The Tragic Vision

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The Tragic Vision: The Confrontation of Extremity.

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I believe it was in early 1949, while I was teaching at Kenyon College, that I first took hold of the body of ideas that moved me to do this volume. It happened, quite suddenly it seemed, while I was listening to a paper being delivered by my colleague, the late Philip Blair Rice, and by way of reaction against it. The paper, later printed in *The Kenyon Review* (Spring, 1949), was entitled “The Merging Parallels: Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*.” During his discussion of the novel, he spoke in general terms and somewhat condescendingly about the “equilibrists on the non-Euclidean parallels”—those “amphibious men of the galaxies and the sea-depths . . . obsessed with the angelic and demonic, in various mixtures.” And while conceding the debt we owe such equilibrists as Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Kafka, he rather spoke for the healthier claims he found in Mann’s complex humanism; a humanism that is broadened and somewhat spiritualized, it is true, but still one that Rice saw as traditionally liberal, democratic, naturalistic, classically positive. As for the Kierkegaards, Dostoevskys, and Kafkas, they had taught us their lesson and—thanks also to Mann—they had unsuperficialized humanism. But now, having said their piece, they were to get off the stage. And we, seeing their obsolescence but remembering them gratefully, were to “give the equilibrists something less than total homage for a while, in order to cultivate a better-proportioned doctrine.”

Of course, I felt that Rice’s Mann was not my Mann, that mine had begun by assuming the bankruptcy of this kind of
humanism. But far more important, I remember perceiving in
this moving plea a perhaps unconscious but forceful onslaught
on our sense for the tragic that threatened to destroy it utterly.
For I could not see how the tragic is conceivable without the
dual vision that lies at its very center. While I conceded that
high tragedy does not finally come to rest in the sickness and the
vision that Rice thought of as equilibrism, I would not for a
moment believe that the pleasant optimism of contemporary
naturalism could, within its shallows, provide for the resolution
of the tragic vision; a resolution that an older culture had found
in the profundity of a cosmic order at once based in religious
belief and sanctioning community and its values. And with these
reflections about the values as well as the dangers of equilibrism
and about its relations to a social morality that can permit life
to be managed, I was launched on what was to grow into this
book.

Although Existentialism and Personalism in general and
Kierkegaard in particular will be seen to have considerable im-
portance in this study, most of my acquaintance with them came
after rather than before my entry upon my subject. Thus they
lent their support to the notions that underlie my work here, al-
though they did not give me initial access to them: they opened
up new avenues within a general direction I had begun to ex-
plore on my own before calling upon their aid. For example, just
about all my work on Conrad was done, substantially in the form
in which it appears in this book, prior to my acquaintance with
them.

I would, then, answer in an obvious way the obvious charge
that I have trimmed the novels I have treated to my own terms
by converting their authors into unconscious Existentialists. I
would turn the logical priority around and suggest, rather, that
it is works like these and the vision that informs them that created
the dramatic categories out of which emerged Existentialism and
the receptive cultural psychology that could make Existentialism
fashionable. As usual, formal philosophy followed upon the dis-
coveries of the literary imagination, systematizing the vision
literature made available. And as usual, in recent European Existenti­alism the fullness of vision has been thinned in its philosophical reductions—always the price of discursive accessibility.

I must therefore claim that, rather than Existentialism, it was the direction of my pursuits in literary theory—however unrelated this field may seem to be to the sort of thematic analysis of novels I engage in here—that initially oriented my approach. In *The New Apologists for Poetry* I tried to work toward an aesthetics of poetry that I later felt found its thematic counterpart in the explorations of this volume. In the final chapter of what follows I specifically examine the analogies and the relations between my view of the complexities of poetic discourse and my view of the existential immediacy of moral experience. What I tried in *The New Apologists* to show as a necessity of literary form will there come to be seen as merely an aesthetic reflection of what many writers have taken as the immediate given-ness of moral existence. Thus, as I show in that chapter, this aesthetic, for all its seeming purity, can, through thematic analysis, be pushed back—perhaps where it belongs—into a metaphysic. And the new study of “thematics,” as it is defined in my final chapter, reveals it to be a branch—and a telling branch—of pure aesthetics. This projection of my aesthetic onto thematics finds in the tragic vision its natural subject, for it is the tragic vision that this metaphysic must be designed to accommodate. In some ways, then, despite what may seem to be profound differences between them in subject, method, and objective, I look upon this volume as being a related structure—if not a sequel—to my *New Apologists* rather than an independent work indicating for me a radically new direction.

It will be clear to the reader that my primary interest is in the detailed consideration of specific novels rather than in the literary or intellectual careers of their authors, and that my interest in the novels is dictated by the extent to which they serve my theoretical scheme—although I hope that in the interest of empirical honesty I have permitted this scheme to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate their unique complexities rather than
indifferently to swallow them whole. The scheme dictates that the chapters proceed from the more obvious to the less obvious; that is, from novels which are from my point of view rather easy to account for to those which are more crucial to my case even as they are more difficult. I move from clearly vicious protagonists, though even these demonstrate the values of tragic visionaries in general, to those whose motives are more nearly pure, though they end by retaining the "tragic" qualification as well. Put another way, I move from the self-conscious demon who is at war with the moral idea to the man of persistent good will whose identification with the moral idea causes him to pervert it: it is a movement from Faustus to the pseudo Jesus who yet remains Faustus within. By the time I complete the circuit, the argument should have been made pretty exhaustive, concluding with the example a fortiori that is to demonstrate that all moral action authentically undertaken—from the worst to the best intended, undertaken in pride and in humility alike—is for these authors doomed not only to destroy the agent but to damn him as well, even if we must cherish him as our indispensable deputy, sacrificed to our visionary need for vicarious daring.

Each chapter from the second through the seventh, then, is meant to be another step in that apparent progression from the most to the least demoniacal, except that each is meant finally to prove deceptive as we see the reduction and—almost—the identification of all, however significant the differences appear with which I begin. But within each of these chapters too there are the contrast and the similarity that befit my intention of thematic variation. For, after treating in the first part of each chapter the example of the tragic vision, in the second part I try to add a second voice in counterpoint. These constitute what I might call nontragic or sometimes even anti-tragic analogues to the novels with which these chapters begin—in all but the last of these chapters of analysis, Chapter Seven, where what seems to be an answer to the tragic finally returns even more forcefully to it.

There are several reasons for my giving voice to these non-
tragic works that seem committed to dismantling my framework. The most obvious is that an increasing awareness of what the tragic is not may help us to sharpen our notion of what it is. And on the other side, I would expect my notion of the tragic to demonstrate its usefulness by illuminating in a special way materials to which it cannot apply but which are close to it if clearly distinct from it. It may be that the tragic not only will illuminate some alternative visions but will expose some aesthetically (and psychologically?) ersatz visions. Perhaps most importantly, these contrapuntal responses to the dominant movement allow me to enter the realm of dialogue by allowing a hearing to voices alien to the one I sound most prominently—at times, especially with Camus in Chapter Five, so hostile to it as to wish to obliterate it altogether. I have preferred to sound these alternatives myself in order not to be limited by the thematic commitments of the works that helped me to frame my principal claims about the tragic. For this volume is meant to be critique of lamentation as well as apology for lamentation, reply as well as expostulation.

Although individual portions were completed earlier, the bulk of the work which created this book as a unit was done on free time that was made possible by a grant awarded me by The John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, by a research appointment given me by the University of Minnesota, and by the special generosity of Rinehart & Company. Consequently, I wish here to thank Mr. Henry Allen Moe and Mr. James F. Mathias and their staff, Dean Theodore G. Blegen, and Mr. Ranald P. Hobbs for their kindness in my behalf. I am grateful also to Mr. John Crowe Ransom, editor of The Kenyon Review, and to Mr. Herbert Weisinger, editor of The Centennial Review, for allowing portions of this book to make their first appearance in these quarterlies.

My dearest friends and teachers, Professors Eliseo Vivas and Milton O. Percival, have been especially profound influences on this work. Professor Vivas, with the discriminations of a literary man, early led me through many of the philosophical intricacies of the modern novel considered internationally, and
Professor Percival initiated me ever so gently and persuasively into the mysteries of Kierkegaard and the Existentialist-Personalist tradition. What they gave me as teachers, however, was greatly enhanced by what they lent me as authors. In Professor Vivas’ work on Dostoevsky and Kafka (in *Creation and Discovery*, New York, 1955) and in Professor Percival’s incomparable *A Reading of Moby Dick* (Chicago, 1951) I was furnished luminous examples of the sort of thematic analyses I might try to undertake in this volume. I am grateful also to Professor Leonard Unger, who in those crucial embryonic stages helped me to think through the relation of aesthetic and thematic aspects of recent literary theory; and to Professor Jay Vogelbaum, whose healthy antipathy to the tragic vision continually kept my own sympathies within the bounds of the objectivity my role demanded.

In dedicating this volume to my wife, Joan, as her book, I am committing no routine act of marital piety. From the outset the ideas seemed to be about as much hers as mine. And she remained their ever alert guardian as she doggedly watched over me struggling to transcribe them onto these pages. Only after great patience would she finally relent and accept my partial failures as being the best I could do. Thus whatever weaknesses there are here demand my apologies to her as well as to the reader.

M.K.

*Urbana, Illinois*