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Senecan Tragedy and the Early Elizabethan Portent of Apocalypse⁽¹⁾

Tatsuro Sato

I

In the second book of his *Naturales Quaestiones*, Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 5/4 BC-AD 65), certifying the practice of divination, indicates that probable effects in the future, whether they be auspicious or unfavorable, can be interpreted on the basis of divining by portents, prodigies such as thunder, lightning, earthquakes and other natural phenomena. "The roll of fate," he then writes, "sends ahead everywhere indications of what is to come," and "whatever happens, it is a sign of something that will happen" (2.32.4).⁽²⁾ The conviction that certain natural phenomena or contemporary events foretell the future and imply a long series of successive fates, particularly benefits from Stoic thought that pervades Seneca's philosophical writings. Posidonius of Apamea (c. 140/30-c. 59/40 BC), the major representative of the middle Stoa, is on record as having said that divination can be defined as the ability to comprehend and explain the signs given by God, and that its aim is above all to illustrate what intentions he bears in mind for the future.⁽³⁾ In Stoic theory, the concept of divination as a part of its philosophical system, in some form, entails the assumption that there exist the links in the causal chain between the present and the future: the entire universe that is equated with "God" or "nature" thus forms one living organism, and all parts of the world, rational or material, are

interconnected by “pneuma”, God’s fiery breath of life, both in time and space.⁽⁴⁾ The universe, in the way God originally intended, is made up of an eternally changing sequence of concrete individual events so that what has happened before may be a cause or indication of what follows.

The relation of the present to the future in which a fixed succession is supposed for all events can be observed in Seneca’s notion of a catastrophe and renewal of the world. In *Naturales Quaestiones*, despite the unstinted praise on beauty and regularity of nature in its preface, there is no historical document or a body of experiences in the following books which do not bear witness to the haunting fear of disarray caused by environmental upheavals. In book 6, on “Earthquakes,” Seneca remarks on the occasion of the news of the earthquake that brought great destruction in the whole Campania where a flock of hundreds of sheep was killed by a plague, “the most unstable personalities develop such fear that they lose control of themselves” (6.1.3, 29.2). But more important, Seneca’s sharpening of the concern with the natural disaster gives rise to the anxiety that the possibility of the world catastrophe lies just below the surface, since the whole universe that makes “a continuum” exists under the same law ; even the smallest upheaval has implication for the pulverization of the world into discrete fragments. An awareness of the inescapability of this destruction is also revealed in the tone of many passages of the last four chapters in book 3 in which Seneca goes so far to claim that excessive rain, the withdrawal of the sun, continuous mist, “a thick fog which no winds will ever dry out”—all things in a united effort contribute to the impression that there will be no delay in the world ruin, for “it seems best to god for the old things to be ended” (3.27.4, 28.7).

However, in Stoic concept of bundling together perception of the

present and expectation of the future, natural disasters also signify another subsequent event, and at the certain stages of Seneca's argument, there are more or less open variants on Heraclitus's postulate of a catastrophe and then a renewal of the world.⁽⁵⁾ In book 3, 29, immediately after the detailed descriptions of the world out of order and hastening toward dissolution, Seneca puts forward his logical development of the doctrine of a cyclical cosmology, implying that the fear of the world collapse in flood and conflagration may mingle with a hope for regeneration and rebirth where new land and a new civilization emerge once again: "Therefore...parts of the world must pass away and be abolished utterly so that all may be generated from the beginning again....and the ancient order of things will be reestablished" (3.29.5, 30.7). Seneca's horror of catastrophe and the paradoxical prophetic confidence of renovation might remind the modern reader of Yeats's own comment on *A Vision*, where he regards the Stoic premise of catastrophe and renewal as possessing an insistent closeness to his most absolute concerns: "I had constantly the word 'terror' impressed upon me and once the old Stoic prophesy of earthquake, fire and flood at the end of an age...Love war because of its horror, that belief may be changed, civilization renewed."⁽⁶⁾

However, we would be wrong to say that much of thinking that needs to be done about the crux of Seneca's argument will stop at the level of Stoic cyclical cosmology, the closed binary system where catastrophe and renewal alternately occur. For if we turn our eyes from Seneca's philosophical work to his dramatic canon, there are some forces at work to undermine that structure, and to render a balance between the horror of catastrophe and the trust of renovation more problematical. In his illuminating study *Senecan Drama and Stoic Cosmology*, Thomas G. Rosenmeyer suggests that "In Seneca's

writings... catastrophe is a pervasive memory and fear, a thought that colors all thinking about the constitution of the cosmos,” and the built-in expectation of the constant danger of disarray is so intense that “the impression of the ultimate catastrophe cannot be shrugged off.”⁽⁷⁾ Distinguishing between “Orthodox Stoicism” that confirms a binary system of catastrophe and renovation, and “Stoic Pessimism” explicit in Senecan tragedy where the soft credo of renewal is given up for the hard admission of “the ultimate catastrophe,” Rosenmeyer then argues that Senecan tragedy, disregarding the positive aspect of the traditional thought, “defies the ostensible matrix from which it springs.” ; and such pessimistic re-interpretation of Stoic thinking, the disproportionate emphasis on catastrophe rather than regeneration, spring from a dark and oppressive atmosphere under the reign of Nero’s tyranny when the concept of the withdrawal of God’s mercy begins to filter into people’s mind.⁽⁸⁾ In act I of *Thyestes*, for instance, where the preamble of the Fury’s speech to the ghost of Tantalus predicts Atreus’s murder of Thyestes’s children and the ruin of the House of Pelops, the description of environmental upheavals sets the tone for the upcoming plot with a picture of nature somber and threatening :

...see how the springs

Recede and shrink, the river beds are dry,

The scarce clouds ravaged by a scorching wind.

Behold, the very Lord of Heaven, the Sun

Is loth to drive his chariot forth, nor cares

To hasten on the day that soon must die.⁽⁹⁾ (116-8, 119-21)

But the third chorus, confirming the reconciliation of the brothers Atreus and Thyestes—and ignorant of the treacherous intentions of the former—regards their civil wars as only the means of renewal : “Now,

stilled is the threat of the killer's sword.... Deep peace/ Comes back to the city, and all is joy again" (574, 576-7). And yet the audience can find that while Seneca allows the third chorus to express clearly the belief immanent in the Stoic binary system, he also tries to dissolve that conceptual framework by focusing on the ironical reversal, the brutal revelation of Atreus's hatred in act IV. After the messenger's report on Atreus's murder of Thyestes's children and his unconquerable obsession with the Black Mass where each part of the bodies is atrociously dissected into pieces, the chorus finally recognizes that the current of Stoic optimism has run into the sands: "the dryness of the river", "a scorching wind" and "the sun's change of course" in Fury's speech have signified a dire social consequence and an eventual corruption of the world:

O Phoebus, hast thou turned thy face from us?
Vesper, the herald of the close of day,
Is not yet here to usher in the stars ;

This is the fear, the fear that knocks at the heart,
That the whole world is now to fall in the ruin
Which Fate foretells : that Chaos will come again
To bury the world of gods and men ;

... Never again
Will there be Moon to catch the Sun's fire in her face
And take night's terrors from us,....

All mingled into one vast void will fall
The multitude of gods.

And are we chosen out of all earth's children
To perish in the last catastrophe
Of a disjointed universe? Are we
To see the world's end come?

(798-800, 829-32, 839-41, 843-4, 875-78)

As is manifest in these lines, Senecan tragedy makes us feel that a tendency to conceive of the world end as happening on every occasion is so strong that any hope for renewal is ceaselessly blighted. The presiding images of darkness and destruction, the "terrors" of "Chaos" and "vast void", the harsh determinism ("the ruin/Which Fate foretells") that ironically arouses the skepticism of divinity, indivisibly jointed with Thyestes's lamentation "Night is engulfed in night....The Gods are fled" (1001, 1117), place us in a world where all the events of the present can be deciphered as the warning signs of the final ruin of the cosmos, and every moment hastens toward "the last catastrophe/Of a disjointed universe."

II

Since the first performance of *Hippolytus* on the Renaissance stage in Rome by the students of Pomponius Laetus Academy in the last decade of the fifteenth century, Senecan tragedy that had claimed comparatively less attention among the medieval writers, reasserted its supremacy as one of the most influential sources of the Renaissance achievement among European dramatists. In England, although adaptations of Seneca go back to the sixteenth forties, sixties humanists' translations of Seneca, published during the first eight years of the reign of Elizabeth, was the first authentic reaction of ancient classical tragedy.⁽¹⁰⁾

It is important to note here that these translators were mainly

the coordinates of Puritanism—the students of the Inns of Court which had been the refuge of some who had opposed Marian reaction and sharing anti-catholic sentiment, awaited the coming of a better day.⁽¹¹⁾ As is shown in the prefaces to these translations, the theory was that the dissemination of the wisdom of the classics would produce new generations of worthy public reformers. But what should be also pointed out that the spirit of enlightenment seems to some extent to be mixed with what one may feel to be dismal accounts or memories of their bitter experiences. Alexander Neville, the translator of *Oedipus*, warns in his preface that the reader ought to escape the evils of the protagonist, revealing the motive of his translation in the following way :

Mark thou reader what is ment by the whole course of the History : and frame thy lyfe from such mischieves,....*The wrathful vengeance of God* provoked, *the body plagued*, the mynde and conscience in midst of *deep devouring daungers* most terribly assaulted, In such sort that I abhorre to write: ... *Such like terrors as these requireth this our present Age*, wherein Vice hath chiefest place, and Virtue put to flight, lies an abject languishing on great extremity.⁽¹²⁾(emphasis added)

The themes to which Neville draws special attention (“The wrathful vengeance of God,” “the body plagued,” “deep devouring daunger”) are certainly the indispensable elements of Senecan tragedy, and it is not fanciful to suppose that the fervent puritan Neville tries here to evoke the apocalyptic sense of contemporary events by associating Senecan “sense of an ending” with the “terrors” of the revival of the catholic government and of the first great crisis of the Elizabethan period, when both Rome and Mary Stuart were challenging Elizabeth’s right of title

and personal safety.

The consolidation of English puritans and Senecan tragedy can be more fully understood, if we explore the political and religious dimensions of Thomas Norton's *Gorboduc*, the first English Senecan tragedy. Thomas Norton, the collaborator of *Gorboduc* and a devout Elizabethan puritan famous for his most rigorous and hostile examination on papist priests, was eldest son of Thomas Norton (another Thomas), a member of the Grocers' Company in the City of London. Although we have scant information of his early life, it is certain that at least during the fifties or the early sixties he maintained a close connection with the Marian exiles or those English reformers who were martyred during the Marian reversal of the reformation.⁽¹³⁾ During those days perhaps one of the most influential reformer to the young Norton was Thomas Cranmer, a martyr under the Marian reaction. After he was admitted as a student at the Inner Temple in 1550, he married Cranmer's daughter and doubtless as a consequence of this acquired a personal connection with a Marian exile, Cranmer's wife, Margaret Cranmer. As early as 1558, after Cranmer's death, she remarried the printer Edward Whitchurch, who offered Norton his own house where he translated Calvin's *Institutes of Christian Religion* (1560) and set to work on his tragedy.⁽¹⁴⁾

Gorboduc, the earliest Inns of Court classical play of the sixties, was first performed in the Inner Temple during the Christmas season 1561, and about a month later was restaged in the presence of Elizabeth in the Queen's Hall at Westminster. Like other Inns of Court plays, it is a self-conscious Renaissance exercise in the imitation and amplification of Seneca, and sets itself up as variations upon Senecan themes—the horror of the world catastrophe, the kingdom out of joint, devastating civil wars for kingship between brothers reminiscent of

Cain and Abel, bloodshed, deadly plague raging in the land —, and at the same time carries a contemporary significance, explicitly exemplifying both Norton's resentment of English catholics and the tense political situation in which it was produced.

As early as 1561, the threat of Catholicism, a brooding presence of Mary Stuart in English politics, and memories of the civil strife under Mary I, had made Norton's sensibility particularly alert to the reemergence of Marian cruelty, and this kind of sense of danger is clearly discerned in his *Orations*, a propagandist pamphlet which carries a political message in tune with his own tragedy. The *Orations* (c.1560) consists of two parts, the English translation of Justin's abridged Latin version of Pompeius Trogos's histories and Scanderbeg's speech recounted by the fifteenth century writer Marinus Barletius, and as its preface shows, both parts, associating "the anti-christian" Philip II, the king of Macedonia, and the bloody Turkish tyrants with Mary I and Mary Stuart, give positive and public expression to the author's anti-catholic sentiments:

...it will please God (if it be his will) to establish our sovereign lady's throne in long peace...to destroy the rod of foreign and Popish tyranny that be in danger of succeeding shaken over his Church, that no enemy of Christ nor child of Antichrist, may live to bring thralldom of Marian cruelties.⁽¹⁵⁾

Given the date of the publication usually attributed to the *Orations* (1560) is correct, it seems reasonable to suppose that Norton was engaged in the writing of *Gorboduc* at that time, and identified the constant anxiety of a state of disorder clearly spelled out in the play with the anxiety about the gloomy future of the Tudor government.⁽¹⁶⁾ In act 5, for instance, when the duke of Albany, an obvious parallel to

Mary Stuart, takes advantage of a state of civil disorder after the death of Gorboduc and his sons and contrives to usurp the throne, the surviving councilor Arostus thus warns :

That ye, my lords, do so agree in one,
To save your country from the violent reign
And wrongfully usurped tyranny
Of him that threatens conquest of you all,
To save your realm, and in this realm yourselves,
From foreign thraldom of so proud a prince,
Much do I praise; (5.2. 115-21)⁽¹⁷⁾

If we compare these phrases “violent reign/And wrongfully usurped tyranny,” “foreign thraldom of so proud a prince” with the passages in the *Orations*’ preface (“the rod of foreign and Popish tyranny,” “thraldom of Marian cruelties”), we can be fairly certain that the horror of the revival of the catholic government casts sharp dark shadows over Arostus’s passages.

In addition to the *Orations*, Norton’s other works that are spreaded over twenty-odd years range from Latin poems to historical and politico-ecclesiastical treatises, and among these, a short essay entitled “Norton of the v periodes of 500 yeares” can be regarded as most vital to an understanding of his tragedy.⁽¹⁸⁾ During the early eighties, Norton was nearing the end of a stormy, troubled, distinguished career. In December 1581, incurring the wrath of Elizabeth for ‘his overmuch and undutiful speaking’ concerning the negotiation upon the marriage between Francois, the youngest son of Catherine de Médicis, and the English Queen, he was sent to the Bloody Tower where he was required to write “A note of certaine pointes to be gathered out of the English chronicles” by Francis Walsingham.⁽¹⁹⁾ Although his long sojourn in the Tower gave him no opportunity for

getting authoritative chronicles such as Stow or Grafton, the end product is an absolutely unique historical design, covering the whole English history from the foundation of England to the reign of both Mary and Elizabeth.⁽²⁰⁾

One of the major characteristics that distinguish this essay is his obsessive fear of the end of an age seen through a puritanical filter : he divides the English history into five periods of 500 hundreds years, each of which ends with some “inevitable catastrophe” : the structure of the essay can be schematized and some passages of the first catastrophe go as follows :

- (1) Of the alteration upon the first revolution —the civil wars after the death of Gorboduc.
 - (2) ...the second revolution—the Roman conquest
 - (3) ...the third revolution —the reign of Vortigern
 - (4) ...the fourth revolution—the invasion of Danes
 - (5) ...the fifth revolution —the reign of both Mary and Elizabeth
- (1) About the end of the first 500 years from the foundation of this kingdom, the line of Brute upon the death of Gorboduc and his sons ceased and the land fell to Interregnum, a vacation of crown, and into most horrible and wicked confusion of civil wars...
(fos. 271-1v)

What the above diagram and passages make clear at once is that when he took the tragedy in hand, Norton concerned himself particularly with the apocalyptic thought, with the horror of “the end of an age,” with the contemporary threat to religion and quiet government : he regards the interregnum after Gorboduc’s death as a devastating catastrophe consequent on the ruin of the world, which in turn, as have

been suggested in Arostus's speech, is inseparably linked with the reign of "Marian cruelties."

What may be also noted here that it is Senecan tragedy which offers a paradigm or an example that, by serving as a precedent, authorizes Norton's sense of an ending, and with the total destruction of the kingdom at the tragic scene of the play, we may compare the following passages of Senecan tragedy which give exemplary expressions of the last catastrophe :

- (A) Let them behold the wide and the hugy fields
With blood and bodies spread of rebels slain. (5.2. 61
-2)
- (a) By means hereof eche Land is fild with clottred gore
yshed
With streams of bloud the Seas are dyd to hue of
sanguine red,... (*Hippolytus*, p. 157.)
- (B) ...the proud and greedy mind at home,
Whom blinded lust to reign leads to aspire,...(5.2.189-
90)
- (b) Let bloodshed lie the lands about fields afar
Let lust triumph;...(*Thyestes*, p.56.)
- (C) One kinsman shall bereave another's life,
The father shall unwitting slay the son
The son shall slay the sire and know it not. (5.2. 212
- 4)
- (c) By brother, Brother reft of breath, and eake the
Father's life
By hands of Childe, eake murdered was the husband
of was the husband of his wife,
And Mother lewd on misciefe set destroyd their bodies

seede. (*Hippolytus*, 156.)⁽²¹⁾

The active meditation on Seneca by the puritans during the early Elizabethan age, characteristically visible in *Gorboduc*'s references to the apocalyptic world derived from *Thyestes* and *Hippolytus*, has its roots in their anxiety concerning the uncertainty of the Tudor government, the threatening catastrophe, the danger of civil wars between the English reformers and catholic forces. By transforming Senecan cosmic catastrophe into their contemporary political sphere, English puritans emphasized the idea that the world in which they live is likely to collapse into complete anarchy. Such ideological interpretation of Seneca, febrile divination of catastrophe, together with the fanatical hostility against Catholicism might somewhat puzzle and go far beyond the modern reader's imagination. But, in a larger focus, their dramatic experiments were entirely based on the wish to express the fear and concerns about the destruction of humanity, anticipating the twentieth century revaluation of Seneca by Antonin Artaud, Fernando Arrabal, Peter Brook and their obsessive preoccupation with the world catastrophe under the crisis of Western civilization.

NOTES

- (1) Part of this work has already been presented in "The Birth of English Senecan Tragedy." *The Birth of Elizabethan Drama*, ed. Yasuo Tamaizumi (Tokyo: Suisaisha, 1996) 241-65.
- (2) References to Seneca's *Naturales Quaestiones* are to T. H. Corcoran's edition and translation in the Loeb Classical Library, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1971).
- (3) Cicero, *De Senectute, De Amicitia, De Divinatione*, trans. William Armistead Falconer, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1923) 295, 365.
- (4) My account here is indebted to Marcia L. Colish's *The Stoic*

- Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985) 21-5.
- (5) Colish, 24.
 - (6) On this point, see Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford : Oxford UP, 1966) 98.
 - (7) Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, *Senecan Drama and Stoic Cosmology* (Berkeley : U of California P, 1989) 149, 151.
 - (8) Rosenmeyer, 36, 151.
 - (9) Except where otherwise noted, all quotations from *Thyestes* are from *Four Tragedies and Octavia*, trans. E. F. Watling (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1966).
 - (10) As for adaptations of Seneca during the 1540s, see Bruce R. Smith, "Toward the Rediscovery of Tragedy: Productions of Seneca's Plays on the English Renaissance Stage," *Renaissance Drama* ns 9 (1978): 3-37.
 - (11) On this point, see C. H. Conley, *The First English Translators of the Classics* (New Haven : Yale UP, 1927), 57-60, 72-8.
 - (12) Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Seneca His Tenn Tragedies*, ed. Thomas Newton, introduction, T. S. Eliot, The Tudor Translations Second Series vol. 11-2 (New York: AMS Press, 1967) 190-1.
 - (13) I rely here on Michael A. R. Graves's account on Norton's life in *Thomas Norton : The Parliament Man* (Oxford : Blackwell, 1994), 13, 22-4, 35.
 - (14) Graves, 37.
 - (15) Norton, *Orations* (London, 1560?), fos. A6v -7.
 - (16) Graves, 42.
 - (17) All quotations from *Gorboduc* are from *Five Elizabethan Tragedies*, ed. A. K. McIlwraith (London: Oxford UP, 1938).
 - (18) Norton, "Norton of the v periodos of 500 yeares," BL Cotton MS, Titus F, fos 271-5v.
 - (19) Graves, 225, 391.
 - (20) Graves, 226-7.
 - (21) These quotations from *Thyestes* and *Hippolytus* are from *Seneca His Tenn Tragedies*.