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Existential Violence in Greek Tragedy

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Existential Violence in Greek Tragedy: Its Necessity (for Spectators)[1]

"Ancient tragedy, ancient tragedy is as sacred and far-reaching as the universe's heart.
A demos gave birth to it, a Greek city, but it soared up at once, and in the heavens set the stage." C.P. Cavafy (1897)[2]

"Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller has to tell." Walter Benjamin[3]

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[1] I am most grateful to Cristina Marinho for her wonderful, generous hosting and organizing, and to her and several other participants for stimulating discussion at the Centre for Theatre Studies, University of Porto (CETUP), XII[th] International Conference on Theater and Violence in July, 2016; at home, I benefitted from discussions with Vishwa Adluri, Jack Clontz, and Jesse Mann. David Barnett (York) wanted me to historicize; I have tried to explain why I see other issues at stake.

[2] Constantine P. Cavafy, "Ancient Tragedy" (1897) in *Before Time Could Change Them: The Complete Poems of Constantine P. Cavafy*, translated by Theoharis C. Theoharis (New York: Harcourt, 2001), p. 312. Daniel Mendelsohn also translates the poem in his edition (2012).

[3] Walter Benjamin, as quoted by Peter Brooks, *The New York Review of Books* 63.12, July 14, 2016, p. 35.

"[There is] plenty of hope ... -- but not for us." Franz Kafka[4]

"I looked into the abyss." "Don't worry, we'll watch something else."
Woody Allen, dialogue in *Whatever Works*

I. Introduction

Cavafy recognizes that tragedy sprang from democratic Athens, but it soared higher, into realms religious and metaphysical. What is this sacred or universal import of tragedy? He notably does not confine tragedy to civic ideology. In this he differs from the predominant trend of recent scholarship, which sees in the dramatic festivals a reinforcement of social, and thus of group, ideology.[5] Sociology or existentialism? For Classicists, this involves asking, what kind of a god is Dionysus (the god of theater, at whose festival the plays were performed in 5th-

[4] Kafka said this to his friend Max Brod who published it in his biography (1937). Coincidentally, Loraux (2002) has a similar epigraph (p. v).

[5] Pucci (2002), pp. ix-x, gives a succinct statement critical of this tendency. Garvie (2007) also criticizes. See generally Mark Griffith, "Twelve Principles for Reading Greek Tragedy," pp. 1-7 of Griffith and Carter (2011).

century-BCE Athens)? For the most part, our age is inclined to sociological explanations.

Another way to see the dichotomy, besides political/metaphysical, is group/individual. If we focus on the sufferings and deaths of individuals, we may approach another understanding of tragedy (and of Dionysus), no less powerful for being encased in social and aesthetic rituals: the violence of human life itself. By "existential violence," I mean death, suffering, fate, the ravages of time, as defining constraints of human existence in the cosmos, of necessity (whether sent by gods or of our own doing).

The ancient Greeks invented drama as we know it; they invented tragedy. The problem of violence in Greek tragedy is a foundational one for understanding theater and the role of art. What do people get from watching a drama? What is the relation of tragedy to civilization and to human life? Greek tragedy is everyone's concern, because we are human. As one scholar wrote, "it is safer to stay in one's own field. But anyone who prefers safety is not likely to have much feeling for Greek tragedy

...."[6] Greek tragedy jolts us, it shakes us up. Reading Euripides' *Bacchae*, wrote a critic, "empowered [me] into a state of shock."[7] Do we focus on the comfort, the closure, provided by the idea of the maintenance of social order (widespread in current views of the ideological function of drama), or are we, with Nietzsche, wise to be reminded of disruption and the abyss?

It is important to note that more is at stake than whether we historicize instances of violence in the plays. Do we choose the community over the individual, optimism over a bleaker realism; do we acknowledge tragedy, or close ranks (intellectually speaking) against it?

First, I'll give some examples of violence in Greek thought and in tragedy. I argue that tragedy is close to history in that both narrate the unfolding of events in time, some of our own doing and some not (fate, death and suffering). Next, I will attempt to come to terms with major modern theories. It is unsettling to find that these largely go back to Hegel. They do not face existential violence head-on or explain it adequately, being more concerned with group identity through ritual: "consolidating

[6] Walter Kaufmann (1979, orig 1968), p. xiv.

[7] David Denby, *Great Books* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 144.

the social identity, maintaining the cohesion of the community."[8] I then advocate a view sympathetic to Nietzsche's. He argued that violence in tragedy importantly conveys the terrors of the human condition, and that art is a way of presenting horrors safely.

II. Violence in Greek Myth, Thought, and Tragedy

To understand Greek tragedy, let us consider a few examples, beginning with myths. To begin with Aristotle's ethical reading of tragedy may be quite misleading.

In myths of creation, chaos (disorder) preceded cosmos (order). Zeus won and established order, but this order is precarious; chaos was not eliminated but a constant struggle is required to keep it at bay. For example, creatures born in the earlier stages of creation, from the time before Zeus established order (these constitute most of the monsters of Greek myth), later pose a threat that heroes face.[9]

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[8] Longo (1990), 14.

[9] I have always taught this using Barry B. Powell, *Classical Myth*, now in its 8th edition (Pearson, 2014). A wonderful study of the origins of apocalypticism (eschatology proves to be not irrelevant to this essay) is Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come* (Yale University Press, 2nd ed., 2001).

Empedocles, a 5th-century-BCE cosmologist, speculated that two forces govern the world, with power over both the cosmos (nature) and human nature: love and strife.[10] Sigmund Freud formulated (in 1920) theory of two forces, using the Greek words Eros and Thanatos (Love and Death). Love and strife combined in the story of how the Trojan War began. The goddess Discord (*Eris*) crashed the wedding of Achilles' parents, causing the fight between the three goddesses that led directly to the seizure of Helen by Paris of Troy. The same wedding that resulted in the birth of Achilles (from an act of love, *eros*) set in motion the events leading to his death in the war. (W.B. Yeats expressed the same theme in his famous poem, "Leda and the Swan," about the conception of Helen by her parents.) Destruction and death are inseparable from *eros*, which unites things and gives birth. Whatever is born dies. Achilles, like Gilgamesh in the Sumerian-Akkadian epic, presents a didactic model of the mortal hero. Human life is ephemeral, literally of a day ("the dream of a shadow," said Pindar), the opposite of eternal.

[10] Empedocles uses the words *philia* and *neikos* (synonymous with *eros* and *eris*). Hesiod earlier spoke of good and bad *eris* (*i.e.* competition and strife), by the way (René Girard, discussed below, picks up on this with his theory of "competitive mimesis/imitation").

The intermingling of birth and death, the presence of death in life, and the basic fact that we are subject to the vicissitudes and necessities of time -- these truths are necessary for understanding violence in Greek tragedy. This cosmic or existential viewpoint precedes and overwhelms the political contexts of human civilization, which most recent literary criticism is concerned with. Nor is any city (state) eternal: not Athens, not Rome. (In the next section I relate such criticism, admirable as its political activism may often be, to an optimistic eschatology of Hegel and the Bible.)

Life is tragic, because time, "all-powerful time which submerges all" (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 609), brings suffering and death. Tragedies, like histories, present the unfolding of events over time. Nicole Loraux wrote, in a self-styled Nietzschean refutation of the political reading of tragedy, of the importance of the mourning cry.[11] Homer's *Iliad* set the tone. The *Iliad* is a tragedy of human life for both Greeks and Trojans. At one point,

[11] Loraux (2002). Pucci, in his Foreword, calls hers "a renewed Nietzschean reading of Greek tragedy" (p. ix). He makes this point using examples from both Homer's *Iliad* and tragedy: "tragedy universalizes them [the victors], decontextualizes them from their position as citizens of the victorious city, and turns them into human beings who feel ... like mortal men ...." (p. xi, cp. xiii).

Trojan servant-women "mourned in his house over Hector while he was living still" (*Il.* VI.500). Likewise, Briseis and seven other Trojan women (all captives of Achilles) mourned outwardly for Patroclus, but also "for her own sorrows each" (*Il.* XIX.301-2). They grieve for both death and reversal of fortune. Greek tragedy is greatly influenced by Homer's *Iliad* and its humanity in the face of violence and suffering.[12] The *Iliad* transcends the particular war, in presenting a philosophy of mortal life. "Fate is the same for the man who holds back, the same if he fights hard. We are all held in a single honor, the brave with the weaklings," muses thoughtful Achilles (*Il*. IX.318-19). "Fate" means the *telos* (end), death. Victors and vanquished at the end of the day (so to speak) share humanity. The *Iliad* ends with Achilles forging a bond with Priam (king of Troy). He has arguably not fully been re-integrated into the quasi-political community of the Achaean (Greek) army led by Agamemnon, but he has attained a broader perspective. It is wise Achilles (the killer) who consoles Priam

[12] Kaufmann, discussing "the humanity of the *Iliad*" (165), argues for "the birth of tragedy from the spirit of Homer" (165). The translations from the *Iliad* are Richmond Lattimore's. This is less true for the *Odyssey*, in which justice triumphs (good and bad people receive their due rewards). Aeschylus called his plays "slices from Homer's great banquet" (Athenaeus 8.347d).

(father of his victim, Hector) with a philosophy of human life, as he explains that sorrows sent by the gods are inescapable for unfortunate mortals (*Il.* XXIV.525ff.). "For," writes Pucci about both Homer and tragedy, "this grief is inalienable: it grasps and defines human beings not as citizens of a political community but as mortal men and women."[13]

Sorrows sent by the gods? What Homer's Achilles says is true even in a purely secular world; we do not always need to puzzle over the inscrutability of the ancient gods. (What gods are not ancient?) To be sure, the tragedians probe how far human beings can understand the logic of events, and what role human agency plays. The plays present the unfolding of mini-histories. These events are presented adjacent to the sanctuary of the god Dionysus during his festival-days (the Dionysia).

Let us remind ourselves of a few examples from Greek tragedy. When we talk about tragedy, we are talking about the productions at the Theater of Dionysus in 5th-century-BCE Athens. The surviving 32 tragedies date from about 472 to 404 BCE. Of course, the Greeks did not depict violent actions, such

[13] Pucci (2002), p. xiii.

as murders, on stage. Murders were reported in words, not depicted,[14] although many problems of staging are still debated.[15] Clearly, violence, whether death or reversal of fortune, defines tragedy: primarily murder, usually against oneself, one's close family relatives, or sent by gods. We also see the effects of violence in war, even on foreigners, especially in Aeschylus' *Persians* and Euripides' *Hecuba* and *Trojan Women*, which reflect contemporary experiences. But I am not going to historicize tragedy, myself; I am not now interested in a sociological study of interpersonal actions. I argue that "existential violence" transcends the political and is universal

[14] Violence in the plays: Sommerstein (2010) is concerned with stagecraft; Goldhill (1991) historicizes. Possible reasons for this apparent convention: Sommerstein; P.E. Easterling in Easterling, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (1997), p. 154. Roig (2014) concludes from the non-staging of violent acts that this shows less acceptance of violence; I don't see this. Taplin argues interestingly that the important action *is* on the stage, in the characters' responses: "not the blood, but the tears" (1978, pp. 160-61 and 1983, p. 2). Likewise Peter Burian calls this "a drama of words" (*Cambridge Companion*, p. 199). A supposed etymology (found in Varro) explains the word "obscene" as "off stage," but *The Oxford English Dictionary* calls this a "folk etymology."

[15] Four on-stage deaths occur (*Cambridge Companion*, p. 222). A three-day conference, "Staging Ajax's Suicide" (in Sophocles' *Ajax*), was held in Pisa in 2013: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6skbFY8qb7Q.

and cosmic in the sense of defining the world human beings are born into. Tragedy offers a glimpse of this truth and a response both emotional and cognitive. What does an audience gain by viewing the playing-out of mythical violence on stage?

All Greek tragedies (except one) concern figures of myth, that is, mythic or legendary history, from a time when humans were close to the gods. In fact, tragedy is close to history. The first two dramas known by name, *The Capture of Miletus* by Phrynicus (c. 494 BCE; lost) and Aeschylus' *Persians* (472, the producer being young Pericles), both concerned contemporary events. The Athenian response to the former raises interesting questions. Herodotus (VI.21) says that the Athenians fined Phrynicus "for reminding them of their own evils" and banned the play. Too upsetting for a tragedy? I have not seen discussion of this paradox. As we saw in Homer, one can mourn for others and (really) for oneself at the same time. So perhaps what was missing was the mask, the artistic illusion that the tragedy was not about oneself. (Nietzsche said art makes terrors endurable.) In short, what was unnerving was the feeling of being a participant rather than a spectator (the *theatron* is literally the viewing-area; see below on the root *thea-*). All tragedy reminds

us of evils, unless (as I discuss below) we side with those who think the audience congratulated themselves on being unlike the aberrant characters onstage. I do not take that view of tragedy or of this story.

Nor does the Phrynicus story define a distinction between myth and history. It is not true (though often said) that from then on, contemporary events were banned from the stage, and only mythical subjects deemed acceptable. *Persians* (472; the first extant tragedy) confounds that. After that, for sure, no other tragedy explicitly mentions a contemporary character or event. But a clear myth/history distinction does not hold. The dramatic characters are figures from legendary history.

What Aristotle says about history and tragedy has set many on the wrong path. Aristotle says that history (the written genre) describes particular, unique events that have happened, whereas tragedy generalizes as to the kinds of things that certain types of persons may say or do, based on their characters, that is. Tragedy, he means, infers events from character. It is actually the broader exploration of differences of character that he draws attention to. The distinction is not one between myth (fiction)

and history (real). History and tragedy, in Aristotle's words, present the same type of events.[16]

In fact, we often say that both Herodotus and even the hard-nosed realist Thucydides, the two great fifth-century-BCE historians, narrate episodes using a pattern of tragedy. Numerous examples could be cited, besides (for example) the thematic resonances of the concepts of fate, *nemesis*, and necessity (*anagke*). This is true. But it may help our view of tragedy if we also phrase this the other way around: tragedy is like history. "For them it [myth] was history."[17] There is a reason the two genres share certain themes and structure. Both display the unfolding of events in time.

After *Persians*, all the surviving plays are about subjects of legendary history. They are mythical in that myth (it seems) always involves gods (as does *Persians*). Naturally, the relations

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[16] Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451b8-12. Janko (1987, p. 92) presents two interesting reasons to temper Aristotle's supposed dichotomy: (i) the characters of tragedy were thought to be figures of history; (ii) he does not give "a true philosophical definition" of what "particular" and "universal" mean "in the context of human action." The issue of character is a part of Aristotle' s definition that has not been much discussed.

[17] David Asheri quoted by Oswyn Murray in *A Commentary on Herodotus Books I-IV* (Oxford, 2007), p. xiii.

of gods and humans are explored in different ways by different authors and works.

Aeschylus virtually invented drama as we know it (he added the second actor, according to Aristotle). *Persians* has been mentioned. The tragedy is less about the triumph of the Greeks than (arguably) the fall (reversal of fortune) of Xerxes' family and kingdom (seen from their perspective) through his own mistakes.[18]

Aeschylus' masterpiece *Oresteia* raises important issues for our understanding of violence in tragedy, and therefore of tragedy itself. *Agamemnon* (the first play of the trilogy) opens with the line, "I beg the gods to give me release from this misery." So says a watchman on the roof of the house (violence is implanted in this house of Atreus). When the sign arrives that his watch is over, that Troy has fallen to the Greeks, this news, however, brings not relief but greater troubles. Triumph turns quickly into tragedy as the returning hero Agamemnon is killed by his wife

[18] It is silly to argue whether *Persians* is a tragedy or not. Of course it is; see A.F. Garvie in his edition of Aeschylus' *Persae* (Oxford, 2009), pp. xxii-xxxii; Pucci (2002), xi. Discussion often focusses on the fact that tragic lessons apply to both Greeks and Persians in this play (with the *Iliad* in mind, again); I suggest another reason it typifies tragedy.

Clytemnestra. Violence begets violence. Shockingly, Apollo orders Orestes to kill his own mother, to avenge his father. The *Oresteia* asks, how can we ever end the cycle of violence? Furies (Erinyes), primitive deities, pursue Orestes to honor the mother's claims for blood-vengeance. The trilogy ends with Athena making peace. She establishes the first homicide court in the city of Athens and casts the deciding vote to acquit Orestes. She settles the Furies in Athens as tamed Eumenides ("kindly ones"). The goddess forged a civic solution to end the cycle of violence. While the main themes are clear, two large matters remain debatable.

Aeschylus himself offers a statement of what the violence of tragedy teaches. Early in *Agamemnon*, the chorus speaks of "Zeus who set mortals on the road to understanding, who made 'learning by suffering' into an effective law. … violent grace [favor, gift] of [from] the gods [comes]" (182).[19] Gods send

[19] Aeschylus, *Aga.* 176-178 and 182, trans. Alan H. Sommerstein (Loeb Classical Library, 2008) with my translation for 182 (δαιμόνων δέ που χάρις βίαιος; Sommerstein has, "This favour from the gods … comes, one must say, by force"). Robert F. Kennedy made this passage famous in his speech upon the death of Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will,

suffering upon humans, in the form of dramatic reversals of fortune ending in death (168-172). They do so for our own good. Can anything so deep be as simple as this seems? Readers have perhaps been too quick to see suffering as redemptive, a rather Christian view that subtly pervades even the newest theories. That is, the sacrifice of a victim (the scapegoat) becomes a means to a greater good. In recent criticism, this good is the social-political community; in a slightly older Hegelian-influenced view, it is human progress;[20] for some, it is an improved soul (of the sufferer). But is the sufferer the one who learns? Not here, not in the case of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra (but compare below on Sophocles). Who benefits? The spectators do. According to the chorus, knowledge of the spectacle of changes of human fortunes leads to wisdom, and wisdom is shown by singing praises of Zeus (*Aga*. 168-175). This wisdom is knowledge of mortality.

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comes wisdom through the awful grace of God." He quoted from a popular translation by Edith Hamilton, who obviously Christianizes the language.

[20] Along with those I discuss later, who take this as political-communal progress, Bernard Knox too writes, "Human suffering, in this all-embracing vision, has a meaning, even a beneficent purpose; it is the price paid for human progress." Knox (1964), p. 4. See next footnote.

The ending of the *Oresteia* has led to an overly optimistic reading of Greek tragedy. Many praise the resolution achieved by the Athenian civic order and generalize this in a political explanation of tragedy. The idea that the development of the three plays demonstrates the overcoming of suffering through the progression of both the individual and the state is a common one, evidently Hegelian but by no means confined to older critics (in whom it is more evident).[21] This is misleading. For one, such resolution is not typical of tragedies. Two, it acquiesces in the "sacrifice" and suffering of the individual victim (as just discussed). And it is fragile. Euripides later recognized this with jokes at Aeschylus' expense. In Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*, some Furies refuse to accept the verdict and pursue Orestes still! In Euripides' *Orestes*, Orestes kills Clytemnestra even though a

[21] John H. Finley, Jr., *Pindar and Aeschylus* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955), pp. 192-193. Coincidentally, Finley was an advisor of Helene Foley's dissertation (cited below in its book form). Finley's work on Aeschylus is pervaded with Hegelian language, e.g. "he sought the coincidence of private and public happiness"; "This optimism ... proclaims that the divine justice is realizable and at hand."; "The confidence of the West in morals and intellect" (p. 193); and other such sentiments (not only on the *Oresteia*).

lawcourt existed (he there refuses to take her to court for the murder of his father). Civilized institutions deal with but do not eliminate violence and suffering. Wisdom means to ponder on "violent grace" with the knowledge that human life is subject to time and pain and mortality. This wisdom can be called proto-philosophical (words used by the *Agamemenon* chorus are *prophronos, phronein*). As yet no salvific philosophical antidotes are offered (arguably). The lawcourt and the state of Athens manage the sociological problem of violence *but not the existential one*.

In Sophocles, we can understand this differently. Those who suffer do learn, sometimes. Oedipus survives to learn from his own sufferings. Even Creon does in *Antigone*. Oedipus is the paradigm of both suffering and of wisdom achieved. He was saved as a child, but "saved for the greatest evils" (1180). His birth (learning of his birth) is his destruction: literally, "This day (*hemera*) will engender you and destroy you." (438, the seer Tiresias speaking) The word "day" and the compound "ephemeral" ("of a day") best describe human existence, a point the chorus stresses (1186-1222, 1524-1530). Sophocles makes

clear that Oedipus' fate is that of everyman. Time itself is the enemy.

Is there a saving consolation or an antidote to suffering? In the "sequel" (so to speak) written much later, *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus has become a wise man. He receives an apotheosis. This is a more philosophical story. (Compare the contemporary story of Solon and Croesus in Herodotus, where Croesus survives a near-death experience and becomes wise through suffering.) But genuine apotheosis is a rare fate reserved for mythic heroes, not one available to ordinary Athenians. How does the audience benefit from stories such as this? Sophocles is usually thought to present tragic heroes as moral exemplars. One can find many a tragic chorus speaking this way: may I avoid such a fate. Such sentiments reinforce a democratic ideal of moderation. In fact, however, the word "*sophrosyne*" or self-control does not occur in Sophocles.[22] And Oedipus did not, in the big picture, suffer his fate because of his own actions. Oedipus' fate is more existential than a moral failing. The audience hears some advice about proper behavior – ethical,

[22] Knox (1964), p. 167 n. 20.

social and political moderation, let's call it – in the face of the awesome reminder of the violence of time, a universal and cosmic truth.

In *Women of Trachis*, Deianeira, the wife of Herakles, kills him, though unwittingly. She has a magic robe she thinks will remedy her pain[23] but it leads instead to the deaths of Herakles and herself. The supposed cure for suffering only leads to more suffering. Love and destruction are intertwined.[24]

In *Ajax*, Athena herself has driven Ajax mad. He has committed atrocities and in the course of the play commits suicide. Sophocles introduced the emphasis on the tragic hero, and spectators might think the plays show the fall of exceptional characters with larger-than-life failings. The stories do not end there, however. Much of *Ajax* takes place after his death and is taken up with discussion of what to do with him and how to judge him. A few plays of Sophocles deal in large part with how

[23] *luterion lupema*, l. 554.

[24] Other instances in *Trachiniae*: love, *eros*, drove Herakles to destroy a town in order to get a beautiful girl, Iole (352ff.). The girl's beauty was her destruction. Likewise, Deianeira said she had earlier feared that her own beauty would bring her pain (24-25). And the supposed love-potion proved destructive.

the characters respond to a death (*Ajax, Antigone*, Herakles' in *Trachiniae*) or a social death (*Oedipus at Colonus*, *Philoktetes*).

Euripides also wonders when sorrows will ever end. Near the beginning of *Medea* (in which Medea kills her own children, among others), the nurse laments, "But no one has discovered how music and songs … can put an end to men's [mortals'] hateful sorrows—which lead to deaths and dreadful misfortunes that overturn the house."[25] Art is not a remedy. Nevertheless this invites us to consider how art itself may be a way of expressing and dealing with omnipresent suffering (instead of being a means to another end such as political community-building). This too is found in Homer's *Iliad*: Helen, a cause of the terrible Trojan War, laments to Hector, "us two, on whom Zeus set a vile destiny, so that hereafter we shall be made into things of song for the men of the future." (*Il.* VI.357-8, trans. Lattimore) Such songs do not blot out the sorrows, Euripides says.

[25] Euripides, *Medea* 195-198, trans. by James Morwood in *Medea and Other Plays* (Oxford University Press, paperback, 1998), p. 6.

In Euripides, gods themselves sometimes send violence to mortals. We see gods doing this as characters, that is. This can be rather arbitrary (as it was for Oedipus). *Hippolytus* opens with the goddess Aphrodite (love?) promising to destroy Hippolytus because he does not honor her. She also destroys Phaedra for no reason. Most unusually, we see Hippolytus die on stage. Euripides presents this as deserved justice for him because he scorns women. Artemis in turn, at the end of the play, promises to destroy the next mortal Aphrodite loves. Equally or more shocking is the *Bacchae*. For refusing to recognize the god Dionysus, king Pentheus is torn to pieces by his own mother and other women, whom the god has driven mad.

Divine violence is not always justified or motivated by human agency. In *Herakles* the goddess Hera sends a goddess named Madness to cause the hero to go mad and murder his wife and children. No reason is given, no claim that the hero deserved this. Herakles had been good; now that he has ended his toils (his labors), Hera sends him a new one. Madness is the daughter of Night, so this might appear to be an irruption of a figure of primitive chaos. However, it is worse than that. Madness (the goddess) is reluctant to do the deed and wonders why Hera is so

harsh. It is more shocking that terrors come from the Olympian gods who uphold the order of our world. There is no escape. "The gods drive you back into the tragic condition."[26]

Zeus is once called, albeit bitterly, "savior of corpses": not saver or collector but savior (Clytemnestra at Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1387). The corpses remain corpses; to quote the Beatles' song, "No one was saved." Art has been mentioned as one possible, if imperfect consolation; imperfect, because art serves to remind us of terrors. Civic structures and moderate ways sometimes are advised, to soften the blows. But these too are subject to the violence of time. However, such a tragic view has not been at the forefront of recent understandings of tragedy. Dominant recent theories hold that theater, and ritual, and civic institutions, are ways of using violence to create order. I wish to offer a critique of some major recent theories that go back to Aristotle and Hegel.

III. Theories of Tragedy: Politics and the State

What do audiences get out of tragedy? Something serious. The word "theater" (*theatron*) comes from the Greek root *thea-* which

[26] I quote Vishwa Adluri (in conversation, June 2016). In the play, Amphitryon harshly denounces Zeus. Roig (2014) says the gods' intervention usually implies violence.

means "viewing." The same root underlies the word "theory" (*theoria*), whose Latin equivalent, "contemplation" (*contemplatio*), is related to the word "temple." We need not commit to any particular view of ancient gods or religion, or puzzle over that too much as introducers of the plays often do, in order to say, first of all, that tragedy, for both an ancient and a modern audience, was and still is an awesome, reverential encounter with mysteries of existence: violent death, reversal of fortune, suffering brought by time.

However, the academic trend has been to make Greek tragedy political. To some extent, Aristotle began this. His legacy for the understanding of tragedy has not been entirely beneficial.

Aristotle thought reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*) from good to bad to be the essential plot-type of tragedy. But he limited this in two ways we are not bound to follow.

Aristotle asserted that a tragedy must not show the misfortunes of good men, as this would be offensive (*miaros*).[27] Tragedy causes fear, he thinks, but it can't be *too* fearful or shocking. The reversal must be due to an error on the part of someone who is

[27] Aristotle, *Poetics* 1452b34-36. Janko translates "shocking"; S.H. Butcher (1907), "shocks us."

not extremely good or bad, but more or less average (like us), morally speaking. In other words, such a mistake is avoidable. As an explanation of why bad things happen, this is just too logical. Yes, what happens to the characters can happen to us; yes, Aristotle makes tragedy secular. But, while excluding gods as real agents, we should not forget they can serve as useful shorthand for what humans cannot control or comprehend: especially, the vicissitudes of time which carry suffering and death. In other words, things happen to everybody and it is not always because of a so-called tragic flaw or character flaw. Similarly, Aristotle's definition, that tragedy entails violence among family members, is too limiting.[28] He circumscribes human suffering too narrowly and defines it socially rather than existentially (likewise, he tames *eros* to *philia*, friendship).

Aristotle made suffering understandable and tragedy useful. By seeing plausibly presented mistakes on stage, the audience

[28] Aristotle, *Poetics* 1453b19-22. Of course, *philoi* means "dear ones," "friends," and translations usually convey this more general sense, but Aristotle's examples in that sentence all involve family members. How far this restriction (taken broadly, "friends") applies to all the tragedies, is debatable. Yes, *Persians* is as much about what Xerxes did to his people as what the Greeks did to the Persians; but in others, such as *Trojan Women*, the pain to family members comes as a result of what the title characters have suffered from enemies in war.

learned to avoid errors. Aristotle rationalized tragedy, he secularized it, he tamed it as part of an optimistic ethical-political discourse of good citizens, just as Athena had domesticated the Furies. Aristophanes in *Frogs* speaks of tragedy in the same way, that it teaches the Athenians.[29] He so justified his own comedies, in opinions expressed in the works themselves. One could argue that Aristophanes attributed to tragedy the view he wanted Athens to take of his own political satire. Comedy is more political than tragedy. To be sure, tragic performances do teach and do perform a civic function. It's significant that two great ancient authors think that and that sophisticated scholarship discerns that public role. What I'm exploring is getting behind the artistic, civic veil (so to speak) to reveal rather than delimit or overcome the terrors of human life.

Likewise, some responses prioritize the idea that tragedy teaches, by offering negative examples, the need for moderation, self-control (*sophrosyne*), endurance, justice (*dike*), or reason. The

[29] Aristotle: learn to avoid errors, avoid facing the worst (Halliwell 236-7). Aristotle praised works of "averted catastrophe" (Halliwell 235 n. 14, 236). Aristotle secularized tragedy: Halliwell's theme. Aristophanes said that tragic poets educate citizens: *Frogs* 1009ff., 1054ff.; he saw himself this way as a corrective satirist.

goal of watching tragedy is then to avoid violence and suffering, indeed to overcome tragedy. Ancient philosophy developed its own responses. Moralists, such as Socrates and the Stoics, taught self-control as a cure or antidote.[30] Highlighting this about the tragedies would miss the existential shock of violence in tragedy. Tragedy shows that life itself is violent and terrible. Does it function as a curative?

The consolation of art, I argue, is the reflection on mortality it provides through presenting horrors of life. Nevertheless, optimistic readings dominate in the past two centuries, based on two things: (i) that tragedy reflects a political hope for order in the community, or (ii) that tragedies are read with a Christian hope for redemption. Marcel Detienne writes of "the surprising power … that Christianity still subtly exercises on the thought of these historians and sociologists."[31] At stake, again, is more than

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[30] Marcus Aurelius 11.6 ("First, tragedies. ...") advocates this: these things will happen, don't be vexed, endure them as even the character has to. Halliwell 351-2 on a theory of catharsis (in Aristotle) as emotional fortitude. (There's also the theory, you'll feel better if you know others have suffered worse.)

[31] Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks* (English translation, Chicago, 1989), p. 20 (with p. 224 n. 85). Jacques Lacan said that when we ignore Hegel, he is always "sneaking up behind us" (quoted in Joseph McCarney, *Hegel on History* [Routledge, 2000], p. 5); that is, his influence is still present even when one does not realize it.

whether we historicize drama. Do we side with the suffering individual (e.g. Socrates) or with the ideology of a supposedly ordered community (Athens e.g.)? Do we admire Heraclitus' "all things flow" or the hope for permanence and eternity of Parmenides and Plato and Christianity (with its "eternal city")? Many discussions of tragedy still follow Hegel. Hegel took character out of the equation. Bad things happen to good people; it doesn't have to be their fault; we don't have to show that a character deserves a downfall. This is a useful advance over Aristotle. However, Hegel contributed two legacies I disagree with. Like Aristotle, he thought that tragedy offers a civics lesson.[32] Hegel used *Antigone* as his paradigm. He said the conflict in this play is between two loyalties, one to the family, one to the state. That is obviously partly true, especially of the opening of *Antigone*. But he read tragedy too politically. The main issue for him was obedience to the law; violence comes from the presence of divided loyalties to both the family and the state. In answer to the perennial tension between the individual and the group, resolution comes from having one law. The

[32] Schmidt (2001) p. 2, etc.

ethical-political goal is to build community by achieving complete harmony between individual and society.[33] Thus, the ordered state is a kind of salvation. Nature is left behind, although the Greeks still had contact with nature and this explains the conflicts in the tragedies and their dialectical fruitfulness.[34] Ironically, most scholars espouse a similar political reading of tragedy today; they glorify the *polis*, even while mocking Hegel's glorification of the state.

In the history of the German philosophy of tragedy, a central theme is the relation between the one and the many.[35] This actually corresponds to a religious issue (monotheism). In Hegel's teleological system, nature is left behind, and violence is ultimately overcome ("sublimated") through the triumph of the spirit ("god's nature," the Idea). This is an undoubtedly Christian

[33] On a Hegelian reading of Aeschylus, see footnote above on J.H. Finley, Jr.

[34] Hegel held that human life moves from nature to the state. The Greeks had a union with life, unlike the Hebrew transcendence exemplified by Abraham: George Steiner, *Antigones* (Oxford, paperback, 1986), p. 24. The *agon* (contest) represents contradictions in nature (at that stage of the development of the spirit).

[35] Schmidt (2001); Szondi (2002). Nietzsche works out the same theme.

scheme.[36] That is, violence in Greek tragedy, and contradictions in society, are part of our past. Tragedy is not about us. (Historicism can do that.)

Of course Hegel is the teacher of the arch-historicist, Marx. There is nothing inherently wrong with either Marx or historicism, where appropriate, and both may even be essential. I criticize giving pride of place to that method here because I wish to criticize the tradition of transcending tragedy through political community. Put another way round, paradoxically, a purely secular historicism misses what philosophies and religion and Greek tragedy seek to address: the parameters of mortal life and its subjection to higher forces (fate, gods, nature, birth and death, time). These (except for the gods) exist in a completely secular world. (This non-metaphysical seeming metaphysics is a challenge to explain, just as, philosophically speaking, a materialist is hard-pressed but bound to explain the mind as physical but different from the body. The issue is a similar one,

[36] Either quasi-Christian or an alternative Christianity, but nevertheless Christian. That the spirit leads to truth comes from Paul (McCarney, *op. cit.*, p. 18). Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, famously argued that all teleological philosophy of history comes from Christianity.

when it is a matter of keeping religious awe in a secular worldview.)

Durkheim himself, a founder of the sociological study of religion, explicitly sought in society something more enduring than the ephemeral individual.[37] Is society then the best lens through which to study the art of tragedy, which sings of ephemeral mortality? The ancient historian, Fustel de Coulanges, was a major influence on Durkheim. Fustel extolled "the omnipotence of the state" in ancient times; "the ancients knew nothing of individual liberty."[38]

Moving to the twentieth century, we find theories, colored by experience of two world wars and the Holocaust, that violence is endemic in human civilization. Sometimes this is accompanied by a utopian and Christian call for redemption (an end to violence). Thoughtful thinkers trace the story back to Homer and tragedy.

Simone Weil ("vay") (1919-43) wrote *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force* in 1940-41 in occupied France. This powerful essay defines

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[37] R.A. Jones in W.M. Calder III, ed., *The Cambridge Ritualists Reconsidered* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), p. 110.

[38] *The Ancient City* (1864 etc.), quoted by R.A. Jones, *ibid.*, p. 103.

violence as a force that acts on men from outside. She admires Homer for showing this: there are no winners; the use of force does violence to one's soul. Hers is a truly tragic vision: "thought cannot travel in time without encountering death"; "all are destined from birth to endure violence."[39] This is an admirably Nietzschean and existential view of tragedy; she does not argue that a violent fate is justified for some reason. Where she betrays her Christian bias, quite overtly and not subtly, is in her call for a solution: the Gospels.[40] That is: Greek tragedy shows life as it is, but we must overcome that history.

René Girard's (1923-2015) theories of violence are somewhat similar.[41] In works such as *La violence et le sacré* (1972) Girard

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[39] Weil (2003), para. 53, p. 59 and para. 34, p. 53. Weil said, "most of life takes place far from warm baths" (*ibid*. p. 46). The work was well known through the earlier 1945 English translation by Mary McCarthy.

[40] Weil also wrote *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks*. See Wolfe (2015), 417-18; Marie C. Meaney, *Simone Weil's Apologetic Use of Literature: Her Christological Interpretation of Classic Greek Texts* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

[41] Girard (1977) and (1987). See Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard* (London, 2004), Ch. 2 on the scapegoat. In *René Girard and Myth: An Introduction* (NY: Garland, 1993), p. 129, Richard J. Golsan attempts to dissociate Girard's theories from Christianity, on the silly ground that they preceded his conversion. After 9/11, Girard faulted Islam for lacking the cross: Girard in *Le Monde*, Nov. 6, 2001, cited in Frederiek Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy* (A&C Black, 2008), p. 146.

argued that violence, specifically the sacrificial killing of a victim (the scapegoat), establishes order in the community. That is: violence is political, deliberate, and founds civilization. Humans apparently introduce violence into the universe. How does this explain violence in Greek tragedy? The tragic hero is a problem to be expelled, a scapegoat killed to strengthen the community. Critics with reason see Girard as a Christian apologist. The sacrifice of Jesus, for Girard, ends violence. Someone who emphatically stated "truth comes from the Jews" might seem a paradoxical teacher about Greek tragedy.[42] In fact theories of tragedy are closely intertwined with theories of ancient sacrifice deriving from Robertson Smith and Frazer. I draw attention to the political claim: if one "scapegoat" is eliminated, all will be well. This marginalizes suffering and strangely legitimates violence. The victim is a means to a communal end.

This line of thought would seemingly applaud Athens for killing Socrates. Another criticism is that a Greek tragedy often contains no one tragic hero. Many people suffer in a tragedy and other

[42] Girard in 1973, using italics for emphasis in his original, quoted in Detienne and Vernant, *op. cit.* (1989), p. 224, n. 85 (see also p. 20). Foley (1985), p. 51 n. 63 cites Detienne's uncovering of the Christian bias in such theories, but still relies on Girard and Burkert.

people are left to ponder the events. We might look at each play and argue, who in it doesn't suffer? Tragedy can happen to anyone anytime. Salvation is elusive. The views discussed here are all teleological.

Similar theories were popularized by the most influential recent scholar of ancient Greek religion, Walter Burkert (1931-2015). Burkert related the suffering of a tragic hero to the act of violence in animal sacrifice. Animal sacrifice was a substitute for human sacrifice. (Deep in the background of modern theories of sacrifice and tragedy is the story in *Genesis* – also from legendary history -- of God commanding Abraham to kill Isaac.) His theory is flawed, but it has ruled the field for decades. He holds that killing is at the center of human society. Civilization brings increased violence.[43] After people kill an animal, they repent and wish to put the animal back together. He calls this (fancifully) an attempt at resurrection.[44] A Christian theme is clearly implicit, but never mentioned.[45] Here too we find a political *telos*.

[43] The growth of technology, mankind's use of tools, not natural instincts, caused more violence. Burkert (2001), p. 14.

[44] In the Buphonia festival in ancient Athens, the sacrificed ox is stuffed and harnessed to a plough; he calls this a "mock resurrection." Burkert (2001), pp. 13, 16, 33 n. 62.

[45] Years ago, Robert M. Price tipped me off to an implicit Christian bias in Burkert's works. The only place I have seen this mentioned by scholars is Detienne (cited above).

Sacrificing one victim -- say, Iphigenia or Antigone or Oedipus -- is a means to transcend to a higher common good. This must be repeated annually for the purpose of establishing order. Burkert does talk, in passing, of the ritual death in tragic terms: "the rites of sacrifice touch the roots of human existence" (*ibid*. 16); "man faces death" (17); "ritual that comprises the mystery of death" (19). This is structuralist language of killing as a meditation on death and (therefore) on life; the point of structuralism (generally) is to find a resolution of the posited binary opposition. Here death brings new life. But the victim is unceremoniously left behind. The community, incredibly, takes on the power of creating new life,[46] meaning not individual life but the renewal of the community, the state. Violence creates community: "the community is ... [held] together in the common experience of shock and guilt."[47] Burkert is not even sure what the gods have to do with any of this: "However difficult it may be for mythological and for conceptual reflection to understand

[46] He thinks that the community (and before that the paterfamilias) takes on the power of life with the power of death (*ibid*., p. 15) and demands repeated killing (pp. 18, 20). This is a revised version of J.G. Frazer's theory of the annual ritual death of the old king.

[47] Burkert (2001), p. 15. Foley (1985) applied Burkert to tragedy.

how such a sacrifice affects the god, what it means for men is always quite clear: community, *koinonia*"; "speaking about gods is a matter for poets--a highly unusual manner of speaking ...."[48] It is a problem that modern theories leave the gods out of Greek tragedy. Tragedy deals with cosmic matters beyond the human scale, of the kind that religion addresses: time, fate, destiny, death. Even for those of us who believe in a secular world, a sociological approach is not always sufficient. The parameters of human existence are defined by nature as well as by culture; the "big questions" are as much existential as social. Durkheim said that religion is a product of society. That does not mean that religion is *about* society. When we read that the story of the death of Hippolytus "may have functioned as a ritual narrative helping to prepare brides psychologically for marriage,"[49] we realize we are in the grips of a puzzling new myth-ritual theory characterized by social constructionism and functionalism. (Since the same story, of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, occurs in

[48] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (English translation, Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 58, 125. F.S. Naiden, *Smoke Signals for the Gods* (Oxford, 2013, p. 4), p. 4 calls Burkert "atheistic in method," but I think this applies only to his treatment of the Greek gods.

[49] Edith Hall, "Introduction" to Euripides, *Medea and Other Plays*, trans. James Morwood (Oxford University Press paperback, 1998), p. xviii, cp. p. xxx.

Genesis, although Joseph is not killed, what kind of historicism is this?) With or without gods, in understanding Greek tragedy it helps to maintain the existential awe that gods represent. Tragedy transcends the political. Violence ruptures the political community and forces us to face harsh truths of human existence. Expelling Oedipus does not make the city of Thebes and its inhabitants less tragic.

Froma Zeitlin argued that tragedies present Thebes (the house of Oedipus and Antigone) as a flawed city, unlike Athens. "Athens is not the tragic space."[50] (She presents many subtle examples, but, generally speaking, the iconic example favored by optimistic Hegelian critics is the final reconciliation in the *Oresteia*.) However true this may be (arguably), we must criticize this supposed Athenian self-image as a false ideology. But many critics do not go that far. They seem too congratulatory about communal order and overly idealize Athens. This again minimizes the existential element of violence, death and awe. Those belongs to bad cities which lack law and order and community. This distances tragedy, in the sense of the tragic

[50] Zeitlin (1990) 144.

nature of human life, not only from ancient Athens, which is cloaked in an illusion of permanence (Zeitlin speaks of it as a site of transcendence[51]) but from us, the spectators. Historicism perhaps tends to create this distance from past meanings. Ironically, in this and other cases, a transcendent and quasi-religious message is retained, but it is not the ancient Greek religion.

Ironically, the state (the *polis*) becomes the *telos*, but this particular *polis* gets a pass because it is democratic. In Nietzschean terms, society becomes a metaphysical solace. Other recent work speaks this way; we read that tragedy shows the "restoration of conditions" after some disabling predicament, and that Sophocles' works concern "inter-familial relationships which affect public status, property ownership, and the continuation of individual *oikoi* [houses]."[52] These are social, legal topics and conclusions. What kind of a god is Dionysus then? Does tragedy have "nothing to do with Dionysus?' It

[51] *Ibid.*, pp. 166-167. Recall here the myth of the "eternal city" (e.g. Rome and Paradise, the New Jerusalem).

[52] The words of Eleanor R. OKell (*sic*) and Sheila Murnaghan, quoted proudly by Carter in Griffith and Carter (2011), p. 13 in introducing their papers in the same volume.

seems he would be either a god of social personae or one irrelevant to tragedy. The idea that he is the god of masks, illusions, and transgression I find a little jejune as an explanation of tragedy.[53] Dionysus is a god of life and death.

All such theories imply a rather idealized conception of citizenship and community. Their philosophical roots going back to Hegel display an interest in the many being resolved into the one, with a clear Christian background of salvation through sacrifice, even though this notion becomes more subtle over time. After the Holocaust and two world wars, twentieth-century theorists came to terms with violence as a defining feature of human civilization; but most of these theories are marred by a political optimism deriving from Aristotle, Hegel, and Christianity. Sacrifice of a scapegoat ensures order (an idea deriving from theories of Hebrew and Greek sacrifice). The community trumps the individual. In fact, such modern theories seem to be acting with a prejudicial conception of what it means to be an individual (someone transgressive; perhaps someone acting from self-interest?). The community overcomes threats

[53] Simon Goldhill in Winkler and Zeitlin, eds. (1990), p. 128.

from private sources. I fear this teleological logic leads to a denial of suffering; more broadly, the city-state would be justified in executing Socrates, or Abraham in killing Isaac. How ironic that the trendiest theories today celebrate the group over the individual. A better solution may be found in the non-Christian, more individual (though not uncommunal[54]), self-styled Dionysiac, tragic thought of Friedrich Nietzsche.

IV. Alternative View Deriving from Nietzsche; Conclusion

Friedrich Nietzsche restored the tragic view of life in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). We don't need to accept all his theories, such as that every tragic hero represents the suffering Dionysus (sections 8, 10). Nietzsche surprisingly makes the Pentheus story beautiful (about merging with the Dionysiac universal oneness).[55] Perhaps all Nietzschean interpretation is

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[54] Richard Wagner wished to promote a return to community with his festivals and tragic operas. Nietzsche speaks that way in his Wagnerian first book, although I take community non-politically there. One sees this in talk of "universal harmony" and "a higher community" (*Birth of Tragedy*, section 1, trans. Speirs, p. 18). Julian Young has shown Nietzsche's interest in actual community, in his biography (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[55] He praises Agave and the "noble" maddened women of Thebes: "The Dionysiac World View" (1870 but unpublished then), in Nietzsche (1999), sect. 1, p. 124. He says Pentheus met his fate because he was enchanted by Dionysus (*Birth of Tragedy*, sect. 12; Geuss and Speirs Introduction, pp. xx-xxi.).

sympathetic paraphrase. It is important, however, that suffering happens to individuals, although it is experienced communally in the theater, and that Dionysus is a far deeper god. Generally speaking, Nietzsche drew attention to a view of the nature of existence, that is universal and prior even to the Olympian gods, and far different from the political and optimistic views I have described; he calls that kind of theory a "cultural lie" that masks "the genuine truth of nature," that destruction is eternal.[56] Dionysus, for Nietzsche, reminds us of the terrors of existence, namely, that everything that is born must die (sect. 17). Art enables "[r]ecognition of the terrors and absurdities of existence, of the disturbed order and the unreasonable but planned nature of events, indeed of the most enormous *suffering* throughout the whole of nature,"[57] by presenting these in a veiled form to make them bearable. Tragedy gives solace by allowing us to look into the abyss and survive, stronger. Nietzsche said, strive not to be happy but to live heroically (sect. 18). He wrote, "the problem of

[56] *Birth of Tragedy,* sect. 8, trans. R. Speirs (1990), p. 41. Destruction is universal, eternal: Silk and Stern (1981), pp. 266-67. On Nietzsche, see also Schmidt (2001), Ch. 5.

[57] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Dionysiac World View" (1870 but unpublished), in Nietzsche, ed. Geuss and Speirs (1999), sect. 3, p. 131.

existence" cannot "be altered or solved by a political event."[58] We are, he says, "tortured ... by the merciless necessity of having to live at all." Wisdom entails embracing "eternal suffering with sympathetic feelings of love" (sect. 18). Art provides a metaphysical solace; other imagined forms of salvation do not. Violent deaths in Greek tragedy, then, remind us that destruction is inherent in our existence, in the nature of the cosmos itself and thus in human nature. Dionysus is a fertility god (here I diverge from Nietzsche's language), and all such gods bear a close relation to death. Tragedy takes place in a theater adjoining a sanctuary of Dionysus; this location, and the plots of the plays which all concern myth, are sites where gods and mortals meet. Gods seem to be required in any definition of myth (arguably). If the subject-matter of the plays is mythic, myth is always religious.[59] Nietzsche brilliantly observed, in a polemic against a solely historical approach to religion, "the essence of religion

[58] "Schopenhauer as Educator," in *Unfashionable Observations*, trans. Richard T. Gray (Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 197.

[59] A Sophoclean chorus once famously asks, if we lose reverence for the gods, "why should I dance in the chorus?" (Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus* 896)

consists precisely ... in the power to create myths."[60] The presence of the gods in the tragedies (either as characters or, more commonly, spoken of) highlights the mortal nature of human beings subject to the vicissitudes of time. Time itself is violent. Violence is in the eternal nature of things. Tragedy shocks because violence happens with the gods watching and even participating (as in the *Iliad* and in the Indian *Mahabharatra*). Through art, drama presents shocking truths in a pleasurably acceptable form. It

is not enough to talk about the pleasure obtained by viewing, or supposed resolutions, or civic rituals and establishment of order at the expense of the individual victims.[61] This domesticates tragedy. Tragedy is more terrifying than that. It is useful to remember that art functions as an illusion, in a Nietzschean sense, that knowledge of suffering is a useful truth, that horrors

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[60]F. Nietzsche, *Unpublished Writings from the Period of* Unfashionable Observations, trans. by Richard T. Gray (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 157, Notebook 27[1], undated entry (Spring 1873), written against David Strauss' historical approach to Jesus.

[61] Foley writes that rituals create an "illusion" of stability according to Durkheim (p. 23), but then praises this order herself: the Greek gods "served to integrate man into the social order ... and into a sacred order." (34). Taplin similarly concludes that tragedy imparts "order to suffering" (see the last footnote below).

threatens to shatter political and cosmic order, and that the sacred itself causes shock. Tragedy provides a "corrective to civic optimism," writes Robert Parker.[62] Tragedy (like religion) concerns the highest solemnities of birth and death. The most shocking tragedies display violence in the family, the site of generation.[63]

Ancient Greek tragedies presents a philosophy of life. They remind forcefully that all mortals are subject to the vicissitudes of time. Whether the plays (and the dramatic festivals) contain a cure or antidote to suffering, in the nature of a moral, civic, or communal consolation, is a secondary question, because in the end there is no solution to death. A tragic view of life comes about by recognizing the prevalence, the eternity, of violence and suffering in human life. The problem of violence in drama is related to the problem of violence in religion.

We "learn from suffering," in the immortal words of Aeschylus (πάθει μάθος, *Aga*. 177). But what do we learn? We learn the necessity of suffering, death, and reversal of fortune. This is

[62] Parker (1997), p. 159.

[63] Cp. Schmidt (2001), pp. 95-98, on family, gender and generation as sites of conflict.

what Oedipus learned that made him holy in *Oedipus at Colonus*, and what Croesus learned in Herodotus' contemporary wisdom-story of Solon and Croesus. (The latter text contains the first certain use of the word "philosophizing"; we may call tragedy proto-philosophical.) Nietzsche said, art allows us to see these horrors without being destroyed. The civic setting makes safe and palatable the terrible truth for all mortal individuals. In Greek tragedy, attempts to escape from suffering only lead to more pain. Any real resolution to violence appears to be doubtful or transient. This is *not* violence whose purpose is to strengthen the community (the most common scholarly view today).

In fact, when people say, "the Greeks did not show violence on stage," this itself is an avoidance-strategy. It avoids the universality of violence. Characters in tragedy are "struck dumb" by what they experience.[64] So is the audience. Violent downfalls strike spectators with awe, horror, dread. The roots of existence are disturbingly anarchic, but not in a political sense.

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[64] E.g. Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 24, 385-6 (both by Deianeira). Man is *deinos*, terrible, awesome, in Sophocle's *Antigone*. *Oedipus* ends in terror, not justice: Kaufmann (248); Kaufmann also uses the words "terrifying" (236), "shock" (248), and speaks of terrors of human existence (161, 165).

Nor can we relegate violence in Greek drama to our past. Then it would not say much about us or the world we inhabit. We cannot congratulate ourselves that we have reached a higher law or resolution. Tragedy shows not law and the gods grounding political unions, but the dark roots of existence.[65] It addresses the individual ultimately (with ultimate truths), but in a safe group setting.

Of course, many more questions need to be explored about Greek tragedy. Why is an accidental death, such as that of Laius in *Oedipus*, not as tragic as that of Jocasta or Oedipus? (Or is it, but just not highlighted?) One answer, with Aristotle, is that character contributes to the downfall. Another way to say this is, violence has both internal and external causes: human nature shares some of the violent nature of the world. Even more generally, it seems that a character must be conscious of what is happening. That contributes to realization of the horror, for both the character and the spectators.

[65] "Culture ... rests upon a terrifying ground": Nietzsche. I use "roots" instead; Vishwa Adluri, a student of Reiner Schürmann's, showed me the difference between grounds and roots.

It is not my intention to draw any political implications (and I regret these may seem to go in a direction I do not intend),[66] but rather to argue for a tragic reading of Greek tragedy and of the world humans inhabit, against a widespread type of salvific politics or religion. If it is true that "the fundamentally destructive nature of humanity is ... at the heart of Greek wisdom,"[67] this tragic wisdom preceded the historically influential philosophical and political antidotes. Following Homer, the Athenian playwrights (and the sometimes tragic historians, Herodotus and Thucydides) showed the violence that comes with being born. They dramatize the horror of mortal life itself which necessarily entails suffering and death and is ever

[66] The historical-sociological approach is allied with a perceived progressive politics (this includes Hegel), whereas an alleged a-historical advocacy of "the tragic view of life" can be found today in conjunction with conservative politics. (And some would say the alleged denial or transcendence of politics is itself offensive.) This happens more when Thucydides is thrown into the mix in advocacy of war. For example: Victor Davis Hanson on "the tragic nature of our existence" in "Raw, Relevant History" in *The New York Times*, April 18, 1998, mostly about Thucydides; V.D. Hanson and John Heath, *Who Killed Homer? The Demise of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom* (NY: Free Press, 1998). Roger Kimball in his Foreword, p. xv to David Stove, *What's Wrong with Benevolence*, ed. Andrew Irvine (NY: Encounter Books, 2001), likewise criticizes the allegedly politically correct orthodoxy: "The idea that some evils may be ineradicable is anathema [to them]." For me, existential and social evils are different questions.

[67] Hansen and Heath, *ibid*., pp. 206. I do not draw the lessons about war that Hansen does.

subject to the violence of time.[68] As Nietzsche crucially said in *The Birth of Tragedy,* and as ancient Athenian playwrights inscribed in the first dramas, this is good to know.

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[68] Oliver Taplin (1990) praises Nietzsche, e.g. "tragedy demands that we see and hear the worst" (4), and pessimistically titles a chapter "No sex is safe sex." However, he himself (much like Foley, cited in a footnote above) concludes somewhat optimistically about the value of learning from tragedy: "the order and significance it imparts to suffering"; "it gives the hurtful twists of life a shape and meaning ... which can be lived with" (1983, p. 12 and 1985, p. 124). Sommerstein says, a bit flippantly, "the recognition that it *is* a rotten, stupid world" (2010, p. 169); Parker, "tragedy's recognition that the worst can indeed happen" (1997, 160).

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