THE RENAISSANCE IDEA OF TRAGEDY: THEORY AND PRACTICE (*)

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Since the Renaissance was itself a general revival of classical culture and scholarship, the Renaissance idea of tragedy both on the Continent and in England was also part of this revival. It developed under the influence of classical theories and examples. Therefore, by way of an introduction it would be appropriate to describe the intellectual climate in Renaissance Europe, which stimulated this revival and, thus, provided the favourable condition for the development of tragedy.

The fourteenth century in Europe, and more specifically in Italy, witnessed a new humanistic attitude towards the study, appreciation and evaluation of classical culture and scholarship and became a turning-point in the accepted tradition of cultural values. The pioneer and, indeed, propagator of this new attitude was Petrarch (1304-74), whose humanism was based on his unprecedented interpretation of history. As Panofsky has explained,

> «where all the Christian thinkers before [Petrarch] had thought of [history] as a continuous development beginning with the creation of the world and leading up to the writer's own lifetime, he saw it sharply divided into two periods, the classical and the 'recent,' the former comprising the **historiae antiquae**, the latter the **historiae**

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novae. And where all his forerunners had conceived of that continuous development as a steady progress from heathen darkness to the light that was Christ ... Petrarch interpreted the period in which the 'name of Christ began to be celebrated in Rome and to be adored by the Roman emperors' as the beginning of a 'dark' age of decay and obscuration, and the preceding period - for him simply the period of royal, republican and imperial Rome - as an age of glory and light.» (1)

If we recall the kind of arguments put forward by the early Christian apologists and Chruch Fathers and maintained by medieval grammarians, exegetical writers and commentators, that classical antiquity had been in complete darkness until the advent of Christ, that the Incarnation had ushered in an aeon of light and salvation, and finally that classical mythology, literature and philosophy embodied under its allegorical veil vestiges of the Christian doctrine, (2) it is obvious that with his daring interpretation of history Petrarch fundamentally reversed the cultural and aesthetic values of his time, which, until then, had been considered unquestionably valid. Furthermore, equally important is the fact that he thus introduced the notion of the term «the Middle Ages» as a period following the decline of classical antiquity, and preceding the rise of the Renaissance itself. (3)

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(1) **Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art** (1965; rpt., London : Paladin, 1970), p. 10.

(2) As Frances Yates («Queen Elizabeth as Astrea,» **JWCI**, 10 [1947], 27-82 [32-3] has pointed out, it was the Emperor Constantine (A.D. ca. 274-337) who first claimed that Virgil's Fourth Eclogue was a Messianic prophecy and that Virgil's Virgo signified the Virgin Mary. On the Christian interpretation of the classics, also see Edgar Wind, **Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance**, rev. ed. (1958; rpt., Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1967), pp. 241-55; M.L.W. Laistner, **Thought and Letters in Western Europe, A.D. 500-900**, 2nd ed. (1931; rpt., London : Methuen, 1957), pp. 45 ff.; and D.C. Allen, **Mysteriously Meant : The Rediscovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance** (Baltimore and London : Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), p. 4 **et passim.**

(3) It was first in the fifteenth century, however, that the Latin equivalents of the term «the Middle Ages» such as **media tempora, media tempestas, media aetas** and **medium aevum** began to be used. See Panofsky, **op. cit.**, p. 8 **et passim.**

Yet it must be pointed out in passing that, in view of his glorification of classical antiquity on the one hand and of his censure of the Christian era on the other, Petrarch should not be imagined as one of those humanists whom Erasmus (1466-1536) was later to reprove bitterly in one of his letters:

> «Everything promises me the happiest success. But one doubt still possesses my mind. I am afraid that, under the cover of a revival of ancient literature, paganism may attempt to rear its head - as there are some among Christians that acknowledge Christ in name but breathe inwardly a heathen spirit.» (4)

Petrarch was a devout Christian and was closely associated with the papal court of Avignon in France. He was indeed a great mystic, who often took refuge in his religious meditations and aspired to lead an ascetic life in solitude. (5) Just as St Augustine, by whom Petrarch was much influenced (6) had, after his conversion to Christianity, attempted to reconcile his pagan and Christian learning, (7) so in his own writings Petrarch also aimed at a similar reconciliation. For instance, his **De Viris Illustribus** (ca. 1338-53) is a good example of his syncretic attempt. In it he included material from classical and Christian history and, thus, attempted to point out the close affinity between the ideals of classical antiquity and Christianity.

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(4) **The Portable Renaissance Reader**, ed. James Bruce Ross and Mary M. McLaughlin (1953; rpt., New York: Viking, 1976), pp. 82-3.

(5) Cf. his letter of 26 April 1336 to Francesco Lionigi de'Roberti, who was a professor of theology at Paris and had earlier introduced Petrarch into St Augustine's philosophy. In this letter, Petrarch reveals his mystical temperament by way of an allegorical description of his hazardous ascent of Mt Ventoux. For a full text of the letter in translation, see Ernst Cassirer et al. (ed.), **The Renaissance Philosophy of Man: Selections in Translation** (1948; rpt., Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 36-46.

(6) See **ibid.**, pp. 26-7.

(7) See his **City of God**, trans. Henry Bettenson, introd. David Knowles (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 311-3 [VIII.10-11], 403-4 [X.23], 788-90 [XVIII.23], 1079 [XXII.27] **et passim**. Also see his **Confessions**, trans. Edward B. Pusey, introd. Fulton J. Sheen (New York: Modern Library, 1949), pp. 130-2 [Book VII]; cf. Peter Brown, **Augustine of Hippo: A Biography** (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), pp. 93 ff., 264-6 **et passim**.

Therefore, it is certain that his disparagement of the Christian era did not stem from a surreptitious longing for paganism such as Erasmus was to fear. It was the natural result of his purely aesthetic, intellectual, scholarly and, to some extent, political reaction against the medieval inefficiency in fully understanding and appreciating the classical cultural heritage. In fact, as Panofsky has suggested,

> «Petrarch looked upon culture in general, and classical culture in particular, through the eyes of the patriot, the scholar, and the poet ... [and] conceived of the new era for which he hoped largely in terms of a political regeneration and, above all, of 'a purification of Latin diction and grammar, a revival of Greek and a return from medieval compilers, commentators and originators to the old classical texts.'» (8)

Although Petrarch's republican aspirations, inspired by the principles of the Roman republic of Cicero's time, were not to be realized for a very long time to come, his humanism was most influential on his contemporaries and became an example to be pursued by them in their own humanistic attempts for the revival of the classics. For instance, his great disciple Boccaccio, who referred to him as «my teacher,» (9) was one of the first humanists who recognized the leading part played by Petrarch in the rise of the Renaissance. By using classical imagery as metaphors Boccaccio gave an enthusiastic description of Petrarch's revival of classical literature in general and of poetry in particular :

> «Then ... Francesco Petrarca ... began to follow the ancient path, with such fortitude of heart, such ardour of spirit, and such acuteness of talent that no hindrances could stop him, and no obstacles of the way could frighten him ... For Petrarca cleansed the fount of Helicon, swampy with mud and rushes, restoring its waters to their former purity, and reopened the Castalian cave which was overgrown with the entwining of wild vines. Clearing the laurel grove of briars, he restored Apollo to his an-

(8) **Op. cit.**, p. 11.
(9) **The Portable Renaissance Reader, ed. cit.**, p. 124.

> cient temple and brought back the Muses, soiled by rusticity, to their pristine beauty. Then he ascended to the topmost peaks of Parnassus ... He has revived in noble spirits the hope which had almost died, and showed that contrary to the belief of many, the way to Parnassus is open and its summit accessible. And I do not doubt that he has inspired many to ascend it.» (10)

Although Petrarch's concept of the Renaissance was mainly confined to a literary and political revival of classical antiquity, it was soon extended by Boccaccio and fifteenth-century humanists so as to comprise all the fields of the arts, humanities and sciences. (11) Therefore, the Florentine Neo-Platonist and the first Renaissance translator of Plato's works Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) asserted in his praise of Florence that his age, which was «like a golden age,» (12)

> «restored to light the liberal arts, which [had been] almost extinct : grammar, poetry, rhetoric, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, the ancient singing of songs to the Orphic lyre, and all this in Florence.» (13)

Indeed, in addition to learned commentaries upon classical authors, philosophers, mythology and rhetoric, classical texts were edited, translated and supplemented with scholarly glosses. On the other, provided material and inspiration for the composition of indigenous works.

When we approach the Renaissance tragedy within this context, we become aware of the fact that the concept of tragedy was closely related to this phenomenon of humanism and, at least in the early stages of its development, was greatly inspired by the classical, especially Senecan, examples. Following the revival and re-formulation on the Continent from the mid-sixteenth century onwards of the Aristotelian precepts in the **Poetics**, the Renaissan-

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(10) **Ibid.**, pp. 124-5.
(11) See Panofsky, **op. cit.**, pp. 15-8 **et passim.**
(12) **The Portable Renaissance Reader**, **ed. cit.**, p. 79.
(13) **Ibid.**, p. 79; cf. **ibid.**, p. 92, where the sixteenth century French humanist Loys le Roi gives a detailed account of the humanistic revival in his time and includes in the same concept the revival of early Christian learning.

ce tragedy underwent a process of transformation and came to include a number of important novelties as regards its theory and practice. Especially with Marlowe and Shakespeare in England, it acquired a distinctive character of its own.

In discussing the rise and development of the Renaissance tragedy, it should be admitted that, like all the other traditional genres of poetry, tragedy was primarily understood and interpreted in the light of the rhetorical theory such as had been formulated and elaborated by Cicero, Quintilian and their followers in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. In explaining the three styles and the kind of subjects appropriate for each style, every rhetorical treatise usually included a gloss on the nature and stylistic decorum of each genre. Since Aristotle had originally pointed out that only the high style was suitable for tragedy and epic, (14) this Aristotelian precept had recurrently been emphasized and elaborated in the rhetorical tradition, and consequently in the Renaissance, as Wolfgang Clemen put it, «an exaggerated value came to be placed on style for its own sake, and this in turn led to the neglect of the claims of composition in the wider sense of the term.» (15) Therefore, the use of rhetorical subtleties and decorative figures of speech became a common practice among Renaissance tragedians; for them, the dramatic effect was to be achieved not so much through the formulation and depiction of a powerful tragic action as through the rhetorical embellishments of the spoken word. This was not unnatural in view of the dominant Senecan influence; indeed, Seneca's tragedies with their rhetorically ornate set speeches and moral platitudes were regarded as the models of a perfect tragedy. Although there were attempts among some of the Renaissance Italian tragedians, who were in fact the first in Europe to write tragedies with a humanistic spirit and, thus, provided the French and English tragedians with examples, to bypass Seneca and return to ancient Greek models, these were not successful owing to the lack of a full awareness of the dramatic conventions and structural dynamics of the Greek tragedy. The best example of this experiment was given by Trissino (1478-1550) with his play

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(14) See Aristotle's **Poetics**, introd. and trans. John Warrington (1963; rpt., London : Dent, 1966), pp. 38 ff [1458ª ff.].

(15) **English Tragedy before Shakespeare**, trans. T.S. Dorsch (1961; rpt., London : Methuen, 1967), p. 22.

Sofonisba (1514-5) which was a tragedy of suffering and included some of the conventions of the Greek tragedy; yet, Trissino found it impossible to get rid of the rigidities of the rhetorical tragedy and not to include para-Christian moralizations in the Senecan manner. The emphasis was put on long soliloquies, choral elaborations and decorative figures of speech. (16) However, most of Trissino's contemporaries preferred to write their tragedies in imitation of the Senecan model of the regular tragedy neatly divided into five acts, observing the decorum of dramatis personae, and containing scenes of blood and horror. (17) The imbalance resulting from the over-emphasis put on the style and the moral dimension on the one hand and the indifference to a full and dynamic exploitation of the tragic action on the other was a structural fault which could be detected in most of the plays based on the Senecan example. Therefore, what Sir Philip Sidney observed with reference to **Gorboduc** not only summed up the main concern of this type of tragedy but also implied the emergence of a fresh attitude towards the concept of tragedy :

> «**Gorboduck** ... is full of stately speeches, and wel sounding Phrases, clyming to the height of **Seneca** his stile, and ...full of notable moralitie, which it doth most delightfully teach, and so obtayne the very end of Poesie, yet in troth it is very defectious in the circumstaunces, which greeueth mee, because it might not remaine as an exact model of all Tragedies.» (18)

If we recall that, like his English contemporaries, also Sidney in his **Apologie for Poetrie** (1583) was mainly inspired by the poetical apologies, theoretical writings and literary commentaries of the sixteenth-century Italian humanist-critics like Minturno, Daniello, Scaliger, Castelvetro and others, his dissatisfaction with the topical and structural organization of **Gorboduc** was in fact an evocation of the new attitude displayed by these humanists towards the

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(16) For a concise account of Trissino's dramatic art, see A.J. Krailsheimer (ed.), **The Continental Renaissance, 1500-1600** (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1971), pp. 251-2; cf. Clemen, **op. cit.**, pp. 26-7.

(17) See Krailsheimer, **op. cit.**, pp. 247-57.

(18) **An Apologie for Poetrie** in **English Literary Criticism : The Renaissance**, ed. O.B. Hardison (1963; rpt., London : Peter Owen, 1967), p. 138.

idea of tragedy. This new attitude, which was influential on the evolution of tragedy from the Senecan tragedy of circumstances towards what may be termed the Marlowean and Shakespearean tragedy of character, was originally stimulated by the so-called Renaissance 'discovery' about the middle of the sixteenth century of Aristotle's **Poetics**. Although the first Renaissance translation into Latin of the **Poetics** had been attempted by Lorenzo Valla (1407-57) and published in 1498, this had had a limited impact on the early sixteenth-century tragedians, like Trissino, Giraldi and the others, who, as we have pointed out above, were strongly attached to the Senecan model; only the Aristotelian precepts concerning the decorum of the tragic hero, the idea of verisimilitude, and the unity of action, were taken into consideration by them. Valla's version was followed in 1536 by Alessandro de'Pazzi's revised edition. However, it was the Florentine humanist Francesco Robortello's edition of the original Greek text supplemented with a Latin translation and extensive commentary, published in 1548 in Florence, that exerted a lasting influence upon his contemporaries. In dedicating his translation to Cosimo de Medici II. Duke of Florence, Robortello remarked that Valla and Pazzi had left out the obscure parts of Aristotle's text and that their translations were full of inadequacies. He further pointed out that he had himself traced the references in the **Poetics**, checked them against their sources and, thus, produced a most reliable version. (19) Indeed, in the true humanistic spirit Robortello had brought out a definitive Latin translation of the **Poetics** and set the trend for Aristotelian criticism and a re-appraisal of the theory of tragedy. Within a period of just over a decade, following the publication of this new version of the **Poetics**, there appeared in Italy a number of commentaries and theoretical writings on the art of poetry. The most important were Fracastorio's **Naugerius sive de Poetica Dialogus** (Venice, 1555), Minturno's **De Poeta ... Libri Sex** (Venice, 1559) and **Arte Poetica** (1563), Scaliger's **Poetices Libri Septem** (Lugduni, 1561), and also Castelvetro's Italian version of the **Poetics** itself (Vienna, 1570). Although each of these studies was in itself a kind of apology for poetry and, hence, aimed at the refutation of the traditional charges made against poetry and stemming from Plato (especially

(19) See **In Librum Aristotelis de Arte Poetica Explicationes** (Florentiae: In Officiana Laurentii Torrentini, 1548), sigs. v^{v}-vi^{r}.

in his **Republic,** 376E ff. and 602A ff.), as commentaries and theoretical writings they were essentially concerned both with an explication of poetical modes and genres and with the formulation of rules, appropriate to each genre and deduced through a synthesis of Aristotelian, Horatian and rhetorical principles. Moreover, poetic topics such as imitation, invention, verisimilitude, poetic fury, art versus nature, the three styles, the plot structure in dramatic modes, **catharsis,** peripety, decorum of characterization in each dramatic mode, and similar topics received a great deal of attention and were treated in the light of these precepts. Similarly, the nature and function of tragedy as a mode of imitation and exerting on the spectator morally therapeutic effects were re-formulated within the contex of Aristotle's explications of **mimesis, hamartia** and **catharsis** ... terms which stimulated a lasting discussion among poetical theorists. Moreover, the Horatian principle of profit and delight, which had always been admitted in the literary and rhetorical tradition as the universal aim of poetry, was re-asserted as the ultimate effect of tragedy. Therefore, a greater emphasis was put on the need in a tragedy for a dramatic analysis of emotions, and the source of the tragic action was attributed not so much to the fickleness of fortune, which had in fact been the underlying principle of the Senecan and medieval tragedy, as to the presence in the tragic hero of hamartia, that is, a moral shortcoming which would cause him to make an error of judgement and, consequently, fall from prosperity into misery. In other words, the tragic pathos emerged not from an unfortunate state of circumstances but from the hero's own character.

Although this new concept of tragedy, essentially inspired through a closer study and extensive elaboration of Aristotle's **Poetics,** was a central issue in the theoretical and critical writings of the time, its impact on the practising dramatists was not immediate. This was due to the fact that Seneca was still regarded as the primary example of tragedy and was regularly studied at schools. Moreover, his tragedies with their moral **sententiae** and scenes of horror fully catered for the prevalent Renaissance taste in lofty moralizations and spectacular representations on the stage. At least this was the case in England before Marlowe and Shakespeare fully exploited and put into practice the possibilities of this new concept of tragedy.