

Chapter nineteen

THE GREAT DRAMATIC FORMS:
THE TRAGIC RHYTHM

As comedy presents the vital rhythm of self-preservation, tragedy exhibits that of self-consummation.

The lilting advance of the eternal life process, indefinitely maintained or temporarily lost and restored, is the great general vital pattern that we exemplify from day to day. But creatures that are destined, sooner or later, to die—that is, all individuals that do not pass alive into new generations, like jellyfish and algae—hold the balance of life only precariously, in the frame of a total movement that is quite different; the movement from birth to death. Unlike the simple metabolic process, the deathward advance of their individual lives has a series of stations that are not repeated; growth, maturity, decline. That is the tragic rhythm.

Tragedy is a cadential form. Its crisis is always the turn toward an absolute close. This form reflects the basic structure of personal life, and therewith of feeling when life is viewed as a whole. It is that attitude—"the tragic sense of life," as Unamuno called it—that is objectified and brought before our eyes in tragedy. But in drama it is not presented as Unamuno presents it, namely by an intellectual realization of impending death which we are constitutionally unable to accept and therefore counter with an irrational belief in our personal immortality, in "immortalizing" rites and supernatural grace.¹ Irrationalism is not insight,

¹See his *The Tragic Sense of Life*, *passim*. Unamuno's feelings are strong and natural; his aphorisms are often poetic and memorable. With his philosophical assertions, however, one cannot take issue, because he prides himself on being inconsistent, on the ground that "life is irrational," "truth is not logical," etc. Consistency of statements he regards as a mark of their falsity. Like some exasperating ladies, who claim "a woman's right to be inconsistent," he cannot, therefore, be worsted in argument, but—also like them—he cannot be taken seriously.

but despair, a direct recognition of instincts, needs, and therewithal of one's mental impotence. A "belief" that defies intellectual convictions is a frantically defended lie. That defense may constitute a great tragic theme, but it is not itself a poetic expression of "the tragic sense of life"; it is actual, pathetic expression, springing from an emotional conflict.

Tragedy dramatizes human life as potentiality and fulfillment. Its virtual future, or Destiny, is therefore quite different from that created in comedy. Comic Destiny is Fortune—what the world will bring, and the man will take or miss, encounter or escape; tragic Destiny is what the man brings, and the world will demand of him. That is his Fate.

What he brings is his potentiality: his mental, moral and even physical powers, his powers to act and suffer. Tragic action is the realization of all his possibilities, which he unfolds and exhausts in the course of the drama. His human nature is his Fate. Destiny conceived as Fate is, therefore, not capricious, like Fortune, but is predetermined. Outward events are merely the occasions for its realization.

"His human nature," however, does not refer to his *generally* human character; I do not mean to say that a tragic hero is to be regarded as primarily a symbol for mankind. What the poet creates is a personality; and the more individual and powerful that personality is, the more extraordinary and overwhelming will be the action. Since the protagonist is the chief agent, his relation to the action is obvious; and since the course of the action is the "fable" or "plot" of the play, it is also obvious that creating the characters is not something apart from building the plot, but is an integral portion of it. The agents are prime elements in the action; but the action is the play itself, and artistic elements are always for the sake of the whole. That was, I think, what prompted Aristotle to say: "Tragedy is essentially an imitation² not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions—what we do—that we are happy or the reverse. In a play accordingly they do not act in order to portray the Characters; they include the

²"Imitation" is used by Aristotle in much the same sense in which I use "semblance." I have avoided his word because it stresses similitude to actuality rather than abstraction from actuality.

Characters for the sake of the action. So that it is the action in it, i.e. its Fable or Plot, that is the end and purpose of the tragedy; and the end is everywhere the chief thing."³ This "end" is the work as such. The protagonist and all characters that support him are introduced that we may see the fulfillment of his Fate, which is simply the complete realization of his individual "human nature."

The idea of personal Fate was mythically conceived long before the relation of life history to character was discursively understood. The mythical tradition of Greece treated the fate of its "heroes"—the personalities springing from certain great, highly individualized families—as a mysterious power inherent in the world rather than in the man and his ancestry; it was conceived as a private incubus bestowed on him at birth by a vengeful deity, or even through a curse pronounced by a human being. Sometimes no such specific cause of his peculiar destiny is given at all; but an oracle foretells what he is bound to do. It is interesting to note that this conception of Fate usually centers in the mysterious predictability of *acts* someone is to perform. The occasions of the acts are not foretold; the world will provide them.

For the development of tragedy, such determination of the overt acts without circumstances and motives furnished an ideal starting point, for it constrained the poets to invent characters whose actions would issue naturally in the required fateful deeds. The oracular prophecy, then, became an intensifying symbol of the necessity that was really given with the agent's personality; the "fable" being just one possible way the world might elicit his complete self-realization in endeavor and error and discovery, passion and punishment, to the limit of his powers. The prime example of this passage from the mythical idea of Fate to the dramatic creation of Fate as the protagonist's natural, personal destiny is, of course, the *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles. With that tremendous piece of self-assertion, self-divination and self-exhaustion, the "Great Tradition" of tragedy was born in Europe.

There is another mythical conception of Fate that is not a forerunner of tragedy, but possibly of some kinds of comedy: that is the idea of Fate as the will of supernatural powers, perhaps long decreed, perhaps spontaneous and arbitrary. It is the "Fate" of the true fatalist, who takes

³*De Poetica*, chap. 6, II (1450a), translation by W. R. Roberts.

no great care of his life because he deems it entirely in the hand of Allah (or some other God), who will slay or spare at his pleasure no matter what one does. That is quite a different notion from the "oracular" Fate of Greek mythology; the will of a god who gives and takes away, casts down or raises up, for inscrutable reasons of his own, is Kismet, and that is really a myth of Fortune.⁴ Kismet is what a person encounters, not what he is. Both conceptions often exist side by side. The Scotsman who has to "dree his weird" believes nonetheless that his fortunes from moment to moment are in the hands of Providence. Macbeth's Weird Sisters were perfectly acceptable to a Christian audience. Even in the ancient lore of our fairy tales, the Sleeping Beauty is destined to prick herself—that is, she has a personal destiny. In Greek tradition, on the other hand, where the notion of "oracular Fate" was so generally entertained that the Oracle was a public institution, Fate as the momentary decree of a ruling Power is represented in the myth of the Norns, who spin the threads of human lives and cut them where they list; the Three Fates are as despotic and capricious as Allah, and what they spin is, really, Kismet.

Tragedy can arise and flourish only where people are aware of individual life as an end in itself, and as a measure of other things. In tribal cultures where the individual is still so closely linked with his family that not only society but even he himself regards his existence as a communal value, which may be sacrificed at any time for communal ends, the development of personality is not a consciously appreciated life pattern. Similarly, where men believe that Karma, or the tally of their deeds, may be held over for recompense or expiation in another earthly life, their current incarnation cannot be seen as a self-sufficient whole in which their entire potentialities are to be realized. Therefore genuine tragedy—drama exhibiting "the tragic rhythm of action," as Professor Fergusson has called it⁵—is a specialized form of art, with problems and devices of its own.

⁴Cf. N. N. Martinovitch, *The Turkish Theatre*, p. 36: "According to Islamic speculation, man has almost no influence on the development of his own fate. Allah is sovereign, doing as he likes and accounting to no one. And the screen of the haial [the comic shadow theater] is the dramatization of this speculative concept of the world."

⁵In *The Idea of a Theater*, especially p. 18.

The word "rhythm," which I have used freely with respect to drama, may seem a question-begging word, borrowed from the realm of physiology—where indeed the basic vital functions are generally rhythmic—and carried over somewhat glibly to the realm of conscious acts, which, for the most part—and certainly the most interesting part—are not repetitive. But it is precisely the *rhythm* of dramatic action that makes drama "a poetry of the theater," and not an imitation (in the usual, not the Aristotelian sense) or make-believe of practical life. As Hebbel said, "In the hand of the poet, Becoming must always be a passage from *form* to *form* [von *Gestalt* zu *Gestalt*], it must never appear, like amorphous clay, chaotic and confused in our sight, but must seem somehow like a perfected thing."⁶ The analysis and definition of rhythmic structure, given in Chapter 8 with reference to musical forms,⁷ may be applied without distortion or strain to the organization of elements in any play that achieves "living" form.

A dramatic act is a commitment. It creates a situation in which the agent or agents must necessarily make a further move; that is, it motivates a subsequent act (or acts). The situation, which is the completion of a given act, is already the impetus to another—as, in running, the foot-fall that catches our weight at the end of one bound already sends us forward to land on the other foot. The bounds need not be alike, but proportional, which means that the impetus of any specially great leap must have been prepared and gathered somewhere, and any sudden diminution be balanced by some motion that carries off the driving force. Dramatic acts are analogously connected with each other so that each one directly or indirectly motivates what follows it.⁸ In this way a genuine rhythm of action is set up, which is not simple like that of a physical repetitive process (e.g. running, breathing), but more often intricate, even deceptive, and, of course, not given primarily to one particular sense, but to the imagination through whatever sense we employ to perceive and evaluate action; the same general rhythm of action appears in a play

⁶Friedrich Hebbel, *Tagebücher*, collected in Bernhard Münz's *Hebbel als Denker* (1913). See p. 182.

⁷See pp. 126–129.

⁸An act may be said to motivate further acts indirectly if it does so through a total situation it helps to create; the small acts of psychological import that merely create personality are of this sort.

whether we read it or hear it read, enact it ourselves or see it performed. That rhythm is the "commanding form" of the play; it springs from the poet's original conception of the "fable," and dictates the major divisions of the work, the light or heavy style of its presentation, the intensity of the highest feeling and most violent act, the great or small number of characters, and the degrees of their development. The total action is a cumulative form; and because it is constructed by a rhythmic treatment of its elements, it appears to *grow* from its beginnings. That is the playwright's creation of "organic form."

The tragic rhythm, which is the pattern of a life that grows, flourishes, and declines, is abstracted by being transferred from that natural activity to the sphere of a characteristically human action, where it is exemplified in mental and emotional growth, maturation, and the final relinquishment of power. In that relinquishment lies the hero's true "heroism"—the vision of life as accomplished, that is, life in its entirety, the sense of fulfillment that lifts him above his defeat.

A remarkable expression of this idea of tragedy may be found in the same book from which I borrowed, a few paragraphs above, the phrase, "the tragic rhythm of action." Speaking of Hamlet, Professor Fergusson observes: "In Act V . . . he feels that his role, all but the very last episode, has been played. . . . He is content, now, to let the fated end come as it will. . . . One could say that he feels the poetic rightness of his own death. . . ."

"However one may interpret it, when his death comes it 'feels right,' the only possible end for the play. . . . We are certainly intended to feel that Hamlet, however darkly and uncertainly he worked, had discerned the way to be obedient to his deepest values, and accomplished some sort of purgatorial progress for himself and Denmark."⁹

"The second scene of Act V," the critique continues, "with the duel between Hamlet and Laertes, shows the denouements of all the intrigues in the play. . . . But these events, which literally end the narratives in the play, and bring Claudius' regime to its temporal end, tell us nothing new but the fact: that the sentence, which fate or providence pronounced long since, has now been executed. It is the pageantry, the

⁹*Op. cit.*, pp. 132-133. "To be obedient to his deepest values" is nothing else than to realize his own potentialities, fulfill his true destiny.

ceremonial mummery, in short the virtual character of this last scene which makes us feel it as the final epiphany. . . ."¹⁰

Tragic drama is so designed that the protagonist grows mentally, emotionally, or morally, by the demand of the action, which he himself initiated, to the complete exhaustion of his powers, the limit of his possible development. He spends himself in the course of the one dramatic action. This is, of course, a tremendous foreshortening of life; instead of undergoing the physical and psychical, many-sided, long process of an actual biography, the tragic hero lives and matures in some particular respect; his entire being is concentrated in one aim, one passion, one conflict and ultimate defeat. For this reason the prime agent of tragedy is heroic; his character, the unfolding situation, the scene, even though ostensibly familiar and humble, are all exaggerated, charged with more feeling than comparable actualities would possess.¹¹ This intensification is necessary to achieve and sustain the "form in suspense" that is even more important in tragic drama than in comic, because the comic denouement, not marking an absolute close, needs only to restore a balance, but the tragic ending must recapitulate the whole action to be a visible fulfillment of a destiny that was implicit in the beginning. This device, which may be called "dramatic exaggeration," is reminiscent of "epic exaggeration," and may have been adopted quite unconsciously with the epic themes of ancient tragedy. But that does not mean that it is an accidental factor, a purely historical legacy from an older poetic tradition; inherited conventions do not maintain themselves long in any art unless they serve its own purposes. They may have their old *raison d'être* in new art forms, or take on entirely new functions, but as sheer trap-pings—traditional requirements—they would be discarded by the first genius who found no use for them.

Drama is not psychology, nor (though the critical literature tends to make it seem so) is it moral philosophy. It offers no discourse on the hero's or heroine's native endowments, to let us estimate at any stage

¹⁰*Op. cit.*, p. 138.

¹¹As Robert Edmond Jones has put it: "Great drama does not deal with cautious people. Its heroes are tyrants, outcasts, wanderers. From Prometheus, the first of them all, the thief who stole the divine fire from heaven, these protagonists are all passionate, excessive, violent, terrible. 'Doom eager,' the Icelandic saga calls them." *The Dramatic Imagination*, p. 42.

in the action how near they must be to exhaustion. The action itself must reveal the limit of the protagonist's powers and mark the end of his self-realization. And so, indeed, it does: the turning point of the play is the situation he cannot resolve, where he makes his "tragic error" or exhibits his "tragic weakness." He is led by his own action and its repercussions in the world to respond with more and more competence, more and more daring to a constantly gathering challenge; so his character "grows," i.e. he unfolds his will and knowledge and passion, as the situation grows. His career is not change of personality, but maturation. When he reaches his limit of mental and emotional development, the crisis occurs; then comes the defeat, either by death or, as in many modern tragedies, by hopelessness that is the equivalent of death, a "death of the soul," that ends the career.

It has been reiterated so often that the hero of tragedy is a strong man with one weakness, a good man with one fault, that a whole ethics of tragedy has grown up around the significance of that single flaw. Chapters upon chapters—even books—have been written on the required mixture of good and evil in his character, to make him command pity and yet make his downfall not repugnant to "our moral sense." Critics and philosophers, from Aristotle to Croce, have written about the spectator's acceptance of the hero's fate as a recognition of the moral order he has defied or ignored, the triumph of justice the hero himself is supposed to accept in his final "conciliation" or "epiphany." The restoration of the great moral order through suffering is looked upon as the Fate he has to fulfill. He must be imperfect to break the moral law, but fundamentally good, i.e. striving for perfection, in order to achieve his moral salvation in sacrifice, renunciation, death.

All this concern with the philosophical and ethical significance of the hero's sufferings, however, leads away from the *artistic* significance of the play, to discursive ideas about life, character, and the world. At once we are faced with the usual dilemma of the critic who sees art as a representation of actual life, and an art form as a *Weltanschauung*: not every work of the genre can really be said to express the *Weltanschauung* that is supposed to characterize it, nor to give us the same general picture of the world, such as the "moral order" in which justice is inevitably done or the amoral "cosmic order" in which man is a plaything of forces be-

yond his control. Then the critic may come to the despairing conclusion that the genre cannot be defined, but is really just a name that changes its essential meaning from age to age. No less an authority than Ashley Thorndike decided that tragedy is really indefinable; one can trace the historical evolution of each conception, but not the defining attribute that runs through them all and brings them justly under one name. The only features that he found common to all tragedies were representation of "painful and destructive actions," and "criticism of life."¹² Either of these could, of course, occur in other art forms, too. A. C. Bradley, in his excellent *Shakespearean Tragedy*, points out that Shakespeare did not, like the Greek tragedians, postulate a superhuman power determining men's actions and accidents, nor a special Nemesis, invoked by past crimes, belonging to certain families or persons; he claims, in fact, to find no representation of Fate in Shakespeare.¹³ Even justice, he holds, is not illustrated there, because the disasters men bring upon themselves are not proportioned to their sins; but something one might call a "moral order," an order not of right and wrong, but at least of good and evil. Accident plays its part, but in the main the agents ride for the fall they take.¹⁴ Edgar Stoll, exactly to the contrary, maintains that the action in Shakespeare's tragedies "does not at bottom develop out of character."¹⁵ One could go on almost indefinitely in citing examples of contradiction or exception to the various standards of tragic action, especially the fatalistic standard.

¹²"Any precise and exact definition is sure to lack in comprehensiveness and veracity. . . . We seem forced to reject the possibility of any exact limitation for the dramatic species, to include as tragedies all plays presenting painful or destructive actions, to accept the leading elements of a literary tradition derived from the Greeks as indicating the common bonds between such plays in the past, but to admit that this tradition, while still powerful, is variable, uncertain, and unauthoritative." (*Tragedy*, p. 12.) At the end of the book he sets up, as the only common standard, "an unselfish, a social, a moral inquiry into life." (P. 376.)

¹³In a footnote on p. 30 he writes: "I have raised no objection to the use of the idea of fate, because it occurs so often both in conversation and in books about Shakespeare's tragedies that I must suppose it to be natural to many readers. Yet I doubt whether it would be so if Greek tragedy had never been written; and I must in candour confess that to me it does not often occur while I am reading, or when I have just read, a tragedy of Shakespeare."

¹⁴The discussion of justice (Lecture I, "The Substance of Tragedy," p. 5) is noteworthy especially for his recognition of the *irrelevance of the concept to dramatic art*.

¹⁵*Shakespeare and Other Masters*, p. 31.

The fallacy which leads to this crisscross of interpretations and opinions is the familiar one of confusing what the poet creates with what he represents. It is the fallacy of looking, not for the artistic function of everything he represents and the way he represents it, but for something that his representations are supposed to illustrate or suggest—something that belongs to life, not the play. If, then, tragedy is called an image of Fate, it is expected to illustrate the workings of Fate. But that is not necessary; it may just as well illustrate the workings of villainy, neurosis, faith, social justice, or anything else the poet finds usable to motivate a large, integral action. The myth of Fate often used in Greek tragedies was an obvious motif, as in later plays romantic love defying circumstance, or the vast consequences of a transgression. But one should not expect a major art form to be bound to a single motif, no matter in how many variations or even disguises; to reduce the many themes that may be found in tragedy, from Aeschylus to O'Neill, all to "the workings of Fate," and the many *Weltanschauungen* that may be read out of (or into) it to so many recognitions of a supernatural order, a moral order, or a pure causal order, leads only to endless sleuthing after deeper meanings, symbolic substitutions, and far-reaching implications that no playgoer could possibly infer, so they would be useless in the theater.

Fate in tragedy is the created form, the virtual future as an accomplished whole. It is not the expression of a belief at all. Macbeth's fate is the structure of his tragedy, not an instance of how things happen in the world. That virtual future has the form of a completely individualized, and therefore mortal, life—a measured life, to be exhausted in a small span of time. But growth, efflorescence, and exhaustion—the prototype of Fate—is not what the play is about; it is only what the movement of the action is like. The play is about somebody's desires, acts, conflict, and defeat; however his acts are motivated, however his deeds undo him, the total action is his dramatic fate. Tragic action has the rhythm of natural life and death, but it does not refer to or illustrate them; it abstracts their dynamic form, and imprints it on entirely different matters, in a different time span—the whole self-realization may take place in days or hours instead of the decades of biological consum-

mation—so the "tragic rhythm" stands clear of any natural occasion, and becomes a perceptible form.

The kind of art theory that measures the value of drama by the way it represents life, or by the poet's implied beliefs about life, not only leads criticism away from poetry into philosophy, religion, or social science, but also causes people to think of the protagonist as an ordinary fellow man whom they are to approve or condemn and, in either case, pity. This attitude, which is undoubtedly derived—whether rightly or mistakenly—from Aristotle, has given rise to the many moral demands on the hero's character: he must be admirable but not perfect, must command the spectators' sympathy even if he incurs their censure; they must feel his fate as their own, etc.¹⁶

In truth, I believe, the hero of tragedy must *interest* us all the time, but not as a person of our own acquaintance. His tragic error, crime, or other flaw is not introduced for moral reasons, but for structural purposes: it marks his limit of power. His potentialities appear on stage only as successful acts; as soon as his avowed or otherwise obvious intentions fail, or his acts recoil on him and bring him pain, his power has reached its height, he is at the end of his career. In this, of course, drama is utterly different from life. The moral failure in drama is not a normal incident, something to be lived down, presumably neither the doer's first transgression nor his last; the act that constitutes the protagonist's tragic error or guilt is the high-water mark of his life, and now the tide recedes. His "imperfection" is an artistic element: that is why a single flaw will do.

All persistent practices in art have a creative function. They may serve several ends, but the chief one is the shaping of the work. This holds not only for character traits which make a dramatic personage credible or sympathetic, but also for another much-discussed device in drama—so-called "comic relief," the introduction of trivial or humorous interludes in midst of serious, ominous, tragic action. The term "comic relief" in-

¹⁶Thorndike regarded tragedy as the highest art form, because, as he put it, "it brings home to us the images of our own sorrows, and chastens the spirit through the outpouring of our sympathies, even our horror and despair, for the misfortune of our fellows." (*Op. cit.*, p. 19.) Shortly before, he conceded that it might also give us—among other pleasures—"aesthetic delight in a masterpiece." (P. 17.)

dicates the supposed purpose of that practice: to give the audience a respite from too much emotional tension, let them have entertainment as well as "pity and fear." Here again traditional criticism rests too confidently, I think, on Aristotle's observations, which—after all—were not the insights of a playwright, but the reflections of a scientifically inclined man interested in psychology. Aristotle considered the comic interlude as a concession to human weakness; and "comic relief" has been its name ever since.

The humorous interludes in tragedy are merely moments when the comic spirit rises to the point of hilarity. Such moments may result from all sorts of poetic exigencies; the famous drunken porter in *Macbeth* makes a macabre contrast to the situation behind the door he beats upon, and is obviously introduced to heighten rather than relieve the tense secrecy of the murder.

But the most important fact about these famous touches of "comic relief" is that they always occur in plays which have a vein of comedy throughout, kept for the most part below the level of laughter. This vein may be tapped for special effects, even for a whole scene, to slow and subdue the action or to heighten it with grotesque reflection. In those heroic tragedies that are lowered by the incursion of farce, and not structurally affected by its omission, there is no integral, implicit comedy—no everyday life—in the "world" of the play, to which the clowning naturally belongs and from which it may be derived without disorganization of the whole.¹⁷ In *Macbeth* (and, indeed, all Shakespearean plays) there is a large, social, everyday life of soldiers, grooms, gossips, courtiers and commoners, that provides an essentially comic substructure for the heroic action. Most of the time this lower stratum is subdued, giving an impression of realism without any obvious byplay; but this realism carries the fundamental comic rhythm from which grotesque interludes may arise with perfect dramatic logic.

The fact that the two great rhythms, comic and tragic, are radically distinct does not mean that they are each other's opposites, or even incompatible forms. Tragedy can rest squarely on a comic substructure,

¹⁷Thorndike points out that *Tamburlaine* is of this genre: "Originally," he says, "the play contained comic scenes, omitted in the published form and evidently of no value in structure or conception." (*Op. cit.*, p. 90.)

See also J. B. Moore, *The Comic and the Realistic in English Drama*.

and yet be pure tragedy.¹⁸ This is natural enough, for life—from which all felt rhythms spring—contains both, in every mortal organism. Society is continuous though its members, even the strongest and fairest, live out their lives and die; and even while each individual fulfills the tragic pattern it participates also in the comic continuity.¹⁹ The poet's task is, of course, not to copy life, but to organize and articulate a symbol for the "sense of life"; and in the symbol one rhythm always governs the dynamic form, though another may go through the whole piece in a contrapuntal fashion. The master of this practice is Shakespeare.

Did the stark individual Fate of the purest Greek tragedy rule out, by its intense deathward movement, the comic feeling of the eternally full and undulating stream of life? Or was the richness that the comic-tragic counterpoint creates in other poetic traditions supplied to Aeschylus and Sophocles by the choric dance which framed and embellished the play? The satyr play at the end of the long, tragic presentation may well have been necessary, to assure its truth to the structure of subjective reality by an exuberant celebration of life.

There is yet another factor in drama that is commonly, and I think mistakenly, treated as a concession to popular taste: the use of spectacle, pageantry, brilliant show. Many critics apparently believe that a playwright makes provision for spectacular effects quite apart from his own poetic judgment and intent, simply to lure the audience into the theater. Thorndike, in fact, asserts that the use of spectacle bespeaks "the double purpose, hardly separable from the drama and particularly manifest in the Elizabethan dramatists, the two desires, to please their audiences and to create literature."²⁰ Brander Matthews said bluntly that not only theater, but all art whatever is "show business," whatever it may be besides.

¹⁸A striking example is J. M. Barrie's little tragedy dating from the first World War, *The Old Lady Shows her Medals*. Despite the consistently comic treatment one expects the inevitable (and wordless) last scene.

¹⁹There is also a genre known as "tragicomedy" (the Germans call it *Schauspiel*, distinguishing it from both *Lustspiel* and *Trauerspiel*), which is a comic pattern playing with the tragic; its plot-structure is *averted tragedy*, temporizing with the sense of fate, which usually inspires a tragic diction, little or no exuberance (humor), and often falls into melodrama. A study of its few artistic successes, and their precise relations to pure comedy and pure tragedy, might raise interesting problems.

²⁰*Op. cit.*, p. 98.

²¹*A Book About the Theater*, pp. 8-9. Cf. *supra*, p. 320.

Art, and especially dramatic art, is full of compromises, for one possible effect is usually bought at the expense of another; not all ideas and devices that occur to the poet are co-possible. Every decision involves a rejection. And furthermore, the stage, the available funds, the capabilities of the actors, may all have to be considered. But no artist can make concessions to what he considers bad taste without ruining his work. He simply cannot think as an artist and accept inexpressive forms or admit an element that has no organic function in the whole. If, therefore, he wishes to present spectacular scenes, he must start with an idea that demands spectacular presentation.

Every play has its intended audience, and in that audience there is one pre-eminent member: the author. If the play is intended for, say, an Elizabethan audience, that honorary member will be an Elizabethan theater-goer, sharing the best Elizabethan taste, and sometimes setting its fashion. Our dramatic critics write as though the poets of the past were all present-day people making concessions to interests that have long spent themselves. But the poets who provided stage spectacles had spectacular ideas, and worked with them until their expressive possibilities were exhausted.

The element of pure show has an important function in dramatic art, for it tends to raise feeling, whatever the feeling is. It does this even in actual life: a splendid hall, an ornate table arrangement, a company in full dress, make a feast seem bigger and the gathering more illustrious than a plain table in a cafeteria, refectory, or gymnasium, with the guests in street dress. A splendid funeral, passing in procession behind chanting priests, is more solemn than a drab one, though perhaps no one at the spectacular service feels more sad than at the colorless one. In the theater, the element of show is a means of heightening the atmosphere, whether of gaiety or terror or woe; so it is, first of all, a ready auxiliary.

But in tragedy it has a more specialized and essential function, too. Tragedy, which expresses the consciousness of life and death, must make life seem worth while, rich, beautiful, to make death awesome. The splendid exaggerations of the stage serve tragic feeling by heightening the lure of the world. The beautiful world, as well as the emotional tone of the action, is magnified by the element of spectacle—by lighting and color, setting and grouping, music, dance, "excursions and alarums." Some play-

wrights avail themselves freely of this help; others dispense with it almost entirely (never quite; the theater is spectacular at any time), because they have other poetic means of giving virtual life the glory that death takes away, or despair—the "death of the soul"—corrupts.

Spectacle is a powerful ingredient in several arts. Consider what playing fountains can do for a courtyard or a square, and how a ceremonial procession brings the interior of a cathedral to visible life! Architectural design may be marvelously altered by a supplement of fortuitous spectacle. The Galata bridge over the Golden Horn in the middle of Istanbul, with thousands of people and vehicles passing over it, coming from steep hillsides on either hand, looks as though it were hung from the mosque-crowned heights above; without the pageantry of its teeming cosmopolitan traffic it shrinks to a flat thoroughfare across the river, between its actual bridgeheads. An esplanade without the movement of water below it would be utterly unimpressive; flooded with moonlight, which picks out the surface movement of the water, or standing immovable against a towering surf, it may become veritably an architect's dream.

But pure show, not assimilated to any art, does not constitute a "work." Acrobatics, tennis playing, some beautiful occupational rhythms such as hauling nets, swinging hammers, or the evolutions of boats in a race, are fascinating, aesthetically thrilling, so they hold the spectator in a joyful trance; but they are not art. For a work of art, this trance is only one requisite. Spectacle, however beautiful, is always an *element* in art. It may well be a major element, as it was in Noverre's ballets, and in the court masques, but even these largely spectacular products are rated as "works" because they had something else that motivated the display: an imaginative core, a "commanding form." A circus could be a work of art if it had some central feeling and some primary, unfailling illusion. As it is, the circus sometimes contains genuine little "works"—a riding act that is really an equestrian dance, a piece of clowning that rises to genuine comedy. But on the whole the circus is a "show," not a work of art, though it is a work of skill, planning and fitting, and sometimes copes with problems that arise also in the arts. What it lacks is the first requisite for art—a conception of feeling, something to express.

Because a dramatic work has such a core, everything in it is poesis. It is, therefore, neither a hybrid product pieced together at the demand

of many interests, nor a synthesis of all the arts—not even of a more modest “several.” It may have use for paint and plaster, wood and brick, but not for painting, sculpture, or architecture; it has use for music, but not for even a fragment of a concert program; it may require dancing, but such dancing is not self-contained—it intensifies a scene, often abstracts a quintessence of its feeling, the image of sheer powers arising as a secondary illusion in the midst of the virtual history.

Drama is a great form, which not only invites expression of elemental human feeling, but also permits a degree of articulation, complexity, detail within detail, in short: organic development, that smaller poetic forms cannot exhibit without confusion. To say that such works express “a concept of feeling” is misleading unless one bears in mind that it is the whole life of feeling—call it “felt life,” “subjectivity,” “direct experience,” or what you will—which finds its articulate expression in art, and, I believe, only in art. So great and fully elaborated a form as (say) a Shakespearean tragedy may formulate the characteristic mode of perception and response, sensibility and emotion and their sympathetic overtones, that constitutes a whole personality. Here we see the process of art expression “writ large,” as Plato would say; for the smallest work does the same thing as the greatest, on its own scale: it reveals the patterns of possible sentience, vitality, and mentality, objectifying our subjective being—the most intimate “Reality” that we know. This function, and not the recording of contemporary scenes, politics, or even moral attitudes, is what relates art to life; and the big unfolding of feeling in the organic, personal pattern of a human life, rising, growing, accomplishing destiny and meeting doom—that is tragedy.