

Modern Tragedy: Hopeless Disillusionment... or not?

The prominent French philosopher Paul Valéry wrote in *The Crisis of the Mind* in 1919 to express disillusionment and loss of hope: “We modern civilizations have learned to recognize that we are mortal like the others. We had heard tell of whole worlds vanished, of empires foundered [...]. But these wrecks, after all, were no concern of ours.” By this statement, Valéry seems to imply the tragedy and vulnerability of modern society and conclude that there is no use finding beauty or meaning in this disillusioned life. In my opinion, two poems of the 20th century make me relate to Valéry’s observation of modern tragedies, but I disagree with him in terms of the conclusion. Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” and Thomas’ “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” depict different forms of contemporary tragedies: the former, indifference and loss of true self, while the latter, the same mortality of every individual. Yet these poems differ from Valéry’s conclusion in that Pound suggests that beauty exists in life despite modern tragedy, and Thomas’ poem urges one to strive despite the inevitable death of everyone.

In “In a Station of the Metro,” the line “the apparition of these faces in the crowd” (Pound, line 1) depicts people’s indifference to others as a modern tragedy. Perhaps Pound implies that contemporary people use indifference to protect themselves: people care so little about others that the crowd around them fades into

lifeless apparitions, as if their selves have vanished. Yet the crowd is not the only apparition without self. Indifference as a defense mechanism also isolates one from others, so that a part of one's true self disappears, and eventually, one also turns into an apparition. In short, I think this line agrees with Valery's observation, for indifference is a modern tragedy by turning everyone into a specter.

However, this metaphor doesn't entail that there is no use in finding meaning or beauty in the disillusioned modern life. Instead, Pound believes there are still "petals on a wet, black bough" (Pound, line 2). Beauty exists in its own way, despite the dark, hopeless atmosphere. Thus, I see the conclusion of this poem diverges from Valery's pessimistic disillusionment, even though the first line points out contemporary people's vulnerability.

Another modern tragedy is that people recognize we are doomed to die. In Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," the poet describes how different people recognize that death is inevitable. For example, "wise men at their end know dark is right" (Thomas, line 4); that is, these people realize their time has come, just as it *has come* to former generations and *will come* to later generations. I think this understanding relates to modern people's experience: we come to accept that in the face of fate, everyone is the same. Unlike the sense of superiority during the colonial era, such a realization of mortality corresponds with Valery's observation: "we are

mortal like the others.”

However, I think Thomas suggests that recognizing mortality does not trap people in the morass of disillusionment, as Valery seems to conclude. People do not wait passively until their fate meets them. Instead, people actively “rage, rage against the dying of the light.” The word “rage” is impactful, and perhaps Thomas chooses it to imply one’s agency in life. We can and should steer our lives and determine their meaning until we, inevitably, meet death. Hence, Thomas’ message makes me disagree with Valery’s conclusion of passive disillusionment, for mortality should not stop us from finding the meaning of life.

In sum, after reading Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” and Thomas’ “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night,” I agree with Valery’s remark on modern tragedy, yet I disagree with his passive disillusionment. Valery reveals contemporary vulnerability and suggests people surrender to mortality and meaninglessness; although Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” also implies a form of modern tragedy, namely that people’s indifference leads to the loss of true selves, the poem suggests beauty still exists despite all gloominess. As for “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night,” Thomas captures the modern, tragic recognition that we are all equal in the face of death—nevertheless, one should strive to create their own meaning of life despite the same end.