

The Function of Criticism and Tragedy 367

by Phil Beisly

When Walter Stein, in his book *Criticism as Dialogue*,¹ proposes his version of criticism and takes it into the area of tragedy, we are challenged to reconsider some essential notions. It is when faced with tragedy, perhaps, that criticism meets its most exacting responsibilities; what it makes of tragedy reveals its inner nature most clearly. What, then, are we to make of Stein's argument that the demands which criticism faces are nothing less than metaphysical? What do we say to the various stages of his argument?

Do we agree, for example, that in Arnold we have a key-figure who fails to meet these demands and whose work can be characterized by such words as 'reductio' and 'surrender'?

'His religious strengths (like his insistence that God is "a term thrown out, so to speak, at a not fully grasped object"—not a "fixed and rigid idea") as well as his complacent, wholesale surrender of dogmatic tradition and metaphysical concepts points directly to present ferments.'²

Again, how shall we formulate our uneasiness at the following suggestion?

'Dr Leavis may have been led into an undue disregard for conceptual thought as such, including the conceptual presuppositions of his own critical practice.'³

What should be said to Stein's ideas about a Christian criticism? When he says that 'the deficiencies of Christian criticism . . . are always accidental: they reflect deficiencies in individual sensibility',⁴ is it enough to suggest that this last comment seems quite enough to dispose of the general notion, since the examples to hand, far from demonstrating 'special advantages in virtue of its unity, its openness and, lastly, its metaphysical reach',⁵ are more often occasions for tactful silence? What do we say to the choice of Raymond Williams as a principal participant in the dialogue?

What are the possibilities, in other words, in the context of 'criticism as dialogue', of arriving at a definition of the sense of radical disagreement that emerges from a reading of this book? For there remains a conviction that metaphysical concepts are not enlargements of criticism but constrictions inimical to it. The initial elaboration of the value of these concepts—with so many questions, allusions and hesitant suggestions—is not indicative of an ability to lay hold of anything of substance that Arnold, for example,

¹Walter Stein, *Criticism as Dialogue*, Cambridge, 1969.

²Stein, p. 5.

³Stein, p. 38.

⁴Stein, p. 48.

⁵Stein, p. 50.

may have overlooked. On the contrary, it suggests that it is precisely from a lack of the Arnoldian confidence—of the complacency which can stand for the moment for Arnold's essential point—that Stein has recourse to a metaphysical supplement which remains, at the end of the argument, not producible. The tentative, stretched nature of the argument is part of the difficulty. Some standpoint outside of the dialogue seems called for, if the vaguely felt disagreement over fundamental attitudes to art and to tragedy are to come into the open. This is so, one feels, because the dialogue is itself caught up with the questions at issue; how can it not be so? Another voice seems needed to stress with sufficient emphasis what criticism as dialogue is not led into criticizing.

'Like the artist, theoretical man takes infinite pleasure in all that exists and is thus saved from the practical ethics of pessimism, with its lynx eyes that shine only in the dark. But while the artist, having unveiled the truth garment by garment, remains with his gaze fixed on what is still hidden, theoretical man takes delight in the cast garments and finds his highest satisfaction in the unveiling process itself, which proves to him his own power.'¹

Not only does this voice provide a necessary critical vantage-point from which to look at 'dialogue', it also has bearings, in the image it uses, on the play to which Stein devotes space—*King Lear*. Stein compares the play with works by Chekhov, who tries, he says, 'to impose a "comic" resolution upon essentially tragic material'.² Shakespeare, on the other hand, allows comedy, in the person of the Fool, to exhaust its potential resources before vanishing from the play. The way is thus open for a facing of complete despair, and only from out of that facing can any resolution be born.

Stein, in other words, sees comedy, in the person of the Fool, as one of the 'cast garments' of the play. But is the naked truth revealed behind it? Stein's metaphysical analysis of the first of the 'cast garments' involves him in the uncritical acceptance of the one beneath it; after discussing the inadequacy of the Fool he is silent about the inadequacy of the character who succeeds him—Edgar, with his strategy of rehabilitation and his philosophy of patience.

The Fool is there to ensure that every conceivable alternative to despair shall be given its chance, and then slain—³

But Edgar is another alternative. That he, too, is a garment covering the naked truth of the tragedy is what a large part of the play seems to be telling us.

Stein is certainly not alone in his endorsement of Edgar's philosophy. He is only following L. C. Knights, for example, when he takes up Edgar's sentence

Ripeness is all

¹Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, New York, 1956, p. 92.

²Stein, p. 96.

³Stein, p. 107.

as if it were the motto of the play. Knights takes that sentence as an articulation of the play's final affirmation: 'the sole ground of a genuinely self-affirming life and energy'.¹ Wilson Knight refers to Edgar as 'so often the voice of the *Lear* philosophy'.² Even Bradley ends his account of the play with quotations which advocate patience.³ 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.

Even Bradley: for Bradley is a far more interesting critic. Together with his own metaphysical concepts—those concepts which find immediate kinship with Edgar's philosophy—Bradley has a series of scattered insights which suggest a very different estimate. Much of what needs to be said about Edgar can be given through Bradley's scattered observations.

Bradley notes that Edgar 'is persuaded without the slightest demur to avoid his father instead of confronting him and asking him the cause of his anger',⁴ and we can follow this hint by inquiring into the nature of the impulse that prompts Edgar, not merely to disguise himself, but

To take the basest and most poorest shape
That ever penury, in contempt of man,
Brought near to beast; (II. iii. 7)

Bradley notes that 'Lear regards the beggar therefore with reverence and delight, as a person who is in the secret of things',⁵ so endowing Edgar with a status that leaves most critics wholly untroubled. We must add that it is what Lear 'regards' as the beggar that seems finally to bring on his madness. It is Edgar, also, regarded as the beggar, who is the occasion for the egalitarian note that enters the play, and for such utterances as Lear's 'prayer' (III, iv, 28)—

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are . . .

and for Gloucester's similar speech before his 'suicide' (IV, i, 67). In the Dover Cliff scene, Bradley notes, Edgar plays on Gloucester's superstitious nature in exactly the way that Edmund had done (although 'for a good purpose').⁶ As for at least one part of Edgar's philosophy, 'Albany and Edgar may moralize on the divine justice as they will, but how, in the face of all that we see, shall we believe that they speak Shakespeare's mind?'⁷

'There remains in him, however, touches which a little chill one's feeling for him.

The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us:

¹L. C. Knights, *Some Shakespearean Themes*, London, 1960, p. 101.

²Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*, London, 1962, p. 197.

³A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, London, 1962, p. 276.

⁴Bradley, p. 210.

⁵Bradley, p. 239.

⁶Bradley, p. 245.

⁷Bradley, p. 226.

The dark and vicious place where thee he got
 Cost him his eyes:
 —one wishes he had not said to his dying brother those words
 about their dead father.¹

Such perceptions survive despite Bradley's metaphysical concepts, and they are surely enough to make us profoundly uneasy about how we regard Edgar, about the vast body of interpretation which rests on endorsing his status and his wisdom as 'my philosopher'. If Bradley is right in these observations, then Stein is wrong when he says that

'The Fool is there to ensure that every conceivable alternative to despair shall be given its chance, and then slain'.

Against that we can set this about Edgar:

'He never thinks of despairing; in the worst circumstances he is sure there is something to be done to make things better.'²

There isn't likely to be disagreement about the Fool as a 'cast garment'; his case is a relatively clear one. Edgar's case is more difficult and arguably more important. What strikes us about Edgar—strikes us if we are responding to the shifting sympathies of the dramatic action—is that his succession of disguises involves a profound psychological truth. He is never seriously disturbed by the movement of events around him, never fully open to realities, never, in any important sense, vulnerable. His disguises correspond to something in him that is only too ready for an evasion of direct response and confrontation, something which will only contemplate such confrontation in terms of its own contriving. His wisdom is therefore directed to experience of which he hasn't himself felt the full weight—it presupposes insensitivity.

Not that Edgar doesn't *feel* any discomfort; but the asides in which we have, registered, the unforeseen dilemma to which his disguise has brought him only enforce the evasion that his pre-assumed stance involves. His policy of optimism is only barely modified: 'he is sure there is something to be done to make things better'. Indeed, only a person who remained untouched by events in his deepest being could sustain the kind of programmatic strategy that Edgar adopts:

Why I do trifle thus with his despair
 Is done to cure it. (IV. vi. 33)

The curing, we have to observe, comes from a consciousness that doesn't itself share the despair, and shows but little acknowledgement of the full import for the individual that such despair entails.

These suggestions, and especially those about the distressing wrongness of intention in the Dover Cliff scene, may be amplified by some remarks of Dr Johnson's on Edgar's famous description of the cliff itself—

¹Bradley, p. 254.

²Bradley, p. 255.

How fearful

And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low! (IV. vi.11)

Johnson comments:

'This description has been much admired since the time of Addison, who has remarked, with a poor attempt at pleasantry, that *he who can read it without being giddy has a very good head, or a very bad one*. The description is certainly not mean, but I am far from thinking it wrought to the utmost excellence of poetry. He that looks from a precipice finds himself assailed by one great and dreadful image of destruction. But this overwhelming idea is dissipated and enfeebled from the instant that the mind can restore itself to the observation of particulars, and diffuse its attention to distinct objects. The enumeration of the choughs and crows, the samphire-man and fishers, counteracts the great effect of the prospect, as it peoples the desert of intermediate vacuity, and stops the mind in the rapidity of its descent through emptiness and horror.'¹

And in conversation Johnson added:

'The impression is divided; you pass on by computation, from one stage of the tremendous space to another.'²

This suggests an Empsonian diagnosis of an ambiguity. As opposed to the overt intention, what the passage actually conveys is a method of 'computation' which is in line with Edgar's general procedure throughout the play. He is never, in any sense, 'assailed'. The computation has not been able to meet the nobility that Gloucester, for all his feebleness, achieves in his contemplation of suicide. Stein himself, at one point, in talking about 'the extreme verge', suggests a reference which would, if pursued, have made something like this point:

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there.³

Taking these hints, we cannot fail to register that some kind of comment is being passed on Edgar and his wisdom. There are unresolved questions about his contribution to Gloucester's death, and about the strange alteration that takes place in Edmund once Edgar has appeared as the St George he has been planning to be. And what, if we are interested in finding more than convenient material for quotation, do we make of the final exchange between Edgar and his father that gives rise to what has been taken as the motto of the play?—

GLOU. No further, sir; a man may rot even here.

EDG. What! in ill thoughts again? Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither:
Ripeness is all. Come on. (V. ii. 7)

¹Johnson on Shakespeare, ed. Raleigh, Oxford, 1965, p. 158.

²Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. Malone, London, 1821, II, p. 176.

³Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'No Worst, there is None', *Selected Poems*, London, 1961, p. 65.

Does that breezy note of confident assurance really deserve to stand for a wisdom that can negotiate the darkest vision of the play?

Why, in comparison with so many other critics, does Bradley have that largeness of operation and freedom of movement which allows him to register perceptions of the kind we have noted? Surely because of the basic manner in which Bradley sets out to read Shakespeare. This is what is knowingly referred to as Bradley's interest in 'character', but it is more truthfully expressed as his recognition of the status that Shakespeare accords the individual, as the indispensable focus of whatever 'themes' or 'concepts' a play takes up. It is because Bradley can appreciate the status of Shakespeare's tragic heroes that he is in possession of some kind of normative sense, some standard of reference, by which he can preserve traces of a healthy scepticism when faced with characters such as Edgar. Bradley is capable, that is, of appreciating the heroic—

'the heroic spirit, in spite of failure, nearer to the heart of things than the smaller, more circumspect, and perhaps even "better" beings who survived the catastrophe.'¹

Bradley, too, wants to talk about redemption, but he looks for it in the very nature of the individual tragic hero who has failed, not for reasons of any metaphysical concepts, but simply because of the impressiveness, the paradoxically greater reality, of the hero as Shakespeare presents him. Bradley can respond to the stature of these heroes, even though he is hampered by his vocabulary from fully developing the response. His grasp of the heroic is central to his grasp of tragedy; that is the essence of Bradley's achievement. And if we call to mind the chronic inability of the Victorian age to deal with tragedy in any decisive way, then it *is* an achievement deserving some recognition in excess of what it now receives.

Bradley's grasp of the heroic, it might also be said, is what makes his work so different from—so essentially opposed to—the spirit of Chekhov. The various aspects of Chekhov's compromise with tragedy are all rooted in his resolute policy of anti-heroism. The contrast suggests the intimate relation between the heroic and the tragic—suggests that tragedy presupposes the heroic for it to come to actuality. It is in his grasp of this fundamental relation that Bradley rises above the rhapsodical entanglements of so much subsequent Shakespearean criticism.

Edgar and his philosophy of 'patience' are quite basically at odds with the heroic. While we cannot conclude from this that such notions as patience and 'Ripeness is all' are disqualified entirely, we must nevertheless feel that the disqualification of their most articulate advocate provokes drastic reconsideration. For not only is Edgar himself not heroic, he is also a major obstacle to the heroic

¹Bradley, p. 271. I am influenced here by Dr Wilbur Sanders' Cambridge lectures on 'Shakespeare and the Heroic'.

development of others; so much so, in fact, that it is a real question whether his influence is finally overcome in the play. The essentially mitigating nature of Edgar's philosophy is irreconcilable with the tragic hero's facing of complete despair, because it will not admit the absolute nature of the experience which leads to that despair—the loss, emptiness and failure. What worries us about Lear during the middle sections of the play is his inability to focus his experience and get beyond the failures of self-knowledge that his extravagances manifest, to see his situation as it really is. How much of it, after all, is an unnecessary creation of Lear's own character which is so much below the level of cause for despair as to be fairly evidently resolvable by common sense.¹

Not only does Edgar's philosophy prevent the emptiness and loss from coming to a true focus, which alone would decide the tragic status of the experience and might be such as to lead to despair; it provides, in the figure of Poor Tom, a radically false focus which delays even further the recognition of the true one. For whatever we attribute to Edgar's impersonation of the naked beggar, we can never simply say that he becomes that character. There remains, through the fact of the disguise, a layer of falsity and deception, however slight and well-intentioned. Poor Tom is not what he seems; he is not the 'thing itself', the naked truth, that Lear takes him to be. He is not that kind of final, elemental reality. But when, in this falsity, he is adopted as 'the thing itself' by a Lear who is still failing to find the true directions of responsibility and relevance in his experience, then a complex comment is being made.

For the true focus—or, to use more familiar words, 'objective correlative'—is Cordelia, as Stein briefly recognizes:

'Tragedy, in its fullness, starts from the fact of Cordelia's death. . . .'²

So much of the material for metaphysical concepts of redemption comes, therefore, from episodes in the play which *precede* the full emergence and definition of the play's tragic insistence. Lear's meeting with Cordelia, his rehabilitation, Gloucester's death, the downfall of Edmund, Goneril and Regan—all these things happen, if Stein's remark, is to be taken seriously, as the concluding episodes of an action which has never, throughout its course, produced anything that calls for the name of tragedy. Stein's admission, which my view of Edgar supports, reserves the word for use until the death of Cordelia.

Well, then, can we maintain that in the short space of time that remains to the play after Cordelia's death, a creative response is born which brings redemptive hope out of the full horror of despair which the event signifies? Can we maintain that in Lear, exhausted and enfeebled, and wanting only the undisturbed life of a bird in a

¹Norman Mailer once expressed the wish to see Lear acted by Ernest Hemingway.

²Stein, p. 151.

cage, we have the tragic hero who is the proponent of that response? (Bradley himself, one should add, did not attach this concept to Lear—as he did, for example, to Macbeth—but to Cordelia.) That the play points towards tragedy and insists that garment after garment be cast off is true. But it seems impossible to believe that in these last moments of the play there is actually produced a tragic hero—a tragic hero, that is, without whom the tragedy can not be said fully to exist.

In case more need to be said about the role of ‘patience’ as a retarding factor, one can simply offer the observation that the death of Cordelia supervenes, as far as Lear is concerned, upon the final version of a belief in that quality. In opposition to Cordelia’s readiness to face her sisters, Lear advocates a resignation which will ‘wear out’ his captors, and it is in his identification of himself with this belief—the final belief with which he identifies himself *as with* a belief—that he makes possible some small return of his old spirit:

The good years shall devour them, flesh and fell,
Ere they shall make us weep: we’ll see ’em starve first. (V. iii. 24)

It is the stripping away of even this garment that leads to Lear’s death. Cordelia’s death might have produced tragedy; all value, all that remained in life, Lear had invested in her. Her death is therefore a complete loss for him. But it leads to no new knowledge, no final heroic exercise of creativity; it involves no reconsideration of Cordelia’s true significance and no possibility of admitting the inadequacy involved in the picture of the two of them ‘like birds i’ th’ cage’. We have only to compare, for example,

This feather stirs; she lives! if it be so,
It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows
That ever I have felt. (V. iii. 265)

with Wordsworth’s poem on a comparable subject:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears or sees;
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.¹

Such a comparison will suggest that the ending of *King Lear* does not contain a character who arrives at any authentic tragic utterance.

Wordsworth’s poem—to elaborate on that for a moment—does

¹Wordsworth, ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’, *Poetical Works*, Oxford, 1913, p. 187. From questioning the sense in which *King Lear* can be said to be a tragedy, we are led to ask just how many tragedies Shakespeare wrote; the word is used loosely by critics, but there is no reason to assume that all the plays conventionally called tragedies are so, in the full sense of the word—they can still be about tragedy.

not mitigate the absoluteness of the loss; it faces it, with stony recognition, acknowledging it in all its implications for the poet who had endowed the girl with such central significance. But what is impressive about the poem is that this acknowledgement co-exists with a recognition of the disastrous unawareness that went with the particular form of the valuation—the recognition given in the irony of the girl becoming, in death, quite literally the ‘thing’ she had seemed to the poet in life. This admission of blindness, however, doesn’t turn into a rejection of the experience or a dissatisfaction with it. Neither does it lead into any possibility of rectifying the error, for there is nothing to be done. The episode has to be recognized for what it was, and the poem does not want to lessen the absoluteness of the loss because this would involve lessening what has been lost; this is so, even though some recognition of misvaluation is given. The corrective considerations are given their acknowledgement, but they are not the point of the poem.

This is the kind of tragic utterance with which Edgar’s wisdom is completely at variance:

‘he is sure there is something to be done to make things better’.

The truth that redemption does not lie, in the context of tragedy, in anything that can be done seems irresistibly urged by the play. Not that we always want to quarrel with the content of what Edgar says—it is the ensnaring characteristic of people such as him that *literally* they are always unimpeachable. It is simply the irrelevance of his wisdom that comes home to us, the irrelevance which, seen in its dramatic embodiment, is the very worst sort of wrongness.

It is by a compromise with this sort of wrongness that Stein’s dialogue about the location and the nature of redemptive hope in tragedy is enfeebled. This endorsement of Edgar also explains the importance, for Stein, of Raymond Williams, for surely what we have in *Modern Tragedy* is a major instance of what I have been criticizing:

While some men imprisoned, other men liberated. There is no evil which men have created, of this or any other kind, which other men have not struggled to end. To take one part of this action, and call it absolute or transcendent, is in its turn a suppression of other facts of human life on so vast a scale that its indifference can only be explained by a role in an ideology.¹

This is quoted by Stein, and he, too, sees something wrong with it. ‘But not every particular suffering is avoidable’, he answers.² But such are the entanglements that Stein’s dialogue involves that he cannot find a way to give Williams’ points of reference the complete rejection they deserve. What blinds him to Edgar blinds him to Williams (and Edgar, too, was a man who ‘liberated’). It is the fundamental irrelevance of these corrective considerations for the

¹Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, London, 1966, p. 59.

²Stein, p. 217.

individual once a tragic situation has developed that needs to be insisted on emphatically:

. . . there are profounder levels; levels of experience that, though they tend constantly to be ignored, are always, in respect of any concern for life and health, supremely relevant. The most effective insistence would be tragic art.¹

These words have been often quoted, but their point can be enforced in this context by recalling just who it is, in the quotation from Lawrence that precedes them, who is being characterized as 'incompatible with tragic experience': it is the 'energizers for movements and policies'. *Not*, it must be grasped, because they are to be banished from the face of the earth—on the contrary, 'there are necessary political and kindred activities at which the characteristic Laurentian contribution may well appear the reverse of helpful or encouraging'; but because art bears witness to what tragedy renders inescapable, that these energizers so often cannot accept the limited capacity of their programmes for dealing with human life, and constantly tend, like Edgar, to ignore what they cannot correct. Edgar stands as a warning to all social workers and political activists—calls them to what is, in their case, the most necessary function of criticism. It is profoundly right that the last words of *King Lear* should be given to a deflated and muted Edgar, a character still fundamentally unseeing, and that the second line of that speech should glance so briefly at everything we have been talking about:

Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.

Why is Stein's dialogue incapable of finding room for such considerations as these? What is the connexion between the urge to find redemption in tragedy, before it has been established in what sense a play *is* a tragedy, and the urge to save this redemption from Raymond Williams in a context of dialogue? Surely it is what was still left for Bradley to deal with in his notion of the heroic individual who seems untouched by the story of his failure: the truth, that is, that it is the individual's holding of truths, and the nature of the humanity from which they arise, which is central to the question of the reality of redemptive hope. It is this, rather than metaphysical concepts. What needs to be spotted in Raymond Williams' discussion is surely the hovering presence of what Nietzsche called, in his comments on Socrates,

'the illusion that thought, guided by the thread of causation, might plumb the farthest abysses of being and even *correct* it'.²

Thought here, of course, stands for that thought which takes the place of direct experience, the thought of the 'theoretical man' whose delight is the cast garments.

The comment is prompted particularly by the details of the thought which provide the attitudes of the Marxist or left-wing

¹F. R. Leavis, 'Tragedy and the Medium?' *The Common Pursuit*, London, 1966, p. 129.

²Nietzsche, p. 93.

critic. The reader of Marx is told, in a generalizing way, new things about the patterns in events which may give rise to a tragic situation. The danger seems to lie, not in what he is told about the relationships that hold good in these patterns, but in what he takes its import to be. Does it involve him, as it involves Raymond Williams, in a complete misunderstanding of the claims for tragic absoluteness and transcendence—that is to say, the location of these realities, not in the individuals they concern, but in an overall pattern of events? Of course it is true that ‘while some men imprisoned, other men liberated’; don’t all the great tragedies make that clear? But don’t they also make clear that it isn’t in the realm of such generalities and shared endeavour that tragedy is constituted? These corrective considerations can’t touch what has happened for the tragic hero—what, for him, always *will have* happened. Apart from the question of how far the ‘thread of causation’ can ever hope to reach (does thought ever encompass all the relevant data, since it is logically driven to see everything as ultimately relevant?) we have to ask whether the perception of such patterns in events is itself the recognition of tragedy. Does not the radical ambivalence that can be seen in these patterns simply enforce the possibility of an absolute situation emerging for the individual?

It is transcendence and absoluteness for the individual that we are concerned with in tragedy, not because we think, as Raymond Williams thinks we think, that there is no other kind, but because there can be no other kind for a tragic hero. If there is something of that sort for him, then we can see it as uniquely illuminating for whatever may hold good in transcendence of other kinds. We can see it as the clearest affirmation that there are those ‘deeper levels’.

For it isn’t only of experience that there are deeper levels. There are deeper levels of response and creative resource that make that experience possible and of which the experience, given its articulation in language, is the finest evidence. It is the paradox of human creativity being possible in the face of complete despair that vindicates those levels supremely, and this is what constitutes the transcendence of tragedy; this is why it is necessary to insist on the kind of heroism that Bradley talks about, since this provides, in individuals, the only place where it is to be found.

A creativity in the very facing of despair is what finally matters in tragedy, for it is the ultimate proof, in the very absence of all conventional materials for it, that creativity underlies human life. 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. Nor will we recognize, in the creativity of tragic utterance, the paradox by which the faculty is revealed here in the clearest definition. For what does the tragic hero create, after all? Nothing that the energizer or the corrective thinker can recognize as achievement. But

the tragic hero affirms that he can still create—that he is still human—in the absence of anything to be done. He affirms his hold on experience; he acknowledges what happens and faces the truth for what it is, as the critic, in his turn, faces it. How the situation arose we leave to the corrective thinker; the tragic hero is not tied down to the level of such patterns. In the face of despair he is still creative; and that is at the bottom of true victory.

To Raymond Williams we may direct this observation from Nietzsche about the nature of tragic transcendence in 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.’¹

And we may repeat to Walter Stein, *art* is the metaphysical supplement, art and the levels of experience it draws upon, art and the criticism which recognizes them. One cannot but see it as symptomatic that Stein should see Lawrence as ‘the poet of total self-fulfilment’,² with the limitation that such a phrase implies. Lawrence, surely, was a man who vindicated more than anyone the kind of transcendence that a tragic demand makes necessary. Yet he also saw, with a justness that is often overlooked, that although this necessity renders every other level of response inadequate it doesn’t justify the ‘posture of pessimism’ with which it is often confused; it doesn’t detract from corrective movements which may be valid at another time. These two perceptions can be found in the following, which discusses a magazine for which Lawrence worked with Middleton Murry during the First World War as an attempt to ‘do something’:

‘To me the venture meant nothing real: a little escapade. I can’t believe in “doing things” like that. In a great issue like the war, there was nothing to be “done”, in Murry’s sense. There is still nothing to be “done”. Probably not for many, many years will men start to “do” something. And even then, only after they have changed gradually, and deeply.

I knew then, and I know now, it is no use trying to do anything—I speak only for myself—publicly. It is no use trying merely to modify present forms. The whole great form of our era will have to go. And nothing will really send it down but the new shoots of life springing up and slowly bursting the foundations. And one can do nothing, but fight tooth and nail to defend the new shoots of life from being crushed out, and let them grow. We can’t make life. We can but fight for the life that grows in us.’³

This is more than ‘the poet of total self-fulfilment’. But criticism as dialogue seems unable to say all that needs saying. It is unable to reject Raymond Williams completely; the dialogue has compromised

¹Nietzsche, p. 142.

²Stein, p. 219.

³D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix II*, London, 1968, note to ‘The Crown’, p. 364.

over basic premises. But it *does* open up the right areas of discussion, and the attempt to talk about redemptive hope in the context of tragedy is basically right. It can only be hoped that the views expressed here will not seem completely at odds with this intention. There has been little mention of redemption, and much insistence on the inadequacy of the false starts towards it before the weight of tragedy has been granted; but it should have become clear that I regard the essential creativity of tragedy as the essence of the redemptive hope it offers. One can only add that in the context of tragedy, redemption has no proof; and that an array of metaphysical concepts cannot furnish proof. I say this in the belief that, although there are more things to be said than 'dialogue' can find room for, these things don't necessarily involve a complete refusal to discuss. They *do* involve the belief that in these matters we have no need of metaphysical concepts or 'Christian criticism'—to be a critic is enough.

(Walter Stein will reply next month)

NEXT MONTH IN NEW BLACKFRIARS

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G. EGNER, more on the Eucharist

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