

## On the Future of Tragedy, Albert Camus

### On the Future of Tragedy<sup>1</sup>

An oriental wise man always used to ask in his prayers that God spare him from living in an interesting age. Our age is extremely interesting, that is to say, it is tragic. To purge us of our miseries, do we at least have a theater suited to our time or can we hope to have one? In other words, is modern tragedy possible? This is the question I would like to consider today.

But is it a reasonable question? Isn't it the same type of question as: "Will we have good government?" or "Will our authors grow modest?" or again, "Will the rich soon share their fortunes with the poor?"—interesting questions, no doubt, but ones that lead to reverie rather than to thought.

I don't think so. I believe, and for two reasons, that one can legitimately raise the question of modern tragedy. First, great periods of tragic art occur, in history, during centuries of crucial change, at moments when the lives of whole peoples are heavy both with glory and with menace, when the future is uncertain and the present dramatic. Aeschylus, after all, fought in two wars, and Shakespeare was alive during quite a remarkable succession of horrors.

Both, moreover, stand at a kind of dangerous turning point in the history of their civilizations. It is worth noting that in thirty centuries of Western history, from the Dorians to the atomic bomb, there have been only two periods of tragic art, both of them narrowly confined in both time and space. The first was Greek and presents remarkable unity, lasting a century, from Aeschylus to Euripides. The second lasted scarcely longer, flourishing in the countries bordering the edge of western Europe.

Too little has been made of the fact that the magnificent explosions of the Elizabethan theater, the Spanish theater of the Golden Age, and French seventeenth-century tragedy are practically contemporary with one another. When Shakespeare died, Lope de Vega was fifty four and had already had a large number of his plays performed; Calderón and Corneille were alive.

Finally, there is no more distance in time between Shakespeare and Racine than between Aeschylus and Euripides. Historically, at least, we can consider them a single magnificent flowering, though with differing aesthetics, of the Renaissance, born in the inspired disorder of the Elizabethan stage and ending with formal perfection in French tragedy. Almost twenty centuries separate these two tragic moments.

During these twenty centuries, there was nothing, nothing, except Christian mystery plays, which may be called dramatic but which, for reasons I shall explain, cannot be considered tragic. We can therefore say that these were very exceptional times, which should by their very peculiarity tell us something about the conditions for tragic expression.

I think this is a fascinating subject for study, one that should be thoroughly and patiently pursued by real historians. But this is not within my competence and I would simply like to enlarge on what I think about it as a man of the theater.

Looking at the movement of ideas in these two periods, as well as at the tragic works that were written at the time, I find one constantly recurring factor. Both periods mark a transition from forms of cosmic thought impregnated with the notion of divinity and holiness to forms inspired by individualistic and rationalist concepts. The movement from Aeschylus to Euripides is, roughly speaking, the development from the great pre-Socratic thinkers to Socrates himself (Socrates, who was scornful of tragedy, made an exception for Euripides).

Similarly, from Shakespeare to Corneille we go from a world of dark and mysterious forces, which is still the Middle Ages, to the universe of individual values affirmed and maintained by the human will and by reason (almost all the sacrifices in Racine are motivated by reason).

It is the same transition, in short, that links the passionate theologians of the Middle Ages to Descartes. Although the evolution is more clearly visible in Greece, because it is simpler and limited to one place, it is the same in both cases.

Each time, historically, the individual frees himself little by little from a body of sacred concepts and stands face to face with the ancient world of terror and devotion. Each time, literarily, the works move from ritual tragedy and from almost religious celebration to psychological tragedy. And each time the final triumph of individual reason, in the fourth century in Greece and in the eighteenth century in Europe, causes the literature of tragedy to dry up for centuries.

What can we draw from these observations on the subject that concerns us? First of all, the very general remark that the tragic age always seems to coincide with an evolution in which man, consciously or not, frees himself from an older form of civilization and finds that he has broken away from it without yet having found a new form that satisfies him. It seems to me that we, in 1955, have reached this stage, and can therefore ask whether this inner anguish will find tragic expression in our world.

However, the twenty centuries separating Euripides from Shakespeare should encourage us to be prudent. After all, tragedy is one of the rarest of flowers, and there is only the slimmest chance that we shall see it bloom in our own day.

But there is another reason that encourages us to wonder about this chance, a very particular phenomenon that we have been able to observe in France for some thirty years now, which began with the reform carried out by Jacques Copeau.<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon is the advent of writers to the theater, which up to then had been the exclusive domain of theatrical brokers and business interests.

The interference of writers has led to the resurrection of the tragic forms that tend to put dramatic art back in its rightful place, at the summit of the literary arts. Before Copeau (except for Claudel, whom nobody performed) the privileged place for theatrical sacrifices in France was the double bed. When the play was particularly successful, the sacrifices multiplied, and the beds as well. In short, it was a business, like so many others, in which the price of everything was marked with, if I may say so, the mark of the beast. This, moreover, is what Copeau used to say about it:

... If we are asked what feeling inspires us, what passion urges, compels, forces, and finally overwhelms us, it is this: indignation. The frantic industrialization that, more cynically every day, degrades the French stage and makes the educated public turn away from it; the monopolization of most of our theaters by a handful of entertainers hired by shameless merchants; everywhere, and even in places where great traditions ought to preserve some modesty, the same spirit of ham acting and commercial speculation, the same vulgarity; everywhere bluff and every conceivable kind of exaggeration and exhibitionism feed like parasites on a dying art, itself now no longer even mentioned; everywhere the same flabbiness, disorder, indiscipline, ignorance and stupidity, the same contempt for the creator, the same hatred of beauty; an ever more vain and stupid output of plays, ever more indulgent critics, and ever more misguided public taste: these are what inspire our indignation and revolt.

Since this magnificent protest, followed by the creation of the Vieux-Colombier, the theater in France, for which we are indebted to Copeau, has gradually recovered its claim to nobility, that is to say, it has found a style. Gide, Martin du Gard, Giraudoux, Montherlant, Claudel, and so many others have restored a glory and ambitions that had disappeared a century ago.

At the same time a movement of ideas and reflections on the theater, whose most significant product is Antonin Artaud's fine book *Le Théâtre et son double*,<sup>3</sup> and the influence of such foreign theoreticians as Gordon Craig<sup>4</sup> and Appia, have once more brought the tragic dimension to center stage in our thoughts.

By bringing all these observations together, perhaps I can clearly define the problem I would like to discuss for you. Our time coincides with a drama in civilization which might today, as it did in the past, favor tragic modes of expression. At the same time many writers, in France and elsewhere, are engrossed in creating a tragedy for our epoch. Is this a reasonable dream, is this enterprise possible, and under what conditions?

This is the timely question, I believe, for all those who find in the theater the excitement of a second life. Of course, no one today is in a position to give so definite a reply to this question as: "Conditions favorable. Tragedy to follow." I shall therefore limit myself to a few suggestions about this great hope that inspires men of culture in the West.

First of all, what is a tragedy? The problem of defining "the tragic" has greatly occupied both literary historians and writers themselves, although no formula has ever received universal agreement. Without claiming to solve a problem that so many thinkers hesitate over, at least we can proceed by comparison and try to see, for example, how tragedy differs from drama or melodrama. This is what seems to me the difference: the forces confronting each other in tragedy are equally legitimate, equally justified.

In melodramas or dramas, on the other hand, only one force is legitimate. In other words, tragedy is ambiguous and drama simple-minded. In the former, each force is at the same time both good and bad. In the latter, one is good and the other evil (which is why, in our day and age, propaganda plays are nothing but the resurrection of melodrama). Antigone is right, but Creon is not wrong. Similarly, Prometheus is both just and unjust, and Zeus who pitilessly oppresses him also has right on his side. Melodrama could thus be summed up by saying: "Only one is just and justifiable," while the perfect tragic formula would be: "All can be justified, no one is just." This is why the chorus in classical tragedies generally advises prudence.

For the chorus knows that up to a certain limit everyone is right and that the person who, from blindness or passion, oversteps this limit is heading for catastrophe if he persists in his desire to assert a right he thinks he alone possesses. The constant theme of classical tragedy, therefore, is the limit that must not be transgressed. On either side of this limit equally legitimate forces meet in quivering and endless confrontation. To make a mistake about this limit, to try to destroy the balance, is to perish.

The idea of a limit no one should overstep, beyond which lies death or disaster, also recurs in *Macbeth* and *Phèdre*, though in a less pure form than in Greek tragedy. This explains, finally, why the ideal drama, like Romantic drama, is first and foremost movement and action, since what it represents is the struggle between good and evil and the different incidents in this struggle.

The ideal tragedy, on the other hand, and especially Greek tragedy, is first and foremost tension, since it is the conflict, in a frenzied immobility, between two powers, each of which wears the double mask of good and evil. It is of course true that between these two extreme types of tragedy and melodrama, dramatic literature offers all the intermediary stages.

But if we restrict ourselves to the pure forms, what are the two forces, in Greek classical tragedy for example, that enter into conflict? If we take *Prometheus Bound* as typical of this kind of tragedy, we can say that there is, on the one hand, man and his desire for power, and on the other, the divine principle reflected by the world.

Tragedy occurs when man, through pride (or even through stupidity as in the case of Ajax) enters into conflict with the divine order, personified by a god or incarnated in society. And the more justified his revolt and the more necessary this order, the greater the tragedy that stems from the conflict.

Consequently, everything within a tragedy that tries to destroy this balance destroys the tragedy itself. If the divine order cannot be called into question and admits only sin and repentance, there is no tragedy. There can only be mysteries or parables, or again what the Spaniards call acts of faith or sacramental acts, that is to say, spectacles in which the one truth that exists is solemnly proclaimed.

It is thus possible to have religious drama but not religious tragedy. This explains the silence of tragedy up to the Renaissance. Christianity plunges the whole of the universe, man and the world, into the divine order. Hence there is no tension between the world and the religious principle, but, at the most, ignorance, together with the difficulty of freeing man from the flesh, of renouncing his passions in order to embrace spiritual truth.

Perhaps there has been only one Christian tragedy in history. It was celebrated on Golgotha during one imperceptible instant, at the moment of: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" This fleeting doubt, and this doubt alone, consecrated the ambiguity of a tragic situation. The divinity of Christ has never been doubted since.

The mass, which daily consecrates this divinity, is the real form religious theater takes in the West. It is not invention, but repetition. On the other hand, everything that frees the individual and makes the universe submit to his wholly human law, especially by the denial of the mystery of existence, once again destroys tragedy. Atheistic or rationalist tragedy is thus equally impossible. If all is mystery, there is no tragedy.

If all is reason, the same thing happens. Tragedy is born between light and darkness and rises from the struggle between them. And this is understandable. In both religious and atheistic drama, the problem has in fact already been solved. In the ideal tragedy, just the opposite, it has not been solved. The hero rebels and rejects the order that oppresses him, while the divine power, by its oppression, affirms itself exactly to the same extent as it is denied. In other words, revolt alone is not enough to make a tragedy.

Neither is the affirmation of the divine order. Both a revolt and an order are necessary, the one supporting the other, and each reinforcing the other with its own strength. There is no Oedipus without the destiny summed up by the oracle. But the destiny would not have all its fatality if Oedipus did not refuse it. And if tragedy ends in death or punishment, it is important to note that what is punished is not the crime itself but the blindness of the hero who has denied balance and tension.

I am talking, of course, of the ideal tragic situation. Aeschylus, for example, who remains close to the religious and Dionysiac origins of tragedy, granted Prometheus forgiveness in the last section of the trilogy; the Furies are replaced by the Kindly Ones. But in Sophocles the balance is most of the time scrupulously maintained, and it is in this respect that he is the greatest tragedian of all time.

Euripides, on the other hand, will upset the tragic balance by concentrating on the individual and on psychology. He is thus a forerunner of individualistic drama, that is to say, of the decadence of tragedy. Similarly, the great Shakespearean tragedies are still rooted in a kind of vast cosmic mystery that puts up an obscure resistance to the undertakings of its passionate individuals, while Corneille ensures the triumph of the individual ethic and by his very perfection announces the end of the genre.

People have thus been able to write that tragedy swings between the two poles of

extreme nihilism and unlimited hope. For me, nothing is more true. The hero denies the order that strikes him down, and the divine order strikes because it is denied. Both thus assert their existence at the very moment when this existence is called into question. The chorus draws the lesson, which is that there is an order, that this order can be painful, but that it is still worse not to recognize that it exists.

The only purification comes from denying and excluding nothing, and thus accepting the mystery of existence, the limitations of man—in short, the order where men know without knowing. Oedipus says "All is well," when his eyes have been torn out. Henceforth he knows, although he never sees again. His darkness is filled with light, and this face with its dead eyes shines with the highest lesson of the tragic universe. What can be drawn from these observations?

A suggestion and a working hypothesis, nothing more. It seems in fact that tragedy is born in the West each time the pendulum of civilization is half way between a sacred society and a society built around man. On two occasions, twenty centuries apart, we find a struggle between a world that is still interpreted in a sacred context and men who are already committed to their individuality, that is to say, armed with the power to question.

In both cases, the individual increasingly asserts himself, the balance is gradually destroyed, and the tragic spirit finally falls silent. When Nietzsche accuses Socrates of having dug the grave of ancient tragedy, he is right up to a certain point—to exactly the same extent that it is true to say of Descartes that he marks the end of the tragic movement born in the Renaissance. At the time of the Renaissance, the traditional Christian universe is called into question by the Reformation, the discovery of the world, and the flowering of the scientific spirit.

Gradually, the individual rises against the sacred order of things and against destiny. Then Shakespeare throws his passionate creatures against the simultaneously evil and just order of the world. Death and pity sweep across the stage and once again the final words of tragedy ring out: "A higher life is born of my despair." Then the pendulum moves increasingly in the opposite direction. Racine and French tragedy carry the tragic movement to its conclusion with the perfection of chamber music.

Armed with Cartesianism and the scientific spirit, triumphant reason then proclaims the rights of the individual and empties the stage: tragedy descends into the street with the bloody scaffolds of the Revolution. No tragedies, therefore, will spring from romanticism, but only dramas, and among them, only Kleist's or Schiller's reach true greatness.

Man is alone, and thus confronted with nothing but himself. He ceases to be a tragic figure and becomes an adventurer; dramas and the novel will depict him better than any other art. The spirit of tragedy consequently disappears until our own day, when the most monstrous wars have inspired not a single tragic poet.

What then leads one to hope for a renaissance of tragedy among us? If my hypothesis is valid, our only reason for hope is that individualism is visibly changing today and that beneath the pressures of history, little by little the individual is recognizing his limits.

The world that the eighteenth-century individual thought he could conquer and transform by reason and science has in fact taken shape, but it's a monstrous one. Rational and excessive at one and the same time, it is the world of history. But at this degree of hubris, history has put on the mask of destiny. Man doubts whether he can conquer history; all he can do is struggle within it.

In a curious paradox, humanity has refashioned a hostile destiny with the very weapons it used to reject fatality. After having defied human reign, man turns once more against this new god. He is struggling, as warrior and refugee at the

same time, torn between absolute hope and final doubt. He lives in a tragic climate. Perhaps this explains why tragedy may seek a renaissance. Today, man proclaims his revolt, knowing this revolt has limits, demands liberty though he is subject to necessity; this contradictory man, torn, conscious henceforth of human and historical ambiguity, is the tragic man.

Perhaps he is striding toward the formulation of his own tragedy, which will be reached on the day when All is well. And what can in fact be observed in the French dramatic renaissance are the first tentative movements in this direction. Our dramatists are looking for a tragic language because no tragedy can exist without a language, and because this language is all the more difficult to formulate when it must reflect the contradictions of the tragic situation. It must be both hieratic and familiar, barbarous and learned, mysterious and clear, haughty and pitiful.

In quest of this language, our writers have thus gone back instinctively to its sources, that is to say, to the tragic epochs I have mentioned. So we have seen Greek tragedy reborn in our country, but in the only forms possible to highly individualistic minds—either derision or highly mannered literary transposition. That is to say, humor and fantasy, since comedy alone is in the individual realm. Two good examples of this attitude are provided in Gide's *Oedipe* or Giraudoux's *La Guerre de Troie*.

[reads]5

What is also visible in France is an effort to reintroduce the language of religion to the stage. A logical thing to do. But this had to be done by classical religious images, while the problem of modern tragedy lies precisely in the need to create new sacred images. So we have seen either a kind of pastiche, in both style and sentiment, as in Montherlant's *Port Royal*, which is at the moment triumphing in Paris.

[reads]

or the resurrection of authentic Christian sentiments, as in the admirable *Portage de midi*.

[reads]

But here we can see just how the religious theater is not tragic: it is not a theater in which the creature and creation are pitted one against the other, but a theater in which men abandon their love for what is human. In a way, Claudel's works before his conversion, such as *Tête d'Or* or *La Ville* are more significant for our purposes. But however that may be, religious theater always precedes tragedy. In a way, it anticipates it. So it is not surprising that the dramatic work in which the style, if not the situation, is already perceptibly tragic should be Henry de Montherlant's *Le Maître de Santiago*, from which I should now like to read the two principal scenes:

[reads]

I find authentic tension in a work like this, although it is slightly rhetorical and, above all, highly individualistic. But I feel that a tragic language is taking shape in it and that this language gives us more than does the play itself. In any case, if the attempts and researches that I have tried to present to you through some of their most outstanding examples do not give you the certainty that a dramatic renaissance is possible, they do at least leave us with this hope.

The path still to be traveled must first of all be made by our Society itself, in search of a synthesis between liberty and necessity, and by each of us. We must keep alive our power of revolt without yielding to our power of negation. If we can pay this price, the tragic sensibility that is taking shape in our time will flourish and find its expression. This amounts to saying that the real modern tragedy is the one that I cannot read to you, because it does not yet exist. To be born, it needs our patience and a genius.

My only aim has been to make you sense that there does exist in modern French

dramatic art a kind of tragic nebula within which various nuclei are beginning to coagulate. A cosmic storm may, of course, sweep the nebula away, along with its future planets. But if this movement continues despite the storms of time, these promises will bear their fruit and the West will perhaps experience a renaissance of the tragic theater.

It is certainly in preparation everywhere. Nevertheless, and I say this without nationalism (I love my country too much to be a nationalist), it is in France that the first signs of such a renaissance are visible. In France, of course, but I have surely said enough to make you share my conviction that the model, and the inexhaustible inspiration, remains for us the genius of Greece. To express to you both this hope and a double gratitude, first of all the one French writers feel for Greece, their common fatherland, and secondly my own gratitude for the welcome you have given us, I can find no better way of ending this lecture than reading you an extract from the magnificent and learnedly barbarous transposition that Paul Claudel has made of Aeschylus's Agamemnon, in which our two languages are mutually transfigured into one wondrous and inimitable tongue.

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Lecture delivered in Athens, 1955

1 Like his early association with the Théâtre de l'Equipe when he lived in Algiers, and his later adaptations of Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun and Dostoevski's The Possessed, this lecture demonstrates the continuity of Camus's interest in the theater and his concern for its wider implications. As he points out in a program note to the adaptation of Requiem for a Nun (this page–this page), his own ambition in the theater was to write a modern tragedy.

2 Jacques Copeau (1878–1949) was one of the outstanding theatrical directors of the twentieth century. After an initial association with Antoine and the realism of the Théâtre libre, he founded his own theater, the Vieux-Colombier, in 1913. There he was able to put into practice his idea that the staging of a play should be subordinated to the meaning of the text and not to the ambition of the famous actor performing the main part. His concept of drama as involving the active participation of the audience as well as the combined efforts of the actors, the director, and the designer is already visible in Camus's work in 1936, in the play Révolte dans les Asturies. –P.T.

3 Antonin Artaud's *Le Théâtre et son double* was published in 1938. Artaud puts forward the view that the Western theater is wrong to attempt an imitation of life. The true aim of the theater, he argues, should be to shock the spectator into an awareness of the violence that lies beneath civilization and the importance of man's more primitive instincts. Artaud began his career as a member of the surrealist movement, and his views have recently found a possibly accidental echo in the plays of Jean Genet—see Robert Brustein: *The Theatre of Revolt* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Co.; 1962). In her study of Camus's work, Professor Germaine Brée also discusses a possible influence of Artaud's ideas on *La Peste* (see Camus [Rutgers University Press; 1959], p. 116). –P.T.

4 Arthur Gordon Craig (1872–1966). Son of Ellen Terry, and a famous theatrical designer and director. In 1908 he founded *The Mask*, in Florence, and ran a school of acting. Like Copeau, he tended to increase the importance of the director at the expense of the "star" actor, and, like Artaud, he was extremely interested in Oriental forms of drama. –P.T.

5 Unfortunately, the French text does not show what passages Camus read during the lecture. –P.T.

The end