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EMOTION AND MEANING IN GREEK TRAGEDY

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I shall attempt to characterize what kind of effect Greek tragedy has – used to have, may have – on a member of the audience. This attempt calls for a basic consideration of the nature of the art-form, and some of the most familiar doctrines about it will have to be cleared from the air. The life-breath of Greek tragedy often seems stifled by antiquarian patronizing and by text-book clichés, clichés which I find trotted out in the programme-notes to almost every modern production.

My working assumption is that the tragedians were free in their use of theatrical techniques, that they chose to convey their meaning by certain actions and sequences of action rather than others, and that this artistic choice directs us to their purpose. But most critics have written not of freedom but of constraints, limitations, rules. In some ways Aristotle's *Poetics* sets the example for this approach, though at least Aristotle was being prescriptive, not descriptive. But in his wake more petty and more authoritarian critics have so extended and rigidly codified the 'rules' of Greek tragedy as to obscure and even deny its lively freedom. Overgeneralizations and simplifications have become common textbook doctrine; and instead of illuminating tragedy these clichés have mortified and alienated it. Some will have to be cleared out of the way in order to approach the experience of the audience of a Greek tragedy. This negative progress will, I hope, constantly be bringing our positive goal nearer.

To react against the imposition of rules by critics is not for a moment to deny that the Athenian theatre was in many respects highly conventional. Innumerable conventions governing diction, tone and propriety

From *Greek Tragedy in Action* (London: Methuen and Co., 1978). Reprinted with minor revisions by permission of the author and the publisher. © 1978 Oliver Taplin.

defined the genre and sustained its elevation. Others regulated, and at the same time made familiar, the technical medium.[1] Some may strike us as awkwardly restrictive (e.g., those governing the handling of the chorus or stichomythia); others are still dramatic common sense and seem too obvious to notice (e.g., only one character speaks at a time, characters normally speak on entry). Very few of these 'laws' are unbreakable. Two conventions, for instance – both with sound practical justification – are that the chorus should not go off in the middle of the play, and that wounds and death should not be presented on stage. Yet there are counter-examples to both: the former in *Eum.* and *Ajax*, the latter in *Ajax*, *OT* and *Hipp*. These unwritten laws are not really restrictions or limitations, they are rather the familiar framework which supports any great cultural florescence. When the artist has accepted forms and his audience shares a complex of expectations, then, since the audience is more sensitive and receptive, the art form can be accordingly more highly developed. So the circumscriptions are liberating (most, if not all, worthwhile human activities need rules). It is only after the flowering is over that the rules become a bondage and the art tends either towards lifeless imitation (like the tragedy of later antiquity) or towards an indiscriminate formlessness (like today?). These flexible defining rules of the game are not like the stiffly distorting overgeneralizations I am complaining of.

Take this, for instance: 'all the important *action* in Greek tragedy takes place off stage: on stage it is merely spoken and sung about.' My claim is, on the contrary, that it is the action which takes place *on* stage which *is* important, and is part of what the play is about: the action off-stage is only of interest in so far as it is given attention on stage. The error comes about from a simple-minded preconception of what constitutes action; it only counts the huge violent events of narrative history – battles, riots, miracles, natural disasters and so forth. This is to miss the point that the stuff of tragedy is the individual response to such events; not the blood, but the tears. It is the life-sized actions of this personal dimension which are the dramatist's concern, and which he puts on stage. (It is above all the film which, for better or for worse, has obscured this distinction.)

I move on to a more evidently attractive fallacy, and one which has, in fact, influenced our contemporary theatre: that Greek tragedy is in one way or another a *ritual* event. This is, I think, true only in so far as all human activities are 'rituals', a use of the word which renders it virtually meaningless. On any useful definition of ritual, Greek tragedy is simply and demonstrably not a ritual. The whole point about ritual is that it should always be the *same*: it is the aim of its performers to

repeat the rigmarole as perfectly, as identically as possible.[2] Whatever its origins Greek tragedy as we know it retains no such repeated elements, neither in part nor in whole. Of course there are all the conventions just discussed above, but they promote diversity, not repetition. Many attempts have been made to find invariable ritual elements in Greek tragedy, but all have failed and all (so far as I can see) are bound to fail. Probably the best known is the struggle, death, lament and rebirth of the 'year spirit', a pattern of fertility ritual which Gilbert Murray extended to Greek tragedy. But not one single tragedy we have can be claimed without distortion actually to follow this pattern; in particular Greek tragedy does not go in for resurrection or rejuvenation.

Now there certainly are some ritual procedures during the course of the events of the plays, for example supplication, or ghost-raising, or the hunting *kōmos*. But these are used *within* the plays, they are not imposed on them from without. Greek tragedy reflects and exploits the rituals of the real world, of course: but it is not itself a ritual. When the playwright set about composition, in other words, he did not have to follow any imposed ritual formula or sequence.

I would go further and suggest that it was a necessary precondition of the great age of Greek tragedy that the drama should *not* have been a ritual. It had to be human and various, beyond the control of repeated superstition, ancestral taboo, actions stylized and codified beyond anything mimetic – it had to exploit ritual, not just conserve and subserve it. This break with the repetitiousness of ritual may well have been onc of the great achievements of tragedy's creators. The impulse among modern critics to impose ritual patterns was largely inspired by the rise of comparative anthropological studies.[3] For when it was seen how rituals, including some semi-dramatic rituals, are so extremely important in primitive societies, it was an obvious step to expect ritual patterns in Greek tragedy. What this approach, which is still active, underestimates is the extent to which classical Greek culture had gone beyond the 'primitive', and moved on in the direction, whether or not one regards it as a beneficial progress, taken since by Western civilization.

But a further argument is advanced by those who claim that tragedy was a ritual, the fact that the tragedies were performed as part of the programme of the city festival of Dionysus, an annual event of several days which included many traditional ritual events – processions, sacrifices, etc.[4] The plays were performed within the sacred area of Dionysus, in the presence of his priest, and were preceded and followed by fixed rituals. All true. But the fact is that these circumstances have left no trace whatsoever on the tragedies themselves, no trace of the Dionysiac occasion, the time of year, the priests, the surrounding rituals, nothing.

We could not tell one single thing about the Festival from the *internal* evidence of the plays; it is all supplied by external evidence.

Unimaginable? We may go to a secular play or concert which is part of a church festival, is given in a church and is even preceded by some prayers from the priest; but does that make the performance a ritual or attendance a religious experience? You have only to contrast it with the lessons, litany and liturgy of a church service. But surely, it may still be claimed, tragedy was, none the less, a religious experience for the audience, seeing that they were participating in a sacred festival. Is going to the *Nutcracker* a religious experience since it is part of the annual festival commemorating Christ's birth (or making the winter solstice, if you prefer)? For the Athenians the great Dionysia was an occasion to stop work, drink a lot of wine, eat some meat, and witness or participate in the various ceremonials, processions and priestly doings which are part of such holidays the world over. It was also the occasion for tragedy and comedy; but I do not see any way in which the Dionysiac occasion invades or affects the entertainment. Some Athenians complained that the tragedy was 'nothing to do with Dionysus' (cf. our Christmas): but whatever everyone else went for it was evidently not another ritual, nor in any obvious or overt sense for a religious experience. To put it another way, there is nothing intrinsically Dionysiac about Greek tragedy.

Next a dogma which is, if anything, even more widespread and more misleading: that 'they all knew the story already'. This promotes several misconceived inferences: that Greek tragedy was a repository of traditional tales, that the dramatist's composition is 'dictated by the myth', that there is no element of suspense or surprise, that the tragedy is the working out of fate or destiny, that the characters are puppets of the gods. All these clichés I regard as more or less wrong.

Greek tragedy almost invariably drew on stories about the distant heroic age of Greece, the period which in historical terms we now call the Late Bronze Age or 'The Mycenaean Age', those few generations of mightly exploits, turmoil and splendour, which were the setting of most traditional Greek heroic song, both in epic and lyric. But these stories were not history, nor were they canonized in any definitive collection of 'Greek myths'. Their oral transmission 'at mother's knee' was no doubt subject to the huge variations which characterize nearly all such oral traditions, variations of emphasis and the mood no less than of narrative content (whatever 'deep structures' the reductionist sage may claim to detect). It is likely, in any case, that the tragedians drew predominantly on literary sources. Here, too, there was almost limitless variation, the product of centuries of re-arrangement and invention, a

process which the tragedians themselves continued. Not even the myths of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are definitive. The only full coincidence with Homer in surviving tragedy, *Rhesus* and *Iliad* 10, reveals many important divergencies. Or take the myth of Orestes. In the story alluded to several times in the *Odyssey* (and also, it seems, in early lyric) Aegisthus is the chief agent of Agamemnon's murder and chief object of Orestes' vengeance: but the whole shape of the *Oresteia* is moulded by Aeschylus' decision, possibly innovatory, to make Clytemnestra the sole murderer and chief victim of vengeance. Then we all know from Sophocles that when Oedipus discovered the truth he blinded himself and went into exile, while Jocaste hanged herself. In the version in *Odyssey* 11 Epicaste (as she is called) hangs herself, but there is nothing about Oedipus' blinding: he rules on in Thebes. And a line in the *Iliad* (23.679) implies that he fell in battle there. Then in Euripides' *Phoenician Women* Oedipus is blind but still in Thebes many years after the discovery of the truth – and Jocaste? She is still alive. Then, again, in Aeschylus' original version of the *Seven against Thebes* Oedipus had no daughters; the death of his sons was the end of his line. Examples like this may be multiplied, and even more so if vase-paintings are brought into play. Very little was immutably fixed.

But even if the myths were much more rigidly laid down than my argument claims, this would still be of minimal consequence for the literary criticism of tragedy, since the mere *story*, such as may be excerpted in a collection of 'Greek Myths', has no significant bearing on the quality of the play. The mere story is shared by good and bad dramatists alike – it may be indistinguishable in Sophocles and in a fifth-rate hack. What matters, for the dramatist and his audience, is the way he has *shaped* the story, the way he has turned it into drama. The constraint is minimal: the scope for artistry enormous.[5] The area of artistic initiative may be conveyed by a crude catalogue of some of the decisions in question: which brief section is to be taken from the continuum of the myth, which events are to be emphasized or played down, which characters, which aspects, which motifs and images? The identity and role of the chorus, the sequence of events, the exposition, the shape of the acts and of the ending, the use of the lyric, whether choral, monody or lyric dialogue; and last but not least, all the aspects of theatrical and visual technique (the subject of *Greek Tragedy in Action*): all have to be decided on. The list could be extended and elaborated to fill volumes: for these factors are, in effect, the playwright's medium and, thus, our means to literary criticism and interpretation. What we ask is *how* the dramatist has wrought his play, and why he has done it in his particular way, for he had deliberated on this process and made his

decisions. The constraint of his myth, in so far as it is fixed, is only of marginal influence. The standard comparison of Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* with the *Electras* of Euripides and Sophocles shows this process of artistic shaping in practice. The range of variation is even better brought out by looking at Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, and Euripides' *Phoenician Women*.[6]

Now let us look at this issue from the side of the audience. They did not know the 'plot' in advance, for they did not know what version, what variations and innovations the playwright would use – no doubt they were eager to find out. Still less did they know how he would shape his plot, how he would dramatize it: that is precisely what they went to see. In this respect the audience approached the drama, I would maintain, virtually free of preconceptions. It was then the dramatist's task to enthrall their minds, to fill them with the knowledge, thoughts and feelings which he wished to conjure up, and to the exclusion of all others. That is why each tragedy is more or less self-contained in narrative, and includes even the most elementary facts in its exposition – which is quite uncalled for if they 'knew it already'. The dramatist would, naturally, prepare for and foreshadow the course of his plot (hence 'tragic irony'), though even here there is plenty of scope for surprise and suspense. He might even call to mind previous versions of his story, earlier dramatizations or, above all, Homer; he will then arouse complex associations and expectations which he can confirm or vary or contradict. But such allusions should only receive as much attention as the spellbinder allows; and what is not alluded to does not, within the play, exist. Far from knowing it all already, the audience knows what it is told, thinks and feels what it is aroused to think and feel.

A brief paragraph on the related misconception that Greek tragedy basically shows the working of Fate, of men fastened to the puppetry of higher powers – a notion with an enduring fascination, for Thomas Hardy for example.[7] Most cultures have their expressions of fatalism; they are one of our chief sources of solace in the face of the pointless waste of ill fortune: 'che sarà, sarà', 'God's will be done', 'his number was up', 'it is written' . . . The ancient Greeks were as prone as any to resort to such notions, though, naturally enough, after rather than before the event, and after disaster rather than good fortune. And like most cultures, for a pattern or purpose behind catastrophe they looked to superhuman forces, personal or impersonal. But this tendency does not, within the whole compass of a drama, preclude the free will of the characters or their responsibility, nor does it render their whole life puppetry. Most of the time they are presented as free agents working out their own destinies – as a rule disastrously, since this is tragedy.

But sometimes they are seen in fatalistic terms; and sometimes the two motivations, human and superhuman, are seen conspiring together, both logically sufficient conditions of the outcome, yet both at work. But never, except perhaps in mad scenes, are the characters of Greek tragedy portrayed as automata or marionettes. Even when they are viewed as victims of the gods, they remain human and independent.

Compared with the 'myth fallacy' and the 'ritual fallacy' relatively few critics are the prisoners of my last trap, what might be called the 'propaganda fallacy'. This is the supposition that a Greek tragedy was primarily or significantly shaped by the desire to promote a certain line on a specific contemporary issue (in politics or philosophy or whatever). The advocates of such a view will have for a start to allow that such propaganda is *cryptic*, if it is true that there is not one single specific allusion to a contemporary person or event in all of Greek tragedy.[8] So far as I can see this is in fact the case. There is not one anachronism to be noted as such, no overt rupture of the dramatic illuson of the remote heroic world. To avert misunderstanding, I hasten to grant that in a sense – in the most important sense – Greek tragedy is entirely topical and the mirror of its own times. It was composed for the audience of fifth-century Athenians, not for a Bronze Age audience; and its general preoccupations, moral, social and emotional, are those of its age. Thus, it is a tissue of technical anachronisms in the strictest historical sense: my point is that they are not to be noticed as such, they are admitted only as long as they are congruous with the heroic world of the far past in which the play is set.

As a warning consider these three facts (all in my view beyond dispute, though not, in fact, undisputed). Nowhere in Greek tragedy is there any direct address to the audience or any other reference to it; nowhere in Greek tragedy does the dramatist use the first person of himself or refer to himself in any way; and nowhere in Greek tragedy is there any reference of any kind to the theatre, to drama, actors, etc. No 'gentle spectators', no 'humble author', no 'all the world's a stage'. All three absences are in direct contrast to the Old Comedy of Aristophanes and to most later drama, which likes to exploit the tension between the world of audience and the world of the play, between these two competing types of reality.[9] This invariable refusal to admit the existence of audience and actors and playwright, or to admit that the play is not the real world, confirms the claim that the dramatic illusion is inviolable. The world of the play never acknowledges the world of the audience: the distancing remains always intact. This is by no means to deny the relevance of the tragedy to the world of the audience; but the relevance is not that of propaganda.

What then *is* the relevance of Greek tragedy to its audience? Now that some more modern dogmas have been cleared aside, we might turn to the ancient Greek sources to see what they thought their tragedies were about.[10] They give us, I think, some views which are interestingly wrong, and some which tally so well with my own experience that I am unable to improve on them.

By far the most substantial fifth-century discussion of tragedy is the second half of Aristophanes' *Frogs*. One theme is particularly persistent: that tragedy *teaches* its audience. 'We poets make men better citizens' (1009 f.). 'Boys have a schoolteacher to instruct them, grown-ups have poets' (1054 f.). In Plato too this is generally regarded as the dramatist's chief claim. This may seem fair enough – most of us decide that art is didactic in one sense or another – but both Aristophanes and Plato apply the notion in disappointing ways. Thus, they both speak of poets, including tragedians, as though it was claimed for them that they actually taught various practical skills – strategy, sailing, economics, cobbling, or whatever it may be. Plato's Socrates has a good time at the expense of this absurdity: obviously for such expertise you go, not to poetry, but to a technical manual or to a living authority.

Another questionable assumption is that the poet's teaching is contained in the words of certain of his lines, and so can be extracted from the work (like a tooth). Aristophanes scarcely seems to doubt that the 'message' of a play by Aeschylus or Euripides – and the man's personal moral views also – is purveyed by certain sententious lines from his work. The same assumption has been shared by the generations of critics down to the present day who have put together a picture of the dramatist from a patchwork of quotations. Obviously this is a hazardous, if not downright foolish, method, since each quotation has a context within the drama as a whole, a context from which (in any good playwright) it is indivisible. The dramatizer of conflict has to be able to put both sides of a case: which side is his message? Furthermore, admirable sentiments may be put in the mouth of a villain, and objectionable ones in the mouth of a virtuous character who does not act upon them (like Hippolytus' notorious line 'my tongue swore, but my heart did not confirm it'). Sometimes, it is true, a final message is drawn from the tragedy as a whole – messages like 'life is full of unexpected turns', 'call no man happy until he is dead', 'think on a mortal level'. But these are the traditional maxims of the Greeks, the property of every grandfather: one need not go to tragedy to learn these. As always, as soon as the message of a work of art is reduced to a sentence it becomes banal.

But the idea that tragedy teaches is not to be abandoned just because it has been applied sophistically. We might well agree in general terms

that, in so far as tragedy teaches, it does so through the work *as a whole*, through the way that human life is portrayed and not merely by individual spoken lines. So the audience learns, in so far as it learns, by way of the whole experience. That is to say, the intellectual burden of the tragedy and its value as teaching has to do with the quality of the audience's experience.

We do have a scrap of fifth-century criticism which seems to be developing this very train of thought. It is a single sentence, a fragment torn from its surrounding discourse, but we know it was written apropos of tragedy: 'The man who deceives shows more justice than he who does not; and the man who is deceived has more wisdom than he who is not' (*ho te apatēsas dikaioteros tou mē apatēsantos, kai ho apatētheis sophōteros tou mē apatēthentos*). These are the words of Gorgias, the Sicilian theorist and teacher of rhetoric, who worked in Athens in the last quarter of the fifth century, and who is best known for his discomfiture in Plato's *Gorgias*.[11] Inevitably any interpretation of this sentence is speculative, but there is one which seems to me to make very good sense, whether or not it is what Gorgias meant. The tragedian who succeeds in enthralling his audience does more justice by the effect this has on his audience than the playwright who fails to captivate them: likewise the member of the audience who succumbs to the spell of the play will through that experience be a better, wiser man than the member who resists and remains unmoved. On any interpretation the key word is, of course, *apatān*, to deceive, trick, beguile (perhaps conveyed by the English word-play that tragedy 'takes in' its audience). It is a balanced paradox, typical of Gorgias' manner, that deceit should be the means of justice and wisdom. It is also a shrewd reply to all those moralists, above all Plato himself, who have complained that fiction is all lies. The deceit, Gorgias implies, is temporary and it is beneficial. Truth and falsity are not the category relevant to the case: the worth of the work of art depends rather on whether it is convincing, on whether it interests, enthralls, moves its audience.

How, then, does this 'deceit' take effect? Gorgias' own views are, I suggest, worth pursuing; and the following passage, which comes from his virtuoso apologia for Helen, surely has tragedy in mind. 'All poetry I consider and define as discourse in metre. There comes over the audience of poetry a fearful horror and tearful pity and doleful yearning. By means of the discourse their spirit feels a personal emotion on account of the good and bad fortune of others.'[12] This passage alone should be enough to rescue Gorgias from the common slander that he was merely a word-juggler. Above all he sees that *emotions* are at the heart of tragic poetry. And what is more he has put his finger on one of the most vital

and remarkable features of this experience: that the emotions are generous – altruistic almost – that we feel disturbed personally for *other* people, for people who have no direct connection with us and indeed belong to another world from ours. (What's Hecuba to us?) This outgoing emotion, as opposed to introverted self-absorption, is characteristic of Greek tragedy, and of most (perhaps all) great tragedy. This point is well brought home by the anecdote in Herodotus (6.21) about Phyrnichus, a contemporary of Aeschylus, who produced a tragedy about the sack of Miletus, a recent outrage on a city closely connected with Athens. Phyrnichus was prosecuted and fined for reminding the Athenians of their *own* troubles; this is not the playwright's function.

Can we characterize these tragic emotions? Gorgias' list is, I think, extraordinarily apt, and far more evocative than Aristotle's terse and derivative 'pity and fear' (*eleos kai phobos*). Literally Gorgias writes 'ultra-fearful shuddering and much-weeping pity and grief-loving longing'. The greatest of these is surely pity, however much Plato and Nietzsche may protest (how deluded Nietzsche was in claiming the Greeks as his authority for denouncing pity). We feel an overwhelming *compassion* for these other people who undergo the tribulations, pain and waste which are the stuff of tragedy. Yet this compassion is seldom if ever separable from other emotions. We pity Agamemnon, Oedipus, Agaue; yet at the same time we feel horror, alarm (*phrikē*); and at the same time we *want* Agamemnon to be murdered, Oedipus to find out the truth, Agaue to recognize her son's head. We have a longing (*pothos*) which wants grief (*philopenthēs*): it is such sweet sorrow. I shall return to the paradoxical pleasure of these doleful feelings; the important new point for now is that the emotions of the tragic experience are *complex*, and they are of course ever-shifting. Perhaps, indeed, the better the tragedy, the more complex and labile the emotions it arouses. This may be why there are certain strong emotions which Greek tragedy does not as a rule subject us to, notably hatred and lust. These are domineering and single-minded obsessions which do not permit mental companions.

It seems to me, then, that Gorgias is right that tragedy is essentially the *emotional experience of its audience*. Whatever it tells us about the world is conveyed by means of these emotions. Plato agreed with Gorgias in this, but he disapproved of the process and regarded it as harmful. Aristotle agreed with him too, but, contrary to Plato, regarded it as beneficial and salutary. Plato's objection was that such emotions are not the province of the highest part of the soul, the intellectual part. This is the forefather of the error made by so many later critics who have not acknowledged the centrality of emotion in the communication of tragedy. They think that if tragedy is essentially an emotional experience,

it must be *solely* that; and they think this because they assume that strong emotion is necessarily in opposition to thought, that the psychic activities are mutually exclusive. But is this right? Understanding, reason, learning, moral discrimination; these things are not, in my experience, incompatible with emotion (nor presumably in the experience of Gorgias and Aristotle): what is incompatible is cold insensibility. Whether or not emotion is inimical to such intellectual processes depends on the *circumstances in which it is aroused*.

The characteristic tragic emotions – pity, horror, fascination, indignation, and so forth – are felt in many other situations besides in the theatre. Above all we suffer them in the face of the misfortunes of real life, of course. What distinguishes the experience of a great tragedy? For one thing, as already remarked, we feel for the fortunes of people who have no direct personal relation to us: while this does not decrease the intensity of the emotion, it affords us some distance and perspective. We can feel and at the same time observe from outside. But does this distinguish tragedy from other 'contrived' emotional experiences (most of them tending to the anti-intellectual), for example an animal hunt, a football match, an encounter group, reading a thriller, or watching a horror movie? Well, the experience of tragedy is by no means a random series of sensations. Our emotional involvement has perspective and context at the same time, and not just in retrospect. Thus the events of the tragedy are in an ordered *sequence*, a sequence which gives shape and comprehensibility to what we feel. And, most important of all, the affairs of the characters which move us are given a moral setting which is argued and explored in the play. They act and suffer within situations of moral conflict, or social, intellectual and theological conflict. The quality of the tragedy depends *both* on its power to arouse our emotions *and* on the setting of those emotions in a sequence of moral and intellectual complications which is set out and examined. Tragedy evokes our feelings for others, like much else; but it is distinguished by the order and significance it imparts to suffering. So if the audience is not moved, then the tragedy, however intellectual, is a total failure: if its passions are aroused, but in a thoughtless, amorphous way, then it is merely a bad tragedy, sensational, melodramatic.

Thus it is that our emotions in the theatre, far from driving out thought and meaning, are indivisible from them: they are simultaneous and mutually dependent. The experience of tragedy can achieve this coherence in a way that the emotional experiences of real life generally cannot because they are too close, too cluttered with detail and partiality, to be seen in perspective. Tragedy makes us feel that we understand life in its tragic aspects. We have the sense that we can better sympathize

with and cope with suffering, misfortune and waste. It is this sense of understanding (not isolated pearls of wisdom) that is the 'message' of a tragedy, that the great playwright imparts. This is well put in T. S. Eliot's essay 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', where he argues that it is the quality of the emotional expression rather than the quality of the philosophy which makes literature great, which makes it 'strong, true and informative . . . useful and beneficial in the sense in which poetry is useful and beneficial'. 'All great poetry' Eliot writes 'gives the illusion of a view of life . . . for every precise emotion tends towards intellectual formulation'.

'*Illusion*'? Maybe; but emphatically not because the play is a fiction and the audiences' experiences the product of temporary artifice. (And all for nothing! For Hecuba?) Their experiences, both emotional and intellectual, are none the less real, and become part of the real person. The experience is not erased when we leave the theatre. Tragedy is only an illusion in so far as any claim to make sense of all the evils of our life is an illusion (and perhaps tragedy does not claim this). The 'tragedies' of real life, unlike those of the stage, are often shapeless, sordid, capricious, meaningless. But supposing this to be true (as I do), what then? It is not *human* to be content with this useless, even if ultimate, truth. We *must* try to understand, to cope, to respond. It is in this attempt that tragedy – that most great art – has its place. For it gives the hurtful twists of life a shape and meaning which are *persuasive*, which can be lived with. And that endurance and perspective are none the less real. As Gorgias so neatly put it 'the man who is deceived has more wisdom than he who is not.' And so in the end the 'deceit' is true to life and part of life and makes life the better for it.

By enthralling its audience tragedy unites emotion and meaning so as to give us an experience which, by creating a perspective on the misfortunes of human life, helps us to understand and cope with those misfortunes. There is nothing new or startling in this conclusion; but if it is along the right lines there is no harm in its being repeated and rephrased. *We* are now the audience of Greek tragedy. Are the actions and emotions and ideas I have been considering irremediably inaccessible? They still have the power, surely, to amaze indeed the very faculties of eyes and ears.

2

DECISION AND RESPONSIBILITY IN THE TRAGEDY OF AESCHYLUS

ALBIN LESKY

What I want to present here is an interpretation of four passages from the extant dramas of Aeschylus. Our point of departure will be the text and not any general consideration. I also want to avoid committing myself right at the outset on the question whether we have to exclude the idea of personal will from the tragedies merely because we do not find in them a corresponding term for it. I do want, however, to confess to one belief. It seems to me just as wrong to interpret the great poetry of the Greeks out of the ideas of our times, out of that '*Impertinente Nähe*' ('audacious Proximity') that Nietzsche spoke of, as it is wrong to regard the Greeks as completely different people, severed from our world by an unbridgeable gulf. The Aristotelian golden mean will here too be the best guide.

Let us begin with a passage from the *Suppliants*, a passage to which Professor Snell has also attributed particular significance.[1] I would like to emphasise, however, that, if I begin with a scene from the *Suppliants*, this does not mean that I have returned to the old view that dated the play in an early period. On the ground of the well-known papyrus-fragment of a Didascalia [production record] it seems to me on the contrary quite inevitable to date the performance of the play in the middle or in the second half of the 460s.

The situation in the first part of the drama needs no special introduction. The chorus is formed by the daughters of Danaos, who have fled to Argos from the impetuous and repulsive wooing of the sons of Aigyptos. (Incidentally, I shall take it for granted that the twelve members of the chorus represented all fifty daughters of Danaos.) Near the town of Argos, they have taken refuge at a large altar, where the images or symbols of a number of gods are combined. The king of the

From *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 86 (1966), 78–86. Reprinted with minor revisions by permission of the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies.

NOTES

O. Taplin: Emotion and Meaning in Greek Tragedy (pp. 1-12).

1. One of my purposes in *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (1977) is to elucidate this 'grammar' of dramatic technique. W. Jens' *Die Bauformen der griechischen Tragödie* (1971) is an attempt, far from successful but none the less enterprising, to compile the whole of this 'grammar'. Disciples of Walter Jens at Tübingen contribute sections (of greatly varying quality) on the structure of opening and closing scenes, on the acts and choral songs, speech, stychomythia, lyric dialogue, and monody; there are also three parerga on supplication, props, and the significance of on- and off-stage.

2. This point is hammered home by Brian Vickers, *Towards Greek Tragedy* (33 ff., esp. 41-2). Vickers' confutation in his section 'Metaphysics and Mystiques' (3-51) of various 'transcendant schemes' which have been vainly imposed on Greek tragedy is one of the best parts of a stimulating, if uneven, book. The most influential account of the Greek theatre as ritual has probably been Ch. i of Francis Fergusson's *The Idea of a Theatre* (Princeton, 1949).

3. I relegate a couple more hobby-horsical reflections to a footnote. Another motive for the search of ritual may be the desire of some to find religious or quasi-religious motives for all valuable human activities so that they are all done to the greater glory of god (even if it is the wrong god). Another more modern motive is the desire of the 'counter-culture' to stress all that is anti-rational, impulsive, and 'primitive' in our life. The driving forces of this movement are too complex and too close for analysis, but they include the decline of traditional religion, disillusion with scientific 'progress', Freudian psychology, expression of solidarity with non-Western cultures, and simple revolt against whatever system is nearest at hand. Greek tragedy, they gather, was a 'primitive ritual', so it is annexed as a venerable support for these cultural trends. But the ancient Greeks are treacherous allies. The undeniable powers of the irrational, the cruel, and the impulsive are clearly recognized by Greek tragedy, but they are not admired; they are rather forces of destruction and inhumanity.

4. The authoritative account is Pickard-Cambridge's *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens* (1968, ch. ii, 57-125).

5. This should be put in its place a fragment of the fourth-century comedian Antiphanes which has been taken much too seriously. His character is trying to show that comedy is much harder to compose than tragedy because you have to make up the story:

> I have only to mention Oedipus, and they know the rest
> that his father was Laius, his mother Jocasta,
> who his daughters are and his sons,
> what he is going to suffer, what he has done . . .

The crudity of this proves, in a sense, the opposite of what it purports to prove.

6. There is an interesting exercise in comparison to be found in the fifty-second (so-called) *Oration* of Dio Chrysostom (Loeb Classical Library, vol. iv, ed. A. L. Crosby, 338 ff.), in which he discusses the three *Philoctetes* plays of Aeschylus,

Euripides, and Sophocles (only the last survives). The fixed elements are that Odysseus and others have to fetch Philoctetes from Lemnos to Troy: the differences between the three plays move them worlds apart.

7. This dialogue occurs at the most harrowing moment of *Jude the Obscure* when Jude and Sue have discovered the violent death of their children:

> 'Nothing can be done' he replied.
> 'Things are as they are, and will be brought to their destined issue.'
> She paused, 'Yes! Who said that?' she asked heavily.
> 'It comes in the Chorus of Agamemnon. It has been in my mind continually since this happened.'

To move from the sublime to the less than sublime see the very title of Cocteau's version of *Oedipus, La Machine Infernale* (1934). The prologue voice says, 'Spectator, this machine, you see here wound up to the full in such a way that the spring will slowly unwind the whole length of a human life . . .' The radio comedy show *I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again* ended its version of *Oedipus* 'My fate, my fate are killing me!'

8. Aeschylus' *Persians* is the exception which proves the rule. Not only is the play not a tragedy about Athens, but the Persian rulers are given the status and distance of tragic heroes indistinguishable, dramatically speaking, from the usual figues of the heroic age. Even those who generally agree with my case would until recently have made an exception of *Eumenides* and granted that it contains political propaganda. But it seems to me that Colin Macleod in his article on the unity of the *Oresteia* (1973) is completely convincing in his denial of specific topical allusions and in his claim that the play is political in a much more ideal and time-free sense. On the 'dramatic illusion' of Greek tragedy see the first and last chapters of David Bain, *Actors and Audience* (Oxford, 1977).

9. See, for instance, Anne Righter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (London, 1962, repr. Penguin, 1967).

10. Excellent translations of the more important fragments are collected in the first section of *Ancient Literary Criticism*, ed. D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom (Oxford, 1972).

11. Some fragments of Gorgias are in Russell and Winterbottom (op. cit.), but for a translation of all the little that survives see that by George Kennedy in *The Older Sophists*, ed R. K. Sprague (South Carolina, 1972, 30 ff.). The standard text is in Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (vol. ii, 7th ed., rev. Kranz, Berlin, 1951-4).

12. A Phonetic rather than literal transcript brings out Gorgias' use of the letters *r*, then *l*, then *t* to vary the predominant emotional *p*: *prikē peripobos kai eleos poludakrus kai potos pilopentēs*.

Albin Lesky: Decision and Responsibility in the Tragedy of Aeschylus (pp. 13-23)

1. B. Snell, *Aischylos und das Handeln im Drama, Philologus SB* 20, Heft 1 (1928).
2. *Proc. of the Cambr. Philol. Soc.* 186 (1960), 27.
3. *Form and Meaning in Drama* (London, 1956), 4.
4. Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* xxvii.
5. *Etudes de Lettres* 6 (1963), 73-112 (*Bull. de la Fac. des Lettres Lausanne*). On all these questions, cf. also H. Lloyd-Jones, 'The Guilt of Agamemnon', (printed

OXFORD READINGS IN GREEK TRAGEDY

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