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I.—Can We Moderns Write Tragedy?

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The variety and realistic thinking of Greek tragedy is neglected in recent discussions of the tragic attitude. Study of the source of tragic conflicts and of the exaltation produced by the tragic spectacle shows that, while Aeschylus may be difficult for a modern to follow, Sophocles' attitude is valid beyond his own time and place, and Euripides might well be paralleled by a modern writer, in spite of the seeming difficulties imposed by Christian morality, historical awareness, and the scientific spirit.

The primer in this cartridge is Joseph Wood Krutch's chapter entitled "The Tragic Fallacy"¹; the propelling charge is a restudy of Greek tragedy; and the projectile, which may turn out to be a bit of the gleaming trumpery that caps blank cartridges, is the answer to the question in my title.

Not only in Krutch's chapter, but in other studies of the general nature and philosophical background of tragedy,² I find an insufficient acquaintance with Greek tragedy; in particular, a tendency to overlook the fact that there are several sorts of Greek tragedy, however strictly we use that term nowadays; and a tendency to overlook the hardheadedness and intellectual thoroughness of the Greek authors. There is reason and room for a re-examination of Greek tragedy to determine its proper place in the history of the tragic spirit. In this examination, we shall take as our objects of

¹ In *The Modern Temper* (New York, 1929).

² W. V. O'Connor, *Climates of Tragedy* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1943); and W. H. Auden, "The Christian Tragic Hero," *New York Times Book Review*, Dec. 16, 1945. O'Connor is better than Krutch on Greek tragedy, but my impression is that his first-hand acquaintance with it is not extensive. I cannot agree with Auden's interpretations, on the Greek side; his suggestions as to Christian tragedy are worth pondering.

inquiry two fundamentals — the nature of the conflict whence comes the tragic catastrophe, and the source of the reconciliation or exaltation which is the proper emotional upshot of tragedy. We shall examine one poet at a time, and treat the work of each in accordance with the conventional chronology.³

We begin with a play so antique in form as to seem almost an oratorio: Aeschylus' *Suppliants*. The fifty daughters of Danaus seek refuge in ancestral Argos from their cousin-suitors. Pelasgus, king of Argos, is caught between the duty of protecting the suppliant, and the duty of maintaining peace and safety for his city. He chooses the noble risk, and the Danaids are saved. We cannot estimate the spirit of this play without guessing at the content of the two plays which completed the trilogy. Our best guess is that Argos was temporarily overcome, and its king killed in battle; then followed the notorious slaying of all the bridegrooms but one; in the concluding play, the merciful bride was vindicated, and perhaps her sisters were compelled to wed suitors less insolent. In the tragedy of Pelasgus, which looms before us in the *Suppliants*, the conflict is demonstrably between Man and Circumstance — Man against a dilemma of evils. The source of uplift is conjectural — but Pelasgus chose to honor the gods, and in the long run his city was saved. The tragedy of the Danaids themselves is all conjecture; but it looks like a conflict of Man against the Order of Nature — the Danaids may refuse their cousins, but they may not repudiate marriage; the source of uplift would be our catching sight of a principle of order, and of a fellow-human who reaches her haven by conforming to that principle.

Some years later, Aeschylus tried his hand at treating modern history, in the *Persians*. Xerxes leads the gorgeous panoply of the East against sober Greece, and is confounded. The conflict is that of headstrong Man against the gods' Order; our exaltation is a solemn joy in the victory of that Order, and in the gods' patronage of the land of our affections.

After four years, Aeschylus tried a different mood in a trilogy of which we have the final play, the *Seven against Thebes*. Eteocles, last of Laius' stock, defends his city against his brother. By the pressure of many little circumstances upon the temper of a true son of Oedipus, Eteocles is led to fight, to kill, and to die with his

³ My interpretations are generally based on the analysis of H. D. F. Kitto in his *Greek Tragedy* (London, 1939).

brother. The conflict is that of Man against the Moral Order allied to inscrutable chance; the uplift comes from the achievement of Eteocles — he, like his father, saved his city; himself he could not save.

Somewhere in a thirteen-year interval came the *Prometheus*. The counsellor of Zeus and friend to man thwarts the ruler of Heaven, and is tortured by that ruler's overweening power. Again we must conjecture the sequel, and with it the inward nature of the tragedy; but surely the conflict is between two kinds of partial right, and the exaltation resulted from their being wrought into harmony, and from the poet's vision that wisdom and patience, if not mercy, are enthroned in Heaven; or, if we may take even a Greek play as allegorical in large measure, that such high qualities are commended as competent in this world.

The climactic and for us the concluding work of Aeschylus is the *Oresteia*. A forceful king of tainted lineage believes himself driven to kill his daughter. For this and other acts of moral dullness, he is killed by his wife, a woman of force as great as his, and of greater keenness. For her crime, the only possible agent of punishment is her son, who, without rancor and under divine command, kills his mother. After purification by great suffering, Orestes is set free; and by the grace of Zeus, a better law than the law of revenge is established in the world to counterbalance wrongdoing. The conflict is first that of Man against the Moral Order, and then that of a new and better Order against the old. Our exaltation stems from the tremendous power of the chief participants, and from the increasing justice of the World Order, so that, more and more, wisdom blooms out of suffering, under the guidance of righteous Great Powers above.

For Aeschylus, then, the struggle of tragedy is produced by man's wrestling with just powers; and out of struggle comes good, and out of suffering comes understanding, if not for the sufferer, at least for others. Frustration is in the present, but was more in the past, and so may be less in the future.

As we follow the plays of Sophocles, we move from near this position to a very different observation post. Clouds are gathering between earth and Heaven.

Perhaps ten years passed between the *Oresteia* and the *Ajax*. In the latter, a great man, self-centered and of great pride, meets adverse judgment from his friends. He is driven beyond the pale

of right, is thwarted from crime by Athena, feels disgraced and hamstrung, and kills himself. Odysseus, whom Ajax regarded as his enemy, moves from wariness to kindness and magnanimity. Superficially, the conflict is that of a hero against his associates; but the real struggle is that of an immoderate hero against the Order of a world in which, as Sophocles' friend Herodotus said, "God will not let the overtopping animals loom large."⁴ Our satisfaction comes from seeing the good in men's characters — great power in Ajax, love and devotion in Tecmessa and Teucer, a canny sort of wisdom adequate for life's emergencies in Odysseus. But the power of balance possessed by Odysseus is a rare quality; we cannot count on it for ourselves, and it is a precarious support for human strivings in general.

In the *Antigone*, a devoted sister rebels against her uncle the king by insisting that her brother is not alienated from her by his hostility to her city. Because both Antigone and the king are of an overbold stock, their conflict brings catastrophe. Antigone will not wait or in any way defer; Creon trusts the logic of his position, and will not heed tradition or instinct or the emotional half-lights of those about him. Not till the gods give a strong hint will he yield; and then it is too late; Antigone is dead, and with her Creon's dearest. The conflict is above all a clash of two strong natures, which chance to be crowded together; secondarily, the conflict is between instinct and tradition on the one side, and the hard clarity of the intellect on the other. Reconciliation comes partly from the view of human strengths, even though they block each other; partly from our ability to disentangle from the conflict a wiser way; and to a large extent from the demonstration that human strength and rightness spring not so much from the perilous constructions of the intellect as from the native inheritance of the human race.

Since even the relative dating of the *Women of Trachis* is in dispute,⁵ we may place it at this point in our sequence, because it is a two-person play⁶ like the two preceding. Deianira, a clinging vine of a kind treated in Sophocles' other plays as sub-heroic (cf. Tecmessa, Ismene, Chrysothemis), is now our heroine. She is wholly absorbed in her great husband, Heracles; as usual, she is

⁴ 7.10E.

⁵ Earp, in *The Style of Sophocles* (Cambridge, 1944), places the *Trachiniae* second in his chronological list.

⁶ In this analysis, I follow, not Kitto (see above, note 3), but Gordon M. Kirkwood, *TAPhA* 72 (1941) 203–11.

keeping the home-fires burning during his prolonged absence. When news comes from him, he has won success in a most crucial venture; but his success threatens Deianira, since he has fallen in love with Iole and sends her home as his captive. Deianira meets this shock with magnanimity toward both Iole and Heracles, but with an unwisdom arising from her sensitivity. She tries magic to recapture Heracles' love; the magic is evil — the gift of an enemy; Heracles is tortured; their son Hyllus accuses his mother of intent; she kills herself. Heracles, heedless of all those about him, lays the burdens of care for himself and for Iole upon Hyllus, and goes to his apotheosis by fire. It is a difficult play — one that needs clarification by performance. The conflict results from the partialness of human strength — sensitivity without strength in the woman, tremendous power utterly self-absorbed in the hero. If we may hope for reconciliation, it must lie in the contemplation of human feeling as fine as Deianira's and human force as efficient as Heracles'; perhaps also in our impression that the wholeness lacking in his parents is attained in Hyllus; perhaps also in the acquiescent faith in an underlying, if incomprehensible, order which seems to inspire Hyllus' closing line, "In all this there is nothing that is not Zeus."⁷

With *Oedipus the King*, we find it even more difficult to view the world with confidence in its order. Oedipus is a man of greatness, a benefactor of his city, with driving energy of intellect. But he is also capable of rashness and of domineering. When the play opens, he is already hopelessly involved in a doom foretold to his parents before he was born — he has killed his father and married his mother. Plague lighting on Thebes induces him to seek its cause, and by his search, he becomes aware of his predicament. His force and greatness will not let him dodge his doom; his rashness drives him full tilt into the smash-up. One cannot say that he could have avoided his doom by being a better or a wiser man — he could have avoided it only by being a wholly different man. The gods are entirely in the invisible background in this play. In Oedipus' world, to be sure, moral pollution produces a physical plague; Apollo also foretold, both to Oedipus and to Laius his father, what

⁷ Since Hyllus has bitterly questioned Providence just previously, my final statement may be open to question; I am assuming that his grave but gentle acceptance of Iole marks his acceptance of the whole terrible situation. Cf. Greene's review (*AJPh* 67.364) of Opstelten, *Sophocles en het Griekse Pessimisme* (Leiden, 1945).

would happen; but no god *makes* the doom happen. Laius could have listened to Apollo, and Oedipus could have appealed to him for help⁸ — in that, they would have been far wiser; but Sophocles does not say (though he might have done so) that Laius was otherwise a sinner. So that we have the frightening spectacle of a man suffering horribly because he was his father's son; hardly less frightening is the fact that circumstances work around against him. Meanwhile, the gods hold aloof. We have good reason to feel fear over this play, as well as that *eleos* which is not only sympathy, but a sense of our own predicament.⁹

The *Electra* presents a similar picture. In this version, unlike Aeschylus' *Choephoroe*, Orestes is secondary to his sister; but he has managed to exclude Apollo from directing the enterprise, by asking the god the wrong question. Orestes did not ask "Shall I avenge my father and kill my mother?"; he asked only "How shall I contrive my return to Argos?" Instead of seeing the gods at work, as in Aeschylus, we never know what the gods' view of the situation is. On the human level, Electra, her suffering and her predicament, are constantly our prime concern. As usual with Sophocles, Electra is heroic in her energy of spirit. She cannot be like her sister Chrysothemis, shrug her shoulders over the murder of her father, and enjoy the status allowed her by her guilty mother and by Aegisthus. Electra cannot prefer utility to honor. On the other hand, Electra is not hardened as Clytemnestra is; Electra cannot limit her view to her own position, and feel that any action is right if it solves her own problem. Clytemnestra has wronged her husband and is wronging Electra, as a corollary to the earlier wrong; but Electra cannot neglect Clytemnestra's rights as a mother, and deal only with her wrongs. Because Electra is arousing the sympathy of the city, she is in utmost peril from Aegisthus; then Orestes comes and saves her from physical danger, by killing Clytemnestra and Aegisthus; but Orestes cannot save his sister from her inner tragedy — to overcome her mother, she must become as hateful as her mother. Even Aegisthus has more moral insight than Orestes — at least, he has a touch, in his last moments, of moral awareness and caution, whereas Orestes is self-complacent.

⁸ As the Athenians did before Salamis (Hdt. 7.141). It made a difference whether the worshipper asked a question, or appealed to the god as a suppliant for help.

⁹ Phaedo says (*Phaedo* 58E) that, surprisingly, he did not feel *eleos* on the last day of Socrates' life.

The dilemma of the play is much the same as in Aeschylus; humanly speaking, there is no good choice for the children; but in Aeschylus, the gods took over; in Sophocles, the mortals bring themselves to moral downfall by their very physical success.

The conflict of the *Oedipus* and the *Electra* is primarily a conflict of Man against himself. The poet is wholly absorbed in the human level here; but we cannot help feeling that the superhuman level, whether we call it Nature — Things as they Are — or the gods, will not, if indeed it can, come to the rescue of Man. Therefore our feeling of uplift or reconciliation can hardly be as strong as in the previous plays. We see and admire human power, it is true. Also, there are no villains in the pieces to make us merely irritated. By contemplating the superlative craftsmanship of the poet, we become as absorbed in it as he, and are inclined to feel that this presentation is so complete that we can do nothing but accept the universe, including this portion of it. But in these superlative tragedies, the world-view presented is certainly not optimistic, and can be called serene only insofar as the plays are too impersonal and objective to deal in direct protest.

The *Philoctetes* is not a tragedy in our sense, but a serious play of moral adventure. All we need to note about it is that the characters have force and nobility, even the "villain," Odysseus, being not noble rather than low.

Sophocles' valedictory is the *Oedipus at Colonus*, written about thirty years after the other *Oedipus* — a sequel, not in details, but spiritually. When we meet Oedipus in this final play, he has by endurance won purification from his pollution. At the beginning of the play, Oedipus is at home in the grove of the Eumenides, from which ordinary men turn even their eyes. He will not defend himself before the chorus, who shrink from the horror of his past; before Theseus, the kingly, there is no need for defence. Oedipus delivers an apologia only to blast the hypocrisy of Creon, who comes too late with fair words and with no motive but that grasping for power which is the curse of Oedipus' sons as well. Athens rescues Oedipus and his faithful daughters from the plots of Thebes. Polynices, the outcast prince, comes to beg Oedipus' aid, but is likewise too late and too self-centered; Oedipus withers him with wrathful denunciation. Then the blind old man, called by Heaven, leads Theseus to the spot where Oedipus shall mysteriously pass from mortality to everlasting guardianship over Athens. Here is

no tragic conflict, but a solemn triumph after tragedy. Not by erasing the past, not by reasoning guilt away, not by a transformation into saintliness beyond man's reach, but by the sheer power of human nature, Oedipus overcomes circumstance, wins recognition from men, and compels the very gods to break their inscrutability and receive him. Oedipus' soul is, as Plato said, *athanatos* — the antithesis of death; and the pains of evil and of death must recede before that soul.

On the slim evidence of the surviving plays, we seem to see Sophocles progressively more concerned with human character in the visible world, and less inclined to include laws of the gods or of Nature in his dramatic pictures. The conflict within the hero is more deadly, to a hero of Sophoclean strength, than conflict with forces without. A sense of reconciliation, or even a feeling that reconciliation is possible, is less easy to attain.¹⁰ Especially in view of the *Oedipus at Colonus*, it may be wise to think of the reasons for the composition of *Oedipus the King* and the *Electra* as being artistic rather than philosophical; yet we cannot help feeling that the moral decay of the Greek world, portrayed with such grim impassivity by Thucydides, stirred not only Euripides to write the *Trojan Women*, but also Sophocles to portray the self-frustration of Electra. The mood of tragic elevation seems to be based on inheritance — one might almost say, on instinct — on a faith that human strength is more important and more effective than human weakness, and that behind the veil worn by the superhuman, there is reason and good order; but Sophocles does not present this view as derived from phenomena.

In considering Euripides' plays, we may omit entirely a considerable number which are not tragedies according to our modern definition.¹¹ Among the remaining plays, the *Medea*, presumably

¹⁰ Cf. Jaeger's remark (*Paideia* 1.277), "Even religious faith and moral sentiment can hardly trace divine justice in the doom of one individual."

¹¹ Thus, the *Cyclops*, a satyr-play, is irrelevant to our purposes. The *Alcestis*, a substitute for the satyr-play, is also of a different *genre*. The *Helen* is, rather more than the *Alcestis*, a comedy with some tragic trappings. The *Iphigenia in Tauria* and the *Ion* are adventure-plays; the *Rhesus*, if it be by Euripides, likewise; the *Heraclidae* in its broken state appears to be no more. The *Orestes* comes near to being a study of tragic error — the error of being unsocial — but because it is about Orestes and Electra, the story is handled as a melodrama, not taken seriously. (I follow Verrall to the extent of thinking that a hint is given that Orestes, Electra, and Pylades are young fascists who insist on believing that they are entirely right, and that force will solve any problem; but I do not agree that Euripides thought of this as a hidden meaning for the intelligentsia — I take it that Euripides intended only one compre-

contemporary with *Oedipus the King*, shows the least change from the atmosphere of Sophocles' plays; yet even here the change is startling. Medea, the barbarian princess with a gift of witchcraft, is put into second place by Jason, a faded hero for whom she has braved and lost family, home, and possible friends. Jason is about to contract a regular marriage with the princess of Corinth; Medea is roused to threats. The king of Corinth will banish her, but, being too moderate for his own good, he allows her a day for preparations. By her preparations, Medea kills both princess and king, and then, not without self-debate, murders her own children, for the sake of crushing Jason. Then she departs for Athens, the traditional refuge of exiles, in the very chariot of the Sun. In part, the conflict is Medea against herself, and in part she represents suppressed women, e.g. of Athens; so far the play is not unlike Sophoclean tragedy. But Medea is an extreme person, chosen by Euripides because she is so. If extremeness were her tragic fault, that would be conventional; but that is hardly the case; certainly, that she should be extreme to the point of being a magician, is something new. Furthermore, the brunt of the catastrophe falls on innocent bystanders, the children and the princess; the king, if not quite innocent, is involved as much because he lacks brutality as because he has made any form of mistake. The tragedy is therefore in large part that of a group broken by one person's overintensity. From our Olympian position of sitting in judgment, and the feeling that we are not likely to meet such extremes, we may derive some comfort perhaps, but we can hardly feel proud or secure in doing so. What little we see of the superhuman in the play is disturbing; the Sun, at least, seems to have no concern for human righteousness.¹²

The chronology of Euripides' plays seems less significant than that of the earlier poets; therefore I venture to place next in our discussion the *Madness of Heracles*, which is twelve years or so later than the *Medea*.¹³ The *Heracles* is a very puzzling play, from

hensive meaning for each play.) The *Andromache* is a study of wrong-doing — sin bearing the label "Made in Sparta" — but from the standpoint of indignant observation, not of sympathetic participation with the sufferers. The *Phoenician Women* has numerous tragic inserts, representing both human weakness and fault, and human strength and gallantry, but the crowding of incident makes this an action-play and not a tragedy. These plays will make no contribution to our discussion.

¹² Kitto, *op. cit.* (see note 3) 199.

¹³ I follow Gilbert Murray's chronology, in his Oxford text edition.

which I do not pretend to draw clear conclusions. As the play opens, Heracles is away on his final Labor; meanwhile a revolution has taken place in Thebes, and the new dictator (an invention of Euripides) proposes to liquidate the family of Heracles for the greater security of the regime. Since the villain is somewhat inefficient, Heracles returns in time to rescue his family by highly justifiable tyrannicide. When the seemingly happy family has disappeared within, an apparition of two divinities occurs; Iris and the Spirit of Madness are sent by Hera to cause Heracles' ruin. Madness is a curiously reasonable spirit, reluctant to perform her heartless task. Nevertheless, Heracles is driven mad, and kills his wife and children. On recovering, he is roused from despair by his friend Theseus, whom Heracles has rescued in the course of his last Labor.¹⁴ Theseus exhorts him to be strong, and promises him honor for his services to mankind; with this aid from Theseus, present and promised, Heracles will take on himself yet another labor — that of living with himself and his catastrophe.

We can say with some assurance that Euripides is not discussing the nature of God in this play, and that Hera is a symbol, not a reality. Whether the reality behind the symbol is subjective — that is to say that madness is a part of Heracles' psychic state — or whether it is objective — that is to say that this madness is an accident, typical of the mischances of this world, which happened to befall Heracles — on this dilemma we cannot dogmatize. Either interpretation would suggest a point of view not unlike that shown by Euripides elsewhere. For the psychological interpretation, which would be based on a strictly humanistic version of the traditional doctrine of *hybris*, we might compare the *Medea*, the *Hecabe*, and the *Electra*; for the view of an external force, the *Hippolytus* and the *Bacchae* would furnish less cryptic parallels. We cannot be sure whether the conflict is that of Man against himself, or of Man against Nature. We can be sure that the tragic uplift, which is more conspicuous here than usual in Euripides, stems from two things: the possibility that good-will and power may not always be separated, as we saw them in the first part of the play, but may on occasion be combined, as in Theseus; and, more importantly, from

¹⁴ This much we can say without disregarding Verrall's doubts as to the supernatural character of the adventure. In connection with this play, I believe it will pay us to keep an eye on Verrall, though Kitto has succeeded in refuting the overall picture of the play which Verrall thought he saw.

the insight that human nature can at its best bear triumphantly any load put upon it, even its own weakness.

The *Heracles* suggests that individual strength may be not without achievement. The *Suppliants* makes the same suggestion as to collective strength. Adrastus, leader of the fatal expedition of the Seven against Thebes, has come to Athens, begging for the rescue of the bodies of his slain champions. Theseus rejects his request, because Adrastus earned his disaster by folly. But the queen-mother points out to her son that there is more than this to the situation: the mothers of the slain, who form the chorus, deserve pity, not judgment; also, Athens should act nobly when occasion arises, and take the initiative in seeing that a decent and humane act is performed. Convinced, Theseus takes the field, against the insolent warning of a Theban herald; the Thebans are beaten back, and the dead are gathered up for burial. But the spread of catastrophe is not wholly arrested, for the wife of Capaneus plunges into the pyre of her husband, leaving her aged father bewildered and forlorn. With Athens, however, it is well; Athena herself appears to guarantee the gratitude of Argos for the services rendered by Athens to the Argive king.

The tragedies of the play are those of innocent bystanders brought low by the errors of others. Adrastus is not presented as a villain, but inasmuch as he brought his trouble on himself, he is less an object of sympathy. The sense of uplift is stronger than usual in Euripides, as though at this time, to which the *Heracles* also belongs, he was somewhat encouraged about humanity; this uplift arises from the amends made in part for suffering, and particularly from the spectacle of collective action founded on intelligent goodwill, and producing demonstrably good achievement.

The *Hecabe* was mentioned above as a possible parallel to the *Heracles*; it will be appropriate to go back about five years in the chronological sequence to consider this play. We have, as in the *Heracles*, a play that falls into two parts, with a central character subjected to terrific strain. We meet the Queen of Troy after the fall of her city, while she is waiting for her captors to settle her fate, along with that of their other captives. The first part of the play concerns Hecuba's loss of her daughter Polyxena, who alone might have companioned her. Polyxena must be sacrificed to Achilles, at the demand of Achilles' ghost. The decision to sacrifice her is made by the best minds of the Greek army. Polyxena accepts her

death heroically; it is both a highly pathetic and a tragic event, though the tragic point of the event is not unambiguous.¹⁵ Even this terrific shock Hecuba can still bear. But now another is added. Her youngest son, Polydorus, sent out of Troy for safe-keeping in the palace of a guest-friend, has been murdered by that friend, who has changed to the Greek side. By this stroke of villainy, Hecuba is broken. She constrains Agamemnon to give her a chance for revenge, and her revenge is wholly horrible. She blinds her enemy and kills his young sons. The concluding prophecy of her metamorphosis into a mad dog is, spiritually speaking, already fulfilled before our eyes.

The conflict of the play is not clear-cut. Rather we have a study of people involved in a mesh of circumstances to which each person contributes a portion; for Hecuba in particular, the result is a crushing pressure before which she collapses; the others, even the best, are hardly better off.¹⁶ There is little release from gloom, though we are not left without glimpses of the better side of human nature, especially in the gallantry, at death's door, of Polyxena.

The trends of the *Hecabe* are carried further in the *Trojan Women*, about ten years later. Euripides was to be seen in the *Medea*, and still more in the *Hecabe*, emphasizing the interlocking of personalities and the effect of the chief character on the surrounding characters. Instead of the Sophoclean centripetal arrangement, by which all the surrounding characters contribute to the spot-lighting of the hero, we have from Euripides an arrangement not unlike the Parthenon pediments — a central explosion affecting in varying degrees the peripheral characters. In the *Trojan Women*,¹⁷ the central hero of the earlier plays is no longer present; we have only a character — Hecuba again — serving as a dramatic point of reference — a monument for our survey of the whole scene. Posei-

¹⁵ I discussed this passage in a note in *CPh* 32 (1937) 68. I took the position there that the human sacrifice was accepted without discussion by Euripides; but Kitto's implied position, *op. cit.* (see note 3) 220, that the sacrifice shows the inadequacy of human moral vision and intelligence, by being a wrong which seems the better alternative, is preferable.

¹⁶ It is noteworthy that only in this play (except for the *Andromache*, cf. note 11) do we find outright villainy, without the element of self-deception and moral confusion which mitigates the baseness even of a Jason. There may be significance in the fact that this villainy generates the horrible last state of Hecuba; perhaps this is a serious instance of the reflection of one character by another, which appears in Admetus, who is noble before Alcestis and Heracles, and base before Pheres.

¹⁷ The *Suppliants* presents the same sort of arrangement.

don and Athena open the play, and from them we learn that the conquerors of Troy are also sinners doomed to disaster. It is worth noting that these gods are purely conventional literary figures — Euripides is not discussing the nature of the gods in this play, but treats his divinities as a material belonging to his artistic medium. Next we proceed to hear and see the dooms of Cassandra, Polyxena, Andromache, little Astyanax, Hecuba, and the rank and file of the chorus; on the Greek side, we learn about Menelaus, a conqueror in vain, Helen, an unmitigated minx, and Talthybius, who, though a herald (Greek heralds suffer from the occupational disease of callous brashness),¹⁸ learns sympathy from his progressively more hateful task. The play shows people hopelessly entangled in an intricate net of actions part noble, part base, but always inadequate to surmount existing problems, or achieve desired ends. There is no villain, no Aristotelian hero — no one to whom the poet will point and say, "Thou art the man." There is only human weakness; and the gods judge, but do not aid. There is little to relieve the gloom, save that, in spite of everything, in the last bitter moments of the down-trodden, there is something glimpsed which is wholly lovable and even admirable.

Shortly after the *Trojan Women* came the *Electra*, which I venture to class as a tragedy, though it has much of the varied incidents and interests of the action-dramas. The picture is wholly changed from the earlier versions of this story. Electra is neurotic almost to the point of hysteria, Orestes is a vacillator who succeeds in accomplishing his deed of revenge in a horribly treacherous manner, and Clytemnestra is likewise a weak character, who is obviously not worth killing after Aegisthus is gone. The very weakness of the characters, however, makes us sympathize with them, and we are quite reconciled to having two of them saved by divine intervention at the end. The intervention does not come from Apollo, but from Castor and Pollux, uncles of the children, who make it clear that Apollo gave Orestes some very bad advice. (This, like the situation in the *Ion*, I understand as a criticism, not of Apollo as a god, but of the Delphic oracle as an institution, the conventional name for which is Apollo; see note 25.) The conflict in the *Electra* is that of Man against circumstances too burdensome for his weakness to control. There is not tragic uplift so much as an evasion of catastrophe — an evasion legitimized by pity.

¹⁸ Cf. the herald of the *Suppliants*.

Much the same picture appears in the *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Again we have characters resembling those Milesians of whom Demodocus said, "The Milesians are not fools, but they do the sort of thing fools do." Menelaus is not a villain, but he acts like one, because he pursues his own course of revenge even if it involves the death of his niece; yet when he really sees what he is doing, he repents. The Greeks are not villains, but they are willing to sacrifice an unknown girl — somebody else's daughter — to promote their expedition. Agamemnon is fairly likable, but quite as clumsy as usual.¹⁹ Achilles, who tries to save Iphigenia from being sacrificed, is gallant, but not very bright — and quite helpless in the face of numbers. Iphigenia is timidly gallant, with less resolution than Euripides' self-sacrificing youngsters usually have.²⁰ The picture of the group tangling themselves in a skein of events has its tragic implications, but Artemis' rescue of Iphigenia, following the operatic scale of the action, puts the stamp of action-drama on the play as a whole.

A very different emphasis appears in two plays separated by over twenty years, but closely related in thought — the *Hippolytus* and the *Bacchae*. In these plays, Euripides clearly discusses the superhuman element in the world. The *Hippolytus* begins with Aphrodite, who explains that she is not a Homeric goddess, but a power of Nature;²¹ Hippolytus will not reverence her, therefore he — and others — shall suffer. Hippolytus appears, to demonstrate his preoccupation with the worship of the pure Artemis, and his disregard for Aphrodite. Next, we see Phaedra, Aphrodite's instrument, who is struggling against her love for her stepson. Phaedra's nurse takes the sub-heroic view that immorality may be inevitable, attempts to negotiate with Hippolytus, and is met with an outburst of self-centered horror on his part. Phaedra now swings to hatred and despair, and kills herself after leaving an accusation against Hippolytus, after the manner of Potiphar's wife. Theseus believes the accusation of his wife, and wills the death of his son. When

¹⁹ Homer set the fashion in this.

²⁰ I am assuming that Iphigenia's character is consistent, and intended to be drawn from life, not arbitrarily manipulated. Kitto takes the Aristotelian view, but regards the manipulation as permissible in this example of tragi-comedy. One might also explain the other characters as tragi-comic artificialities, but they are too much like the people of the *Hecabe* and *Trojan Women* to count for nothing in a consideration of what Euripides saw when he looked at the world.

²¹ *Hippolytus* 20, 48–50; cf. the remarks of the Old Servant on what a personal divinity should be, 117–120.

Poseidon has fulfilled the wish of Theseus, Artemis appears to clear the name of Hippolytus, and bring about a reconciliation of father and son. Poseidon and Artemis are conventional figures of poetry — but Euripides cannot help being dissatisfied with Artemis because she is no more.²²

The conflict is that of Man against a Law of Nature. (It should be noted that the play would make sense even if the superhuman level were omitted, as is done in the treatments of the story by Seneca and Racine.) The tragic reconciliation comes from our feeling that human wisdom might be sufficient to avoid this conflict — in fact, that the usual, or moderate, or instinctive human being would work with Nature, not against her. Furthermore, Hippolytus' exceptional character is not wholly a loss — it wins him some recognition.²³

But the impersonality of Aphrodite is rather terrifying, and no less so, the spread of harm from the central figure to those surrounding him.²⁴

The same sort of conflict appears in the *Bacchae*. The natural force is less easy to define than Aphrodite, but it has to do with emotion, ecstasy, and instinctive life-force. Its avatar is Dionysus, who speaks prologue and conclusion as himself, and appears in between as hierophant of his own rites. These rites he has brought to his mother's native city, Thebes, but the Thebans have not the grace to receive the new god. The women of the city are constrained by the god's power to go to the mountain and do him honor. The king, Pentheus, feels bound to crush the newcomer for the sake of logic and good order. The king's grandfather, Cadmus, accepts the new rites, but tardily and insincerely; the legendary prophet Teiresias also accepts, perhaps sincerely, perhaps only as a matter of professional comity; at any rate, he seems to be accepted by Dionysus. The king is the center of resistance; after Dionysus has sought to turn him by mild measures, after the king's messenger has refuted the king's suspicions that licentiousness is the keynote

²² Cf. note 26.

²³ This consists primarily in the sympathy of the audience; but I am assuming that the *ailion* of the honors paid to Hippolytus at Troezen (1423–1430) is a little more than incidental decoration. I do not believe it is much more, cf. the *ailion* in the prologue, 29–33, and the *ailion* of the honors to Medea's children, *Medea* 1378–83, which is wholly irrelevant to the play. But Hippolytus is left in a better position than the obliterated Phaedra, as Oedipus is left in a better position than Jocasta, cf. Kitto, *op. cit.* (see note 3) 141.

²⁴ Cf. above, p. 12.

of the exotic cult, the god bedazzles his adversary, and leads him spellbound to his doom at the hands of his own kinswomen. After the terrible ecstasy of the god is extinguished, the bloodstained mother and the ancient Cadmus are sent forth to exile and metamorphosis. But Dionysus cannot tell them the reason, or explain the justice, of their destiny. Dionysus is not a personal divinity.

Again, Man is confronted by an overruling power, mysterious and perhaps deadly, but not malicious; nor is its maleficence its most important aspect. There is a tide in Nature which dashes down the sand-castles of Man; yet it is a tide of life and vigor — perhaps, for the fortunate, of joy. Therein lies the reconciliation of this tragedy.

To summarize Euripides' position is to run a grave risk of being superficial. Euripides was much surer of his negatives than of his positives, and therefore it is unlikely that one can formulate from his plays a creed which will neglect none of the evidence. But let us run the risks of summarization.

As to the gods, there are at least three Euripidean views of them. On occasion, the gods are accepted as traditional agents in poetry; in such appearances, the poet tells us nothing about divine nature.²⁵ Secondly, there are various *obiter dicta*²⁶ defining the nature of a personal divinity who is theologically believable. Such a divinity would surpass in goodness and mercy (Euripides says, in wisdom) the best of human performance, and would at least equal the highest of human ideals. But Euripides sees no evidence that such gods exist.

²⁵ The best examples of this treatment are Poseidon and Athena in the *Trojan Women*. More debatable is my preference for putting down here the gods from the machine (Apollo and Thanatos of the *Alcestis*; Thetis of the *Andromache*; Athena of the *Suppliants* and *Iphigenia in Tauria*; the Dioscuri of the *Electra* and *Helen*; Apollo of the *Orestes*; Athena and the Muse in the *Rhesus*; and presumably the Artemis of the alternative ending to the *Iphigenia at Aulis*). I do not know how to classify Iris and Lyssa in the *Heracles*. The Dioscuri of the *Electra* are somewhat special, because of their criticism of Apollo. Euripides' willingness to use Apollo as the symbol of a defective human institution may be of some significance in connection with Euripides' theology, but I do not know how to evaluate it. The *Ion* is of course the *locus classicus* for this cavalier treatment of Apollo; Hermes (but not Athena) is tarred with the same skeptical brush. The messenger in the *Andromache* accuses Apollo of complicity in the murder of Pyrrhus (1161–5) but, in spite of the voice from the temple (1147–9), this is not clear evidence for the god's involvement. I do not regard the *Iphigenia in Tauria* as anti-Apolline in its implications, nor the Apollo of the *Orestes* as open to skepticism (*contra*, cf. Kitto, *op. cit.* [see note 3] 319 and 227).

²⁶ E.g. *Hippolytus* 117–120; cf. note 22.

The superhuman powers which he does see existing, and discusses, are forces of Nature, such as we have noted above. They are impersonal, of course; one does not expect gravitation to be a respecter of persons, nor a volcano to take aim at the unrighteous. But just because these powers are impersonal, they are not necessarily maleficent²⁷ and Euripides intimates that it is the plain duty of Man to learn about these powers and conform to them. As illustrations of these powers, he gives us Aphrodite and Dionysus.²⁸

Now what is Euripides' view of human nature? It has been said that a friend is one who knows all about you, and still likes you; Euripides is that sort of friend to the human race. We have seen that he emphasizes the weakness of man. His approach is always intellectual; he takes his stand as analyst and critic. As such, he is against the process of artistic simplification and emphasis, at least in the amount used by Aeschylus, or even Sophocles. We always see the faults of the hero, and the claim to sympathy of the "villain." Moreover, as we have seen, Euripides insists on viewing the individual as one element in a social network, sometimes affecting his surroundings, but often a prisoner of them. Euripides saw Greece, especially his own Athens, tearing itself to pieces, while violence, cruelty, and faction became more fashionable than justice, moderation, and the wide view. He could not see at work in his world either the justice of God, or the power of man. And yet one might borrow for him from a later theater the motto "*Quand même!*"; for even when worst had come to worst, out of the weak in their extremity Euripides saw arising that which commanded not only sympathy, but admiration.²⁹ It should also be noted that Euripides has no doubts as to what constitutes a dirty trick against the weak and helpless, and is as much against such crimes as any preacher was ever "against sin." Aristophanes, when he chooses to represent,

²⁷ Lucretius (e.g. 3.14-30) represents belief in impersonal forces as a great mental relief, compared to belief in gods, who he assumes would be capricious.

²⁸ As intimated above, p. 15, I cannot agree with Kitto, *op. cit.* (see note 3) 202 and 383, that Artemis in the *Hippolytus* is a force of nature; it seems to me that Euripides tried to treat her as a conventional goddess, but couldn't help letting us feel his dissatisfaction with the *mores* of such beings.

²⁹ I am assuming that the gallantry of the women and children of Euripides is not merely a casual touch of "good theater" (cf. Kitto, *op. cit.* [see note 3], e.g. 255); this view depends on the cumulative effect of many scenes and characters, a number of which occur in the melodramas, and are open, individually, to the suspicion of theatricality which seems to be Kitto's verdict about them.

and not caricature, Euripides, shows him as an uncompromising moralist.³⁰

We have now completed our survey of Greek tragedy, and are ready to consider whether any of the insights behind it are valid today. We might begin with this question — in view of our Hebrew-Christian tradition, can we write tragedy? If by any chance we interpret that tradition to mean that we possess a complete and obvious guide to all details of conduct, then we can no longer write tragedy, since catastrophe due to mere perverse neglect of duty is not matter for tragedy. But if we feel that revelation is not yet complete, then we can still write tragedy. We will not use the divine characters of Aeschylus;³¹ and we are of course debarred from depicting natural forces as ultimate powers, in the manner of Euripides. But Aeschylus' ideas that suffering is the due result of human error, and that out of suffering comes betterment, are not alien to the sterner thinking within the Hebrew-Christian area. If we concentrate on the human aspects, surely either the Sophoclean tragedy of self-frustration or the Euripidean tragedy of social involvement is by no means impossible. The background of moral principle would perhaps be represented as somewhat more definite; but between the principles and the specific situation, there would yet lie a region of mystery and human groping hospitable to the tragic spirit.

A second question might be — but can we write tragedy, inasmuch as we are historically-minded? One must admit that the Athenians were better off than we in this respect; they had their belief in the historicity of the events described in tragedy — these things were real, because they had happened. And at the same time, the events were isolated enough so that the poets had wide scope for interpretation. We cannot leave our poets such scope. As to historical figures, we are bound to demand the photography of history, rather than the bold simplicity of art. Thereby we fail to make things easy for our serious dramatists, since they have to build a situation from the bottom. A dramatist might do something with our semi-historical characters — the people who were real, but about whom we know little, provided only that the little

³⁰ *Ran.* 1427–9.

³¹ It is interesting to consider whether we can write a drama of a moral step upward, comparable to the *Oresteia*; I think this should be possible, but in terms of the acquisition by man of a new moral insight, rather than of a new divine dispensation.

we know has caught our attention — for possible instance, Chief Logan, Osceola, Molly Pitcher. But such characters in these States tend to be semi-humorous folk-heroes — Heracles undeified; and when Stephen Vincent Benét remade Daniel Webster into a legendary figure, he used the same semi-humorous touch, perhaps by way of apology to the historians. The obstacle of historicity is not insurmountable, however; with our longer plays, and with the novel so strongly in our background, our writer of tragedy should be able to convince us that his characters are true people, as well as worth watching. Certainly we are finding ourselves in these latter days still used to the practice of selecting the *exemplum* — the type-making individual — the Churchill, or the Rodger Young.

Thirdly, we must consider our attitude as citizens of a scientific world. My thesis is not that we should believe in tragedy rather than in science, but that we should believe in tragedy precisely because we are better scientists than was Krutch in 1929. Now, it has been clear for many years that it is not well to accept the results of a science without accepting the validity of the scientific method; there is something pitiful about the man who insists on picking out certain results of biology, while rejecting the theory of evolution. But more than that, it will be well, if we have not already done so, to accept not only the results and the method of science, but also its fundamental faith.

And what are some of the articles of this credo? First, that the universe is knowable. Therefore, while the problems of the individual may not be solvable, the problems of the race are; at least, that is the hypothesis upon which we are working.

Second, that half a truth is better than none; or a scientist might prefer to quote Bacon, and say, "Truth comes out of error more easily than out of confusion." Here we might pause to recall how discarded views have sometimes served as leads to something better; and how constantly the scientist casts his hypotheses before him, and finds the process valid, though the hypotheses suffer drastic amendment. A scientist colleague of mine says, "A scientist does not discover laws — he formulates descriptions." And so does the poet, after his lone-handed fashion.

A third article in this creed is that the more knowledge we gain, the more order and reason we are able to perceive in the universe.

A fourth article in the scientist's credo is that man is better off when he knows than when he does not know.

A fifth article — the last of this *ad hoc* series — is that man is part of the universe.³² Science regards all parts of the universe as possessing value and being worth study, and surely not least valuable is that part which understands something about the rest.

So much for laying a foundation; now can we build tragedy on it? I believe we can. Scientific effort is one thing, the poetic effort of tragedy is another; yet they arise from the same base — man's urge to describe what he sees, and understand both what he sees, and what is veiled from him. The universe is knowable, therefore we ought to try to achieve the tragic enlightenment. Precision is better than confusion; therefore tragedy, even at its most pessimistic and doubt-filled stage, is valuable. The more knowledge we gain, the more order we find; the more we know, the better off we are; therefore, the uplift of tragedy is justified. Man has at least as much worth as anything in the universe, and has more importance than anything else *to himself*; therefore, a man may be given the status of a tragic hero. Tragedy is an effort to establish a generalization from evidence, and to that extent is analogous to science. But, of course, tragedy makes an ephemeral generalization, by individual effort (and therefore the generalization of the poet may differ from several generalizations created by different spectators), whereas science generalizes by consensus with a view to permanence. But as scientists, we may at least write *nihil obstat* on the flyleaf of tragedy. If we want to know what tragedy is like when written out of a predilection for science, we may look at Euripides; and insofar as we are scientists, we will write Euripidean tragedy. The domination over man by forces of nature, and the social involvement of the individual, will be views congenial to a scientifically-minded writer.

³² This alleged creed of scientists was formulated in rejoinder to certain statements of Krutch's, which I subjoin, with a numeral indicating my attempted counter: ". . . the unwarranted assumption that every human problem is somehow of necessity solvable" (I); "pure intelligence is incapable of influence by desire, and therefore is incapable of choosing an opinion because it is fruitful and beneficent" (II — we do not intend to choose flattering unctious for our souls; but scientists will choose opinions precisely because they *are* fruitful and beneficent; opinion is man's creation; if it does not serve his welfare, it is henceforth good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under the foot of man); human happiness, order and reason are contrary to Nature, and "are achieved, if at all, in her despite" (III and V); "we are an accident of the universe" (but the scientist assumes that there are no accidents in the universe — not of course that we can explain everything now), and, "most of our biological existence is meaningless," and, "science nowhere supports human dignity" (V). With IV, Krutch agrees.

Now I have said that our religious tradition will bar us from writing one kind of Euripidean tragedy. I shall not attempt to determine a synthesis between our scientific and our religious lines of thought. This is the place, not to say what tragedy shall be written, but merely to point out that some tragedy may be written. The inclusion of scientific views within one's religious thought is precisely the duty of the poet as individualist, with the aim of stimulating other individuals, rather than of laying down the law.

That unquestionable tragedy has been written in our time, we can hardly say. But I believe we are spiritually ready for the highest tragedy. President Homer Davis of Athens College says of the Greeks of today, "People in general have so much courage that one is impressed by courage rather than being depressed by suffering." That is the mood of tragedy. To write Euripidean tragedy, tragedy with the *quand même* spirit, is a minimum possibility today; this is tragedy which can be based on no more than keen observation of past and present. Sophoclean tragedy, rich in appreciation of human character, and with a background of faith in the divine, is now within our capacity, if we claim any heritage from the Hebrew-Christian faith. A Russian could surely write even Aeschylean tragedy — a depiction of the triumph of world-order out of suffering. Perhaps a Christian believer in democracy might rise by a powerful effort of faith to write such tragedy, too.

Yes, we can write tragedy today; there is one small lack yet unsupplied; all we need is a genius to write the plays for us!