

## Walter Stein replies to Phil Beisly

I should naturally wish to welcome Phil Beisly's taking up of the standing invitation implicit in a volume of essays entitled *Criticism as Dialogue*.<sup>1</sup> The notion of 'dialogue', as used in my book, is intended to work on several levels, sometimes in senses specifically stressed in the book, but of course including just the sort of ordinary dialogue that Mr Beisly has entered into.

Or has he? Obviously, the *sine qua non* of 'dialogue'—on any level—is a real meeting of minds; and, unfortunately, I don't feel that there is much of this going on in Beisly's article. To this, though, it must be added that, for all the recent drum-rolls for 'dialogue' (now increasingly relapsing into anathemas and 'confrontation') genuine dialogue is as rare as it is exacting; and most of what claim to be dialogues these days turn out to be either monologues by proxy or bandwaggoning unconditional surrenders.

Actually, Beisly does not pretend to have much use for 'dialogue' anyway—at any rate in the field of criticism; and is especially unkeen on 'Stein's argument that the demands which criticism faces are nothing less than metaphysical'. He is convinced that 'metaphysical concepts are not enlargements of criticism but constrictions inimical to it'. And he recoils from the idea of a Christian criticism concerned to elicit or test or nourish such concepts. 'To be a critic is enough' (367; 379). Now ('enough'?—enough *for what?*), such attitudes might well occasion a genuine encounter of fundamentally differing approaches to literature—i.e. might themselves give rise to a form of critical dialogue. But Beisly avoids such dialectical traps, by dispensing with any such encounter. My book has three—I hope, carefully argued—chapters (out of six) on these problems; and, whilst Beisly's opening paragraphs, expressing his 'sense of radical disagreement' in these matters, raise the question 'what do we say to the various stages of his'—(my)—'argument?', they could hardly be said to indicate these 'various stages', still less to 'say' anything about them, beyond the fact that he disagrees.

The nearest Beisly gets to accounting for this sense of disagreement is to regret my 'lack of the Arnoldian confidence—of the complacency which can stand for the moment for Arnold's essential point' and 'the tentative, stretched nature' of what he calls my 'metaphysical supplement'—which, he says, 'remains at the end of the argument not producible' (368). Now, this unintended good mark for the lack of complacency of my approach—'with so many questions, allusions and hesitant suggestions' (*ibid.*)—is so central to my conception of dialogue, amongst the contemporary falling apart that makes dialogue so imperative, that I needn't perhaps worry unduly about the description of the metaphysical efforts involved (with so many

<sup>1</sup>'The Function of Criticism and Tragedy', *New Blackfriars*, August, 1972.

questions, allusions and hesitant suggestions) as a 'metaphysical supplement'. (If we were to confine ourselves to the term 'confidence'—though I don't deny that Arnold *could* be complacent at times—I'd feel it appropriate to note, on the one hand, that Arnold at his best was impressively capable of taking the measure of a culture

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight  
Where ignorant armies clash by night

—and, on the other hand, that I wouldn't, for my own part, admit to lacking an ultimate relevant confidence. Such a confidence—rooted in biblical and dogmatic tradition, and constantly to be purified, to the best of one's ability, from complacency and dogmatism—is just what renders 'dialogue' so especially called for in our exploding pluralist culture, at once radically challenging and radically in need of being challenged.) As to whether its metaphysical dialectic 'remains at the end of the argument not producible', this, as I see it, depends on what exactly one means by the 'end' of such an argument and on the sense in which one expects its findings to be 'producible'. After all, one is here dealing with matters which are, by definition, of a very 'tentative, stretched nature' indeed; so that I have no reason to be averse to having this argument characterized as tentative and stretched. But if somebody further asserts that no 'producible' metaphysical orientation emerges, one surely cannot help wondering where, or how, *this* argument is 'produced' if he just does not come to grips with the 'various stages' of a discussion on which he pronounces with a 'complacency which can stand for the moment for (his) essential point'. Perhaps the assured, clear and distinct items suggested by words like 'end' and 'supplement' in this context may have something to do with the problem. One might recall the somewhat related problem Aunt Juley has, in *Howards End*, with ideas that are not 'portable' as nuts are.

Yet not only does Beisly himself insist—when he isn't questioning the role of a Christian literary criticism—upon Christianity's 'critical, negative, transcending role' (since it possesses 'resources' which, for instance, Marxism lacks),<sup>1</sup> but he rapidly passes from denying 'that the demands which criticism faces are nothing less than metaphysical' to commending, of all things, Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*—than which nothing could be more metaphysical—as a suitable 'standpoint outside the dialogue' to cut through its critical and metaphysical knots (368). It takes two to sustain a dialogue, but only one to cut it off. And, conversely, instant metaphysics is no less metaphysical than a 'tentative, stretched', dialectical response to inescapable ultimate questions; it is only less open to any sort of relevant discipline. It's interesting to note that one of Beisly's own quotations from *The Birth of Tragedy* (though it does not appear till much later in his article) itself, as it happens—in describing the

<sup>1</sup>Phil Beisly, 'The Function of Criticism and Politics', *New Blackfriars*, April, 1972, p. 157.

relations between nature and art—speaks of a ‘metaphysical supplement’ (p. 378). And, incidentally, when *Nietzsche* said ‘supplement’, he meant, in a precise, relevant sense, *supplement*; since, at this stage in his career, he saw empirical human life—the entire ‘phenomenon’ of individuated existence—as absolutely, eternally dreadful: an ‘original pain’<sup>1</sup> to be ‘overcome’ by tragic art:

The genesis of tragedy cannot be explained by saying that things happen, after all, just as tragically in real life. Art is not an imitation of nature but its metaphysical supplement, raised up beside it in order to overcome it.<sup>2</sup>

Only a detailed study of Nietzsche’s work could bring out the full import of this radical dissociation between ‘nature’ and tragic art. It must suffice, here, to stress two especially pertinent points. First, *The Birth of Tragedy*’s—both immediate and ultimate—concern with an ‘*esthetic delight*’:<sup>3</sup> ‘Only as an esthetic product can the world be justified to all eternity’.<sup>4</sup> This equivocal tragic estheticism submits to a ‘*marvellous illusion*’, which, by ‘*toying*’ with the ‘sting of displeasure’, can ‘justify the existence of *even “the worst possible world”*’<sup>5</sup>—resolving ‘original pain’ into a sort of cosmic sado-masochistic ecstasy:

This world can be justified only as an esthetic phenomenon. On this view, tragic myth has convinced us that even the ugly and discordant are *merely an esthetic game* which the will [i.e. ‘the primal Being’]<sup>6</sup> in its utter exuberance, plays with itself.<sup>7</sup>

Dionysiac art . . . wishes to convince us of *the eternal delight of existence*, but it insists that we look for this delight not in the phenomena but behind them. . . . It forces us to gaze into *the horror of individual existence*, yet without being turned to stone by the vision: a metaphysical solace momentarily lifts us above the whirl of shifting phenomena. *For a brief moment we become, ourselves, the primal Being*, and we experience its insatiable hunger for existence.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, it is very much to the point that, by the time Nietzsche came to write *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he himself not only regretted certain ‘frantic and confused’ elements in *The Birth of Tragedy*, but was now inclined to apologize for this ‘arrogant’ book—its ‘lack of logical nicety’ and its being ‘so sure of its message that it dispenses with any kind of proof’.

Worse than that, it suspects the very notion of proof being a book written for initiates, a ‘music’ for men christened in the name of music and held together by special esthetic experiences, a shibboleth for the highbrow confraternity.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, New York, 1956, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 142 (original italics).

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 145 (italics added).

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 102 (cf. the following quotation).

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 143 (italics added).

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 102 (italics added).

<sup>9</sup>*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part IV, ‘Of Greater Men’; included, as ‘A Critical Backward Glance’, in *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 6.

Of course the book remains, nevertheless, a classic of its peculiar kind of metaphysical criticism, as well as a mine of particular insights.

But one cannot help asking what might qualify it to serve as a sort of supreme court of appeal in Beisly's argument, dispensing not only itself but its appellant from 'the very notion of proof'—and this in a context involving Christian (as opposed to 'Dionysiac') perspectives; how Beisly should feel entitled to employ Nietzsche's metaphysical 'shibboleth' to rule out my argument that 'the demands which criticism faces are nothing less than metaphysical'—without even pausing to indicate why Nietzsche's Dionysiac esthetics should oblige us to take them as Gospel truths.

Nor does Beisly find any difficulty in passing directly from Nietzsche's insistent denial 'that things happen just as tragically in real life' as they do in art (whose function is 'to overcome it') to an anecdote about D. H. Lawrence—about Lawrence's *real life*—which, moreover, far from involving any esthetic refuge from 'the horror of individual existence', is essentially an expression of trust in the 'life that grows in us', of hope—in spite of everything—in the possibility of a 'real life' human renewal (p. 378). Oddest of all, perhaps, is Beisly's admonition:

And we may repeat to Walter Stein, *art* is the metaphysical supplement, art and the level of experience it draws upon, art and the criticism which recognizes them.

—as though he had not, after all, started with a denial of 'Stein's argument that the demands which criticism faces are nothing less than metaphysical'. Or does 'recognition' of metaphysical levels of art and experience not itself demand any sort of metaphysical judgment, subject to metaphysical disciplines? Can any proper response to such levels bypass a grappling with 'metaphysical concepts'? And can the—often radically diverging—visions embodied in different works, all of which we may recognize as of great weight, properly be assimilated without a proportionate dialectical effort? Conversely, does it, or does it not, matter to the critic who holds that 'to be a critic is enough' whether, for instance, tragedy is necessarily identical with Nietzsche's 'marvellous illusion'; or whether the 'metaphysical solace' of a particular work reverberates with intimations of *personal resurrection*, or instead envelops us in a momentary sense 'that even the ugly and discordant are *merely an esthetic game which the will, in its utter exuberance, plays with itself*'? Does it, or does it not, matter whether an image of tragic existence presents itself as a pitiful and terrible challenge to faith—

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;  
They kill us for their sport—

or as an occasion for an advanced '*esthetic* delight', as we delight in 'musical dissonance as used by a master',<sup>1</sup> such dissonances and human torments being both seen as

<sup>1</sup>*The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 143.

aspects of one and the same Dionysiac phenomenon, of that spirit which playfully shatters and rebuilds the teeming world of individuals—much as, in Heracleitus, the plastic power of the universe is compared to a child tossing pebbles or building in a sand pile and then destroying what it has built.<sup>1</sup>

If the divine 'sport' suspected by Gloucester should delight *us*, in Nietzsche's playfully shattering sense ('For a brief moment we become, ourselves, the primal Being'), questions about the *truth or falsity* of Gloucester's accusation would admittedly be beside the point. It's the '*esthetic* delight' in man's fly-like destruction (that 'musical dissonance as used by a master' that can 'justify the existence of even "the worst possible world"') which would then be 'the thing itself'—would itself *constitute* the 'metaphysical supplement'. To insist on asking whether (either within the limits of *Lear* or beyond) men *are indeed* mere creatures of some divinely wanton sport would, in that case, not only involve going back on questions which Nietzsche has already answered *a priori* (and, in Beisly's view, apparently, definitively, once and for all); it would also imply that 'the demands which criticism faces *are* nothing less than metaphysical'; and that, in order to mediate between Nietzsche's vision and Shakespeare's (as well as between Gloucester's, here, and those of the play as a whole), 'metaphysical concepts'—even though they may seem 'constricting' to Beisly's formula that 'to be a critic is enough'—are simply conditions for being open enough to art, life—and the function of criticism. As, however, I do not find a Nietzschean type of delight in the pain of *King Lear*, I cannot avoid persisting in asking questions like these. And, even at the cost of incurring Beisly's 'vaguely felt disagreement' over fundamental attitudes to art and to tragedy (2), I am obliged to 'recognize' that both the art of *King Lear* and the metaphysical concepts of *The Birth of Tragedy* involves us in—well, 'metaphysical concepts'; and so also to recognize that the critical and existential demand to draw Shakespeare and Nietzsche into a pertinent reciprocal questioning is indeed 'nothing less than metaphysical'.

Still, I fully agree that, ultimately, the test of any theoretical critical standpoint must lie in its bearings upon critical practice; and that tragedy forms a central test-case for this practice. My essay on *Lear* and Chekhov was certainly put forward as thus central to the whole discussion.

Once more, however—though Beisly is more specific here, and puts forward some interesting points of his own—I don't feel that his discussion really makes much contact with mine. Thus, the sort of questions just indicated, concerning the play's cosmic vision, hardly figure in his comments at all. There is no response to my stress upon the play's concern with the 'problem of evil' (in its specifically

<sup>1</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 143-4.

theological sense); nor to my efforts to indicate how it points beyond the excruciating immediacies it dramatizes to at least the *possibility* of a world where, if not within history then ultimately beyond it, apparently sterile 'sacrifices' can bear fruit. Consequently Beisly's understanding of 'patience'—and with it his whole approach to Edgar—is unrelated to the play's structural inquest into the options of an ultimate nihilistic revolt and an ultimate religious submission. The pervasively enacted paradoxes of blindness and seeing, reason and madness, mysterious hopes emergent within apparently ultimate despair—and the ways in which these relate to the retrospective symbolic stocktaking of Shakespeare's last plays—are thus absent from Beisly's account. And Edgar, whose inescapably symbolic—at times virtually allegorical—role my essay examined within the context of these paradoxical bearings, is treated as a naturalistic character, on whom Beisly moralizes in almost total abstraction from his shifting symbolic functions.

I can only point back to the passages of my essay (*Criticism as Dialogue*, pp. 106-13, 123-29, 137-49) which seek to place Edgar within the defining contexts of the play, and which include a response to a critic whose approach to Edgar in many ways parallels Beisly's.<sup>1</sup> It would hardly be useful to restate my evidence (not sifted by Beisly). I only need to note that, in so far as Beisly's objections to the sort of criticism I advocate relate to my failure to treat Edgar as one of the play's 'cast garments'—and this does seem quite central to his objections—he would, if he proved his point, prove too much for his purpose. For, as he himself remarks, 'Stein is certainly not alone in his endorsement of Edgar's philosophy'. L. C. Knights, Wilson Knight, 'even A. C. Bradley' (with qualifications)—indeed, Beisly, says, 'most critics, in their differing interpretations of *King Lear*, seem drawn towards Edgar as some kind of spokesman, and it is often in terms of his wisdom that they try to formulate the tragedy of the play' (p. 369). I mention this not just because one can hardly help feeling cheered by such distinguished and catholic company in this matter; but because it surely must mean that if Beisly's case against Edgar were enforcible against all these readings, it could hardly be specially damaging to any particular critical approach—not even my own. Either the entire range of 'fundamental attitudes to art and to tragedy' underlying this misguided consensus would be exploded; or mine, too, would be left exactly where it was.

Ultimately Beisly's objection to Edgar is that he 'and his philosophy of "patience" are quite basically at odds with the heroic' (p. 372)—as is Lear himself. Indeed, 'the ending of *King Lear* does not contain a character who arrives at any authentic tragic utterance' (p. 374).

Cordelia's death might have produced tragedy; all value, all that remained of life, Lear had invested in her. Her death is

<sup>1</sup>*Criticism as Dialogue*, pp. 125-129; the critic is H. A. Mason, in three articles in *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. II, nos. 1-3.



therefore a complete loss for him. But it leads to no new knowledge, no final heroic exercise of creativity.

I take it, this can only mean that Cordelia's death *might* have 'produced tragedy', but, in Beisly's view, does not. In that case—and to anyone who can regard Lear's last speech as not being an 'authentic tragic utterance'—I can only suggest that he would be well advised to reconsider his definitions. His metaphysical dogma—or, if he prefers, his 'persuasive definition'—of tragedy could hardly undergo a more ultimate *reductio ad absurdum*. It is rather like saying that Oxford and Cambridge are not authentic universities, as they are demonstrably ancient foundations, and, furthermore, are based on the College system.

And what exactly does Beisly mean by 'the heroic' and 'heroic creativity'? Apart from the question (and it is a very pertinent question) whether 'the heroic' is a *sine qua non* of all tragedy—of all that could commonly be termed 'tragic'—his notion of 'heroic creativity' is as mystifying as it is confident in its simple precision.

The tragic hero affirms that he can still create—that he is still human—in the absence of anything to be done.

Yes, all right (though—in spite of Beisly's contrary view, I hold that this is just what Edgar, though not Edgar only, brings to expression within *King Lear*). But:

If we don't believe it to be the case that human life is centrally directed by a faculty to create—to create *ex nihilo*—then we won't have any faith in this faculty when it meets its severest challenge (p. 377).

Here I confess myself beaten. *Ex nihilo!* Really? That certainly is a lot of creativity. A radical existentialist might perhaps be able to make something of this; as, for instance, suggested by Camus' description of the Romantic 'dandy', feeling himself 'in the hands of fate and destroyed by divine violence':

The human being who is condemned to death is, at least, magnificent, before he disappears, and his magnificence is his justification. It is an established fact, the only one that can be thrown in the petrified face of the God of Hate. . . . The dandy creates his own unity by aesthetic means. . . . The dandy rallies his forces and creates a unity for himself by the very violence of his refusal.<sup>1</sup>

This at any rate lends to human heroics which seek to create *ex nihilo*, magnificently, before disappearing, some sort of intelligible meaning. I am unable to see what such an *ex nihilo* might mean for a tragic creativeness beyond nihilism (for which creation must ultimately be a form of *endurance*—where 'action is suffering/And suffering action'.—'Ripeness is all. Come on.');

<sup>1</sup>Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, London, 1953.

moment enable me to sympathize with Beisly's 'conviction that metaphysical concepts are not enlargements of criticism but constrictions inimical to it'.

## Koch on Apocalyptic

by Bernard Robinson

'(Jesus' audience) thought that the Kingdom would be a place like the old kingdom of David, with armies and a king's throne. Jesus knew that it was not a place, but the action of God ruling over our hearts.' So John Hargreaves,<sup>1</sup> though it is perhaps unfair to pick on him, for similar pronouncements can be found in hundreds of popular, and indeed scholarly,<sup>2</sup> theological writings. It is the way most of us were brought up to think. Perhaps it is the right way of thinking, but there are, I think, increasingly good reasons for feeling unsure about that. When the Jews talked about 'the kingdom' (without further qualification) they certainly were not thinking of some invisible operation: they meant the Roman Empire. The 'Kingdom of God' on the lips of Jesus may well have referred to something equally tangible—to a world order, not a concept. He may well have been speaking not of the invisible activity of 'grace' in the 'soul', but of a kingdom, however spiritual, with visible, material attributes. A recent writer on the Fourth Gospel, for instance, has interpreted the scene before Pilate in these terms:

Jesus' kingship is not 'unworldly'. Instead one of the characteristics of the Johannine treatment of the trial and of the events that lead up to it is that the *political* implications are emphasized. In 11, 48 a specifically political motivation is injected into the plotting of the Jewish authorities. John alone mentions the presence of the Roman soldiers (*he spaira kai ho chiliarchos*) at the arrest of Jesus. In the trial itself, the political-realistic element is introduced by the Jews at 19, 12: 'If you release this man you are not Caesar's friend; anyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar'. The climactic rejection of Jesus by the Jews is the statement 'We have no king but Caesar', in which the 'religious' and 'political'

<sup>1</sup>John Hargreaves: *A Guide to St Mark's Gospel* (T.E.F. Study Guide, 2), London, S.P.C.K., 1969, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup>See, for instance, Rudolph Schnackenburg, *God's Rule and Kingdom*, 1963, p. 95: God's sovereignty is 'purely religious in character', without political connotations. Such a spiritualizing tendency may stem, Klaus Koch suggests, from the 'disappointment' of German scholars with the German Reich.