# TRAGEDY

By JOHN ASHTON

THE YEAR following my ordination I used to say Mass daily in a small hospital run by a dedicated group of nuns, one of an extraordinarily large number of religious communities clustered together on the hill of Fourvière, site of the forum in the old roman town of Lugdunum. Most of the patients had terminal cancer, many in very painful and virulent forms. One I remember whose face was disfigured by a particularly hideous lupus. He received communion with an uncomplaining tranquillity that astonished me. Never have I seen such serenity and faith. Another man, much older, was blind. Born with a diseased eye, he had to have an operation in early childhood and the surgeon removed the good eye by mistake. As a result of this ghastly error his life had been empty and unhappy, but even so he was comforted by his faith.

On Easter Sunday I returned to Fourvière from a supply in an outlying parish, and decided to look in at the hospital and make a rapid tour of the wards (which I visited regularly a couple of times a week). *Bonne Pâques*, I greeted the patients, in one ward after another, 'A happy Easter!' They all returned my greeting in their own way, except for a middle-aged man in the last ward of all. I had never noticed him before, but I saw now that his throat was terribly swollen and inflamed. He glared at me angrily and said, 'To hell with your happy Easter. How can that help me? I am in pain. I've been in pain for weeks'. Too taken aback to say anything in return, I mumbled an apology and left.

Some people, then, aided by their faith, are able to accept suffering quietly, others rebel against the meaninglessness and the agony. These are those for whom life is truly 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'. Some afflictions and disabilities can be overcome, others absorbed or disarmed. Stories of astonishing fortitude and strength of purpose are not rare. One thinks, for example of the carmelite nuns who went to their death during the French Revolution chanting a latin hymn. Undoubtedly they offered the world an object lesson in faith and submission to the will of God. But who can say that Bernanos and Poulenc were

wrong in imagining among some of them a more agonized questioning than the world ever knew? Most of us resemble Iago in his reluctance to wear his heart upon his sleeve, and I have often wondered why we are so ready to assume simply from an absence of declared pain that our friends and neighbours must be reasonably happy and contented people.

By and large, christians have been brought up to accept uncomplainingly the trials and sufferings attendant upon human existence and to see them as their share in the cross of Christ. Even little children, grieving inconsolably over some early intimation of mortality, are urged to 'offer it up', and their instinctive protest is muffled by a thick blanket of cultural conditioning. The stiff upper lip of public school british mythology is no doubt one of the threads in this blanket, but the warp and the woof are basically christian.

Nor must the endurance commended in christian teaching be confused with the grim fortitude inculcated by the stoics. The resigned philosophizing of Epictetus and Montaigne is worlds apart from the message of the cross. Where the stoic advises his disciples to protect themselves from pain by a thickening of the skin, an inner remoteness or aloofness, christianity urges that the suffering be admitted, absorbed, assumed, not kept outside or minimized in any way: 'In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, that is, the Church'.[1] The sufferer is not anaesthetized; and the suffering is not denied, but somehow rendered tolerable by being set within a larger frame of reference. St Paul expects his fellow christians to share his faith and follow his example. He tells the Philippians that he is eager to share in the sufferings of Christ, 'becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead'; and then exhorts them, 'join in imitating me'.[2] This exhortation, one should observe, is not delivered in a tone of helpless resignation. The letter in which it occurs is in other respects the most hopeful and cheerful of all Paul's writings, marked by a mood of spontaneous joy rare enough anywhere in the New Testament: 'Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, Rejoice. . . And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus'.[3]

Now many critics of christianity, led by Nietzsche, protest against the anodyne qualities of this message. Christ himself is the great

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[1] Col 1, 24. [2] Phil 3, 10–12, 17. [3] Phil 4, 4–7.

seducer, and his teaching weakens men when they need to be tough, softens them when they need to be hard, in order to put up with the stark realities of life. Marx, too, protests that through being taught to postpone their expectations of bliss until the next life, christians have been duped into a passive acceptance of the miseries and injustices of this religion as the opium of the people.

Of course some kinds of suffering carry with them benefits that outweigh or at least balance out the pain. The maturity attendant upon the acknowledgment and assimilation of failure in an individual's life can hardly be reached in any other way. And the startled recognition of the degree of one's own responsibility in the pain hitherto laid at someone else's door may be worth the experience of that pain. But is this enough? In many cases, the grief is so intense that a growth in insight seems poor compensation for the suffering involved; in others, the objective situation is too appalling to allow of an explanation within its own context. A young husband struck down and bed-ridden by accident or disease: nothing he has done in the past or can do in the future will make sense of this even for himself or his wife and family; for here it is not just the event but its continuing and awful consequences that have to be faced by all of them.

We have already glanced at one facet of the christian solution. Let us now turn back to the Bible and see what else it has to say. One explanation it explores very thoroughly is the theory of divine retribution. How often the prophets – up to and including Jesus – urge their listeners to admit that the tribulations they are enduring or are about to endure come as the proper punishment for their sins. At the same time, right at the heart of the christian proclamation lies a refutation of the universal validity of this argument: 'we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong'.[4] The word 'passion' has come to refer, not exclusively but predominantly, to the suffering voluntarily undergone by Jesus in the full realization of his own innocence. True, this is an exceptional case, for those who profess belief in the redemptive suffering of Christ are traditionally encouraged to foster an awareness of their own guilt. Even so, it is impossible to maintain that men necessarily suffer precisely according to the measure of their own sinfulness. (Not, at any rate, in this life, though such is the power of the anguished demand for proportionate justice that the theory of

[4] Lk 23, 41.

divine retribution has been transferred to the after-life, where it functions better if only because it cannot be refuted by an appeal to common sense and ordinary experience.)

In fact, long before Jesus began to preach everlasting punishment (and liberal theologians might well be disconcerted by the frequency of his allusions to hell), the Jews of the second century had begun to reflect upon the problem of the suffering of the innocent and the triumph of the wicked. One (possibly earlier) high-point of this reflection is the seventy-third psalm, which continues to move us despite its unmistakable vindictiveness. This is what the author feels tempted to say:

> Behold, these are the wicked:
> always at ease, they increase in riches.
> All in vain have I kept my heart clean
> and washed my hands in innocence:
> For all the day long I have been stricken,
> and chastened every morning (vv 12–14).

He resists this inclination, discovers instead a conviction that the wicked are all set for ruin, and is consoled by a sense of the abiding presence of God:

> I am continually with thee,
> thou dost hold my right hand (v 23).

Unlike christian writers, fortified by a belief in the resurrection of the body, the psalmist does not look for a solution beyond the life he knows. He is sustained both by the faith he shares with the community, his reluctance to be 'untrue to the generation of thy children', and by his strong personal attachment to God:

> Whom have I in heaven but thee?
> and there is nothing upon earth
> that I desire besides thee.
> My flesh and my heart may fail,
> but God is the strength of my heart
> and my portion for ever (vv 25ff).

Later on, the terrible persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes prompts a different kind of solution: it would seem that no sense could be made of the suffering of the Maccabean martyrs without some hope of future recompense: 'one cannot but choose to die at the hands of men and to cherish the hope that God gives of being raised again by

him'.[5] Judas Maccabeus himself, we are told, acted according to the same conviction:

> For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought.[6]

In a similar vein, the author of the contemporary Wisdom of Solomon criticizes the short-sightedness of the wicked:

> For they reasoned unsoundly, saying to themselves: Short and sorrowful is our life, and there is no remedy when a man comes to his end, and no one has been known to return from Hades.

The conclusion is well-known:

> . . . the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seem to have died, and their departure was thought to be an affliction, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace.
> For though in the sight of men they were punished, their hope is full of immortality.[7]

If there is one book of the Bible that goes into this problem more deeply than the rest, it is the Book of Job. It is easy to be misled by the happy ending: having emerged from a series of trials and misfortunes which would have made any greek hero cower, Job is eventually rewarded by receiving 'twice as much as he had before' (42,10). This is enough to persuade George Steiner, for one, to exclude Job from his survey of tragedy, for 'where there is compensation, there is justice, not tragedy', and 'the demand for justice is the pride and burden of the judaic tradition. Jehovah is just, even in his fury'.[8] But Steiner is blinded by the artificiality of the ending to the central insights of the book.

Job is not reproved for insisting on his innocence and upon the utter disproportion between anything he may have done and the tribulations he has been forced to undergo. Even his bitter protest against God goes unscathed. The vain attempts of his counsellors to convice him of his guilt reinforce the reader's assurance that Job is right: the comfortable theory of divine retribution has no rele-

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[5] 2 Mc 7, 14. [6] 2 Mc 12, 44f. [7] Wis 2, 1, 3, 1–4.
[8] *The Death of Tragedy* (London, 1963), p 4.

vance, no possible application here. The easy answers are repulsed. What then is the true answer? In the end, perhaps, there is none. A few blind alleys are sealed off, that is all. If he is not being punished for his sins, there is nothing else in his own life or that of his family to provide an alternative explanation.

Such answer as there is begins with the wonderful hymn to creation in the twenty-eighth chapter. Its effect is to take the spotlight off Job's own home, and direct it instead upon its surroundings. Job's life is now seen in perspective against the backcloth of all creation. Even so, the road to wisdom remains blocked, at least to him, for he cannot see his way. All he is offered is a starting point, the fear of the Lord, not because he has done anything to deserve God's anger, but because the ways of God are inscrutable and mysterious. After this the remote magnificence of creation, far beyond human comprehension, continues to be extolled, albeit a trifle perversely, by Elihu; but the true climax of the book artistically and theologically, comes in God's final speech, with its wondering delight in all those elements of creation that are especially inaccessible to the human understanding. The ox, the ass and the ostrich provide puzzles of their own, as do the hawk and the horse; but the two beasts that conclude the catalogue, Behemoth and Leviathan, are so utterly inscrutable and absurd, though known and described in every detail, that no further reply is possible. Job and his supporters (the readers), who are surely meant to laugh at this point, are left with a vision of creation so huge and voluminous that the personal pain clamouring for an explanation at the beginning of the book is simply lost sight of, engulfed in a mystery of infinite dimensions. The problem, it might be said, is not solved but shelved. Nevertheless, the pointer is unmistakable: retain your blinkers, focus on nothing but the original question, and no answer will be forthcoming.

The Book of Job, then, exceptionally within the Bible, rejects any simple solution to the problem of pain. Its unknown author examines the theory of divine retribution from every angle, allowing Job's interlocutors full room to state their case as powerfully as they can . . . only to discard it. Moreover, unlike Wisdom and Maccabees, he does not take refuge in the comforting idea that accounts may be squared off in a future life. A third possible answer, that of Karl Marx, characteristically jewish in his conviction that justice must somewhere be found, is still a long way off. Marx was to place his faith in the Ideal State, since for him the collectivity would make

sense of lives futile in themselves; but how many individuals are strong or selfless enough to accept this? Clearly, to a truly religious spirit, this solution would be even stranger and more unacceptable than the other two.

Still, the unflinching scrutiny of pain is no answer either. The protesting sufferer cannot be allowed to stay immersed in his own anguish. That way lies madness or dissolution, as it did for Lear. The author of Job, following an old sapiential tradition, realizes that the ways of God are beyond man's understanding, and it is in the mystery itself, the baffling multiplicity and enormity of creation, that he finds his only answer. His consolations are hard, but they force the individual outside his own pain: they must do this if they are to offer any help at all.

This one book, then, if shorn of its prose ending, constitutes a bridge between the judaeo-christian affirmation and the tragic vision. The author treats the problem of pain with a greater seriousness than any other in the Bible, but without closing the door upon a real religious faith. His answer may seem inconclusive. But the truth is that any tidy solution (such as the last chapter of the Book of Job itself) is false, and the consolations it offers spurious. For suffering in itself makes no sense. Death and disease, and their psychological analogues, are evil, and their evil cannot be wished or prayed away.

The genuinely christian answer, of course, is not to be found in any adventitious doctrine of an after-life, but in the mysteries of the passion of Christ: 'if any man will follow me, let him take up his cross . . .' It is not that suffering presents no problem to those who see it as redemptive. Jesus himself begged his Father, 'if it be possible', to spare him the pains he saw looming up on him. But the christian faith, even if it cannot make sense of suffering, furnishes the sufferer with a motive for endurance that is rare: 'we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and folly to the Gentiles'.[9] St Paul was under no illusion as to the curious implausibility of his message and the peculiarity of its good news. But although the suffering itself remains unintelligible, and although the christian is taught to look elsewhere for the truth, nothing is to be gained by ignoring what is there.

One man who clung to his faith whilst continuing to gaze in hurt and puzzlement at the problem of evil was Dostoyevsky. The

[9] 1 Cor 1, 23.

argument between Ivan and Alyosha was surely the expression of the novelist's own inner conflict. Ivan's anguished rejection of a God who could allow the murder and torture of innocent children is met by the faith of Alyosha, whose overriding confidence in the love of the suffering Christ overcomes the confusions stirred up in his mind by Ivan's fierce attack. For all that, the 'poem' of the Grand Inquisitor hardly admits of a simple response. And the attractiveness of Dostoyevsky's own position is that he refuses a resolution; he will not despair, but he rejects the alternative of an anodyne hope. Ultimately, his only answer is on the level of his own art, wherein the dramatic conflict itself is transformed into an object of contemplation that offers no consolation other than its own existence as a source of peace. Dostoyevsky is not devoid either of rhetoric or of sentiment, but he steers clear of the pitfalls of each:

> The rhetorician would deceive his neighbours,
> The sentimentalist himself; while art
> Is but a vision of reality.

Not all writers – not all great writers – have the same answer as Dostoyevsky. Chekhov's quiet yet sympathetic ironies, his simple insistence that, come what may, life must go on, is one solution. Lawrence's passionate plea for a commitment to instinct and the life-force is another. Eliot's search for a more sophisticated and properly dressed response to pain is another. But it may be a mistake to try to extract from art a hidden philosophy. Samuel Beckett reiterates the meaninglessness of human existence from play to anti-play, yet his art, until it collapses into complete silence, is there to refute him, just as the absurdities underlined in *L'Etranger* and *La Nausée* are held at bay in the very books that expose them. The ability to project one's vision in a way that evokes even the faintest 'yes' from audience or readers is what counts. This ability we call 'imagination'.

'If the philosopher's world is this present world plus thought, then the poet's world is this present world plus imagination' (Wallace Stevens). (One might add that the theologian's world, ideally, is this present world plus faith.) No doubt the precise force and nature of the 'plus' would require to be elucidated separately in each case. But only if (and this is where the arguments can begin) the 'plus' implies falsification, either of rhetoric or of sentiment, can any of the three answers be rejected out of hand. And it may be that the patterns of response are not essentially different in the three

cases. What is important is that they should be discovered rather than imposed. Faith, thought, imagination will always breathe a new life into material reality. But unless they ignore or replace it, they will all rightly retain their hold upon the minds and hearts of men. They all offer a consolation that the realist or materialist might repudiate as bogus. But, we are entitled to ask, has his steady scorn any greater claim to general acceptance? For he too must set his version of reality within a larger context; in this case the context of his own scepticism.

Of course we are free to select the poet, philosopher or theologian whose grasp on reality seems firmest, whose vision ranges most widely and benignly. We can prefer Shakespeare to Beckett, Tolstoy to Lawrence. We can follow St Paul rather than Sartre, Aquinas rather than Schopenhauer. What we may not do (although most of us are doing it most of the time) is to use faith or poetry or philosophy as a palliative, dulling our awareness of human suffering with the opiate of illusion. 'Eschatology', remarks Walter Stein, 'is not an alternative to history'; and this is true not just of falsely consolatory theologies but of revolutionary philosophies as well. A man *may* sacrifice himself for the betterment of the human race, conceived either in religious or in political terms, if this makes sense for him. But none of us has the right to impose his own sense upon the suffering of others. Every protest against the meaninglessness of pain deserves our full respect.

'Poetry', asserts Wallace Stevens, 'is a purging of the world's poverty and change and evil and death. It is a present perfecting in the irremediable poverty of life'.[10] For Stevens, poetry replaces religion as a source of consolation; in the same breath he admits that the poverty of life (that is, its raw reality ungraced by the imagination) is irremediable and yet asserts that it can be purged. True, the purging and the perfecting are evanescent reliefs: they cannot disguise the structure of existence, tragically empty of any built-in consolations. Even so, the respite it affords enriches our otherwise poverty-ridden lives.

For all this, Stevens' attempt to replace religion by poetry as a cure for the meaninglesness of life is surely doomed to failure except for a privileged few. The consolations of inferior art are just as spurious and deceptive as those held out by any religious sect, however venal or bizarre. And great art is usually too demanding

[10] *Opus Posthumous* (London, 1959), p 167.

and difficult to provide an answer accessible to many. (What proportion of people in this country, I wonder, have seen or even read *King Lear*?) No doubt there are fewer and fewer people in today's world who find any form of religion a credible alternative. But those with the gift of faith are helped not just intellectually but emotively and imaginatively to admit a sense to their lives. By being put into touch with God, the act of worship in which they join enables them to locate themselves in the world they live in, and to read some meaning into all their experiences, both glad and sad. It is hard indeed to see how poetry could ever provide a substitute for God.

But by way of proof that poetry can hold hands with religious belief, and that neither need dull the poet-believer's sense or experience of pain, here in conclusion are some lines from a sonnet by Gerard Manley Hopkins. The poem begins:

> No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
> More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
> Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
> Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?

and concludes:

> O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
> Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
> May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small
> Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! creep,
> Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all
> Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

Surely there are no false consolations here.