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The Value of Poetry as Imitation in Tragedy

James Kulas

Dramatic imitation is the representation of human acts. But what Aristotle means by “men in action,” says S. H. Butcher, is not simply outward phenomena, but “everything that expresses the mental life, that reveals a rational personality.... Such actions are not necessarily processes extending over a period of time: they may realize themselves in a single moment; they may be summed up in a particular mood, a given situation.”¹ Not movements, then, nor even deeds in themselves are the stuff of dramatic imitation. It is mental and emotional processes — changes of mind and emotions, conflicts of beliefs and feelings, intensities in resolutions and passions — that provide the necessary causes for human effects and hence make for dramatic imitation.

When we are fascinated by the individual murder and unimpressed by large-scale military homicide we give weight to the fact that it is not action, however momentous in itself, that is important or significant, but only such action as is, or as seems to us, human and deliberative. We are not concerned about the fact of slaughter, but about the reasons for and results of this event. Often the startling crisis or catastrophe, as when Brutus kills Caesar or Macbeth Duncan, interests us only by highlighting the questions, “Why should he do this?” and “Where will it lead him?” Perhaps the dramatist’s fuller representation of the *before* and *after* of a crucial event, than of the event itself, signifies his awareness of man’s wonder about the beginning and end, the whence and whither, of life and his relative unconcern about the facts of his existence. “Why did it have to happen to me?” and “What am I going to do now?” are expressions of this attitude. Sometimes we are concerned with a question the very nature of which suggests the preoccupation of drama with internal rather than external moments: “Why does Thomas of Becket choose death?”; “Why does Hamlet not kill?” Thus, while we find that spectacle in drama has genuine appeal — an appeal that *attracts* the attention — yet it is in imitating mental conditions and emotional states that dramatic action consists, for this *concentrates* the attention.

Of what value is such imitation? Aristotle speaks both of the instruction and the pleasure to be gained from things imitated. As to the manner in which one derives pleasure and instruction from what Aristotle called a catharsis of the feelings of pity and fear, the statements of Butcher, if rather summary on the matter, are at least suggestive and clear. A man in the experience of dramatic imitation

passes out of himself. . . through the enlarging power of sympathy. He forgets

his own petty sufferings. He quits the narrow sphere of the individual. He identifies himself with the fate of mankind... The *katharsis*, viewed as a refining process, may have primarily implied no more to Aristotle than the expulsion of the disturbing element, namely, the pain, which enters into pity and fear when aroused by real objects. (*op. cit.*, p. 266)

That is, the spectator, by a mimetic process which consists in the identification of himself with another, is able to purge the pain from pity and fear and achieve a certain pleasure from the refinement of these feelings. One may say that pity and fear fester in the spirit of a vicarious sufferer like an irritant in a sore opened by contact with the sharp experience that we call tragedy. Even as physical pain gradually leaves the deep sore after beneficial agents have cleansed the infected blood and tissue, and healthy life continues, so too on a psychological plane, in time the turmoil and conflict reach a climax and then subside, and a state of serene well-being follows the waste and exhaustion.

However, this serene well-being which is a value of tragic imitation is not what we ordinarily understand by "pleasure." It is not something thrilling or ecstatic. The pleasure of participation in tragedy is subdued in tone and steadying in influence; it is unlike that received from the comic experience, which leaves one in a delighted and agitated mood.

Moreover, it is from the very nature of the tragic pleasure that the value of the instruction of imitation derives. Tragedy, by mirroring for us and stimulating in us the extravagance or disorder in thought and feeling of a sympathetic and great hero, prepares us to appreciate the causes that bring about painful effects. We are feelingfully shown what to avoid. As we view with distress a helpless King Lear, who had disinherited his youngest daughter Cordelia for not volubly proclaiming her love for him, now naively expecting kind treatment from false Regan after having been abused by his eldest daughter, Goneril, we believe that we will not easily take the path of weak judgement that leads from ingratitude to ingratitude to madness in a storm. Finally, however, when we see the aged Lear awakening from his "great rage" to humbly recognize his loving Cordelia, we are relieved and pacified by the vision of mercy and goodness after all. We learn from the profoundly subdued and oceanically calm voices and gestures in the reconciliation scene in *King Lear*, even as from the atonement scene in *Oedipus Rex*, the needs and uses of suffering and sacrifice.

By understanding the nature of tragic imitation and accepting its values, we may come to a recognition of the importance of poetry in such an experience. Tragic imitation, we say, is largely a matter of serious representation of conflicting or agitated states of mind and feeling. And, says T. S. Eliot, "the human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse."² Moreover, he adds, "what makes [poetry] most dramatic is what makes it most poetic." (p. xx) Why is this so? Eliot leaves it to the neurologists to explain how emotions and rhythm are related. Granting, however, the appearance of the greatest poetry of Shakespeare in the greatest scenes of his best plays — and this, in Eliot's words, "not by a concurrence of two activities, but by the full expansion of one and the same activity," (p. xx) — one may say that great tragedy is great because its poetry represents more nearly than can prose the

states of internal conflict and resolution in our most significant human acts.

The question then becomes, "How does poetry make great drama?" If imitation is the nature of drama, and language and action its form, we should expect an analysis of the substance called poetic drama to account for these elements.

Poetry, says Dr. Johnson, is "the art which joins pleasure to truth by calling imagination to the aid of reason."³ If the value of dramatic imitation lies in its power to give pleasure and truth, and if Dr. Johnson's definition is accepted, the values of these two arts are the same. Can we go a step further and claim for poetry what we require of drama, that it show action? So we must do, if we hold to what we have claimed for dramatic action. It represents conflict that is either of or within the soul that is confronting a grave problem which appears insoluble.

Is this demonstrable for poetry? While admitting that quotation is not proof, we hear Eliot asking, rhetorically: "Who is more dramatic than Homer or Dante? We are human beings, and in what are we more interested than in human actions and human attitudes? Even when he assaults, and with supreme mastery, the divine mystery, does not Dante engage us in the question of the human attitude towards this mystery — which is dramatic?" (p. xix)

If it be objected, in a practical definition of drama, that the *Iliad* and the *Divina Commedia* are notactable, and hence not dramatic, may not one retort that the reasons for this are circumstantial rather than essential ones?: that we do not know classical Greek and medieval Italian, that the works are too long to provide catharsis, that the poetic excellence in them is not sustained. The first of these criticisms is not to be laid against the poems, the second may mean merely that passages of description and incidental action are not dramatic, and the third tells us only that even a genius cannot write great poetry for thousands of consecutive lines. The reason why *Oedipus Rex* succeeds in a prose translation in modern production, while parts of the *Iliad* might not succeed, is perhaps due chiefly to the fact that the poet Yeats has made his prose virtually poetry. Matthew Arnold's well-known dictum applies to Yeats's *Oedipus*: great poetry results when "a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with simplicity and severity a serious subject." Also, one must also allow something to the artist or "poet" in a gifted actor that sometimes enables him to raise good prose to the heights of poetry. Even the film production of Yeats's *Oedipus Rex* makes clear, through such techniques as gestures, pauses and voice tones, how much a drama may depend upon the actors for its fullest revelation.

A look at some of the poetry of the first two books of *Paradise Lost* may find something of its drama in poetry, and we may see, too, the affinity between poetic-dramatic imitation and truth. After a kind of prologue which tells the subject and sets the scene ("Satan with his Angels lying on the burning lake, thunderstruck and astonished"), Satan begins the drama by addressing Beelzebub:

"If thou beest he — but O, how fallen! how changed
From him, who, in the happy realms of light,
Clothed in transcendent brightness, didst outshine
Myriads though bright! — if he, whom mutual league,
United thoughts and

counsels, equal hope And hazard in the glorious enterprise, Joined with me
once, now misery hath joined In equal ruin; into what pit, thou seest, From
what height fallen!" (I, 84-92)

For all that might be said about the poetic devices of these lines — especially variations of the iambic rhythm and internal and final pauses—what strikes the spectator is not their art but their drama. That is, poetry and action here are one, and drama is great because of the union. A prose paraphrase of what is “happening” within the hero would destroy or much weaken the poetry-*cum*-drama. As one instance, while the exclamations and self-interruptions might be carried over in a prose rendering, their intensity and nuances of tone would falter or fail outside their vehicle of controlled and controlling pentameters. No sensitive rendering of the lines can fail to make clear that we have, as Milton gave it, the only possible verbal patterns to express the character of a once-magnificent being suddenly appalled by a tragic fall in fortune. Milton’s hero *acts*, in thought and feeling, as Shakespeare’s might.

On the shore the hosts of Satan’s followers assemble in despair, but are soon roused to draw their “Millions of flaming swords” upon their leader’s shout: “War then, war/Open or understood, must be resolved.” Mammon’s crew heap up towering Pandemonium atop a hill, and when all are gathered within, the chiefs debate what should be their course of action. Moloch seps forward:

“My sentence is for open war . . .
.....What can be worse
Than to dwell here, driven out from bliss, condemned
In this abhorred deep to utter woe;
Where pain of unextinguishable fire
Must exercise us, without hope of end,
The vassals of his anger, when the scourge
Inexorable, and the torturing hour,
Calls us to penance?” (II, 51, 83-90)

The long question is a groan of agony, desperation, and perhaps unconscious pleading for another way out. But Belial is no less dramatic, and exclaims in frenzied imagination that worse is indeed possible. What if, he asks, we fail in battle? We shall be

“Caught in a fiery tempest, shall be hurled.
Each on his rock transfixed, the sport and prey
Of racking whirlwinds, or for ever sunk
Under yon boiling ocean, wrapt in chains,
There to converse with everlasting groans,
Unrespited, unpitied, unreprieved,
Ages of hopeless end!” (II, 180-6)

Mammon also advises resignation, suggesting that they build an empire of gold. The vast murmur of approval which follows his appeal is at once hushed when Satan rises to tell them of his hope to ruin God’s plan for the new race of mankind. Hearing him, “joy/Sparkled in

all their eyes.” Satan undertakes the task, and at hell-gates he meets his horrible bride Sin and their offspring Death. Sin prevents a battle between father and son, and after hearing Satan’s design, she tells him that the Almighty has forbidden her to unlock the gates. Yet, she considers,

“...what owe I to his commands above,
 Who hates me, and hath hither thrust me down
 Into this gloom of Tartarus profound,
 To sit in hateful office here confined,
 Inhabitant of Heaven and heavenly-born,
 Here in perpetual agony and pain,
 With terrors and with clamours compassed round
 Of mine own brood, that on my bowels feed?
 Thou art my father, thou my author, thou
 My being gav’st me; whom should I obey
 But thee? whom follow? thou wilt bring me soon
 To that new world of light and bliss, among
 The gods who live at ease, where I shall reign
 At thy right hand voluptuous, as beseems
 Thy daughter and thy darling, without end.” (II, 856-70)

The words of Sin are dramatic poetry, as her voice ranges from bitterness at piercing loss (she was born in heaven of Satan’s pride), through a sense of debased and agonized maternity, followed by piteous awareness of filial dependency; she ends with a lustful, incestuous longing to be Satan’s child and queen on earth.

Leaving hell, Satan “swims, or sinks, or wades, or creeps, or flies” his way through to the throne of Chaos, who, after Satan tells him, “yours be th’advantage all” of the endeavor, “mine the revenge,” answers “Go, and speed; / Havoc, and spoil, and ruin, are my gain.”

This cursory survey of the beginning of *Paradise Lost* may suggest, by the nature and spirit of the lines quoted, that some of the best poetry of the poem is highly dramatic. For from the words of Satan, Moloch, Belial and Sin we gain not only that effect of pleasure joined to truth by the impassioned welding of imagination and reason, but we thrill also in each case to the revelation of some inner plight: “Into what pit, thou seest”; “What can be worse / Than to dwell here”; “Unrespited, unpitied, unreprieved”; “Who hates me, and hath hither thrust me down.” And it is this synthesis of imaginative vigor and psychological tension that makes the truth of imitation that results in the most compelling portrayal of human action called tragic drama.

To anticipate a possible objection: one can no more object to considering the opening of *Paradise Lost* as drama on the grounds of the unhumanness of its aspiring hero and the fantasy of its events than one can object to the ambitious fantasy-ridden Shakespearean hero Macbeth, who believes in witches and “sees” a dagger and ghosts, and who at last resembles Satan also in viciousness and despair. Many readers to their distress have found perhaps as

much of themselves in Satan as in Macbeth. Were it not for the dramatic poetry with which each character is enlivened, it might be hard to say what alchemy of art has resulted in our feeling much the same towards two such similarly motivated (ambition-driven) but highly unique heroes. ("Hero," used for Satan, is of course ironic.)

The value of such poetic drama as we find in *Paradise Lost* is of the same nature as that which we derive from *King Lear* or from *Oedipus Rex*. Satan in agony yet in wrath, leading his hordes of minions, impatiently hearing out his chiefs, taking at last his destiny—the effects of his choice — upon himself, should remind us in his grand style of our more familiar tragic heroes. It does us no credit to say that we feel even a bit of pity for the colossal anarchist and deceiver, but there is much in Milton's depiction of Satan as sufferer that makes it difficult for us to entirely deny this emotion. That there is great terror for us in much of Satan's mien and behavior is certain. And it is in the agitated emotions with which we react to the poetic drama of the early stages of the narrative that we detect its most striking likeness to tragedy.

True, we never come in *Paradise Lost* to the catharsis of traditional tragedy. Yet was it not, perhaps, towards this value, the emotional equilibrium and rest after duress that we desire from great drama, that Milton was striving? His aim faltered only because, when he shifted his scene in *Paradise Regained* to heaven, he wrote comparatively undramatic poetry about the deities, spirits alien to us. Of the turmoil of soul which must precede catharsis, Milton affords us full measure, but the calm and fullness of tragic repose he wished to withhold until God's promises are delivered to Adam and Eve — much too late to serve as a pacifier after the purge, which, in fact, we are never given.

That our generation does not produce tragic drama that is great is due to various causes. However, reports that modern audiences have occasionally undergone the cathartic experience at performances of past masterpieces suggest that it is not entirely the society which is at fault. The lack of modern tragic characters is partly explained by the fact that our playwrights give us mean-natured Willy Lomans and too-submissive Electras. Yet it is true that today's dominant societies have been educated to affluence rather than to wisdom, that our aims are shortsighted instead of far-reaching, that we are unwilling (or merely disinclined?) to venture, and hence suffer, greatly. Moreover, our century of wars and film violence has dulled our sympathies and fears, so that we fall and rise, struggle and search, in a world that is a hospital, not a wild heath where an old King Lear is raving and crying and "travailing for perfection."⁴

Finally, the fault is that our dramatists are not sufficiently poets. Dramatic imitation becomes three-dimensional when it honestly and sensitively shows the inner struggles of mankind. It needs the timeless fourth dimension of poetic genius to charge that reality with imitation that is enthralling as well as credible, with truth that is passionate as well as real. Yet if we cannot carry away from our twentieth-century drama that enlightened serenity we receive from older tragedy, we take not only solace but inspiration in knowing that while a Sophocles, a Shakespeare and a Milton do not come frequently, they come for all time.

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- 1) *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1902), pp. 123-4.
- 2) In "Dialogue on Poetic Drama," *Of Dramatick Poesie: An Essay by John Dryden* (London: Etchells and Macdonald, 1928), p. xv.
- 3) "Life of Milton," *The Lives of the English Poets*.
- 4) The quotation is from A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) (London: Macmillan Student Editions, 1983), p. 29.