does he disbelieve in providence, because experience has shown him that the end towards which the supreme powers lead forth mankind is still unseen. We miss some­thing of the exultant energy of the Marathonian man, but under the grave and gentle guidance of his successor we lose nothing of the conviction that, “because right is right, to follow right were wisdom in the scorn of conse­quence.” Not only the utter devotion of Antigone, but the lacerated innocence of Œdipus and Deianira, the tempted truth of Neoptolemus, the essential nobility of Ajax, leave an impress on the heart which is ineffaceable, and must elevate and purify while it remains. In one respect, however, it must be admitted that Sophocles is not before his age. There is an element of unrelieved vindictiveness, not merely inherent in the fables, but inseparable from the poet’s handling of some themes, which is only too consistent with the temper of the “tyrant city.” Æschylus represents this with equal dramatic vividness, but he associates it, not with heroism, but with crime.

Sophocles is often praised for skilful construction. But the secret of his skill depends in large measure on the profound way in which the central situation in each of his fables has been conceived and felt. Concentration is the distinguishing note of tragedy, and it is by greater concentration that Sophocles is distinguished from other tragic poets. In the *Septem contra Thebas* or the *Prometheus* there is still somewhat of epic enlargement and breadth ; in the *Hecuba* and other dramas of Euripides separate scenes have an idyllic beauty and tenderness which affect us more than the progress of the action as a whole, a defect which the poet sometimes tries to compensate by some novel denouement or catastrophe. But in following a Sophoclean tragedy we are carried steadily and swiftly onward, looking neither to the right nor to the left ; the more elaborately any scene or single speech is wrought the more does it contribute to enhance the main emotion, and if there is a deliberate pause it is felt either as a welcome breathing space or as the calm of brooding expectancy.

The result of this method is the union, in the highest degree, of simplicity with complexity, of largeness of design with absolute finish, of grandeur with harmony. Superfluities are thrown off without an effort through the burning of the fire within. Crude elements are fused and made transparent. What look like ornaments are found to be inseparable from the organic whole. Each of the plays is admirable in structure, not because it is cleverly put together, but because it is so completely alive.

The spectator of a Sophoclean tragedy was invited to witness the supreme crisis of an individual destiny, and was possessed at the outset with the circumstances of the decisive moment. Except in the *Trachiniae,* where the retrospective soliloquy of Deianira is intended to emphasize her lonely position, this exposition is effected through a brief dialogue, in which the protagonist may or may not take part. In the *Œdipus Tyrannus* the king’s entrance and his colloquy with the aged priest introduce the audience at once to the action and to the chief person. In the *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* the entrance or discovery of the hero is made more impressive by being delayed. Immediately after the prologos the chorus enter, number­ing fifteen, either chanting in procession as in the *Antigone* and *Œd. Tyr.,* or dispersedly as in the *Œd. Col.* and *Philoctetes,* or, thirdly, as in the *Electra,* where, after entering silently during the monody of the heroine, and taking up their position in the orchestra, they address her one by one. With a remarkable exception, to be noted presently, the chorus having once entered remain to the end. They always stand in some carefully adjusted

relation to the principal figure. The elders of Thebes, whose age and coldness throw into relief the fervour and the desolation of Antigone, are the very men to realize the calamity of Œdipus, and, while horror-stricken, to lament his fall. The rude Salaminian mariners are loyal to Ajax, but cannot enter into his grief. The Trachinian maidens would gladly support Deianira, who has won their hearts, but they are too young and inexperienced for the task. The noble Argive women can sympathize with the sorrows of Electra, but no sympathy can soothe her distress.

The parodos of the chorus is followed by the first scene or epeisodion, with which the action may be said to begin. For in the course of this the spectator’s interest is strongly roused by some new circumstance involving an unforeseen complication,—the awakening of Ajax (*Aj*.), the burial of Polynices (*Ant.*) the dream of Clytemnestra *(El.),* the dark utterance of Tiresias *(Œd. Tyr.),* the arrival of Lichas with Iole *(Trach.),* the report of Ismene announcing Creon’s coming *(Œd. Col.),* the sudden entreaty of Philoctetes crossed by the entrance of the pretended mariner *(Phil.).* The action from this point onwards is like a steadily flow­ing stream into which a swift and turbulent tributary has suddenly fallen, and the interest advances with rapid and continuous climax until the culmination is reached and the catastrophe is certain. The manner in which this is done, through the interweaving of the *ῥήσεις* and *στιχoμυφία* of the dialogue with the *στάσιμα* of the chorus, and the *κομμοί* and *κομματικά* (where there is interchange between the chorus and the persons), is very different in different dramas, one of the principal charms of Sophocles being his power of ingenious variation in the employment of his resources. Not less admirable is the strength with which he sustains the interest after the *peripeteia,@@*1 whether, as in the *Antigone,* by heaping sorrow upon sorrow, or, as in the first *Œdipus,* by passing from horror to tenderness and unlocking the fountain of tears. The extreme point of boldness in arrangement is reached in the *Ajax,* where the chorus and Tecmessa, having been warned of the impending danger, depart severally in quest of the vanished hero, and thus leave not only the stage but the orchestra vacant for the soliloquy that precedes his suicide.

No such general description as has been here at­tempted can give even a remote impression of the march of Sophoclean tragedy,—by what subtle yet firm and strongly marked gradations the plot is unfolded ; how stroke after stroke contributes to the harmonious totality of feeling; what vivid interplay, on the stage, in the orchestra, and between both, builds up the majestic, ever- moving spectacle. Examine, for example, the opening scene or *πρόλογος* of the *Œdipus Tyrannus.* Its function is merely to propound the situation; yet it is in itself a miniature drama. First there is the silent spectacle of the eager throng of suppliants at the palace gate,—young children, youths, and aged priests. To them the king appears, with royal condescension and true public zeal. The priest expresses their heartfelt loyalty, describes the distress of Thebes, and, extolling Œdipus’s past services, implores him to exercise his consummate wisdom for the relief of his people. The king’s reply unveils yet further his incessant watchfulness and anxious care for his subjects. And he discloses a new object to their expect­ancy and hope. Creon, a royal person, had been sent to Delphi, and should ere then have returned with the response of Apollo. At this all hearts are trembling in suspense, when a figure is seen approaching. He is wreathed with Apollo’s laurel ; he looks cheerfully. What has Phoebus said ? Another moment of suspense is interposed. Then the oracle is repeated,—so thrilling to

@@@1 A tragic action has five stages, whence the five acts of the modem drama :—the start, the rise, the height, the change, the close.