CHAPTER I

THE DRAMA BEFORE SENECA

In the realm of letters it has been Seneca's destiny, like Banquo's, to beget in his posterity a greatness denied himself. Virgil, that imperial poet, was the founder of a line of degenerate literary *fainéants*, the Epic poetasters of Silver Latin: but from Seneca, decadent Silver Latinist himself, by a seeming freak of fortune can be traced the direct descent of the lordliest names in the dramatic literature of Western Europe. To estimate his influence and to trace the line of descent from him to the Elizabethans is the main purpose of this book. But for the sake of completeness I have prefaced a slight sketch of the rise of the Greek drama, which made him possible, and of the Roman which led up to him, before dealing with Seneca the man, that strange compound of strength and weakness, brilliance and imbecility, and Seneca the writer, so second-rate, decadent and vulgar, yet with an ingenuity like Ovid's, almost genius, and an influence on Renaissance literature which really is amazing.

But before going into details it may be well to try to give the keynote of the whole, the thread that may be recognised running through even the earlier, but far more the later, part of our period of 500 B.C. to 1640 A.D. I mean that endless conflict which under a hundred different names is waged through all cultures, in all times and lands.

On the one side stands Classicism, in its widest sense, the feeling for the value of tradition, of form; for perfect form is of its nature the outcome of a long traditional evolution. And Classical minds and Classical periods are really only those in which are particularly realised the value of restraint,

of law, of self-control, of construction in works of art, of an exact and perfect fitness in the relation of what the artist expresses to the frame in which it is expressed. Think of a Greek pediment, its elaborate symmetry, its adjustment of its balanced grouping to the sloping gable sides—an attempt only fully successful after centuries of effort and experiment and readjustment. Classicism is always conscious of the importance of "due measure"; it tends to care a great deal for faultlessness and flawlessness, a little too much, very often; to be intellectual rather than emotional and intuitive; it values rule, distrusts instinct; it criticises itself while it creates; it is produced not in a frenzy of inspiration, a "first fine careless rapture," but with labour and pain; its creations smell not of the wine-cup, but the lamp.

Such is one of the two combatants in the eternal duel, which may perhaps be called the battle of Classic and Romantic, always being fought, never decisively won. It is a conflict like the conflict of summer and winter; the happiest periods are those when neither is completely dominant.

So much then for Classicism: that is what I shall mean when I use the word. One needs to be a little careful and remember that many Greek and some Roman Classics are not in that sense strictly classical. Aeschylus is hardly to be roped in: but Sophocles is an example of such 'Classicism' at its best, and for 'Classicism' not at its best one may think of the orator Isocrates who spent nine years oiling the smooth periods of his panegyric or of the Roman epic poets of the Silver Age, who produced those vast and devastated poems with an imitative conformity almost Chinese to their great master Virgil; and for modern instances of Classicism, of Pope and of Racine.

Against this attitude there rises in eternal revolt the spirit which may be called Romantic, which cares not for tradition but originality, not for form, but colour. It realises the value,

which extreme Classicism forgets, of spontaneity instead of restraint, of freedom instead of the bondage of law, of self-expression rather than self-control, of emotional and passionate sincerity in art rather than cunning of technique. Classicism, in the words of Pericles, "loves beauty with economy"; Romanticism loves beauty with ecstasy, without sparing, without economy, without reservations. It cares not for faultlessness, for avoiding mistakes, for not doing certain things; it cares for reaching the heights, for climax, and never minds the bathos, the depths. The Classicist cries with Ben Jonson of Shakespeare "'He never blotted a line' say you. I say 'Would he had blotted a thousand!'" but the Romanticist believes with Napoleon "That if one does not make mistakes, one makes nothing," with Bernard Shaw "That the poet has a right to have his chain tested by its strongest link." So must a Wordsworth be judged.

Romanticism, to conclude, cares for heart more than head, passion than intellect; it creates spontaneously, uncritically, unselfconsciously. It is the essence of Youth against the essence of Maturity, the Many in Greek philosophic language against the One, the Spirit of Dionysus in Nietzsche's phrase against the Spirit of Apollo.

Think of the history of the struggle. The naturalism of the Mycenaean civilisation before Homer is overlaid by the strict Geometric restraint of the invading and pervading North; the best Greek Art, as the best Art, I believe, always, is compounded of both freedom and law; but decadence brings dissolution. In Euripides the perfect bloom of Greek tragic form passes away with the gradual pushing of the Chorus out of the Action, the Greek tragic spirit tints from its marble purity to the colours of Romanticism. Love begins to set foot on the altar of Dionysus. Such a play is his *Andromeda*, now lost save in fragments, which opened with the maiden chained in the dim of dawn beside a faery, monster-haunted

sea and which, in Lucian's mocking phrase, in after-days so bewitched the good folk of Abdera, town far-famed for its stupidity, that the city was filled with seven-day old tragedians, pale and haggard, chanting aloud "O Love, high monarch over gods and men"[1]. That new influence descends through Alexandria and the Greek novelists of later centuries to the torrent of fiction that roars like Niagara over the bookstalls of to-day.

The Muses passed to Rome. Imitative from its cradle, though with a ponderous massiveness all its own, Roman literature after the Augustan age became Classical *à outrance*. Then the Barbarians, the Dark Ages, Medievalism and again the fresh mating of the Classic and Romantic spirit in the Renaissance.

For a picture highly imaginative, yet in its deep essentials true, of the Classical spirit, latent and biding its time of resurrection through the darkest hours of barbarism, we may turn for a moment to Chesterton's *Ballad of the White Horse*. There, among the leaders Alfred musters for the great fight at Ethandune with Danish barbarism flooding in from the North Sea, the poet has added, beside Saxon and Celt, a last descendant of the race, whose eagles left Britain for ever four centuries before, a last scion of Classic Rome—Mark of Italy.

> His fruit trees stood like soldiers
> Drilled in a straight line.
> His strange stiff olives did not fail
> And all the kings of the earth drank ale,
> But he drank wine.

[1] Courtney in his *Idea of Tragedy* points out that Andromeda's words to Perseus:

> "Take me, O stranger, for thine handmaiden,
> Or wife, or slave,"

are exactly Miranda's to Ferdinand in the most romantic of Shakespeare's plays (*Tempest*, III, 2, 83–6).

Wide over wasted British plains
Stood never an arch or dome,
Only the trees to toss and reel,
The tribes to bicker, the beasts to squeal,
But the eyes in his head were strong like steel,
And his soul remembered Rome.

He may be historically impossible; spiritually he is very symbolic. He was to fall at Ethandune; but he and his were to mould the English spirit of seven hundred years onward. We owe so much to these "whose souls remembered Rome." And when we come to trace the descent of the greatest Elizabethan drama from, on the one hand the formless, childishly spontaneous and shapeless effusions of the Miracle-play, on the other the meticulously rigid Senecan drama, like *Gorboduc*, and the University Latin play, with their five acts, their Chorus, their stereotyped conventions, their attempts to cling even to the Unities of Time and Place, it may be more apparent why we have dwelt so long on Classic and Romantic.

But, to begin at last at the beginning of all things with a brief sketch of Seneca's Greek predecessors, we must picture the first home of Tragedy; the heroic age of golden Mycenae has vanished under one of those periodic waves of Northern barbarism which for thousands of years swept down on the Mediterranean lands; only after centuries the waters of the cataclysm begin to recede. The Greece of Hesiod is one of those "deserts called peace." Little fighting in Hesiod's Boeotia, only the wearier aftermath of war—scarcity, want, the anarchy, the class-hatred of peasants writhing under a feudal baronage of gift-devouring kings. The world is grown smaller as well as meaner; without sea communication travelling has never been light work in Greece; and the sea is one of Hesiod's ultimate horrors. There in his own mountain-girdled plain, generation after generation, "man comes and tills the soil and lies beneath." Those who venture out across

the sea, go pushed by dissension and over-population, to return no more, like the emigrants from Scotland after the '45 and from Ireland long after. Through the eighth and seventh centuries Greece spreads to East and West; but the dawn comes slowly from the sunrise. Echoes of the great things of the Orient, like the fall of Nineveh, reverberate dimly westward. Then the light spreads on to the islands of the Aegean. The Lyric poetry of Archilochus, Alcaeus, the fiery self-realisation of the individual, springs up; and philosophy arises in Ionia. And yet the boy Aeschylus born about 525 B.C. in an Athens without political freedom, with little art except a still rude sculpture and an immature vase-painting, with little literature of its own, save the poems of the genial old politician Solon and Thespis' first rude development of parochial religious drama, can never have dreamed, in the coldness of that dawn, of the noonday he was to live to see.

In his youth the Greek drama was still a strange, unlicked, shapeless thing—only freshly emancipated from a religion to which it had been as closely tied as the analogous Medieval miracle-play.

Now to precisely what sort of religion, without raising a hornet's nest of discussion, one cannot clearly say: it does not seem to matter vastly. Whether the dancing and mimicry of early drama was in honour of a vegetation Year-Daemon or the spirit of a buried king, is still a subject of undecided and acrimonious conflict. A rash attempt to reconcile the jarring alternatives might suggest that from the particular one passed to the general, from the soul of one dead king, still making his people's crops grow green in spring, to the universal power that makes all Nature revive and bud again. But all, or more than all, that is known in favour of what seems to me the likelier hypothesis will be found in Sir W. Ridgeway's *Origin of Tragedy*.

We must picture as persisting age after immemorial age, in the lonely villages, the little hill cities of Hellas, perched between peak and peak, or nestling between the mountains and the sea, these dances of sunburnt rustics—dances with strange chants and weird figures, and yet already with that inscrutable grace of all things Greek. Gradually as the custom grows older, as the generations of glad dancers pass into silence and their children glorify the powers of life and death in their brief turn,—gradually the religious intensity dies away, and the art of the conscious artist comes stealing into its place. The dance ceases to be felt as an impassioned appeal to friendly or terrible forces of the unseen world; we dance now because it always has been done; it is custom; and what a good custom it is! And to make it even better, we find someone, fellow-townsman or stranger, who has the feel and the gift, someone to whom the Muses can whisper beauty, to make us new dances and to better the old. Masters of the ballet arise; the century 650–550 B.C. sees Arion at Corinth, Alcman teaching the girls of Sparta his songs of wistful loveliness, the splendid and sonorous Stesichorus striking an epic lyre in Western Sicily. Beside the individual lyric of Aeolia, of Alcaeus and Sappho, stands now the lyric of the choir.

But in Attica there follows a new development. Athens is growing in peace and prosperity under the benevolent despotism of Pisistratus, gathering her strength in silence for the hectic and glorious centuries of liberty to come. King Theseus five hundred years before had made the territorial unity of Attica; Pisistratus was now to make it spiritual. He brought in Zeus the Olympian to dominate the petty local gods of his turbulent nobles; he brought in a greater still, Homer; and it must have been at least with his approval that under Thespis about 535 B.C. the village drama of the local cult found its centre too beside the shrine of Dionysus, below the Acropolis of Athens.

For the village dance of Attica had become Drama indeed. Tradition says it was Thespis, though it may have been some earlier and forgotten worthy, who in the interval while his dancers rested came forward and declaimed to the audience himself—the first of actors. Nor was he limited to monologue; he could engage in converse with the leader of his chorus. Ghost, hero, tyrant, messenger, God—he could be all by turns. The addition of further actors was merely a matter for time and his successors.

He did not rest there—probably his fame spread—it was easier for Thespis and his troupe to tour Attica than for Attica to tramp to Thespis' native Icaria, as Europe goes to Oberammergau. As to the local Medieval Mystery with its amateur resident actors succeeded the Morality with its professionals, so in the latter sixth century, Thespis packed his itinerant troupe on to a waggon and trundled off to conquer the world. He did not have to wander far—where one sits to-day with one's back to the rock of Athene's hill and the morning sun shining over Hymettus and the sea, there under Dionysus' patronage, Attic Drama found its home. Thespis had passed; and the next generation of tragedians was passing, when the first play of Aeschylus appeared about 500 B.C.

So, like the Medieval drama, only with far swifter development, the Greek drama passed from the domain of religion to that of art.

But Aeschylus does remain dominantly religious in tone. There is no time to dwell at length on the Greek Tragedians; they concern us here for their influence on Rome. But one may briefly say that Aeschylus is concerned with justifying God's ways; Sophocles with portraying man's, with humanity for its own sake; Euripides with impugning God's ways, and with Humanitarianism. Aeschylus the prophet, the soldier of the Great War who found Athens becoming estranged, as a generation grew up that knew neither him nor it, wrestling

with the problem of World-governance alone like a Hebrew prophet, was to shake from his shoes his native dust and die among the Sicilian cornfields in the West.

Sophocles reigned in his stead. Of him, though perfectly happy in his life and in his work, there is not much to say, for our purpose. The perfect artist seldom rears great successors. He comes at the end of a line of development, which he brings to its climax of excellence; so that in his particular line little remains to be done. Sophocles remains there, in Mr Wells' words of our own dead friends, "rounded off and bright and done,"—to be equalled in his way by none, to be appreciated, even, only by the most sensitive among future generations.

With Euripides we come to the really vital influence on the tragedy of Rome from Ennius to Seneca. The Tragic Muse has passed from her splendid prime to the thoughtfulness and wistfulness of middle-age; the rift has begun within the lute; and in all the haunting melody of Euripides, in his tragic pathos—"most tragic of the poets"—in his passionate outcry against the world that Sophocles had found full of wonder and terror, but of beauty most of all, in all this wild protest, this insistent questioning, this hopeless regret of the last of the great tragedians, there sounds one perpetual note of dissonance; "one little grain of conscience makes him sour."

One must realise the man living through a twenty-eight years' war with his ideals being tortured into hypersensitive agony by the meannesses, and the basenesses of a desperate struggle for victory. The Heavens are iron above him; the gods the devils of superstition; he turns to humanity. And he finds nothing but a contemporary earth as hopelessly wrong as heaven. He cannot forget the oppressed and the neglected—women and slaves. He grows embittered. Perfect art means that intellect and emotion have kissed and go hand

in hand in its creator's soul. Euripides, soured a little in the battle of scepticism, tends at times to become an intellectual, to make his characters talk rhetoric, be sophistic, too clever, too hardly brilliant; on the other side, his emotion, his intense and noble pity, tends, as to-day with Galsworthy it tends, to bury itself in a pathos too painful, in situations too realistically miserable, in a forgetfulness of any side of life but its ever-present unhappiness, nay, its horrors.

None the less it was, quite naturally, not Sophocles the perfect poet, but Euripides the thinker, the questioner, the cosmopolitan, "the human," who influenced the more sterile ages that followed, while tragedy ran dry and the mantle of Euripides descended on Menander, the great poet of the New Comedy. It was Euripides, again, who first godfathered the infant stage of Rome. For of the great Tragedians of the Republic, on the whole, Ennius, the earliest, is most influenced by Euripides, Pacuvius by Sophocles, Accius by Aeschylus; that is, the earliest Romans by the latest Greeks and *vice versa*. Then a century and a half after Accius, Seneca reverts utterly to Euripides.

Let us dwell for a moment on the distinctive and infectious things in the style of Euripides.

Firstly the Tragic Chorus as handled by him already bears on it the mark of its ultimate destiny, extinction. These descendants of our rustic dancers, once supreme, from the moment that Tragedy really begins, are throughout its history slowly and surely dominated and evicted by the actors. But Euripides was the first definitely to make these its creatures—who were in fact an incongruous anachronism forced only by religious convention on his modernist drama—to make them sing lyrics irrelevant to the immediate action, to convert them from an acting to an orchestral part, to turn them into an extra, providing musical interludes between acts.