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It's a Tragedy

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Tragedy and Philosophy

by Walter Kaufmann

Doubleday, 363 pp., \$6.95

The Identity of Oedipus the King

by Alastair Cameron

New York University, 165 pp., \$6.95

Reality and the Heroic Pattern

by David Grene

University of Chicago, 169 pp., \$5.00

These books are all concerned with classic drama and its meaning for us, and therefore could be reviewed at great length if one tried to deal with the countless questions they raise. They all treat Sophocles, but except for that they have little in common.

Mr. Kaufmann's title suggests an interest in philosophy as much as tragedy, but he tells us, "My central aim is to develop a sound and fruitful approach to tragedy, try it out, and thus illuminate Greek tragedy and some problems relating to the possibility and actuality of tragedy in our time." His first two chapters are devoted respectively to Plato's and Aristotle's ideas about tragedy, his third is entitled "Toward a New Poetics," and his fourth, "The Riddle of Oedipus," which he describes as a crucial effort: "Not only is the play familiar, but so are a number of different interpretations. Let us match our own against them, and if we succeed in coming up with a different but convincing reading, we will have gone a long way toward establishing our own poetics." This opening part of the book is the best place to consider his themes and methods.

He disposes of Plato's few remarks with speed, and then bears down on Aristotle's *Poetics* with resolution. He acknowledges, rather ruefully, the prime importance of the *Poetics*, but he doesn't like Aris-

totle and, lacking much feeling for his philosophy, gives a singularly dry impression of the classic work. It was not written as a whole; it consists of notes, some of which may even be by someone else, and is therefore a most difficult text. The commentator has the choice between sticking literally to the frustrating text, or trying, in the light of Aristotle's other works, to interpret it and then show how it may be used in the analysis of drama. Kaufmann selects, on the whole, the first approach, as a preliminary to offering his own "new" poetics.

His first criticism is of Aristotle's notion of imitation, which appears at the beginning of the definition: "Tragedy (tragoidia), then, is the imitation of a good (spoudaias) action...." Kaufmann wants to reject "imitation" altogether, and substitute "make-believe" or "pretense" for it. He is particularly disturbed by the very Aristotelian notion that poetry, dance, and lyre or flute music *imitate*. His trouble is twofold: he doesn't see the possibility of imitating in a limited medium like musical sounds and rhythms, and he completely fails to notice what Aristotle means by the "action" the dramatist imitates; he never discusses that crucial concept. In the *Poetics* "action" means something like "motive": "mainly a psychic energy working outwards," as Butcher put it. If one understands action that way it is easy to see that music or lyric poetry may imi-

tate it; if one does not, most of the *Poetics* loses its force, its consistency, and its suggestiveness.

Having failed to understand action Kaufmann naturally fails to bring out the fact (recently emphasized by Else) that the parts of tragedy mentioned by Aristotle are the successive acts whereby the poet makes his imitation: plot-making, character-drawing, and the *arts* of language. Kaufmann mentions both Else and Butcher with respect; if he had read them with care he would have come out with a more adequate account of Aristotle. His other chief quarrel with the definition is with the phrase, "through pity (*eleos*) and fear (*phobos*) it achieves the purgation of such emotions." He reports that he doesn't feel pity when he sees a tragedy, and adds, at length, his mistrust of pity, which he regards as sentimental. He doesn't mention Joyce's interpretation of the famous formula: "Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer. Terror is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause."

Kaufmann makes no effort to put together Aristotle's observations on the effects of tragedy: the pleasures of harmony and rhythm; the purgation of pity and fear; the recognition, near the end, of the universal meaning of the catastrophe. Instead he offers his own definition to replace Aristotle's mysterious and pregnant formula:

Tragedy is (1) a form of literature that (2) presents a symbolic action as performed by actors and (3) moves into the center immense human suffering, (4) in such a way that it brings to our minds our own forgotten and repressed sorrows as well as those of our kin and humanity, (5) releasing us with some sense (a) that suffering is universal—not a mere accident in our experience, (b) that courage and endurance in suffering or nobility in despair are admirable—not ridiculous—and usually also (c) that fates worse than our own can be experienced as exhilarating. (6) In length, performances range from a little under

two hours to about four, and the experience is highly concentrated.

Presumably he applies these notions to his account of *Oedipus*, which I found fairly trite, except for the sections entitled "Human Blindness" and "The Curse of Honesty," where he comes close to the actual play: "All the conflicts in the play are generated by the king's quest for the truth," he remarks.

By the end of the *Oedipus* chapter Kaufmann has only reached page 135 of his 363-page book. He writes six more chapters on the following topics: "Homer and the Birth of Tragedy"; "Aeschylus and the Death of Tragedy"; "Sophocles: Poet of Heroic Despair"; "Euripides, Nietzsche, and Sartre"; "Shakespeare and the Philosophers"; and "Tragedy Today." The chapter on Shakespeare is probably intended as a kind of summary, for he grades the following philosophers according to their relevance to Shakespeare: Aristotle, Hume, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Max Scheler. The trouble is that his own sense of Shakespeare is too weak; he writes, for instance, "What raises Shakespeare above all other post-Greek tragic poets is not his arrangement of the incidents or his handling of the plot but rather—if we stick to Aristotle's categories—his portrayal of character and his diction, or, as I should prefer to say, his poetry." It is doubtful whether he could have said that had he considered what Shakespeare did when he re-plotted his sources. The notion that his plot-making has "an almost slap-dash quality" has, I think, been thoroughly discredited in the last fifty years.

This book is too long and too ambitious to review with any thoroughness. But before abandoning it I should like to raise the question of what it is really about. One might have expected a book entitled *Tragedy and Philosophy* to consider the relation between the tragic genre and philosophic formulations of the same issues, as is often done, for example, with the tragedy of Corneille, Racine, and Dryden, and the rationalistic philosophy of its period. But Kaufmann does nothing with such questions; he is interested in the philosophers only when they comment upon tragedy. Nevertheless he takes them (as he does Plato) as rivals of the tragedians, and in his epilogue he concludes that the

playwrights won the long battle: "Plato tried to tell us that the tragic poets offered us illusions, images of images, while he would show us true reality. Now we know show us true reality. Now we know to our sorrow that philosophy as he envisaged it was an illusion, while the tragic poets show us the reality of life." This sounds like the remark of a repentant, conscientious, and ambitious philosopher who wishes to prove that he understands tragedy. He brings to the task all that would be required, except the essential feeling for the genre.

Mr. Cameron's book contrasts sharply with Kaufmann's. A classical scholar who has spent his life with Greek, he defines his aim as "to keep a grip of the play or, if we have lost the grip, to find our way back to the play." In this he is remarkably successful: almost everything he says throws light on the actual play. He writes with care, but also with the richness which comes only after years of familiarity with the topic.

His book has five chapters after the Preface, and some of them are parallel to Kaufmann's chapter on the play. His first chapter, "The Maker and the Myth," covers Sophocles's use of the mythic material he used, as Kaufmann also did, but Cameron is more persuaded of Sophocles's complete originality: "I shall maintain that the myth of Oedipus was really made by Sophocles," he writes. He surveys the versions preceding Sophocles's more thoroughly than Kaufmann, and then relates it all to the play: "Let us put it then that the *Oedipus* of Sophocles, unlike the versions of his predecessors, becomes a play of discovery, the whole action being aimed at recognition and its consequences." He shows that the quest turns into Oedipus's search for his own identity, and he relates that basic action both to Apollo, on whose temple at Delphi was written the phrase, "Know thyself," and to the Sphinx, whose riddle eventually applies to Oedipus's career. This first chapter gives one a sense of the richness of pattern in the play, and also serves as a preview of the book as a whole.

In "Self-Discovery in Action" Cameron proceeds to analyze Oedipus's action in more detail, showing how it leads to his quest for his own identity when the Corinthian messenger reveals that the King and Queen of Corinth were not

his parents. The concentration is on Oedipus; but Cameron knows that: "Greek tragedy characteristically, I believe, sought a concentration on the individual at the center of the large, in fact, the total context." And he proceeds to describe the physical theater as a reflection of the world that Athens saw, and then writes an excellent short piece on the theme that, in the Greek view, "the only place where the individual can be found alive is in the whole."

It is however in "The Gods in the Action" that Cameron comes closest to the action of the play as distinguished from that of Oedipus. He persuades me completely that the gods, especially Apollo, were somehow *in* the action from the first, for it was Apollo who sent the plague, dictated the Delphic oracle, inspired Tiresias, and the Sphinx, and Oedipus himself, at last, to blind himself. *A propos* of the gods Cameron discusses the two last episodes, that of the Corinthian messenger who comes at just the right moment to reveal that Oedipus is not the son of Polybus of Corinth, and that of the old shepherd who gave the babe with pierced feet to the Corinthian. These episodes were scornfully criticized by Corneille and Voltaire as improbable, but Cameron thinks their improbability was intended, to bring out the arbitrary, "divine" element in the story. In investigating the gods Cameron is of course obliged to look at the chorus, Oedipus's counterpart, and the element in the play which is most important in making its rhythm and its overall effect. His sense of the chorus's action is accurate, and his treatment suggests that he would have been able to handle the play as a whole as well as he handled Oedipus, if his topic had not been "the identity of Oedipus."

In "The Self-Blinding" Cameron argues that Oedipus's blinding of himself is "*the* act of the play," representing the true nature of all his actions as we have seen them or heard about them all along. It has the same anomalous essence; the combination of hiding and revealing himself; the yielding to his own passion and at the same time to the will of Apollo; the ultimate need to show himself to Thebes. One may agree with that notion, which is full of insight, and still criticize Cameron's handling of the end of the play. For the self-blinding is part of the extended recognition, shared by all the charac-

ters, which begins when Oedipus at last sees who he is, and rushes off. It passes through a number of carefully controlled phases lived-through by the chorus and the attendant, as well as Oedipus, in which the suffering alternates with new perceptions; and it does not end until the *literal* truth of Oedipus's situation—his helplessness with the state and with his children—is painfully clear. The chorus's perception, expressed in the last speech of the play, that Oedipus's fate might be any man's is the only possible fullstop. I'm sure Cameron knows all this; if he didn't bring it out it was because of his focus on Oedipus.

In his Preface Cameron dissociates his approach from that of the Freudians, and also that of the Cambridge anthropologists: the view that the form of Greek tragedy is derived from the ritual or rituals of the Festival of Dionysos, where the tragedies were performed. "Ritual," he writes, "was one of the facts of daily life for a Greek, and no one can fail to see that it plays an important part in the tragedies.... But ritual meanings are one thing, and to maintain that a hidden ritual provides the form for the play is quite another." He makes no serious attempt to dispute the theories of Cornford, Harrison, Murry, *et al.* beyond remarking, "The most serious objection to the theory is, of course, that we have no evidence at all that any Greek dramatist thought of himself as following out a ritual." To which one might reply, we have no evidence at all how the Greek dramatists thought of themselves. The ritual theory has produced its share of nonsense, but if carefully used it may still throw light on the play as a whole, especially perhaps on *Oedipus*.

In his last chapter, "The Tragic Perspective," Cameron asks, "And what is a hero in tragedy?" and answers, "The man who has the capacity for tragedy. That is, the man who can and will take up his fate. These are the men the gods know." He sees Oedipus as the paradigm of the type; and from his story deduces a sharp view of the world of Oedipus, and indeed of Greek tragedy in general:

A play where situation and character remain constant, where the past is taken into what happens on the stage, raises questions about time.... And a world in which

Oedipus old or young remains the same and acts in the same situation must be a timeless world in some sense...a world of a continuous present. This is thoroughly Greek, and to give it its Greek name, it is a world in *being*.

In this passage Cameron assumes that we have reached the final recognition in the play; but the world of the tragedy doesn't look that way until the end. As we go through it from the beginning, what we (and Oedipus, and all the characters) see changes continually. Tragedy seems to require both the constant change which makes the substance of the play and the final vision which ends the action. The whole problem is related to the puzzle of free will versus determinism. Cameron of course does not solve such problems, but his awareness of their relevance sharpens his insight into *Oedipus*. It is a pleasure to read his book; it modestly but firmly puts one in touch with many aspects of the play, which still has new insights to offer its admirers.

Mr. Grene's book is devoted to the last plays of his three authors, which he finds "alike enough to make it interesting to discuss these plays in a single volume." What they have in common is a theme, and "That theme at its most direct—as in the Ibsen plays—is the establishment of meaning for the events of a life, looking backward from its conclusion." One may grant the existence of this theme in all these plays without finding it unique. Most tragedies (as Cameron pointed out for *Oedipus*) reach a vision near the end which makes some sort of sense out of the heroic failure of the play.

Grene's account of his chosen plays is pretty routine, on the whole, but the best is the one on *Oedipus at Colonus*. He sees in all three Sophocles plays (including *Philoctetes* and *Ajax*) a crucial relation between the hero as a man—"the ambiguous figure of the outlaw"—and the honor he ultimately receives at the gods' behest as "the community's protector." This incommensurability of the human and the divine in Sophocles is one of Cameron's points also, but he explains it with much more delicacy, exactitude, and authority than Grene does. What Grene does with the three late Shakespeare plays—for he omits *Pericles*—is the least persuasive. He has read Till-yard and Traversi, but failed

to acquire their sense of Renaissance fable-making, with its roots in the classic or pre-classic past.

Ibsen seems to be the author whom Grene reads most easily, apparently enjoying both his naturalistic style and his very modern kind of despair. *Little Eyolf* is the only play he discusses which ends without the suicide of the protagonist, and he blames that on the cowardice of Rita and Allmers. *John Gabriel Borkman* and *The Master Builder* he regards as pessimistic, but *When We Dead Awaken* he surprisingly describes as a triumph. He acknowledges that “The identification of death and the triumph of life, of death and sexual consummation—which is certainly made in both *The Master Builder* and *When We Dead Awaken*—may perhaps be criticized as perverse.” But he rejects that interpretation of *When We Dead Awaken*: “Nowhere, almost, on the stage of western Europe is there a play which has transformed into an appropriate dramatic expression such inward and personal reflections. Nowhere without the aid of poetry has such solidity been given to the mood of despair and ultimately the mood of victory.”

At the end of his essay he has this to say about the half-mad Irene: “In no figure has Ibsen been able to dramatize more effectively the combination of despair and hope than in Irene. She is perhaps the very greatest of his heroines.” I re-read the play for the purposes of this review, but found it impossible to share Grene’s enthusiasm. It looks to me more like the decay of Ibsen’s dramaturgy than the discovery of anything new. I agree with Archer, who saw in it the signs of Ibsen’s own rapidly approaching madness.

These three books all emerge from the quiet, academic cultivation of the drama. They seem less original and less urgent than their counterparts of thirty, forty, or fifty years ago. But in a time like ours, when the writing of drama shows little sign of life, perhaps this is the best we can do. Cameron, at least, does so well with his modest aims that he succeeds in bringing *Oedipus* alive once more in its mysterious richness and strength.