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Seminar

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Nietzsche and The Greek Tragedy

Before[1] we begin to explore Nietzsche's persuasions regarding Greek Tragedy, we must first understand the sense of two elements fundamental to this issue, and the ramifications which they present. I refer, of course, to the Dionysian and Apollinian forces, which united together made possible the creation of the Greek Tragedy.

Dionysian and Apollinian, the very names themselves present us with concrete images. Likewise, our first task will be to gain an understanding of these forces in as unambiguous and unwavering a manner as possible; this though to the perhaps paradoxical end of a realisation that these two concepts have no real existence outside the esoteric, at least in Nietzsche's sense, that they must retain the body of the abstract in our considerations.

To begin: Nietzsche's preliminary statements equate the Dionysian and Apollinian realms to those of music and the plastic arts respectively. These comparisons, in themselves, are complete, yet there exists still a certain vagueness. We must then contemplate them, as Nietzsche suggests, from a new angle, where we find the former becomes intoxication and the latter, dream images.

The effect of the Dionysian then is creation of that pervasive state into which we pass whilst raptured, captured by music. That hypnotic universe which sees a vanishing of self, which destroys awareness of our empirical reality and, as well, that of time. To seek out the firm footing of example, it is that place into which dancers

[1] Quotations, will conform to the following method of reference:
N.: Nietzsche, Birth of Tragedy.
A.: Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound/
S.: Sophocles, Oedipus Rex.
E. Euripides, The Bacchae

tumble, where, if we might resort to cliché, the dancer and the dance become as one. It is that place into which musicians take retreat, and into which an audience might find itself, whence the material world becomes something akin to a distant memory. It is a domain foreign to bearers of logic and sobriety, whose affinities lie in quite a different area:

The Apollinian realm. A world of images, of mere appearance, as Nietzsche states it. The stalking ground of Socratic philosophers. Taken to its extreme, an Apollinionite might view reality itself as nothing more than an illusion, believing that a quite different reality lies beneath. We are confronted then with a worldly manifestation of Plato's shadowy cave, where suggestive images dance across the wall.

To search out a solid example of this we must bring in an element central the Apollinian concept: the "*principium individuationis*". This can be seen as the Apollinian in its purest state. It is the belief that all outside of the self is illusion, that the "I" is the one and only truth, that all else is counterfeit. This, of course, is diametrically apposed to the Dionysian emotions, which result in a forgetting of self. It is perhaps this which leads us to view ourselves as immortal, believing that accidents happen only to other people. Similarly, it is the Apollinian force which presents us with a perfect image of ourselves, where our friends may see our faults, but the individual sees only the picture perfect rendering of what thinks he is.

Now, with what should be a clear understanding of the Dionysian and Apollinian, and their opposite effects, let us now see how they apply to Nietzsche's view of the Greek Tragedy within the bounds of specific texts; and how, also, the elimination of the Dionysian, which we find in "Medea" and which was fostered by Socratic and Platonic ideas, saw the termination of this genre.

Aeschylus

"**Prometheus Bound**"

Nietzsche's claim that the chorus is of paramount importance presents us with a serious problem: Since the chorus is a typification of the Dionysian, which is therefore capable of producing a "forgetting of self" (N. 36), a oneness with all, and due to the very nature of the Dionysian—and particularly the way that it is manifest in the chorus—our search for evidence and components with this potentiality is *necessarily* in vain. As we explore this we shall come to understand that this is an unavoidable anomaly, for there are two factors to be considered which seems to both explain the anomaly and indeed, as I have said, necessitate it. The first is that we are reading a translation. The second is that we are reading.

In respect of the former, we find the words of the chorus, once poetry, are reduced to a mere skeleton of their former selves. What might be seen as the flesh of the verse—the poetic devices used by the Greek poet—is stripped away. In English, surely only the bare bones

remain. Translation of prose offers a poor substitute; translation of poetry results in an absolute negation of what was.

To consider the latter, we must understand the difference between the effect of writing and of oration, which is particularly obtuse in the context of poetry[2]. With the written word it is only the sense and meaning which can stir us. A poem recited offers all this and more: the emotions of the reader is superimposed, the timbre of the voices suggests other dimensions, the melody and rhythm is acute. It is therefore only when we imagine the words spoken out loud, and by the multi-voiced chorus, that we might find suggestion of the possibility of the Dionysian effect: a loosening of the tight grip of normal reality and consciousness. We must imagine the music of the many voices, singing, as it were, in unison, and taking us into the realm where man and nature are brought into union. This then is the "primal unity"(N. 36) of which Nietzsche speaks.

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[2] We might make note of Plato's comments in "Gorgias" regarding oratory, music and specifically choruses and dithyrambic poetry (G. 108-109), where he states that they merely "pander" to the audience and, since they serve no instructional value, are therefore of a low moral tone. Tragic poets, he says, play the role of orators within the world of the theatre, and since Gorgias is a condemnation of the orator, and the art of oratory is said to be no art but a "knack," we must conclude that the Greek Tragedies, of which Prometheus Bound is one example, are not indeed true works of art, at least according to Plato unusual criteria, for they serve in no way to ameliorate the health of the souls of those who make up the audience. From this we can see the implied understanding of the differences between the written word and the emotional vitality of the same spoken out loud.

In contemplating the Greek chorus we do best to think in terms of music, for this is the true Dionysian art, and poetry is, in these terms, a derivative of that art.

Translated words upon a page then are to the chorus what the transcribed score is to the orchestra.

We see now that it is the *spectator* who is "nullified in the presence of the chorus" (N. 59), not the *reader.*

It might be mentioned also that the Dionysian is not a realm open to all. To prove this we might consider the sober man who looks scornfully at a party of revellers—and goes on his way. Likewise, "know thyself and nothing in excess" (N. 46) are appropriate maxims for the Apollinian, and one who abides by these words might search in vain for the Dionysian, and finally conclude either that it does not exist or that it is an untrue and undesirable state. That we do not find the *Dionysian* chorus in the *text* of "Prometheus Bound," but only the poetic chorus, is then a paradoxical proof that it could very well exists.

What then can we say of the chorus, as it appears *on the page*? Unfortunately, in "Prometheus Bound," very little. One offering we have though is the chorus' assistance in creating a different reality, the Dionysian reality, which proclaims itself in the Greek Tragedy as being one more fundamental and closer to the natural universal truth than that reality which we perceive as cultivated beings, and which contemporary dramatists emulate. In "Prometheus Bound" the chorus demonstrates immediately that the reality within the play is

altogether different from our empiric one. As they appear, as they speak, the chorus is both one and many:

"It is a *troop* of friends.

...let *us* come.

Swift speeding breezes have borne *me*."

This alternate reality is crucial to Nietzsche's concept of the Greek Tragedy.

"It [tragedy] could dispense from the very beginning with a painstaking portrayal of reality." (N. 58)

We shall now turn from the chorus and examine this other reality in more detail and from a different perspective.

A brief perusal of the character list at the start of "Prometheus Bound" is enough to indicate a scene embracing a different reality from that which we know. The air of Supernatural begins to blow before we even begin to read the text. The foundation of this new reality, "created in art, and sanctioned by myth and cult," (N. 58) is at once made evident.

Later we see the entry of Io. She is a victim of Zeus and presents an instance of the dual role of supernatural and the power of the Gods, whose rule is absolute. Appearing, as she does, in the changed form of a beast, we need not question if it *could* be, or if it *should* be, but simply accept that it is. The other reality is created, and we should not labour over the application of our morality to its context.

Greek Tragedy, in this instance "Prometheus Bound," shows man as a being of little worth, and the audience then is in no position to

judge, condone or condemn that which it sees. This is in diametrical opposition to the orientation of Euripides, (N. 77) as we shall later see.

The theme of justice in "Prometheus Bound" then is one which the audience must know yet not practice. Prometheus is at once guilty and innocent, and we are in no position to decide which. The pathos of his predicament is balanced by the possibility of Apollo's intent to wipe out man and begin something anew as being something better. Perhaps one is right and the other wrong. But who? We find ourselves observing the art and entering into it without the burden of logic to slow us down and trap us. Without the need to formulate the equation of right and wrong and to submit it to the contortions of inner dialectics. Without the need of rationale.

Prometheus: In their proud minds they saw no place for the trickery of intelligence.(A 11)

Though he is here speaking of the Gods, the sentiment applies most aptly to the audience.

Even the dialogue then, which Nietzsche states on 67 as being Apollinian, is, in a sense possessed by the Dionysian. The two are inextricably bound together.

As Prometheus foretells the fate of Io, we are taken still further into this reality in which the gods dominate; where the supernatural (three swan shaped hags with one eye between them, Gorgons and griffins) is the natural. Here Zeus is the absolute authority, and mankind must endure, for there is no other recourse. The Greek gods, as Nietzsche states, were "the embodiments of good and evil," (N. 42)

and appear "unaware of the difference." This seems true, and we should not err in concluding that the conflict between Prometheus and Zeus is a conflict between good and evil, for we cannot in all truth decide which of the two is *right*.

The Socratic argument in the Bacchae is one of rational considerations in opposition with savage Dionysian urges[3]. Compare this then to the hot spirited dispute between Prometheus and Hermes, (A. 29-30) where *feeling* is the only rule; where phrases and name calling viz. "self conceit," "your menial position," "You speak like a mad man," "you lackey," etc. are the basic rule. And if we should begin to mistakenly side with Prometheus, we should recall: "Prometheus: I am his debtor, and would like to pay him back." He is speaking of Zeus, and we see clearly the sentiment by which he is guided: revenge.

Sophocles

"Oedipus Rex"

As with "Prometheus Bound" we shall begin our examination of this text in regard to the chorus. It might be mentioned at this point that much of what was said of "Prometheus Bound" is also valid and

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[3] Nietzsche states that in "The Bacchae" Euripides came closest to writing a true tragedy, that it was perhaps a token gesture to right past iniquities. Despite this there are still examples of un-Dionysian elements, of which the argument alluded to is one.

pertinent in this case, and therefore our inquiry will accordingly prove more brief.

With all haste then we move once again to that alternative reality created by the Dionysian force as manifest by the chorus. Here we find yet another device, which though Nietzsche does not mention, is in the same vein, and therefore worth of noting. I speak of the effect of the strophe and the antistrophe. How far from our own contemporary drama—which serves the Apollinian end of creating a true to life image of the reality we know—is this. Again it is a enigmatic quality which is not present on the written page, but we must view in our minds eye the surreal and haunting effect of a single body now not only speaking as one, but moving also. It might perhaps be an exaggeration compare this movement to dance, but the unity of it certainly suggests that the exaggeration is minor and quite permissible.

And so, now we see that the paraphrasing of Schiller is indeed a most suitable summation of the role of the chorus, that indeed it does form:

. . .a living wall that tragedy constructs around itself in order to close itself off from the world of reality and to preserve its ideal domain and its poetical freedom. (N. 58)

Without forgetting the early point made regarding the translation of poetry, we might also remark upon the more abstract nature of the chorus' words to be found in "Oedipus Rex." The role here, though often active in terms of the plays plot, is also equally often an *addition* to that. The ambiguity and so the mystery is present to a

greater degree than we have thus far seen. All this, needless to say, serves the spirit of the Dionysian.

To turn from the chorus: Without going too deeply into the issue, we might conclude that the person of Oedipus is an expression of the Apollinian. This conclusion can be drawn from the likening of Socratic theory to the Apollinian, and the similarities between the former and Oedipus. In the character of Oedipus, we see a certain pride in the use of reason, and in fact that pride becomes a powerful driving force. Other evidence also is found when he admonishes the prophet Teiresias: "All things you say in riddles and unclear," (S. 128) which can be seen in terms of a dissatisfaction with the same ambiguity we find in poetry. This then ties in with one of the themes as stated by L.R. Lind in a preamble to Oedipus Rex, namely the error of setting human reason above obedience to the gods, which in turn is an aspect the Dionysian works to prevent.

Oedipus Rex is jam packed with possibility and ambiguity as to the role of fate as apposed to that of will.

"They were done by will, not fate;" (S. 146) says the messenger. If we conclude that his role is minor and that therefore his words should not be given too much credence, then we are missing the point entirely, as shall shortly be explained. Firstly we must search out any evidence which could support this idea, and indeed such is present:

Jocasta: An oracle came once to Laius. *I do not say from Phoebus himself, but from his ministers*.[4]

She goes on to recount the prophecy and this results in the baby Oedipus being thrown into the mountain wilderness. What we have then is a question of the authenticity of the prophecy. If we assume for a moment that the words of the oracle were not indeed true, then all that followed was indeed the result of will.

There is yet another possible reading of the messengers words. Perhaps when he speaks of "will" it is not free will which he implies, but the will of the gods. This brings about a subtle difference between fate and the will of the gods, the problematics of which shall not be ventured into in this paper.

Now, the point of all this possibility and ambiguity. It seems clear that we, as audience, are unable to find the source of Oedipus' misadventures, and therefore we cannot lay blame upon any ones doorstep. We cannot be sure if either Oedipus, fate, Apollo or indeed any other connected party is responsible for that which comes to pass. We *cannot judge*. This factor, you will recall, was also present in "Prometheus Bound," and is a fundamental part of Nietzsche's theory.

Euripides

Medea

As we attempt to prove that "Medea" is indeed no tragedy—at least according to Nietzsche's criteria—we shall in the process substantiate

[4] My italics

"The Birth of Tragedy" as plausible theory; and that the account of the death of tragedy is strong indication of that.

Firstly, to continue in a similar form, let us look at the chorus. Despite all that was said of the translation of poetic words, we see a distinctive difference between the Euripidian chorus and those of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Here we find no sign of poetic inclination neither in terms of form nor content. By form I refer to the manner in which the words are set out upon the page. The latter, of course, refers to the numerous qualities which differentiate poetry from prose; some of which are still evident in translated text such as those we have looked at.

The chorus here is to all intents and purposes nothing more than a character, in the manner of any other character. Further evidence of this might be the singular presentation of the "leader". It seems that Euripides saw the many voiced chorus something of a distraction to his *primary goal* (which we shall shortly arrive at), and chose frequently to have only one representative of that body speak out.

It might be seen then as the beginning of the end as far as the Greek chorus is concerned, and the truth of this will be made abundantly clear as we realise that the Euripidian drama is the forefather of modern drama in terms of the authors intent. [5]

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[5] Once again the juxtaposition of Socrates and thus Plato and Euripides is exemplified when we consider that The Republic is considered by many as the prototype of the modern novel.

Though I conclude my examination of the Euripidian chorus here, the brevity of this section should be seen as a concise presentation of fact which needs no further elaboration, and the importance of this new chorus—which is a modification by Euripides with the intent to eliminate all qualities of the Dionysian spirit—should not be negated by the reader due to consideration of the limited space I have deemed necessary for its expostulation.

It is certainly a Socratic inclination towards the validity (or perhaps more appropriately the invalidity) of poetic recital which lead Euripides to form this new chorus, but it was by no means due to a blind following of that doctrine which brought this about, but rather, as I momentarily hinted, because of the *primary goal* of Euripides. This will be the final concern of this paper.

Nietzsche states that Euripides merely copied reality, (N. 83) and that there was therefore no art involved. Though we shall not enter into a discussion upon the question of art, though Nietzsche might be seen as narrow minded in the extreme on this point, there is much we must consider in respect to the duplication of reality upon the stage, which was also referred to as a "mask" (N. 77) of reality, for it maintains only the un-Dionysian elements of "morality and world view," (N. 81) and thus excludes certain elements of the comprehensive reality, i.e. those related to Dionysian aspects of life.

Add to this "morality and world view" the idea that every man, the common man, was now able to see himself upon the stage, and that they are therefore competent to judge that which comes to pass, and we have

the essence of Euripides' *primary goal*: to demonstrate and thus educate. Euripides can accordingly be seen as a practitioner of social and political satire within the realm of drama.

There is certain problems to be overcome, when we read "Medea" in the terms stated above, in respect of its statements regarding sexism, which is no minor theme of the play. An example of this is to be found when we compare certain sections where contrary views are offered. We shall begin with the opening speech when the nurse announces:

And therein lies a woman's best security, to avoid conflict with her husband. (E. 33)

There are other occasions when the role of women is deemed a secondary one, and that it is fitting that they show obedience to men. The problem occurs when we see the opening speech of Medea, (E. 37) which is a spirited declaration of the awful lot of the female species, and the injustice therein. I ask then which of these two is the message? Is the feminist reading we might lean towards merely a product of our 20th century mode of thinking? Probably not, for a question of morality is initiated:

The world and morality are turned upside down. The hearts of men art treacherous. (E. 41)

These are the words of the chorus. As stated earlier they play nothing beyond the part of an ordinary character: they are part and parcel of the lesson Euripides bids we learn. "Woman kind will be honoured," they say.

Which ever might be the case in view of the possible 20th century reading we might unintentionally impose, we have demonstrates a keen

awareness of the simple human condition on Euripides part, which is further proof of the mirror image of reality he creates for the audience of "every man."

Another theme of social significance is the abuse of power.

The souls of royalty are vindictive; they do not easily forget their resentment, possibly because being used to command they are seldom checked. It is better to be used to living among equals. (E. 35-36)

Here we see from the words of the nurse yet another significant insight into the state of affairs, the injustice that existed and also a boldness on the part of Euripides. The conclusion of this self same speech brings us again face to face with the proximity of Euripides and Socrates:

"Moderation! Firstly the very name of it is excellent; to practice it is easily the best thing for mortals." (E. 36)

We now come close to the conclusion, and shall therefore examine the issues which lead to the down fall of Medea, and which, in typical Euripidian tradition, are interwoven within the field of social comment and education of the audience.

If any central theme exists, it might be that which can be contained within the single word: betrayal. This presents itself in many guises, two of which we shall consider in this final conclusion.

Medea's betrayal of her homeland (which itself was the result of yet another betrayal, namely that of her father) has ramifications

which at long last are realised. Nationalistic sentiment pertaining to this is expressed by the nurse, and she concludes "How sad a thing it is to lose ones fatherland." (E. 34). That she has no place to retreat compounds Medea's problems, and is part of the overload she experiences, which results in the terrible course of action she decides upon.

Nationalism again appears when Jason *reasons* with Medea, but this time we see the other side of the coin.

... you have your home in Greece, instead of in a barbarian land. You have learned the blessings of law and justice. (E. 44) Her denunciation of the king in a sense is a betrayal of the country which took her in.

I must admit at this point to a certain craftiness, for this "betrayal of nation" is of a very minor importance, though it has served to bring us, within the overall theme, to an important passage. The entire speech, of which the above was an extract, (E. 43-45) offers firstly, as we have seen, no small degree of irony. Such are the blessings of law and justice when neither can effect the moral crime of which Jason is guilty. Secondly, we have what appears to be something akin to an attempted Socratic dialogue. The leader of the chorus finally responds: "Jason, you arrange you arguments very skilfully." (E. 45) Of course, it is a second rate attempt for all parts of the speech are fatally flawed. Despite this we may say, with the full awareness of repetition, that Nietzsche's statement claiming Euripides' dramas were a mask of reality, as was Euripides himself,

and that it was the voice of Socrates who spoke through that mask is absolutely accurate.

We have seen how the compounding of troubles was the route to Medea's downfall. Before we arrive at the place of its final happening we shall turn to Jason.

It is the chorus who announces clearly the cause of his undoing. It is the betrayal of Medea and the abandoning of sacred oaths.

"Gone is the respect for oaths. Nowhere in all the breadth of Hellas is honour to be found." (E. 42)

Again do we hear the ghost of Socrates? The question of honour is reiterated by Medea:

"If you would have been an honourable man, you would have sought out my consent..." (E. 45)

It is this twofold betrayal that sees misery befall Jason: betrayal of Medea and of the code of honour which all men should abide by.

The final station on Medea's road to disaster is immorality. Irony serves well when the extreme of this immorality comes to be shown: Medea, not only incensed but out of her mind with anger and hurt agrees to a plan which would have Aegeus and herself commit the very crime that Jason and the Princess are guilty of.

Perhaps we should not be surprised that Medea escapes Jason, for her punishment, the torment of knowing that it was at her own hands that her children died will surely prove more agony than any sentence Jason might have imagined.

Justice.

Honour.

Morality.

We need go no further.

Much has been left out of this account of "Medea," which show yet more clearly the links between Socrates, as we know him through the Platonic dialogues, and Euripides. Never the less, the relationship has been firmly established, and where Socratic dictums reign supreme, then, like Medea, the Dionysian spirit is banished to a far off land.

Works Cited

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