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## THE HAMLET-EXPERIENCE

(An attempt at measuring the impact of the tragedy)

Literary works are not only products of, but they are also productive of life. They are not lifeless mirrors reflecting social or psychological conditions, but are also sources of energy that are transforming and shaping man and society. These are antiquated common places, we know, and repeat them only because literary historians are far too frequently unmindful of them. They confine themselves to the analysis of the social and personal conditions which contributed to the genesis of the literary work and there are only few among them who take also the second step, which is by no means less important, that of clearing up the effect produced by the work of art on people, and society in general. If we have, however, important results to record in this field, it is due less to literary history than to three other disciplines. To aesthetics — the definition of the impact of arts being necessarily the starting point or conclusion of all systematical aesthetics, to educational psychology — as it has recently made a series of experiments in order to determine the influence of reading on the expanding mind, and finally to book- and library-sociology — which by its public opinion tests is endeavouring to know readers' taste, demands and sphere of interest.

But all these researches offer only partial results that ought to be summed up and largely completed by literary historians. For aestheticians are moving on the level of philosophical generalities abstracted from the works of art themselves, educationalists are interested only in psychological and not in historical moments and, finally, sociographers generally content themselves with stating numerically the popularity of a literary work or artistic form, without inquiring for the sources or effects of this popularity. There are, nevertheless, some excellent monographies dealing with the history of book-trade and diffusion, with the evolution of libraries, of reading habit and of public taste in general. As for instance Richard D. Altick's *The*

*English Common Reader. A Social History of Mass Reading Public. 1800—1900* (Chicago 1957), or James D. Hart's *The Popular Book. A History of America's Literary Taste* (New York 1951). These and similar studies are gradually clearing up how literature has had a growing ascendancy on society, they schedule the changing quantity and nature of books diffused in different ages and different social sections, they list up best-sellers and register the changes in popular taste — they determine, in short, which books could have a considerable impact on society and they state the importance and permanence of this effect. But they seldom ask the final questions which read: What is the content of this effect? In what direction did it influence and drive the readers? Or generally speaking: What effect has literature produced in all ages on the life and evolution of mankind?

These are difficult problems, and one cannot even say for certain if literary effect is determinable at all. And even if it is, how to measure it in cases less evident than that of *Uncle Tom* or *Oliver Twist* so frequently quoted in this respect? Research work is here still in the phase of experimentations, in that of elaborating the appropriate working methods and devices. In contribution to these studies, we selected Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with the purpose of investigating the effect produced by this tragedy on its audience and critics since the time Shakespeare wrote it. Our choice fell on *Hamlet* because he is one of those meteor-like literary heroes who impressed not only their own contemporaries, but have remained sources of light and energy all over the ages. Therefore, if we can record all those changing experiences that the tragedy produced in the minds of the different generations, we shall have at our disposal, instead of a single, homogeneous effect, a whole series of different experiences out of which we may reconstruct the tragic impact in its whole complexity.

We are, of course, not the first to undertake such a task. Between the two wars several so called "after-lives", "Nachwelt"-s were published, but the majority of them were conceived in the spirit of the *Geistesgeschichte*, i. e. their authors considered the metamorphoses of their heroes as a mirror reflecting the changes and the evolution of an abstract *Zeitgeist*. For us, on the contrary, the history of the *Hamlet*-experience is the history of the active role *Hamlet* has played in the evolution of human mind and society.

We hoped in the same time to contribute by our studies to contemporary *Hamlet* criticism, which since the beginning of the century has deemed it more and more necessary to investigate the impact of the tragedy upon its audience, going even so far as supposing that the clue of the tragedy, of the *Hamlet*-enigma is to be sought in the *Hamlet*-



-experience of people as much as in the tragedy itself. "It is of the highest importance to attend to contemporary opinion concerning Shakespeare" — writes J. Sisson and we may refer, in the same way, to statements and practice of E. E. Stoll, A. J. A. Waldock, J. Dover Wilson, H. R. Walley, L. Morsbach, R. M. Alden and others, and may quote by way of illustration a passage of H. D. F. Kitto who writes somewhere: "But it remains true that drama, like music, is an art; that its real »meaning« is the total impact which it makes on the audience; and that if we reduce it to the logical formulae of prose, as the critic must, we are gravely attenuating it".

During our investigations, we tried to clear up the history of the Hamlet-experience as reflected in Shakespeare-criticism and in the stage-history of the play. We gave an account of the methods and results of these researches on another occasion<sup>1</sup> so that, at present, we may proceed immediately to our next task which is to study the Hamlet-experience of our own time, of our own contemporaries.

#### GAUGING LITERARY IMPACT BY QUESTIONNAIRES

In investigating the present-day effect of the Hamlet tragedy, we are in the advantageous situation of having at our disposal, beyond our traditional sources (reviews and analyses, diary notes and letters, statistical data and personal confessions, book illustrations and stage-designs, and so on), also a new one, which may prove more abundant in results than any of the former ones. We have, namely, the possibility of contacting the reader or the spectator directly, putting him questions that will induce him to reveal and define his Hamlet-experience, and even the unconscious elements of it, if the question-paper is suitably composed. We have only to pursue this kind of investigations and to extend them systematically to all age-groups and social sections of our time; in the end our notion of the twentieth century Hamlet-experience will be, presumably, more differentiated and authentic than that concerning former ages.

Our results achieved hitherto are, unfortunately, very modest. We were able to issue only 500 questionnaires and could circulate them only among arts students of three Hungarian universities. In this way, those 59 question papers which we got back duly filled up (this is about 12% of the quantity issued) furnish us particulars only on a few people, who belong in addition to the same narrow social group and are, more or less, of the same age. From such data no sweeping conclusions may be drawn concerning the contemporary society in general. And which is more: the answers may not be evaluated even in

<sup>1</sup> *Neue Wege der Hamlet-Kritik*. Shakespeare Jahrbuch 1958.

view of this small social group, as they will get their real significance only when they are checked up with the answers and views of other social sections in and outside Hungary. But even if the final summing up of our facts and figures must be postponed at present, this first experimental poll gave us the opportunity of stating the insufficiencies of our question form, and to elaborate the means and methods of evaluating and systematizing the material which, as a result of further polls, will stream in — so we hope at least — in considerable quantities.

In the first and general part of our question form (we give its whole text together with the numerical results of the poll in the appendix), we inquired for some personal data of the respondents in order to be able, when the time comes, to make all necessary breakdowns. The second and main part of the questionnaire deals with the tragedy itself. In trying to determine the Hamlet-experience of our respondents, we analysed the answers and arranged them in the following groups:

1. The intensity of the tragic impact.
2. The positive or negative nature of the impact.
3. The trend and content of the impact.
4. Final evolution and permanence of the experience.

Let us begin with the first one.

1. The intensity of the impact

Its numerical measurement is scarcely possible as we have so far no voltmeters and ammeters for the mensuration of the tension and intensity of human feelings and reactions. Experience has, however, a large scale of intensity ranging from indifference — through sympathy and admiration — to the very ecstasy of feelings.

The best source of intensity-gauging is, in our case, the style and character of the answers. Mere yes or no answers, for instance, or those given only by underlining prefabricated responses are, in general, denotative of a shallow experience. Qualified answers, on the contrary, indicate a deeper impact, and their vehemence or moderateness, their indicative, disputative or imperative character is a sure guide to the intensity of the tragic experience. The results achieved in this way may be validated by analyzing the contradictions between the different answers of the same person. Formal contradictions, inconsistencies or logical lapses betray that the experience was not deep enough, so that the respondent gave to every question the first answer that happened to cross his mind. As for instance he who underscored first that "Hamlet is master of his own fate" (Question 10), but some lines below, without giving any reason of his changing of opinion, he



underlined already the answer that Hamlet is the victim of the society (Question 15). Those contradictions on the other hand, which reflect the deep antitheses of life, are likely to be the products of a strong tragic impact. Another young man, for instance, gave the following answer to the latter question: "Hamlet is the victim both of himself and of the society. Among other social circumstances he would not have gone under, but he would not have been born either". His later answers have the same antithetical character, so that we get more and more convinced of the exceptional intensity of his experience. He writes e. g.: "It is true, that man is weak in himself, but he should confine his destiny on greater powers only when those powers are just and humane" (Question 28). Or elsewhere: „Don't meditate but act! This is a very good motto, if you have the possibility of acting at all" (Question 28).

The intensity of the experience depends in some way or other on the degree in which people are identifying themselves with the tragic hero. If somebody makes common cause unreservedly with the hero, he is likely to have undergone a deep tragic effect, and vice versa. This interrelation of intensity and feeling of community is important for us, because the degree of identification may be stated already in statistical numbers. Question numbers 9, 16 and 19 are diagnostic of people's identification or non-identification with the hero. The result by our sample poll was this:

| Identification | Neutral | Non-identification |
|----------------|---------|--------------------|
| 40%            | 20%     | 40%                |

This proportion is likely to vary according to different social groups, and so it is, or may be characteristic of them. By analyzing some further questions and answers (Nos. 11, 13, 25) we may validate our results. Those respondents, for instance, who have become one with Hamlet, generally do not take him for a fool, and the majority of them judge the Fortinbras-scene (the last scene of the play) superfluous, as one of the girl, who writes: "I even do not remember this scene. Hamlet is dead, what do I care about anything that may happen afterwards!"

## 2. Positive or negative nature of the impact

We call the tragic impact positive or negative according to its being stimulating or depressing. It is positive, if it enhances the vital energies of man and is negative in the opposite case. Analyzing several questions of our paper (Questions 7, 9, 16, 22, 25—28), we could state that: the ultimate and total effect of the Hamlet-tragedy on our respondents was

Positive  
in 35%

Neutral  
in 30%

Negative  
in 35%

This proportion corresponds, more or less, to that of the self-identification (see above), so that we may be driven to the conclusion that the positive or negative character of the tragic effect depends somehow and among other factors on the intensity of the experience. Perhaps so far, as those who have the chance or the courage of enduring the tragic impact in its totality come out of this dangerous adventure renewed and regenerated at last. And though they experienced the stirring and upsetting forces of the impact, they feel it in the last resort uplifting and fortifying, and almost never depressing or disheartening, as those feel it frequently who — out of distrust or anxiety — kept aloof, in advance, from the tragic effect, or immersed in it only with anxious circumspection (See question 26).

It would be very important to know those psychological and social factors which influence the intensity and the nature of the tragic impact. It is still a matter of conjecture, but it is more than probable that the Hamlet cult will run high in transition periods, i. e. in nations going through a critical time and in social layers that are struggling against the old and for a new social order. As for instance on the turn of the 18th century, from Herder to the generation of Victor Hugo. Untroubled and static ages, on the contrary, and the prevailing conservative layers have been biased against him in the majority of cases: one considered him a subversive, undesirable man, and found more faults than virtues with him in the mid-eighteenth century as much as in the second half of the 19th. He was treated in the same, negative way by some energetic and sweeping social groups pushing toward sure and well-known objectives, as for example the Hegelites or the partisans of the *Junges Deutschland* movement, while irresolute people, still seeking and only surmising their way out from an unbearable present, used to feel themselves attracted towards Hamlet's mysterious world and meditating spirit full of strange and unappeasable nostalgies.

If the exact role of these social and psychological factors is still unknown to us, we can state, on the other hand, with certainty that the tragic effect is always a reciprocal mechanism: it is not an action, but an interaction. The positive or negative nature of the final experience is always the result of a struggle that is going on between two centres of energy, i. e. between the tragic impact and the human mind. This fight may run several courses. It happens that the tragic effect does not divert at all the vital drive of people from its normal course,

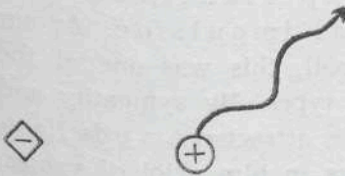


and it happens also that it restrains or stimulates their dynamism, breaks it or gives it a new direction.

The diversity of the progress and issue of this fight is so great that if we want to obtain results that are clearly diagnostic and statistically evaluable, we have to systematize the material and to concentrate it in some well-defined typical cases. Though we have still very little material at our disposal, we have made an attempt at establishing some of the main types of tragic action and reaction. In order to avoid lengthy descriptions, we deemed it useful to give for every case a simple graph illustrating the main lines of force of this struggle. The squares stand for Hamlet, and the plus or minus signs in them indicate whether the respondent considers him as a positive or a negative force. The circles represent the respondents themselves, and the symbols in them denote whether they are optimistic or pessimistic, whether they feel themselves powerful or powerless in their fight with the tragedy and with life itself. The arrows illustrate the process and issue of the fight: they dart up when people are feeling Hamlet or themselves victorious over life, and they point downwards when bitterness and despair are overwhelming them.

a. No real experience. Indifference. This type of respondent is not impressed by Hamlet at all, so that his vital dynamism does not deviate from its normal course. He takes cognizance of Hamlet's faults and virtues calmly, without the least emotional or intellectual reaction. He states categorically, that Hamlet is not a man of our days, and so he thinks to have done personally with the whole problem.

b. No real experience. Emotional refusal of the experience. He, too, is biased against Hamlet, but he is not strong enough to pass by him with a feeling of horror. "Life him indifferently: he holds back from would be a series of tragedies — he writes — if many people would be like Hamlet". It is remarkable that our former respondent (a), for whom Hamlet's world was completely strange, could call it reassuring (NB. those who under-

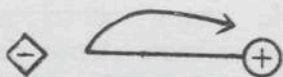


went a strong tragic effect never feel it reassuring), while this one, touched already by the fearful tragic atmosphere of the play, calls it depressing and endeavours, consequently, to get rid of it.

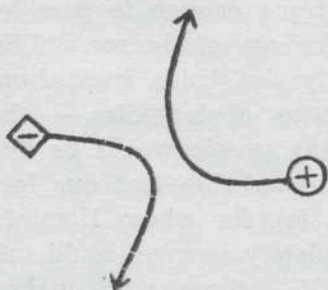
- c. No real experience. Intellectual refusal. Being anxious about his peace of mind and feeling of security, he turns a deaf ear to everything that may or might be in the farthest connection with Hamlet. He does not answer a lot of questions at all, and honours other ones with a laconical yes or no. Lest he should get entangled in the labyrinth of the Hamlet-world, he does not even formulate in words his thoughts and feelings. Instead of answering, he writes: "Ask Freud". Or he refers us in the same off-hand manner to Schopenhauer.



- d. No real experience. Moral refusal. He is already on the way of being attracted into Hamlet's gloomy world. He feels Hamlet's solitude, resignation and disillusionment his own, but he starts back suddenly having realized that Hamlet's blank despair is something else than his own bitterish melancholy. Finally, in order to break all links between Hamlet and himself, he lines up quickly a score of moral objections against the hero.



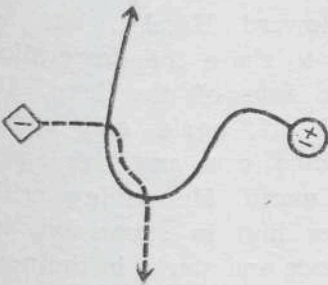
- e. Negative experience, but unbroken vital impulsion. At our experimental poll, this was one of the most frequent types. By sympathy and admiration he is attracted towards Hamlet, he discovers in him a lot of values, he is even moved by his tragic defeat, but his own dynamism, sweeping upwards, is not broken by this experience. He does



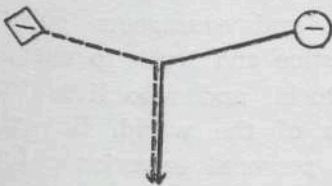


not identify himself with Hamlet and does not become involved in the mesh of his enigmatical destiny. He makes it clear that this tragedy may not, and must not be generalized. Looking for the lessons of the drama, he underscores in the 27th and 28th questions all active, optimistic answers. And finally, by three exclamation marks, he lays a particular stress on the appeal: "Action is needed, not meditation!!!"

- f. Negative experience. Vital forces wellnigh succumbing. This is in many respects similar to the former, but his vital drive is not strong enough, so that he finds it hard to break out of the magic circle of the tragedy. Being aware of his weakness, he accepts Hamlet in advance with more reserves than the former, but he betrays every instant that he feels a certain community of fate with him. At last, he succeeds in shaking off this uneasy and fearful experience, and by the last question, he underscores three active and stimulating answers. But his underlinings are faint and they fade away between the lines: they do not give the impression of a firm conviction.

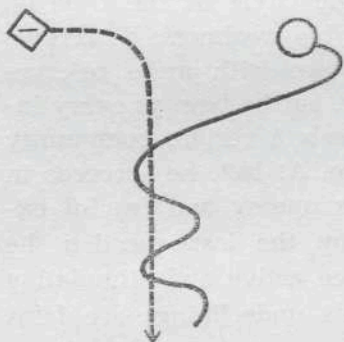


- g. Negative experience and involuntary acceptance thereof. This is one of our senior clients. He is 32 years old. His attitude is remarkably more forced and not so dynamical as those of the younger ones. He confesses that he has something in common with Hamlet, but he knows that this is to his disadvantage. Reality and desires have already diverged in him more than in the others. Younger respondents are still able, in the ardour of

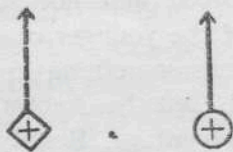


a great passion at least, to break out from desperation. By him, on the contrary, every occasionally hopeful voice is choked with bitter cynicism. Hope is nothing more than illusion for him. And the final lesson he draws from the play is not a balanced statement, but an illusory postulate that will be, he knows very well, hardly fulfilled: "Good must be triumphant in the world if you want that life be beautiful and worth living".

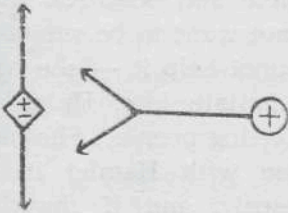
- h. Negative experience and unsuccessful fight against it. In this case, we may follow up, step by step, the struggle of a man against the tragic impact. This young man here feels drawn toward Hamlet, but he does not want to share the desperation and the tragic fate of the hero. He shoves himself off, again and again, but he is attracted, over and over again into Hamlet's world. He denies, criticizes or ignores him in succession, he feigns indifference and starts, in the next moment, a bitter attack on him, but all this in vain: he gets again and again under his influence and is swallowed up by the waves of despair. This fight is going on with varying success to the last question of the form.



- i. Positive experience, but no real influence. He regards Hamlet as a noble and courageous spirit, who prefers justice and truth to everything in the world, and who lives for the reformation of the world. But all this means no personal experience for him. He does not need Hamlet's energies. He does not look upon him as an ideal: he is rushing forward sure of his own forces.

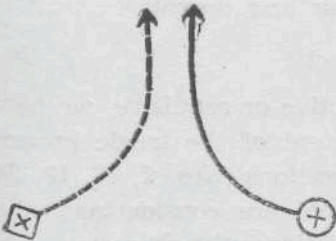




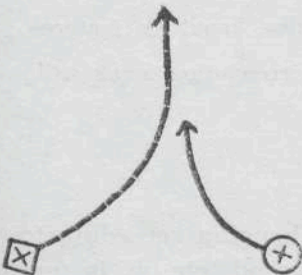


j. Positive experience. Intellectual attitude. He does not become pervaded by the tragedy: he remains, from first to last, a cool observer. He takes the play for a logical problem that is to be solved. Hamlet does not fascinate him. He deliberates coolly his good and bad qualities. He is capable of subtle distinctions: "There is only a surface similarity between Hamlet and the modern man — he writes — as the springs of their irresolution are different. Hamlet is wavering because he sees too much of life, while modern man is only weak-willed". He is not a man of moods. He does not reject Hamlet completely, and does not idealize him either. Taking all things into consideration, he states that the social demand in people like Hamlet is not too great, but some of them are absolutely needed: they are the conscience of the community.

k. Positive experience. Sympathy. He feels a deep affection for Hamlet, but he does not become one with him. His experience is strong and personal, his sympathy deep and sincere. But this is only attraction, and not identification. As he states himself: "Hamlet is not the symbol of our own destiny, though a thinking person is always congenial with him". Note this: Only congenial and not identical. Only fellow spirit and not fellow sufferer.

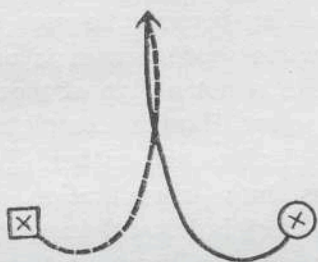


l. Positive experience. Admiration. She admires Hamlet without reserve. Moral greatness and firmness of purpose characterize him. He is not an average man, because he is able to deny himself in the interest of a higher objective. And what is still more: he has the strength of renouncing of Ophelia and



of love itself. The student girl who writes these lines is so astonished and bewitched by this sacrifice that she feels herself compelled to express her admiration thereof, once more, on the verso of the questionnaire.

- m. Total experience. Ecstasy. This is not sympathy or admiration any more, but complete and ecstatical identification. "I do not want to be similar to Hamlet, but I cannot help it — she writes. You cannot imitate him. He is the destiny of deep-feeling people". She makes common cause with Hamlet in his solitude and despair, and if they are able at last to rise up from the depths of desperation, this is due to a certain revolting defiance and to a noble pathos of accepting freely their tragic fate. Whether Hamlet is neurotic or mentally ill? — she asks. "Yes, he is, if it is to be ill to meditate upon things that are evident for others, or to hesitate when another would draw his dagger, or if it is to be ill to renounce a great emotion and accept loneliness and despair".



### 3. The trend and content of the tragic impact

Beyond its being positive or negative, attractive or repulsive, we have to determine also the exact direction and content of the tragic impact. Here we have to sum up, first of all, those questions (Nos. 7, 16, 19, 24, 27, 28) and answers which betray what people are considering valuable or valueless, attractive or repulsive in Hamlet's character. The score of our sample poll was this:

| Positive, attractive features       |    | Negative, repulsive features        |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|-------------------------------------|----|
| Love of truth . . . . .             | 65 | Meditation, irresolution, weak will | 80 |
| Humanity, morality . . . . .        | 35 | Scepticism . . . . .                | 32 |
| Intelligence . . . . .              | 33 | Melancholy . . . . .                | 10 |
| High and noble demands . . . . .    | 14 | Cowardice . . . . .                 | 3  |
| Consistency in principles . . . . . | 14 |                                     |    |

This scale of values is, to all probability, changing according to variables, such as age, social status, historical period, etc. It is feasible,



for instance, that only for this younger generation are love of truth, intelligence and noble demands the greatest values of life. The fact that two of our three older respondents do not mention any of these characteristics may be regarded as indicative of this. Another possible characteristic of these young people is the fact that there occur almost no moral motifs in their answers. There is even one among them who, to the question whether Hamlet is or is not a moral man, gives the following response: "What is morality? This question is anachronistic". Their judgments as to values are rather vitalistic. They blame Hamlet almost exclusively for his passivity and irresolution and clamour for quick and energetic action. Two of the senior respondents, on the contrary, are alone with their moral reproaches and with their conviction that the chief reason of Hamlet's fall lies in the fact that he was revengeful and committed murder.

But Hamlet's positive or negative characteristics are only the components of the final resultant of the tragic impact. If we want to determine the ultimate direction of the impulse given by the tragedy, we have to analyze the answers given to the last two questions of our questionnaire. By our 27th question, we asked our respondents to state the essence of the Hamlet-tragedy, and to say whether they are regarding Hamlet as the symbol of a certain kind of human destiny. We asked this, because the symbol is the final synthesis and result of the tragic experience: everything that the tragedy meant to the spectator is, or may be incorporated in it. Our question was a multiple-choice one. In the appendix you will find those Hamlet-symbols which got the most agreeing and disagreeing votes. By our 28th question, we had respondents word once more their tragic experience, but this time already on the level of practical conclusions. What is the lesson of the tragedy, if there is any? — so reads the question. The score of the ballot is to be found again in the appendix. And we may conclude on the basis of them, that the great majority of the answers are optimistic, active and intimate a steady belief in man and in ideals. This optimism is not a naive and an idyllic one, for several of our respondents feel the burden of great and often inexecutable duties; many of them suffer from the fact that Hamlet has got into conflict with his own society and is constrained to accept solitude. But they do not cast the blame thereof exclusively on society. Here are some answers to illustrate the wide range of their different attitudes:

— Society tramples unmercifully on Hamlet and his like; they struggle with each other and, as it always happens, force is victorious not justice.

- There is no social order in which Hamlet-like people would feel themselves happy.
- The cause of his defeat is in himself, though it is indisputable that in Fairyland he would not have gone under. But where is such a land?

They do not delude themselves by saying that we have got over these problems and are very well aware of the difficulties to be faced. Bitter and cynical voices mingle with their answers, and some of these 20—22 years old youths are trying already the attitudes of resignation and disillusionment. But in the last resort, their doubts and reserves strengthen rather than weaken their conviction that the creative dynamism of people who demand much of life and still more of themselves is the greatest value of life and the surest pledge of our future.

These conclusions are, of course, more or less arbitrary. We wrote these lines only to illustrate the possibility of revealing and describing people's tragic experience by the help of a questionnaire. The final evaluation of the responses is to be postponed, as we said before, till we have extended our researches to all important sections of our society. Only then shall we be able to specify with precision the effect the Hamlet tragedy has produced and is producing on contemporary society.

#### 4. The final evolution and permanence of the experience

The action of the tragedy upon its audience is not a momentary, flashlight phenomenon, but it is a lasting process during which one is defending oneself and struggling against the violent and destroying forces of the immediate tragic impact and is transforming it gradually into a fruitful human experience. If we intend to specify our knowledge on this interaction between tragedy and spectator, we have to extend our polls not only in space (i. e. to different social sections), but also in time: we have to check the development and formation of the tragic experience several times, repeating the polls at least in three subsequent stages of its evolution.

1. During the action of the immediate tragic impact, i. e. in the intervals of a theatrical performance, or immediately after it.
2. Some hours or, at the very most, one or two days after the performance, in order to registrate the emotional and intellectual working up of the tragic impact.
3. Some months later, trying to state the further transformation and final conservation of the experience.

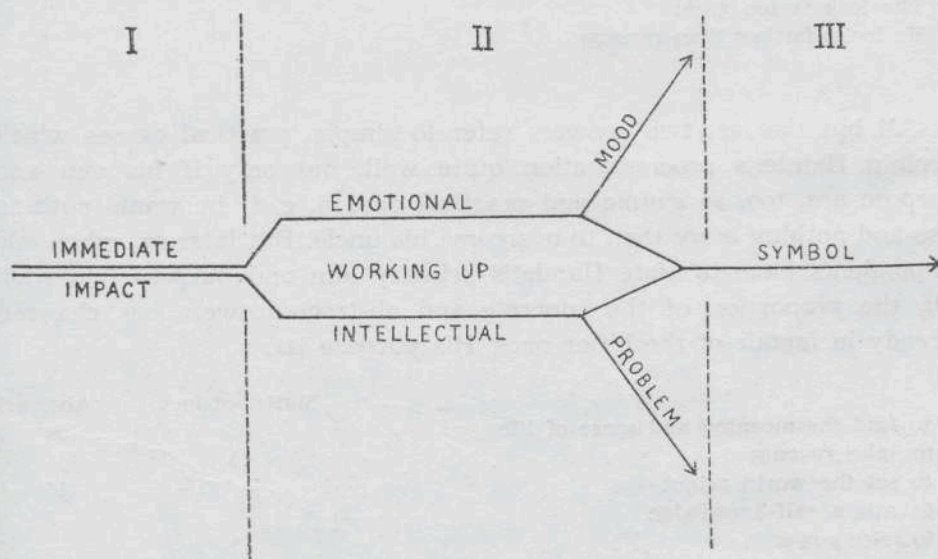
The measurements are to be done by the same question form, for this is the only way to register the modifications in respondents' attitudes and experiences with sufficient accuracy. We had designed our



questionnaires accordingly but unfortunately we have had opportunity, up to now, only for measuring the third phase, as our respondents read, or saw the tragedy months or years before the poll. There was only one among them who read it the day before the test and, which is more, he read it for the first time in his life. Some moments characteristic of the first phase may be noticed in this single paper.

It is, for instance, conspicuous at once that the experience of this respondent is still so immature and unsettled that he is the only one who is unable to tell which is Hamlet's chief characteristic. Besides, the name of Hamlet evokes in him a mood (the sorrow) and not something more definite and formulated, as e. g. a problem or an idea, which is the case with the other respondents. He, further, recalls such particularities which the other pollers have already forgotten. "The cause of Hamlet's defeat — he says — is his antagonism with his uncle", while his fellow respondents formulate the same thing already in a more generalized form, on the level of general and abstract truths, saying for instance that Hamlet is the victim of the conflict between the old and the new morals, or the old and the new social orders. His answers show also that the process of transforming his experience into a symbol has not even begun in him.

But let us not confound the moment of generalization and that of creating symbols, as these are two different and subsequent phases in the evolution of the tragic experience. This evolution may be charted in the following way:



The first phase is that of the immediate impact which may be analyzed — as we told already — by measurements done in the intervals of a performance. The second stage is that of the emotional and intellectual working up of the tragic influence. According to the testimony of the questionnaires, there are many people in whom this process of working up had come to a stop very early and their experience is rising to a more general and elevated level only while they are filling up the question form. One of our respondents, for instance, facing the 20th question of the form (What is Hamlet's real aim and purpose?), underscores first the following answer: "To take revenge". But discovering immediately after the more general and abstract responses, he scores out "to take revenge", and underlines this time, in the zest of discovering the two most abstract statements: "To correct the world" and "To find the meaning and sense of life". This generalizing effect of the questionnaires may be observed in the majority of cases.

Let us see the figures. At the start, answering the 6th question (Why is he deferring revenge?), the distribution of the replies is the following:

|   | Matter-of-fact | Abstract |
|---|----------------|----------|
| 1. He has a brooding, wavering character    | 19             |          |
| 2. He looks for more evidence               | 17             |          |
| 3. He has moral scruples                    | 8              |          |
| 4. He is waiting for a good occasion        | 6              |          |
| 5. He has regards for his mother or Ophelia | 4              |          |
| 6. He fears responsibility                  | 2              |          |
| 7. Conventions hamper him                   | 1              |          |
| 8. The task is too great                    |                | 1        |
| 9. He looks farther than revenge            |                | 1        |
|   | 57             | 2        |

All but the last two answers refer to simple, practical causes which explain Hamlet's procrastination quite well, but only if his aim and purpose are, too, so simple and practical ones, i. e. if he wants nothing else and nothing more than to overcome his uncle. But later on, when our respondents have to state Hamlet's primary aim and purpose (Question 20), the proportion of the concrete and abstract answers has changed already in favour of the latter ones. His purpose is...

|  | Matter-of-fact | Abstract |
|--|----------------|----------|
| 1. to find the meaning and sense of life |                | 28       |
| 2. to take revenge                       | 16             |          |
| 3. to set the world aright               |                | 15       |
| 4. to attain self-knowledge              |                | 5        |
| 5. to seize power                        | 3              |          |
| 6. to overcome hopelessness              |                | 4        |
|  | 19             | 52       |



Here we have already only 19 matter-of-fact answers, referring exclusively to dramatic action in the strict sense of the word. The majority of the answers have already ascended in the higher spheres of philosophy and view of life. If Hamlet's aims are really so abstract and cosmic ones, it follows that in postponing action he ought to have had quite other reasons than to look for more evidence, or to wait for a better occasion. This means that our respondents contradict themselves, but this contradiction is not a formal one: thesis and antithesis indicate here two subsequent phases of a process in the course of which people's Hamlet-experience is growing more and more universal.

In the third and last phase of the interaction between drama and spectator, the tragic experience is being transformed and is finally embodied in a symbol. We write symbol rather than only type to indicate the great emotional intensity that characterizes necessarily this last stage of the tragic influence. Both type and symbol incarnate a typical social tendency or condition, a typical human nostalgia or destiny, but only those social or psychological types become a symbol in our minds which we referred to ourselves and which became our personal experience.

This final transformation of the tragic experience is missing by the majority of our respondents. They came to a standstill in the second phase of the experience that is dissolving in a soft, undefined mood, or — if intellectual rather than emotional moments dominate in it — it is formulated and fixed in a problem: people store it away in their memories as a philosophical, moral or historical fact or thesis.

But moods are fading easily away and thoughts are quickly forgotten. Human experience will abide only if one succeeded in concentrating and focusing it in a symbol; that is to say if tragic experience, which was being abstracted in the second phase of the process from the concrete moments of the drama, is brought back to the tragic hero, and all intellectual and emotional forces of the tragic impact are embodied in him. The symbol is the utmost concentration of the experience so that the interaction of great spiritual forces and lucky circumstances is necessary to its coming into existence. Only the greatest writers are able to create such human destinies that may develop into symbols. But writers create only the potentiality, and if there is no community to discover its own fate in the destiny of the tragic hero, then he remains but a literary hero, his life only a mood or a memory, a problem to be solved or an exciting and edifying story.

It happens frequently that an imaginary, fantasy-made hero becomes a symbol only several decades or centuries after his birth. Impressions and emotions are slowly accumulating in him, a typical human experience

is slowly crystallizing in him, till there comes an age which discovers in him at once the symbol that has been latent in him. There are periods rich in symbols, and there are other ones which are poor in them. There are epochs that destroy them, as e. g. the age of the Enlightenment, and other ones exceedingly creative and fertile in this respect, as for instance the Romantic era. This latter not only revived an abundance of prehistoric and medieval symbols, but also raised to the level of symbols such heroes who, up to then, had been living only as simple literary figures in the memory of people, as for instance Hamlet, Don Juan, Don Quijote, Thyl Ulenspiegel and many others. And finally, Romanticism created quite a lot of new symbols among which some are more abiding and universal than those produced by the decades called officially Symbolism.

Beside writers and communities, there are also individuals capable of creating symbols. Unfortunately, the number of such readers is very small, but they are the genii of reading. They are quite as indispensable as the great creators, as only in them is to be found that great intensity and tension of spiritual forces which are necessary to forge human experience in symbols of universal validity. The greatest among literary historians and critics have ever been of this kind.

There are many things that may hinder and definitely prevent a literary hero from being transformed into a symbol. We saw already, that the predominance of emotional or intellectual forces respectively may drive the experience on a side-track. There is no symbol produced either, if the impact has been shallow, or the receptive soul forceless or full of moral or other reserves and objections. Or if somebody does not accept the hero as a whole, in his entity, but singles out some features of his character and rejects the other ones. As one of our respondents, who writes, e. g. "His good qualities, treated as independent from him, are to be followed, but on the whole, he is not the man whom you may learn from". The "symbolist" attitude is just the opposite of this. It does not abstract, but on the contrary, it does embody in the hero some general human aspiration or destiny.

Our questionnaire, unfortunately, proved to be undiagnostic in the field of revealing whether Hamlet is or is not a symbol for the respondent. In drafting our form, we committed the fault of giving under item 27 a multiple-choice question, listing up almost all possible Hamlet-symbols, thus enabling all respondents — even those for whom Hamlet has not been and will perhaps never be a symbol — to underline one or more answers, one or more symbols. In order to avoid this fault, we ought to have asked early in the list of questions, whether respondent regarded Hamlet as a symbol and if he did, whether he could specify



this symbol. In this way it would have appeared who are those in whose minds Hamlet lives actually in the form of a symbol. Some other questions, however, make it evident, that few of our respondents belong to this group. And it is even probable that they are in general poor in symbols. The distribution of the answers given to our question No. 3 (Who is more sympathetic? Hamlet or Romeo, Hamlet or... etc.) indicates clearly this fact:

|  |         |
|--|---------|
| Hamlet — Romeo                               | 36 — 11 |
| Hamlet — Othello                             | 40 — 10 |
| Hamlet — Faust                               | 36 — 8  |
| Hamlet — Don Juan                            | 49 — 0  |
| Hamlet — Don Quijote                         | 43 — 5  |
| Hamlet — Monte Cristo                        | 40 — 7  |
| Hamlet — Adam in Madách's<br>Tragedy of Man: | 15 — 34 |

Just this overwhelming majority of the votes cast on Hamlet diminishes their validity. It is namely not quite sure that Hamlet is so very much a greater experience than for instance Don Quijote or Faust. We have to assume rather that all these experiences are more or less of the same intensity, and Hamlet prevails against them only because the whole questionnaire is about him. But if one of the other heroes were more than a mere reminiscence, if it were a symbol, then the mere mentioning of his name would conjure up its impact in its original vigour and would tear the respondent out of Hamlet's magic circle.

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Instead of summing up what we have written about, let us conclude by appointing our further tasks.

1. We have to revise our questionnaire and bring it up-to-date.
2. We have to extend our researches to all important social sections (also to those of foreign countries, if possible). This will enable us to perform the breakdown of the sample on all variables which may influence literary experience and the impact of the tragedy.
3. Summarizing our contemporaries' feelings and thoughts about this tragedy, we have to select those features of the Hamlet-experience which are in general characteristic of our age.
4. To validate our results obtained through the instrument of questionnaires, we have to study also those Hamlet-experiences that may be unraveled from the Hamlet-literature of our time (accounts on performances, critiques, literary studies, etc.).

5. If we survey, finally, the results of our investigations concerning the historical evolution of the Hamlet-experience, it will become clear to us how the Hamlet-experience of today is linking up with the long train of former experiences that have ever been changing together with the coming and disappearing centuries and generations.

#### APPENDIX

The text of our questionnaire.

The figures and notes put in brackets indicate the upshot of our experimental poll.

Questions relating to the respondent

- I. Age..... (56 respondents between 18—30 years, 3 above 30 years)
- II. Sex..... (22 men — 37 women)
- III. Education..... (Secondary school certificate for all but three)
- IV. Occupation..... (Arts students, with the exception of three)
- V. Some of your favourite books..... (...)

Questions relating to Hamlet

1. How many times have you seen the *Hamlet*? ..... (2—3 times in the average)  
When for the last time? ..... (Months or years before the poll, with the exception of one respondent who read it on the previous day)
2. How old is Hamlet according to you? ..... (37 votes for 23—28 years, and only one for less than 20)
3. Who is more sympathetic? Hamlet or Romeo? Hamlet or Othello? Hamlet or Faust? Hamlet or Don Juan? Hamlet or Don Quijote? Hamlet or Adam of Emeric Madách<sup>2</sup>, Hamlet or Monte-Cristo? (For results see the text above)
4. Do you think that Hamlet is weary of life? If you do, please give reasons .....  
(39 Yes — 16 No)
5. There are experts who affirm that Hamlet has really gone mad. Other ones believe that he only feigns madness. Which of these two opinions do you believe is nearer the truth? ..... (He is mad: 39 votes — He only feigns it: 15 votes)
6. Why is he deferring revenge? ..... (See the text above)
7. What is his chief characteristic? Intelligence? (15 votes) Agressivity? (0 vote) Scepticism? (21 votes) Melancholy (10 votes) Love of truth? (29 votes) Irresolution? (19 votes) Having high and noble demands? (9 votes) Indifference? (0 vote) Or?...
8. Some people say that it would be better if Hamlet survived at the end of the tragedy. Do you agree or disagree with this?... (1 Yes — 1 alternative — 57 No)
9. Are there any people like Hamlet in your environment? ..... (27 Yes — 21 No)  
Would you like if many Hamlet-like people lived among us? ..... (15 Yes — 7 alternative — 29 No)
10. Is Hamlet master of his fate, or is he the pawn of greater powers? (Master: 19 votes — Both: 14 votes — Victim: 20 votes)
11. There are good reasons for thinking that Hamlet is a neurotic. If he is, the

<sup>2</sup> The greatest Hungarian playwright in the 19th cent.



- average healthy men, such as we are, have not much to do with him. Do you agree or disagree with this?..... (8 Yes — 44 No)
12. Is Hamlet a moral man? (55 Yes — 4 respondents did not answer) Is he selfish (7 votes) or unselfish? (36 votes) (He is both: 8 votes)
  13. Do you feel pity for him (43 votes) or do you think rather that he deserved his fate? (8 votes)
  14. Which is the most impressive scene in the drama? (The great monologue: 9 votes; the closet scene: 7 votes; the mousetrap scene: 4 votes; the mad Ophelia: 4 votes; the death of Ophelia: 3 votes; the grave-digger scene: 3 votes; etc.)
  15. Which of these two statements is, according to you, nearer the truth: The causes of Hamlet's defeat are to be sought
    - a: in himself, so that he is the victim of himself;
    - b: in outside circumstances, i. e. he is the victim of society.
 (In himself: 11 votes — Both: 20 votes — Society: 26 votes)
  16. May we look upon him as a paragon? ..... (24 Yes — 18: In some respects — 13 No). We may because he is ..... We may not, because he is ..... (For results see the text above)
  17. May we generalize his tragedy? May we consider it as the symbol of human destiny in general? ..... (13 Yes — 43 No)
  18. Some people regard him as the type of the meditating, sophisticated and desperate modern man. Do you agree or disagree with this? ..... (20 Yes — 36 No)
  19. Would you like to be similar to him in something? ..... (Only 12 absolute refusal; see also the text above)
  20. What is his real aim and purpose? To take revenge? (16 votes) To correct the world? (15 votes) To seize the power? (3 votes) To attain selfknowledge? (5 votes) To overcome hopelessness? (4 votes) To find the meaning and sense of life? (28 votes)
  21. Is there anything that you do not understand in the play? (54 respondents have no problems at all. 2 respondents do not understand Hamlet's behaviour towards Ophelia, another writes that Hamlet's madness is problematic, and according to one of them, Hamlet's real aim and purpose is uncertain)
  22. Hearing Hamlet's name, what is your first thought? The dreariness of life? (2 votes) Meditation? (29 votes) Ophelia? (2 votes) Death? (2 votes) One of your acquaintances? (7 votes) Human destiny? (3 votes) You yourself? (0 votes) The necessity of struggling? (9 votes) Or....
  23. What fault do you find with Hamlet? (26: Nothing. 27: Irresolution, weak will. 2: Revengefulness. 1: Cynicism. 1: Treatment of Ophelia)
  24. What is the cause of Hamlet's tragic fall? (14: Weak will. 11: Cruel society. 7: Loneliness. 3: Love of truth. 2: murder)
  25. Do you remember the last scene of the tragedy: the marching in of Fortinbras? There are theatres which produce the tragedy without this final scene. Do you approve or disapprove of this? (Disapprove: 41 votes. Approve: 16 votes). Some characteristic answers:
    - It is important, but I do not think that this new world will bring much good to people.
    - This is the most beautiful scene. Belief in the future. But it is a commonplace one.
    - This is only eye-wash for the audience.
    - It is important, because so we understand that Hamlet's tragedy is not that of the whole mankind.
    - It is important only for those who instead of trying to find the substance

- of the tragedy are eager to find and to smuggle in optimism everywhere (I am an optimist!!).
- It is important, but this only scene does not change much the atmosphere of the play and does not give any real answer to our problems.
  - Hamlet is dead. What do I care about anything else!
26. What is the general atmosphere and the final effect of the tragedy? Is it

reassuring (8) — or — upsetting? (23)  
 comforting (7) — or — distressing? (1)  
 uplifting (27) — or — depressing? (15)  
 fortifying (12) — or — disheartening? (6)

27. What is the essence of Hamlet's tragedy? What kind of truth, what kind of human fate is symbolized by it? Underscore answers you agree with and blot out those that are, to your mind, utterly unacceptable. (This was a multiple-choice question with 20 pre-formulated answers. Instead of their original sequence, we give these answers in order of importance, i. e. according to the number of votes cast on them.)

Answers that got the greatest number of positive votes, „positive“ meaning here that respondents did agree with these alternatives:

- It is the tragedy of a man who does not tolerate lie, foulness and compromise (Positive votes: 29; negative vote: 1);
- The tragedy of a man, who has greater and nobler demands on life than average people and strives for perfection in everything (+ 25; - 0);
- The tragedy of a man who breaks down under an unbearable load (+ 17; - 7);
- The tragedy of human loneliness (+ 17; - 1);
- The tragedy of a man who reflects too much and is, consequently, unable to act (+ 16; - 9);
- The tragedy of over-conscienciousness (+ 13; - 3);
- The tragedy of the outsider who has come into antagonism with his society (+ 13; - 5);
- The tragedy of over-sensibility (+ 12; - 3)

Answers that got the greatest number of negative votes in testimony of their disagreement:

- It is the tragedy of the merciless, self-centered man (- 40; + 0);
- The tragedy of a man who is weak-willed and unable to make up his mind (- 20; + 8);
- The tragedy of the revengeful, unforgiving man (- 20; + 6);
- The tragedy of the common human destiny, that of the futility of all human activity (- 15; + 3);
- The tragedy of the faithless, sceptical man (- 14; + 2);
- The tragedy and martyrdom of a man who fights for social progress (- 13; + 6);
- The tragedy of the genius (- 10; + 7);

Indifferent answers that got only few votes:

- It is the tragedy of the idealist who craves for unattainable ideals (+ 8; - 9);
- The tragedy of a man who has lost his confidence in man and his faith in life (+ 8; - 7);



- The tragedy of the man who has realized the antithesis between his own aspiration to the infinite, and the finiteness of human existence (+ 7; - 7);
  - The tragedy of a victim of the reckless and inscrutable Fate (+ 7; - 6);
  - The tragedy of a man who has grown disgusted with the horrors of life (+ 3; - 7);
28. What is the lesson of the tragedy, if there is any? (This, too, was a multiple-choice question)

Answers that got the greatest number of positive votes:

- Even if defeated, struggling Man is great, noble and admirable (+ 38; - 1);
- Action is needed not meditation. Let us defeat hopelessness (+ 28; - 2);
- In the last, truth triumphs over everything (+ 17; - 7);
- I believe in life, because there live people like Hamlet among us (+ 11; - 7).

Answers that got the greatest number of negative votes:

- Hamlet is the victim of dark and bygone days. We have got over these problems (- 20; + 6);
- Evil and wickedness are for ever triumphant. Nothing can be done (- 19; + 2);
- Life is hopeless and painful: resignation is the only solution (- 13; + 2);
- Love is more important than truth. Instead of calling people to account, love them (- 10; + 4).

Indifferent answers that got only few votes:

- Let us live more courageously with greater and nobler demands than we have done hitherto (+ 9; - 4);
- Let us create order and harmony in the chaos of life (+ 9; - 1);
- Common sense and strong will overcome all obstacles (+ 9; - 7);
- Pessimism and scepticism lead inevitably to destruction (+ 8; - 3);
- Life consists of a series of concessions. You have to resign yourself to this (+ 8; - 9);
- He who transgresses the limits of moral, has to pay the penalty (+ 7; - 4);
- Life is the supreme good in this world. You must not sacrifice it for abstract ideals (+ 6; - 7);
- Man is weak in himself, He has to rely on greater powers (+ 2; - 9);
- Do not perturb the unknown depths of life (+ 2; - 7).

## O PRZEŻYWANIU „HAMLETA“

(Próba oceny oddziaływania tragedii)

### STRESZCZENIE

Wpływ wywierany przez literaturę na czytelników w ogóle, a oddziaływanie różnych literackich rodzajów w szczególności nie zostały jeszcze zbadane w dostatecznym stopniu, jakkolwiek znaczenie tego problemu na ogół jest doceniane. Intencją autora było poszukiwanie nowych możliwości i opracowanie nowych metod określania oddziaływania literatury.

Mając to na względzie, autor wybrał tragedię Szekspira *Hamlet* za cel swych badań. Śledząc historię przeżywania *Hamleta* starał się ustalić wpływ tej tragedii w różnych stuleciach na różne społeczeństwa. Doszedłszy do XX wieku, współczesnego sobie, autor uznał za pożyteczne wejść w kontakt z szekspirowskim

audytorium bezpośrednio, a więc nie poprzez krytyków, ale za pomocą ankiet wypełnianych przez samych widzów teatralnych. W swej pracy podaje wyniki pierwszej eksperymentalnej ankiety przeprowadzonej wśród studentów wydziałów humanistycznych trzech węgierskich uniwersytetów.

Ponieważ wypełnionych ankiet było tylko 59, autor powstrzymuje się od wyciągania daleko idących wniosków co do przeżywania *Hamleta* w naszych czasach, ograniczając się do ustalenia najlepszych środków i metod oceny i usystematyzowania materiału, który — jak sądzi autor — będzie wpływał w znacznych ilościach w miarę przeprowadzania dalszych testów.

Autor utrzymuje, że takie ankiety mogą odkryć następujące aspekty wpływu i przeżywania tragedii:

a. Intensywność przeżycia. Autor wylicza tu czynniki psychologiczne i społeczne, mogące mieć wpływ na intensywność odbierania sztuki, i opisuje procedurę wymierzania tej intensywności.

b. Pozytywny albo negatywny charakter oddziaływania sztuki. Autor nazywa oddziaływanie negatywnym lub pozytywnym, zależnie od tego, czy pobudza ono do działania, czy też działa depresyjnie; oddziaływanie jest pozytywne, jeśli wzmaga żywotny dynamizm ludzi, negatywne zaś w przeciwnym wypadku. Stwierdza, że przeżycie tragiczne nie jest zjawiskiem statycznym, lecz walką pomiędzy oddziaływaniem tragedii a ludzkim umysłem. Podaje kilka typowych przykładów tej walki.

c. Kierunek i treść oddziaływania tragedii. Tutaj autor stara się wykazać, że gruntowna analiza ankiet winna ustalić dokładną treść oddziaływania tragedii, a także kierunek, jaki nadała ona przeżyciom widza.

d. Ostateczna ewolucja i trwałość przeżycia. Ponieważ przeżywanie tragedii jest procesem trwającym i zmiennym, a nie chwilowym, błyskawicznym zjawiskiem, należy sprawdzać je kilkakrotnie w trakcie jego rozwoju. Tylko w ten sposób możemy dokonać analizy trzech następujących po sobie faz ewolucji, a mianowicie: 1. Działania bezpośredniego wpływu tragedii; 2. Emocjonalnego i intelektualnego ukształtowania się przeżycia; 3. Przetworzenia przeżycia w symbol, który jest jego ostateczną i trwałą esencją.

Na zakończenie autor zarysowuje dalsze problemy i perspektywy badania przeżywania tragedii i oddziaływania literatury w ogóle.

Przełożył Tadeusz Rybowski