center. Existentially guilty, he suffers the nemesis existence makes ineluctable; yet he has been his own undoer. At the end, he breaks through to a view of his true position and the inevitability of the defeat of a particular, exceptional configuration. Yet man, being man, cannot avoid this deadly flight.

When we come, then, to Mr. Bell's quotations from *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear* ("My life hath more of wrong endured than of wrong done," "a man more sinned against than sinning"), we find that they are perfectly apposite to tragedy, but that their tragic meaning is not laid open. This meaning inheres in the discrepancy between ethical guilt and tragic guilt, the latter being the violation of existential law by willful intent.

Tragedy consists in this experience; and it is because Mr. Bell does not bring out the nature of tragic experience and the tragic protagonist that he misplaces his emphasis. The tragic rhythm requires assertion, suffering, peripeteia, and anagnorisis. It is sufficient that this experience be undergone, for a work to qualify as tragedy. We have no right to impose the condition—which is the point of Mr. Bell's emphasis—that the ending must come out in a certain way, and inspire us with hopeful confidence in man and the divine goodness of the world. The function of tragedy is not to furnish us with the bromide of resignation nor with the stimulant of optimism. Certainly, resignation and reconciliation are one perspective tragedy may open to us. But this is incidental and contingent. It is the defeat, which is implicit in the resignation and makes it necessary—the defeat, coming after a peculiar kind of experience which conveys the feeling of human greatness—that is essential. If the particular perception obtained by the protagonist, as the result of his extreme experience, is one of bitter pessimism, or of the hopelessness of human life in a confused and meaningless universe, this may be a great truth, and even a solid foundation for true human greatness. Certainly, his experience is none the less tragic.

Tragic perception may be of different kinds, and it is most ironic to exclude pessimism from the range of its possibilities. The heart of the tragic vision, the split between the human world of aspiration and the conditions of existence in a non-human world, between will in its freedom and

necessity in its binding fate—can be laid open in this perspective as well as in another. Similarly, it is possible to write Christian tragedy, even though Christianity encloses an untragic world-view, perception of which brings tragedy to an end. If the tragic experience has been truly lived and portrayed, no more is needed for the work of art. Through it, the veil of appearance is torn and a fundamental reality is glimpsed. One experience may lead, through tragic assertion, peripeteia, and defeat of the will, to the view of an ultimate reality that redeems (but does not remove) the tragic reality of this life. Another may reveal, as in Sophocles, a mysterious order, unfathomable to us, that does not redeem the tragedy of our lives, but makes greatness possible through action and suffering, and in the end seems to achieve some purpose. A third experience may reveal, as in Euripides, a bleak universe without purpose and value, an existence in which man is an eternal stranger, a homeless exception to the universal. By making all depend on a redeeming species of perception, Mr. Bell describes one kind of tragedy and one issue of tragedy and shrinks its manifold vision to the narrowed perspective of his telescope.

Consequently, while I agree with Mr. Bell that Ibsen did not succeed in writing tragedies, it is not because his lives unfold in a universe without intrinsic value. On the contrary, discovery of the split between man's value, creativity, and a valueless universe is a discovery of widest tragic dimensions—one that may lead either to despairing apathy or to resolute and defiant greatness. Ibsen simply did not create tragic heroes or give his heroes the tragic experience of life.<sup>2</sup> Writers like Sartre, Malraux, and O'Neill, working also in a universe without intrinsic value, have written great tragic works. But Arthur Miller, who perhaps believes in a universe with order and value, has nonetheless failed to write tragedy, for he has not created the protagonist or the experience of which tragedy is made. Mr. Bell properly compares Marlowe's and Goethe's *Faust*. Marlowe has indeed written a "tragic history," for his Faust's hubristic assertion is followed by suffering, anagnorisis, and catastrophe. Goethe's Faust falls from tragic heights, as he shifts, explores, compromises, and accomplishes. Goethe's Faust cannot be damned, and his death is triumph and reward for learning to be at one with cosmic purposes.

2. The disillusion and bitterness for which Mr. Bell condemns Ibsen is true also of Hamlet and Othello. *Ghosts* is not tragic, because it meets none of the conditions of the tragic experience, and not because it makes us feel that "life *should* be beautiful." For again, this is precisely Hamlet's feeling, and the root of his troubles. But Mr. Bell does not perceive, in the quotation with which he closes his article, Hamlet's defeat and apathy, his resignation to the futility of human effort.

Mr. Bell excludes O'Neill from tragedy on still another ground. His heroines are criminal, selfish, tortured, exhausted, and leave us with no faith in man. Man is not ennobled, but depressed. Here we are facing not the question of radical pessimism, which I hold to be a legitimate perspective of tragedy, but that of the nature of the protagonist and the emotions he inspires in us. Here the pitfall we must avoid is the confusion—to be found to some degree even in Aristotle—between the ethical standing of the protagonist and his existential standing. The tragic hero must excite our admiration, but not necessarily in the ethical sense, which would make us want to be like him. Else Richard II and Macbeth would be villains, not heroes. The admiration required is the one which Corneille so clearly understood. We must marvel at what man is capable of, in good or in evil, as he pursues to the limit the possibilities of human existence. We admire his creative efforts (which may imply destruction) and his heroism, despite necessary failure. The "optimism" lies in faith in man's persistence, defiance, and will; but the underlying tone is the pessimism of the inevitable failure of his excessive purpose, the *décalage* between his aspirations and the world. Viewed in this light, the heroines of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Christine and Lavinia, pass the test of tragedy.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, Mr. Bell limits the scope of tragedy in still another way. Euripides he condemns for reflecting purely human feelings and disillusion. But the tragic experience can exert itself at many levels and in many directions. Tragedy may indeed engage the protagonist in Mr. Bell's favored direction—in conflict with cosmic laws. Yet it may unroll with equal justification in the individual's relation with the State, with any group or whole, or level of law. Tragedy may be particularly effective where only individuals are concerned, as in the portrayal of the excessive aspirations and the defeat of love, when man and woman attempt perfect union. The attempt at self-realization through another turns out, by the

3. In closing the doors of life behind her, Lavinia reaches the highest tragic stature. Proudly, she assumes full responsibility—*existentially*. She defiantly rejects ethical guilt or atonement, which a Raskolnikov, for instance, or Calderón's Segismundo accepts, losing their position as exceptional beings. In a valueless universe, in a night without stars, she asks no one to forgive her but herself. But she is perfectly aware of having trespassed beyond the limits life allows, aware of the necessity of her defeat, the impossibility of escape from "the infernal machine." After the greatness of carrying will to the confines of human possibilities, she has the greatness to reject death as the easier way, and seeks an even more tragic punishment. In tragedy, man achieves a victory, for he has dared to defy the unbeatable forces that oppose him; he emerges from the conflict the loser, but the greater in his existential stature. *Mourning Becomes Electra* leaves us with an unforgettable impression of Lavinia's indestructible integrity, of her invincibility even in defeat. She satisfies Bradley's requirement, that the tragic hero must have great qualities of mind and heart that have been used with wrong, so that we carry away a feeling of tragic waste.



*Notes and Discussion*

usual tragic process of peripeteia, to be a frustration; and yet, the law of life says we must make that attempt. It is, however, true that most tragedies will perforce reflect several levels at once, as human action is not isolated. This is the case in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the *Scarlet Letter*, or *Anna Karenina*. The greatest tragedies, like *Hamlet* and *Oedipus*, embrace the cosmos, the State, and the individual in their grand sweep. But, to return to Euripides—tragedy can only be “purely human,” since tragedy is a possible experience only to men. It may well, as we have said, involve the universal order, and indeed, is not this order inextricable from the “human tragedies” of *Hippolytus* and the *Bacchas*?

Only after much hesitation have I ventured to take issue with so brilliant and redoubtable an esthetician as Mr. Bell. But the notions that underlie his article have gone too long unchallenged, and it is time that other views were advanced.