On Tragedy: A Critical Trilogy

by Samuel Hux (July 2021)

Oedipus and the Sphinx, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, 1864

I

Plato would have approved of my introduction to his work. In *The Republic,* his mentor Socrates reserves philosophical education for the guardian class, from which are derived the rulers of the *kallipolis* (the beautiful city). I never became a ruler, nor had any political ambitions, but I served a few years as a "guardian," attached to the Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia. Not that philosophy was on the curriculum at The Infantry School, but my unit was full of college grads and guys who had interrupted college for military service, as I had, and one of my barracks mates lent me his copy of Plato's *Symposium*. When, a bit later, I ran afoul of a question of the chain of command, and the unit's adjutant asked if I was stupid, my mate answered, "Of course not; he's read the *Symposium* twice!" Actually, I'd read it only once. But since then, several times.

I've spent a good deal of time as a college professor thinking about Plato, which means thinking about his student Aristotle as well. If you're a literature professor—as I was for half my academic career before moving over to the philosophy discipline—it seems to go with the territory that you especially admire Plato of the two Greek masters. After all, he was the greatest pure artist among philosophers. Of course, there was much later George Santayana and, dipping a bit, Jean-Paul Sartre. But Santayana kept his poetry and fiction separate from his philosophic tomes, as did Sartre with his dramas and novels. I might add the literary virtues of William James and René Descartes, but I'd only be delighting in their graceful and lucid prose styles. But Plato was the champ, as his artistry was a necessary component of his dialogues. I've seen somewhere—I can't recall where—an essay on Plato as novelist; and indeed, he had great narrative

skill—unlike Aristotle, I might add, who had no narrative skill at all and, thank God, never tried to. So, Plato remains a special favorite among the academic literati. So, it might seem a mark of ingratitude to wonder why.

But wonder I do—for I think it somewhat more than strange that "Platonism" (to refer to both Plato and Socrates) has no bloody idea what art is! Unlike the comparatively plodding Aristotle, who knew exactly what it is. All talked about "imitation." Only Aristotle had a firm idea what imitation is.

Plato devotes great hunks of *The Republic* to the question of *poetry*, using the word in its broadest sense, not referring only to verse but to the art of creation—the *poet* meaning the *maker*—his analysis most developed in Book Ten. But even before Ten Plato makes it clear (or rather Socrates the speaker does) that poetry is not quite to be trusted in the *kallipolis*, indeed to be banned from broad use. Because . . .

Well, let me employ an odd example which at one point Plato endorses. There's such a thing as a *bed*: we know because of obvious experiences such a sleep. But beyond or behind or whatever word you wish there is the *idea of* or *ideal* bed, the universal and metaphysical reality of "bed-hood," so to speak. So that thing you arose from this morning is but a merely physical imitation of that metaphysical or ideal *bed-ness.* So, we're now one step away from *real* bed-ness. Suppose then you're a painter and you compose a picture of *that* "bed," your *imitation*, your *copy* so to say, is two steps away from the idea of bed. What you can do with "bed" you can do with other things physical and mental as well. So if you're telling a story or singing a song about a fictional couple making love or dancing or quarreling or whatever, you are merely imitating something you may have observed possibly, which imagined instance is already a step removed from the idea of making love or, or, or . . . So art gets us away from, away from,

away from real reality. The famous 17th century Puritans who closed down theatres in England had nothing on Plato. Thank God (thank Apollo?) for Aristotle who understood so much, and appreciated so much, of what he observed on the Athenian theatrical stage.

Plato's "psychology" is fascinating, with its tripartite soul (quite different from Freud's now more familiar three-part psyche). His political theory is equally fascinating, with the three classes in the republic corresponding to the three-part soul. And if the *kallipolis* is beyond feasibility, Socrates seems to recognize that fact as he develops a feasible substitute, the idea of the Philosopher-King equally fascinating. As is "the Allegory of the Cave," as is this, as is that. There is so much there in Platonism! But those professorial enthusiasts who find Plato so much more to their tastes than the admittedly brilliant but prosaic Aristotle should just think about the following for a minute. If Socrates and Plato had had their druthers, the ancient Athenians from the fourth century BCE on would not have seen—and we would never have heard of—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, to say nothing of the lyric poets.

Which naturally leads us now to Plato's student Aristotle and to my chosen subject, *Tragedy*—which means something more profound than *sad, unfortunate*, or *unhappy*, as when we refer to, let's say, a "tragic accident on the Long Island Expressway."

Tragedy derives from the Greek word *tragoidía,* which as every Greek-less English major must know means "goat-ode" or "goat-song"—or more exactly "an ode or song or story about a scapegoat," or better yet "a dramatization or narrative of a scapegoat's sacrifice for the good of the community." And, of course, as the major knows, the principle text for the definition and elucidation of that literary genre is Aristotle's *Poetic*s. But from that point on, radical

confusions set in. This I well know from my student days and from my years teaching in English departments before I finally switched to the Philosophy discipline, invited to do so by a wonderful Philo chair named Howard Ruttenberg, God bless him. The confusions?

According to garden-variety profs and their student victims, Aristotle in the *Poetics* writes only and specifically about the dramatic genre, while Aristotle specifically says that the desired effect upon the audience will be achieved even if the story is merely heard instead of enacted on stage, a narrative that is, not necessarily a play. This confusion is the result, in part, of misunderstanding Aristotle's declaration that the plot is "the imitation of an action"—as many assume the "action," *praxis*, to be a physical event imitated by an actor. But, first, the *praxis* is a mental action, as the best translator of the *Poetics*, S. H. Butcher, pointed out, something like a "motive." And secondly, imitation is not physical mimicry but rather a "following" or some such, so that *the plot is a following out of a motive,* which as Francis Fergusson argued in *The Idea of a Theatre* can be put as an infinitive phrase: for instance, in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* the plot is the following out of the motive *to find out the killer of Laius and save Thebes from the plague.* According to the prof, the plot must be developed within a 24-hour period, whereas Aristotle simply suggests that Tragedy will be most effective if developed over a defined and limited period of time.

Furthermore, that desired effect upon the audience occurs as it exercises the emotions of *pity* (for the tragic hero or heroine) and *fear* (for the audience's own possibilities), thus purging the audience of these emotions—whereas, again, Aristotle proposes no such emotional-medical "enema" or "emetic" catharsis at all. Rather, Tragedy is not meant to make you feel good and relieved, but to make you feel like hell for the betterment of your soul. Franz

Kafka was very Aristotelian when he said that great art was like an ice-axe that hits one in the chest, breaking up the frozen seas of emotion within one. Furthermore, and getting more absurd, the tragic protagonist must be of the nobility—whereas, once more, Aristotle means he or she must be of *noble character,* one whose fall from high estate (not necessarily a kingdom or dukedom!) to misfortune inspires the *pity,* or better *sympathy,* for the noble character, and the *fear*, for if such can happen to one so noble what can possibly be in store for the likes of mere us? And that noble hero or heroine must possess a "tragic flaw" in his or her character causing the fall into misfortune—while Aristotle simply says that the noble protagonist is after all human and thus with the capacity for *hamartia,* can make a mistake.

The best way to look at Aristotle is through use of his method of examining the "four causes" from his *Physics* and *Metaphysics* (*cause* an odd translation, perhaps better understood as *factor*). The *Material* cause, the matter from which something is made. The *Efficient* cause, who or what does the making. The *Formal* cause, the shape or organization of that which is made. The *Final* cause, its purpose, what it is for. To speak specifically of a drama, although a narrative would work just as well, the playwright (efficient cause) uses language and spectacle (material causes) to create a coherent organized plot about a set of characters (formal cause) to produce in the audience the desired cathartic effect (final cause). Now, if that's a tragic drama we're talking about—not a comedy for instance—its plot will involve the fall from high fortune to low of a noble character who in some manner makes a sacrifice of him- or herself for others: then a real *goat song*! And moves the audience to a real ice-axe experience, if you will.

Aristotle's *Poetics*, then, is a theory of art. Subsequent theories tend to be modifications of that of the "the Philosopher," as Aquinas called him. Georg Wilhelm

Friedrich Hegel's *Aesthetic Lectures* proposes a similar notion of the pity-and-fear catharsis, its major modification being that in a *real* tragedy, as Hegel sees it, the conflict the tragic hero undergoes is never a battle between good and evil, but between good and good, without the possibility of adjusting one good to the other, and the consequent mangling of the hero in the process. This is still an aesthetic theory. Since two positives, two goods, in conflict are so destructive, it is then a comment on the nature of life itself, a sense that something is radically wrong in the nature of things.

II

While there are tragic dramas, tragic narratives, and so on, there is also a *Tragic Sense of Life* which would exist even had there been no dramas or narratives. The most moving meditation on this fact is Miguel de Unamuno's *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations*, which since it is the great Spanish philosopher's theological exploration, and to a large degree an *apologia* for Christianity, it hopes (so to speak) to be a positive declaration, but cannot fully escape the mood of its awful (that is, full of awe) title, with the implication that *the tragic* is an experience both for individuals and for all.

Friedrich Nietzsche's first published book was *The Birth of Tragedy.* While it was written by the newly appointed Professor of Philology at the University of Basel (odd that so many great philosophers were not professors of *philosoph*y itself) it was not exactly the work of literary scholarship one might expect of a classical philologist but a proposal in philosophy of existence instead, a sense of the tragic. Tragedy arises out of the conflict of two antagonistic impulses, the Apollonian and the Dionysian. The first, brainchild so to speak of Apollo, governs all that is rational, orderly, constructive, architectural—like the finely structured and organized plot of Aristotle's imagination, one

might say. The second, gut-child of Dionysus, governs all that is irrational, disorderly, destructive, formless—like nothing that Aristotle could approve. I put it that way because Nietzsche does not really disapprove (more of this momentarily).

These conflicting impulses, as I've called them, are not poetic fantasies but ontological realities, parts of the way-things-are-in-nature. A work of tragic art manifests the conflict: there is the Apollonian finely-shaped poetry and plot, all the spectacle we see on stage or imagine if we read the text, all presented by the artist as cogently and reasonably as possible; and there are the terrifying Dionysian realities bubbling up, so to speak, and overwhelming the finely wrought. Example: There is Sophocles' aesthetically perfect play *Oedipus the King* (or as close to perfection as a work of art can get); there is the mixture of fate and choice in the patricide and incest and all the horrible ironies of the story of Oedipus, Laius, and Jocasta. Nietzsche's metaphor: the Apollonian learns to speak Dionysian.

I may be one of the few philosophy professors with strong reservations about Nietzsche, whose popularity has been increasing for decades, after his disastrous reputation as proto-fascist and anti-Semite (legacy of his despicable sister Elisabeth's revisions) was proven to be totally false. My reservations lie in two specifics. He seems to me to be too indulgent of his ironies which often obscure his meaning. And, more important in this context, his tone and rhetoric in *The Birth of Tragedy* often make it sound as if he finds the civilizing Apollonian too stuffy and the Dionysian, threat to all that's civilized, rather thrilling. There is something approaching the perverse in some of Nietzsche's attitudes, it seems to me. Nonetheless, he does have a strong tragic sense of life, even if rhetorically compromised on occasion.

If it is difficult to imagine Arthur Schopenhauer without Immanuel Kant, it's hard to imagine Nietzsche without

Schopenhauer. Kant in his *Prolegomena* and various *Critiques* distinguishes the sensory appearance of things from the reality beneath that's opaque to the senses. The phenomenal and the noumenal. The *noumena,* the reality beneath—any single bit of which or "thing in itself" (*das Ding an sich*)—cannot be perceived directly; all we can experience with the senses is what "appears," the phenomenal, and we can never know if the *phenomena* truly corresponds to the *noumena*. Why? Here's my metaphor, not Kant's:

Suppose there were a creature whose only experience of water was that liquid enclosed within a cylindrical bottle; it might think, then, that water was a cylindrical something. In similar manner, the human mind can only "see" what it is capable of "seeing" because the human mind imposes limited shapes (like that bottle) on the noumenal things-in-themselves and thus the deep realities outside that "shape" are never perceived. We are stuck with the *phenomena* only.

Arthur Schopenhauer, compared to Kant and his intellectual meticulousness, was (I exaggerate somewhat, perhaps) a relatively sloppy thinker—although powerful as all get-out. His *World as Will and Representation* repeats Kant's distinction between *noumena* and *phenomena,* the latter called by Schopenhauer "representation": that is, what appears. But . . . Schopenhauer thinks he *can* experience the *noumena,* any *Ding-an-sich* directly: as what he calls *der Wille.* Which is not to be understood as "will" in the same way the word is meant in, say, "freedom of the will." *This* will, *Wille*, therefore is the noumenal revealed. But what does it "look" like? Ah, there's the problem. (I rather imagine it looks much like the older Schopenhauer himself, who looked a horror, after being such a handsome young man. What happened?) Schopenhauer cannot give you a clear picture. On the one hand, The Will is like the will you have within you; on the other hand, it isn't. It is some un-satisfiable metaphysical faculty, but it's not part of your faculties. As Einstein

understands Schopenhauer, “a man can do as he will, but not will as he will”—which is no great help. I’ve seen a cartoon somewhere of Schopenhauer pulling back a Kantian screen and observing *der Wille* behind it, and it looks like a monster. In any case, it, The Will, Schopenhauer’s version of the noumenal reality beneath/behind is a-or-the cause of suffering and pain.

The World as Will and Representation is no more pleasant to read than Kant’s *Critiques,* often, both, like hitting your head against a wall. Schopenhauer is much more approachable in his essays, less technical, as in the selection *Essays and Aphorisms,* where what I take to be the ultimate point is much clearer: the chances of happiness in this life are small, misery is the more likely experience, the chances of things going wrong are larger, etc. (One reason Schopenhauer is often credited with advising suicide—which he absolutely does not do, suicide being a cowardly attempt to escape the human fate.) With all that said, the experience of reading the essays is more pleasurable—sometimes fun—than the two volume tome on Will and Representation. But—pleasant or unpleasant reading aside—my major point, at this point, is that Schopenhauer’s *Wille* strikes me as the revelation of Nietzsche’s Dionysian impulse; or perhaps that should be put the other way around.

Unamuno’s, Nietzsche’s, Schopenhauer’s theories all reveal a tragic sense of life, as well as Hegel’s indirectly. But this is not to say that Aristotle’s theory is only an aesthetic contemplation of the shape of dramas and narratives about the heroic scapegoat, the goat song. The fact that Aristotle’s emphasis in the *Poetics* is on the structure of the goat song does not mean that the broadest ranging philosophic mind ever has no conception, himself, of the tragic sense of life. It would be an insult to the intelligence of a genius to assume he does not see that which he is not explicitly analyzing. We should instead just look at the way Aristotle

describes the plot of the hero's fall into misfortune:

III

There is early a "defining event" which establishes the *praxis* (the infinitive phrase, to do something . . . as Francis Fergusson said, and by the way, the great Russian director Konstantin Stanislavsky before him), that *praxis* or action which leads through a sequence of *agons,* or conflicts, to a "turning point" or "reversal" (*peripeteia*), a moment after which nothing can be the same anymore, that turning point in the best tragedies occurring in a "recognition scene" (*anagnorisis*) in which the protagonist realizes what he or she never had realized before, and all leading to the denouement, the *catastrophe.*

To be specific, in Aristotle's best example of a Greek tragedy, *Oedipus the King,* the defining event is Oedipus's resolution before the Chorus representing the Theban people to find out the slayer of Laius and remove the plague from the city. The resulting conflicts lead to the sequential moments when Oedipus, witnessed by Queen Jocasta, discovers that the man he remembers killing at a place where three roads meet was the previous king, Laius, that Laius was his father, and consequently that Jocasta his wife is his mother. All this leads to the catastrophe of Jocasta's suicide and Oedipus's self-imposed exile and sacrifice of himself.

Putting all this in the simplest of terms (which is to say as complicated as possible): Oedipus is born condemned by the gods to kill his father and marry his mother; to avoid this fate he travels as far away as is safe, only to meet during his first exile a man whom he kills (his father) in a senseless quarrel, continues in exile to avoid his fate, one point of which has now occurred, reaching the city of Thebes which has recently become kingless (with the death of Laius), thinking himself Corinthian (not knowing he was shipped away by his Theban parents while an infant) he falls in love with

the youthfully beautiful Queen Jocasta and marries her, thus fulfilling the second part of his fate. Complicated enough even though I have skipped some points between his birth and his arrival in Thebes. Now, several years later a plague (not quite a pandemic) is ravaging Thebes, and we are informed by a seer that the cause is the unavenged killing of Laius, the previous king. Oedipus, excellent king that he is, resolves to find out the killer, etc. Are we really to believe that Aristotle, focused so clearly on plot structure, was unnoticing of the Dionysian (so to speak) horrors layered beneath the Apollonian plot?

He surely was aware of the injustice the tragic hero suffers. He makes a strong distinction in the *Poetics* between Comedy, in which humans are dramatized through the selection of the protagonists as "worse" than we are, and Tragedy, in which humans are dramatized through the selection of the protagonists as "better" than we are, so there's no doubt that a protagonist such as Oedipus (or Antigone and so on) falls into the category of the best of the race. All the more tragic their stories then. Furthermore, Aristotle may be the original phenomenologist, describing things as they really are; he does not hector reality about what it should be.

Contemplating some fictional characters that stood before Aristotle's mind I think of people (yes, they become people) such as Sophocles' Oedipus and Antigone, and Aeschylus's Clytemnestra and Agamemnon and Orestes, and Euripides' Medea—and so on. Too bad Aristotle could not have observed Shakespeare's Hamlet and Lear and Macbeth and Othello and Brutus. Tragic protagonist all. Obviously, but that's too general. They all fall on the better than the common lot side of Aristotle's equation. Of each could be said—with suitable national or ethnic adjustments—what Mark Antony says of Brutus, "This was the noblest Roman of them all," even when the nobility is distorted by circumstances. And they, with a couple of exceptions or extenuations, make horrible and/or

even criminal mistakes, as in line with Aristotle's *hamartia.*

Of Oedipus, enough said already; his life is one mistake after another even if they're "understandable." Gentle Antigone may be the exception; her only error is an inability to see that a good in conflict with her good (remember Hegel) is not an evil. "A mistake" often implies a cloudiness of intention. But Agamemnon knows exactly what he is doing when he sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia for favorable winds to Troy. Clytemnestra is clear-headed when she avenges her daughter by killing her husband; as is Orestes when he avenges his father by killing his mother. But revenge is still murder, as the Eumenides know in the third play of Aeschylus's *Oresteia,* when they say, in effect, "All this must end; no more!" Medea, to assault her husband, who deserves it, kills her children, who don't. Hamlet may be an Antigone-like exception, but he is the conscious cause of the deaths of his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is largely responsible for the madness and suicide of his beloved Ophelia, kills Polonius almost as a careless gesture, and is not totally free of responsibility for the death of his mother. Lear's mistakes are in no way criminal, errors of judgement of an old fool of a father, too self-addled to know daughterly innocence from malignity. Macbeth's action are criminal. As is Othello's defining action: no great love affair should end in murder. More "understandable" is Brutus's killing of Caesar, but the assassination of a dictator not in Hitler's league is murder nonetheless.

If my cast of tragic protagonists seems too ancient and Shakespearean, then add Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, or whomever you wish. Or, if you wish to indulge the other end of the scale: Arthur Miller's notion of "the tragedy of the common man," in which a character Aristotle would consider "comedic" ("worse than") is elevated, Willy Loman. Neither of these is free of serious *hamartia* and innocent of serious complicity in his own tragic fall. Or if you wish to

consider a work in which the heroine is truly innocent of error or complicity, and which utterly breaks one's heart, like the wonderful Willa Cather's lovely novel *Lucy Gayheart,* then reflect upon this fact:

In classical Greek Tragedy, or in Shakespearean, or in that emulative of the Bard, the death of the hero or heroine, such a common but heart-breaking event, is not what makes a tragedy a Tragedy. There is something even beyond that . . .

The great tragic literature of Western civilization is about figures of internal excellence, who even if compromised, march toward their ends or falls, trailing clouds of glory perhaps, but the glory clouded by/with one mistake or colossal error or deadly misjudgment after another. But . . . and this is a very big *but . . .* all the classical theories of literary tragedy from Aristotle through Hegel and beyond suffer from a serious inadequacy. It's a big "but" in spite of the fact that I agree with Dante that Aristotle was "the master of those who know" and my respect for the *Poetics* is pretty near limitless. What's the inadequacy then? The "final Cause" of the tragic work, the movement of the audience or reader to the radical cathartic effect through the exercise of pity and fear. It does not work exactly the way it is famously supposed to work. Something deeply greater is going on.

I recapitulate for a moment. We feel pity (*empathy* is a better word) for the fall into misfortune of a character of great nobility, who surely deserves better; we feel fear for ourselves because if one so noble can fall, what could be in store for someone such as we who deserve so much less than he, or she? The tragic character's fall is in some way the result of a fatal error or misjudgment—or in the conventional view a "tragic flaw"—which makes him or her more human and thereby increases our fear. But—wait a moment—does it really always happen that way?

In two, at least, of the greatest tragic plays, one

Greek and one Shakespearean, what *hamartia*, what "flaw" are we talking about? I practically turned over backwards some pages back to find a mistake Antigone made: she cannot grasp that the necessities of the state as combined in King Creon's view could be a good as well as the claims of family honor. What could be more natural—no matter what Hegel says—than to think that what opposes what you know to be a *good* must be an *evil*? Are we comfortable saying that her failure to understand is pig-headedness instead of honorable and virtuous innocence? And do we, can we, really believe that Hamlet's insensitivity toward Ophelia, his failure to protect Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his mental cruelty to Gertrude and accidental killing of Polonius are all part of the *hamartia* that brings about his tragic end? What happens to Hamlet is independent of these flawed judgments and actions. How many times when we were students were we told that *Hamlet* "is the tragedy of a man who couldn't make up his mind"? As if his honest indecisiveness is the flaw bringing about his end. Surely what's going on in *Hamlet* is something deeper than this. Do we really believe this is what leaves us *shattered*? And considering another Shakespeare play: to think that what happens to King Lear, and Cordelia—which wounds us like an ice-axe in the chest—is all a matter of Lear's flawed vision is seriously to diminish the terror of that play.

What I am suggesting—and what I must explore—is that the impact that tragic literature has upon us has less to do with the results of the hero's or heroine's mistaken human behavior than that which informs *the tragic sense of life.* We need another look at the best thing a Greek writer ever did.

A prevailing assumption about *Oedipus the King* is that Oedipus is the plaything of the fates, that he is an absolutely predestined character. That's an assumption easy to understand, but absolutely in need of correction. For although Oedipus in the hour or so timeline of the play has already fulfilled his destiny of patricide and incest, he is not

destined to know it! His fate was to kill his father and to have sexual knowledge of his mother . . . *period.* His discovery of his double guilt is the result of deliberate acts of choice, as he continues to ask questions even when he senses he is close to making the terrible discovery. He cannot stop this process of choice because he is the excellent man he is, whatever the violence of his youth. Put another way, Oedipus is trapped into self-destruction by his own moral relentlessness. Was there ever a more relentless goat song?

Can one seriously think that Oedipus's flawed act is the "defining event" of, and in, the play? It seems an odd thing to say that his initiating the *imitation of an action,* "to find out the killer of Laius and free Thebes of the plague," is a "hamartic" act! It is, rather, what a proper king should do. So, what brings about Oedipus's tragic fall we cannot call a flawed or mistaken act of choice at all—unless we're being cleverly perverse. Or unless some metaphysical higher force is the cause. Which is in fact the case.

Or perhaps we must play a bit fast and loose with Aristotle's notion of *hamartia* and place the act not *in* the play but *before* it. Indeed Sophocles' masterpiece is that rare exception, a play which does not make much sense unless the audience—which is to be cathartically shattered—has a firm knowledge of its prehistory. So, Oedipus's mistake or flawed act was his killing of his father and sexual knowledge of his mother Jocasta long before the dramatic action of the play begins. But that assumption is truly perverse, since that is precisely what the gods had predestined him to do. The crimes-sins of patricide and incest are the responsibility of the gods, not of Oedipus, who unknowingly fulfills their intentions. He consciously does everything possible to avoid his fate once he learns of it; and everything he does to avoid it leads him closer to its fulfillment. What I am suggesting, then, is that Sophocles knows that his masterpiece is not about the results of human error—no matter how mistaken a

human being may be—but rather is about the mysterious intentions of the gods . . . This all leads to a dilemma.

The audience wants to know: Why? The English word *why* is too thin and whiney, no more expressive than the pleasant-sounding French *pourquoi.* The Greek *giatí,* while etymologically more appropriate, is no better. Only the German *warum* (Vah-Room!) comes close. Of course, there is no answer to "Why?" in this play. The gods will it for no moral purpose whatsoever; it serves no moral purpose in the universe; any attempt to grasp a reason is met with a divine silence (although scholars may chatter). It is as if the gods wake up one morning, and having nothing better to do agree, "Let this babe now aborning grow up to commit patricide and incest"—and that's it, that's all.

Perhaps it is worse for us than the ancient Greeks, who could try to believe that the gods must have some "transcendent" reason beyond mere human comprehension. But we? We not believing in "the gods" have no half-assurance to get us by. Or, if we are instructed by the Bible we've been taught by *The Book of Job* that it is not our place to know the unfathomable; and since neither Judaism nor Christianity allows us to believe in a malevolent God—as an ancient Athenian might well do—we are left with a silent blind stare at God-knows-what.

We the audience are left with, instead of some moral instruction about the noble characters' pitiful and fearful falls into misfortune, a dreadful intuition about, and from, some ill-defined malevolence in "nature." What we're left with, that is to say, is an overwhelming sense that all is not right in the-way-things-are. Leave that phrase—*the way things are*—in its vague and non-specific generality, which makes it all the more frightening since it's not a solvable problem: not a matter of social disorder, bad politics, environment, or some such. Rather, mysteriously, *ontological. All is not right in the way things are*—and even if the specific tragedy had not

occurred that remains true.

All of which is to say that while *Oedipus the King* is the story, we know it is more than that: a reflection on, and instruction in, "the tragic sense of life in men and nations," as Unamuno put it—which gets us back to a philosopher not commenting on literary Tragedy at all: Arthur Schopenhauer. The chances of everything going well are so small, the chances of all going awry are so large . . . Well, let Schopenhauer say it:

"If the immediate and direct purpose of our life is not suffering then our existence is the most ill-adapted to its purpose in the world: for it is absurd to suppose that the endless affliction of which the world is everywhere full, and which arises out of the need and distress pertaining essentially to life, should be purposeless and purely accidental. Each individual misfortune, to be sure, seems an exceptional occurrence; but misfortune in general is the rule." Which in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* translates as the Dionysiac impulse overwhelming all the Apollonian expectations of the reasonable and architectural order of things.

Aristotle's insistence that literary Tragedy—the goat song—has a certain shape, the plot being an imitation of an action, is correct. No tragedy—indeed no work of art worth its name—is a disorderly and incoherent *series* of events as opposed to a meaningful *sequence,* but the *form* of a work of art is not the *meaning*. Indeed, if you survey the works of drama and narrative, in poetry and prose, that we agree and sense deep down are tragedies, you don't always find the neat *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* that make *Oedipus the King* such a perfect work of art. What exactly is the "turning point" of *Antigone* for instance? Or of *Hamlet*, or of *King Lear?* While the *praxis* in the form of infinitive phrase is clearly perceived in *Oedipus* and *Hamlet*—"to find out the killer . . ." —what's the clear *praxis* in *Macbeth*? Francis Fergusson's

answer, “to outrun the pauser, Reason,” does not inspire one with confidence. But all the tragedies in Western literature answer another question the same way that Schopenhauer would, answering a question with a question: Is there something vague but persistent in human experience suggesting that all is not right in the way things are, that the world—*not* speaking in scientific diction—is fundamentally *broken?*

IV

But now a fourth part, which will be briefer than what precedes it, as is proper for a mere addition. Just as the long tragic trilogy of which each Greek tragedy was a part (like Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, the sole survivor in manuscript) is followed, briefly, by the comic “satyr play,” so the order of these reflections follows that tradition.

Aristotle’s *Poetics* is more than a theory of the tragic form of literature. It is an Aesthetic in itself, and something far beyond Plato’s capacity. Much earlier I described Aristotle, perhaps somewhat cryptically, as the “original phenomenologist.” I use the term loosely to characterize one who tries simply to describe phenomena; I do not have in mind the more technical and sophisticated pursuits of Edmund Husserl for instance, or Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Being and Nothingness*, subtitled *An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology.* Aristotle’s Poetics gives us a *descriptive* theory of Tragedy: here is what the Greek tragedians *actually do*