The Spiritual Aesthetics of Greek Tragedy: A deductive analysis of Nietzsche's tragic

worldview.

INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

The aesthetic judgements of tragedy in the literary world had been dominated by

the Aristotelian, Roman neo-Aristotelian, and, eventually, the modern conceptions of

tragedy when Friedrich Nietzsche published his first of many influential works: *The Birth

of Tragedy*. The feature that sets this review of Greek tragedy apart from its predecessors

is that it is not a mere scientific analysis of literature but also an honest confession of the

limits of such an analysis. In fact, it seems that, *prima facie,* Greek attic tragedy is merely

being used as a means for Nietzsche to nourish and communicate his fresh philosophical

critiques. This is a plausible proposition as the use of art as a bearer of philosophical

meaning is not an uncommon occurrence amongst philosophers. Plato used Homeric

poetry; Martin Heidegger used Holderlin; and Michel Foucault used Rene Magritte.

There is nothing out of the ordinary here. What *is* extraordinary is the nature of

Nietzsche's evaluation of Greek poetry and the implications it holds for literary criticism

and scientific inquiry in general. He turned to the literary criticism of his day, noticed

problematic aspects of its system of research, and catalogued it in *The Birth of Tragedy* as

an inquiry into the problem of the scientific world-view. This is exemplified in such

passages as the following:

> What is the significance of all science, viewed as a symptom of life?… Is the resolve to be scientific about everything perhaps a kind of fear of, an escape from, pessimism? A subtle last resort against—*truth*?[1]

According to Nietzsche's thesis, the anti-pessimistic metaphysics, the assumptions of, what I shall call, the "neo-Aristotelian" literary *weltanschauung*, are insufficient grounds for understanding the significance and meaning of Greek tragedy (or, according to the reference above, "truth in general")— the deep psychological and theological issues that it attempts to portray, and the "tragic sense of life" that it, at least, originally promoted.

In effect, *The Birth of Tragedy* can be seen as one of the first deconstructive movements of the emerging post-modern philosophical world. On account of the paucity of veritable scientific "facts" about the historical context of Greek tragedy's genesis, a "scientifically precise" rendering of the history of Greek tragedy is nearly impossible. Even with the precious few tragedies left to us, the scholar must take many interpretive leaps to create a full historical picture of their context and meaning. In the context of this subject, there is a large open conceptual field within which Nietzsche was able to exhibit the veiled subjectivity of the criteria concerning what can be nominated as "verifiable scientific evidence". To put it crudely, Nietzsche believes that the "true" knowledge of the tragic is for the "poetic overman" to posses, not the plebes. I believe Nietzsche saw Greek tragedy as a window of opportunity to act against the modern scientific monopoly that was attempting to paint all mysteries as essentially "knowable".

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[1] Nietzsche, Friedrich. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. *The Birth of Tragedy and The case of Wagner*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 17-18.

In the spirit of Nietzsche's "artistic metaphysic", therefore, I will conduct a

smaller review of Greek tragedy and attempt to outline, for both my reader and myself,

the tragic aesthetic or "tragic worldview" in the greatest degree possible.[2] To do this I

will paint the tragic stage in the context of the historical facts left to us about the Great

Dionysian festival of Athens: its religious, political, and philosophical purpose in the

Greek polis. Then I will paint the stages of the three great attic playwrights: Aeschylus,

Sophocles, and Euripides within this framework and offer a metaphysical/theological

interpretation of each poet in accordance with the dialectic (or perspective) of Nietzsche's

tragic aesthetic.

THE DIONYSIAN TELEOLOGY OF TRAGEDY

The Dionysian element is essential to understanding Greek tragedy. The

proceedings of presenting Greek tragedy in the Great Dionysia begin, consist, and end in

the recognition and worship of the Bacchic deity.

The Dionysian festival was held inside the city of Athens, at the south end of the

acropolis in the sacred enclosure of Eleuthereus. This great feast in honor of Dionysus

would last for about five to six days.[3] The whole of Athens stopped for the Great

Dionysia: businesses and law courts were closed, and restraints from debt were forgotten

for these sacred days. Citizens, slaves, and some prisoners were released from their work

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[2] Even though this telos seems to counteract that which I believe Nietzsche to be saying, broad and simplified systematic explanations that cause an idea to be attainable for many are an "unavoidable evil" in every modern educational event. We must always keep in mind that my review, as such, is not the complete "truth" but should be realized as something similar to or a step on the way to understanding and truth. Taken as such, this paper has value only insofar as it communicates the extreme complexity and mystery of truth. In adding this addendum, I shall remain true to the spirit of the paper.

[3] Haigh, A.E. *The Attic Theatre*: Third edition edited by A.W. Pickard-Cambridge. (New York: Kraus reprint, 1969.), 7.

or prison stays, all for the sake of worshipping the great god Dionysus, enjoying the festivities, and the passion of the tragic stage.[4]

The first day of the festival was devoted to commemorate the mythical arrival of Dionysus' statue to Athens. This commemoration was conducted by means of a ceremonial *pompe*, i.e. procession[5], beginning in Athens at the Temple of Dionysus where the idol was kept. It was constituted by magistrates, priests, citizens, and poor alike. Most were dressed in their finest clothing and some in special religious garb such as gold ornaments, decorated masks, and brilliant robes. Others carried sacred objects like golden baskets full of offerings, ritual loaves of bread, and the sacred Bacchic phalluses.[6] There were a small band of soldiers brandishing shields and spears that guarded the golden image of Dionysus, and, I am sure, the rich statesmen and powerful citizens that proceeded in its shadow. Following after the idol was a band of *canephori*: young virgins bearing sacrificial instruments in baskets on their heads, and behind them was the long train of sacrificial bulls provided mostly by the state and rich citizenry. The tragic choruses and actors also decorated the procession with their striking costumes.[7] The grandeur of this *pompe* was one of the greatest spectacles of the entire festival.

The first destination was the marketplace where a chorus performed before the twelve statues of the gods. It was probably at this point that the *proagon* was held: i.e. the ceremonial presentation of the playwrights, the performers, and subjects of the plays to

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[4] Ibid., 1.

[5] Goldhill, Simon. *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy:* The Audience of Athenian tragedy. (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1997.), 55.

[6] Ibid., 55.

[7] Haigh., 8.

the public.[8] The *pompe* then progressed outside the city gates on the road to Eleutherae and traveled to the temple that was close to the Academy. Here the statue of Dionysus was placed on a pedestal and bulls were sacrificed.[9] The remaining daylight was spent here in *komos*, which is historically known as a "celebratory revel."[10]

A Greek *komos* was probably characterized by feasting, drinking wine, and dancing in honor of Dionysus. The *komos* ended in the evening, when it began to get dark. At this time, the *pompe* returned to Athens by torchlight and the statue of Dionysus was placed in the orchestra of the stage for the next day's performances.[11]

The opening of the theatre the next day was not bereft of the participation and display of the previous day's *pompe*. In the middle of the fifth century, the commencement of the theatrical competition was marked by four political and religious ceremonials. The first of these was a libation poured by the political figureheads and the ten generals that currently led the military. Next, citizens who had benefited the state in a laudable way were recognized and awarded a crown for their services. Third, a display of tribute from the states of the Athenian Empire was given to exhibit Athens' current political prestige. Last, the orphaned children of deceased Athenian soldiers who had died fighting for the state were displayed. These gladiator-children were educated at the state's expense and upon reaching manhood were presented in the theatre in full military dress where they publicly swore to fight and die for the state just as their fathers had done.[12]

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[8] Goldhill, 55.

[9] Haigh, 9.

[10] Goldhill, 55.

[11] Haigh, 9.

[12] Goldhill, 56.

Each of these ceremonials held special meaning for every class present in the theatre. A libation in honor of the religious unity of the state; a recognition of the common citizen; a display of the this unified state's power; and the statewide adoption of orphans probably left very few audience members as mere "spectators", yet still held the divisions between the common and the powerful in place. The powerful were known to be such and the less powerful were known as such as well without any explicit clash between the two. This was perhaps used to ingrain and exemplify the Greek virtue of moderation: of which one aspect is the ability to know one's place and fulfill it well.

After these initial proceedings, the tragedies and culminating satyr play of one poet would be performed. Then there was probably a break in the performances and the people would take leave for food and drink before returning to watch the comic plays in the afternoon.

Depending on the number of scheduled performances, the second through fourth or fifth days of competition followed the pattern of having a tragedy in the day, breaking for feast, and then a concluding comedy.[13] There was usually only one tragic poet shown per day.

Here, it is obligatory that we take care in analyzing the form of tragedy in order to recognize its place in a Dionysian teleology. The traditional tragic form was a series of two to four tragedies, all advancing the same theme and characters that found culmination in a concluding satyr play. Many scholars in the past took the Roman view of the satyr

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[13] Easterling, P.E. *The Cambridge Companion to Greek tragedy*: A show for Dionysus. (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1997.), 38.

play as something "thrown in," what Aristotle catalogues as *embolima*.[14] Aristotle sheds

more light on this term when he uses it in the following context:

> "The chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an
> integral part of the whole, and take a share in the action—that which it has
> in Sophocles, rather than Euripides. With the later poets, however, the
> songs in a play of theirs have no more to do with the Plot than that of any
> other tragedy."[15]

To put Aristotle's comments in context we must see that early attic tragedy was

made up of about two to four actors and a chorus of "satyr-like" characters ranging from

twelve to fifteen members. The satyr play, however, had one actor, which usually acted

as protagonist, and a chorus of fifty satyr-like creatures. The choral cast of the satyr play

had both the wild creatures of the tragic chorus as well as the individual heroes of each

tragic play. As Easterling remarks: "The chorus might indeed be made up of

entertainingly uninhibited creatures of the wild, but the heroes themselves were allowed

to retain their heroic dignity, and there was nothing of the hilarious obscenity and

grotesquerie of comedy in the way they were made to behave."[16] What is the point of

placing woeful tragic heroes into the midst of the dithyrambic madness and drunken

revelry of a satyr play? Here the Dionysian teleology proposes that it was to have the

audience take notice of the Dionysian blessings of, what Nietzsche calls, "primordial

release" and incite worship of the deity for his life-giving gifts by following suit with his

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[14] Easterling, P.E. *The Cambridge Companion to Greek tragedy*: Form and Performance. (Cambridge:
Cambridge, 1997.), 155.

[15] Aristotle. Trans. Ingram Bywater. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*: Poetics. (New York: Random House,
1941.), 1456a25-28.

[16] Easterling, P.E. *A show for Dionysus*., 38.

closest disciples.[17] In saying this, there comes to mind a whole host of subtle symbolism concerning the underlying thesis of the work that I shall explicate later.

The satyr play was a "release" from the painful tragic and Apollinian elements of life. The anticipation of this release, for the fifth century attic Greeks, must have reigned over the whole of the tragic dramas and been utterly excruciating in the context of a well-performed tragedy. What a revel it must have been for the Greeks to realize, in its fullness, the "existential release" that came in the form of the Dionysian intoxication. Nietzsche paints this point of the tragic format beautifully and I shall quote him at length:

> "Dionysian art, too, wishes to convince us of the eternal joy of existence: only we are to seek this joy not in phenomena (the tragic play), but behind them (the anticipation). We are to recognize that all that comes into being must be ready for a sorrowful end; we are forced to look into the terrors of the individual existence—yet we are not to become rigid with fear: a metaphysical comfort tears us momentarily from the bustle of the changing figures. We are really for a brief moment primordial being itself, feeling its raging desire for existence and joy in existence; the struggle, the pain, the destruction of the phenomena, now appear necessary to us, in view of the countless forms of existence which force and push one another into life, in view of the exuberant fertility of the universal will… we have become, as it were, one with the infinite primordial joy in existence, and when we anticipate, in Dionysian ecstasy, the indestructibility and eternity of this joy."[18]

The "metaphysical comfort" that the tragic stage offered to the Greeks was the anticipation of a "release" that colored the entire tragedy. It brought all true participants face to face with the primordial "will to existence." To the one that could comprehend the moment, there was no denying it in this context. The Dionysian element of tragedy (the anticipation) gave life to all phenomena of Apollinian existence. The attic tragic stage

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[17] Ibid., 39.

[18] Nietzsche, 104-105.

was, essentially, the perpetual "deepening" of the Athenian self-awareness and spirituality. The tragic stage was an existentially "life affirming" event in every aspect.

THE TRAGIC STAGE OF AESCHYLUS

Aeschylus is commonly known as the father of attic tragedy. He took the dithyrambic drama and created tragic drama out of it. Aeschylus' creation is the first of what Aristotle calls "the first step of changes that the movement of tragedy stopped on."[19] Aristotle describes Aeschylus' alterations to the dithyrambic drama as follows: "The number of actors was first increased to two by Aeschylus, who curtailed the business of the chorus, and made the dialogue, or spoken portion, take the leading part in the play."[20] Aside from setting the general form of tragedy, Aeschylus selected many of the themes and styles that later poets caricatured.

Aeschylus was indeed a religious thinker as well as a poet. Religious ideas deeply season his plays with the taste of Dionysian mystery. As Nietzsche says, "Aeschylus' interpretation of the myth does not exhaust the astounding depth of its terror."[21]

The first aspect that I will cover concerning Aeschylus' religious communication is his peculiar use of the tragic chorus. In Aeschylus' plays, with the peculiar exception of *Prometheus Bound*, the chorus took up about half of the dialogue.[22] This is probably because Aeschylus noticed the potent ability of the chorus to communicate mythical terror and bring the audience into a mode of participatory suffering rather than a mere

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[19] Aristotle, 1449a14-15.

[20] Ibid., 1449a15-18.

[21] Nietzsche, 70.

[22] Haigh, 285.

exegetical tool. A telos of the Aeschylean stage was to *create* an atmosphere, a "reality"

so to speak, by means of poetry, music, and dance. It is clear that this assertion may be

taken with incredulity because history has buried many of the facts concerning the tragic

stage. Yet, the remaining poems of Aeschylus within the context of the Dionysian

teleology offer a metaphysical framework that yields a cogent defense.

The chorus was situated in the orchestra, which was a large circular "pit" with the

statue of Dionysus placed in the center. The orchestra pit was level with the front row of

amphitheater seating and the chorus usually stood with their backs turned to the audience

around the center of the pit.[23] The chorus would stand silent and watching, in much the

same manner as the audience, until their queue was given. This was usually a queue to

face the audience and dance or perform a mime accompanying the *rehsis*, a long dramatic

speech, of a character.[24]

The use of dance and its communicative abilities in the culture of ancient Greece

were accentuated in performance much the same way that special effects are in modern

theater. Haigh describes wonderfully the ancient Greek's views and practices of dance:

> "The purpose, then, of ancient dancing was to present various objects and
> events by means of gestures, postures, and attitudes… The art was carried
> by the Greeks to its highest perfection, and a good dancer was able to
> accompany a song (and speech) with such expressive pantomime as to
> create a visible picture of the things described."[25]

The dance of the tragic choruses was called *emmeleia*, and was characterized by its grave

and majestic motions. In fact, this is one of the two art forms approved of by Plato for use

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[23] Ibid., 304.

[24] Goldhill, Simon. *The Cambridge Companion to Greek tragedy*: The Language of tragedy: rhetoric and
communication. (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1997.), 127.

[25] Haigh, 313.

in his Republic.[26] Although, for fear of haphazardly agreeing to connotations of the above

citation, we must keep in mind that in the Aeschylian stage the Dionysian anticipation

was always underlying all Apollinian art forms. Therefore, the phenomena of dance were

not taken as ends in themselves, but as Apollinian means to realizing the Dionysian

anticipation and intoxication.

With this in mind, we will discuss the chorus' ability to transform the audience

into tragic participants as they were without necessarily robbing tragedy of the necessary

teleological mystery. Aeschylus recognized the anticipation of the satyr play as tragedy's

most vital aspect. Therefore, the chorus would need to be able to affect the audience in an

intimate fashion. Aeschylus' chorus was close and level with the audience so that it could

effectively interact as a connective between the audience and the tragic characters on the

stage. We know from ancient records that Aeschylus' chorus was able to make people

mad with tragic despair. As well as terrify audience members into fainting spells, as was

the case when the furies in his Orestes plays first appeared on the stage.[27] Nietzsche

captures the Acheylean use of the tragic chorus well when he says: "Only we must

always keep in mind that the public at an Attic tragedy found itself in the chorus of the

orchestra, and there was at bottom no opposition between public and chorus: everything

is merely a great sublime chorus of dancing and singing satyrs or of those who permit

themselves to be represented by such satyrs."[28]

Essentially, the chorus is the "vision of the Dionysian mass of spectators" and the

Aeschylean stage was the tragic chorus' creation. The clarity of all Appolinian art forms

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[26] Ibid., 317.

[27] Ibid., 302.

[28] Nietzsche, 62.

were thus always left, ultimately, grounded in mystery. In Nietzsche's words, "The force

of this (theatrical) vision is strong enough to make the eye insensitive and blind to the

impression of 'reality,' to the men of culture who occupy the rows of seats all around."[29]

The Dionysian dithyrambic chorus was the womb of all Apollinian phenomena that

happen on the stage. Every idea, word, and speech delivered from Aeschylus' stage is

merely a reflection of the inherently mysterious dance and song given by the dithyrambic

tragic chorus. The chorus *is* the background, the only "reality", in the sense of *arche* or

first principle from which everything else is derived, of Aeschylus' tragic stage.

      This observation heeds a stark difference between Aeschylus and the two later

tragic poets, Sophocles and Euripides. The Aeschylian stage set was usually very

"primitive" in nature because it used little stage decoration, backdrop paintings, or

machines. It is very likely that the only backdrop used was a *skene*, which was merely a

large booth located in back of the stage with two or three doors wherein the actors could

enter or exit.[30] Again, his only exception was probably *Prometheus Bound*. Aeschylus

may have had a large rock or something of that sort put on the stage that simulated the

side of a high cliff. The majority of Aeschylus' "stage painting" was left to the imagery

delivered by the song, dance, dialect, and words of the chorus and the actors mixed with

the imagination and anticipation of the audience.

      Two stage machines that Aeschylus could have used are the *mechane*: a primitive

crane with a rope wrapped around a pulley and weights enough to support an actor's or a

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[29] Ibid., 63.

[30] Walton, Michael J. *The Greek Sense of Theatre.* (London: Methuen, 1984.), 46.

few actors' weight, or the *theologeion*: a tall platform that stood on the stage that was

frequently used to present deities or other elevated situations on, was also available.[31]

One good example of a place where he may have used a *theologeion* is in the opening of

the *Agamemnon*. We find the watchman "couchant upon the palace roof of the

Atreidae… still awatch for the signal-flame, the gleaming fire that is to harbinger news

from Troy and tidings of its capture."[32] If Aeschylus did use stage machines, it was a rare

occurrence because of his effective use of the chorus and alliteration. He most certainly

did not use machines in the crass manner that Euripides later did.

The form of Aeschylus' plays was usually the three tragic plays followed by a

satyr play. Sadly, there are no complete Aeschylian satyr plays left to us. We have only

fragments. Still the imagery and language used in Aeschylus' satiric dramas are just as

complex, vivid, and beautiful as the Aeschylian tragedies left to us.

It is clear that Aeschylus understood the soul of tragedy and strove to uphold this

idea by creating beautiful and captivating themes within the bounds of the tragic

aesthetic. He understood that anything transgressing the boundaries of the tragic

teleology is *not* tragedy, but merely some other art form wearing the noble mask of

tragedy.

<u>THE TRAGIC STAGE'S EVOLUTION UNDER SOPHOCLES</u>

On the first occasion that Sophocles competed against Aeschylus in the Great

Dionysia of 468 BC, Aeschylus was defeated.[33] A new poetic voice was on the scene

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[31] Haigh, 209-210.

[32] Aeschylus. Trans. Dr. Herbert Weir Smyth. *The Loeb Classical Library*: Agamemnon. (Cambridge:

Harvard, 1963.), lines 4, 10-13.

[33] Walton, Michael J., 101.

with the abilities to take up the tragic mantle after Aeschylus. Sophocles, for the most

part, kept within the boundaries of the tragic aesthetic but brought changes that set the

stage for what Nietzsche calls the later death of tragedy.

The first difference from the Aeschylian stage, that is not necessarily a

stylistically or ontologically unacceptable one, is the move away from a poetic

visualization of "worldwide" tragedy to a focus on character development. Sophocles'

characterization is much subtler than Aeschylus' broad archetypes. The tragic suffering in

Sophocles' drama happens mostly in the souls of his individual characters rather than the

soul of a people group or community as in Aeschylus' dramas. We could say that

Sophocles sought to exhibit the tragic feelings of the common Greek individual as well as

the tragic sentiments of the individuals of higher classes. This focus on the universal

tragic sentiments of the subject was not a completely disagreeable step to the implicit

ontology and interpretive mystery of the tragic drama.

Sophocles also began to use stage machines more in his plays. The use of "more

advanced" stage scenery initiated the change of the tragic chorus' use in tragedy and his

most ostentatious turn against the tragic aesthetic. Sophocles frequently used a piece of

scenery called the *ekkyklema*. This was a small wooden platform on wheels that would be

rolled out from behind the *skene*. On it would be a scene that had taken place off stage:

e.g. to show the murdered victims with bloody instruments of death laying next to them

as in the *Agamemnon* when Clymenstra reveals the corpses of Agamemnon and

Cassandra. [34] The use of such machines was good in one aspect and maleficent in at least

two: good in that it did allow for a greater amount of shock value by offering easy access

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[34] Haigh., 202.

to the suffering of an individual character in his or her time of tragic revelation by making the story more candid. This was also harmful to the nature of tragedy insofar as it held a strong confidence in the ability of plastic phenomena to communicate the "higher ideas" and inner secrets of man in a verifiable way, and that it took the focus off the mysterious ground of the tragic story found in the music and symbolic gestures of the chorus as the main medium of storytelling.

Replacing trust in the word with trust in the visual phenomena transgresses the tragic aesthetic insofar it shows incredulity to the validity of myth as encountered in the form of spoken word and attempts to replace this mode of narration's implicit epistemological hierarchy that necessarily offers clear "answers" to few and intoxicates the minds of most with its mystery. Nietzsche seems to trace the roots of the modern lust for evidence that appeals to the sense of sight and is easily accessible, in other words the paradoxical "easy-truth", back to this phenomenon as the first devastating manifestation of the Apollinian spirit against Greek tragedy.

Indubitably, a implicit paradox exists in the work of Sophocles that reveals Sophocles' failed attempt to escape the aforementioned Dionysian epistemological hierarchy of the tragic aesthetic. As he questions the ability of words to communicate the deeper aspects of the individual human spirit, he uses them more for the communication of this inability. The abilities of language are a common theme in both Sophocles' and Aeschylus' poetry, but the problem is given center stage in Sophocles' work. A good example is in his *Philoctetes* when we are introduced to the un-deceitful heart of Neoptolemus and his foil Odysseus who believes "Mightier than deeds is puissance of

tongue."[35] Odysseus sees nothing wrong in tricking Philoctetes out of his treasure, the

bow of Heracles, by using a subtle force of the tongue the Greeks called *dolos*, or guile.[36]

In the end, Odysseus persuades Neoptolemus into tricking the naive Philoctetes with a

few subtle lies and wining the bow of Heracles. Before too long Neoptolemus' ethical

scruples catch up with him, but it is too late for Philoctetes does not trust Neoptolemus'

seemingly good deed and turns the bow away with a sentiment that is very familiar to our

modern ears: "Such thou wast, No less fair-spoken, when thou wert about to steal my

bow, black treachery in thy heart?"[37]

In addition to the lack of communicative inability exhibited here, it also reflects a

growing mistrust of the tragic stage's ability to set the tone of communication in the polis.

No one in this time *spoke* Homeric Greek. It was the business of the tragic poets to

"retell" the ancient myths in the current dialect of the people.[38] Sophocles does not seem

to be rejecting the myth as the basis of Greek communication but he is indeed

questioning its validity. In this aspect, we can interpret the story of Oedipus as

Sophocles' self-portrayal. In the same way that Oedipus realizes the inevitability of his

fate by means of the seer's prophecy, Sophocles became infinitely resigned to the need of

myth for any understanding and also why he does not completely reject the bounds set by

the tragic aesthetic.

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[35] Sophocles. Trans. Storr, F. *The Loeb Classical Library: Sophocles II*: Philoctetes. (Cambridge: Harvard, 1963.), line 99.

[36] Goldhill, Simon. *The language of tragedy: rhetoric and communication.*, 143.

[37] Sophocles. *Philoctetes*., line 1271-2.

[38] Goldhill, 129.

THE SACRELIGEUOS HANDS OF EURIPIDES

It took more than the efforts of one man to kill such "sublime plaything" as Greek tragedy. Since tragedy was born of what I shall call the cultural-will, the one thing that could herald its end would be the change and delusion of the cultural-will. Therefore, I will not say that it was the work of Euripides alone that caused the death of Attic tragedy, but rather the cultural influence of Socratism (what Nietzsche portrays as the beginning shades of the methods of modern scientific and philosophical inquiry) and its aesthetic, of which Euripides was the mask. The tragic aesthetic and the aesthetic of Socratism are incommensurate. The acceptance of one will necessarily bring about the death of the other.

Nietzsche describes the essential elements of the Soctratismic aesthetic as follows: "To be beautiful everything must be intelligible… Knowledge is virtue."[39] The powerful opposition this aesthetic holds to the "Dionysian mystery" and any "metaphysical comfort", i.e. unfathomable comfort, is clear. Nietzsche interprets Euripides desire to mix this doctrine with the art of Attic tragedy as the consequence of the delusion of the myth and its telos in the context of the tragic stage and its being replaced by a scientific optimism that says man can know and conquer all things—the Baconian "*Scientia est potentia*".

First, I would like to note that Euripides was a good writer. He had the gift of telling stories and composing verse well. What Euripides missed was the will of the tragic aesthetic. Instead, Euripides exhibits the will of the hopeful skeptic.

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[39] Nietzsche, 83-84.

Reminiscent of Sophocles, Euripides' focus was on re-creating the complex

emotional responses of the everyday person in a realistic way.[40] However, unlike

Sophocles, Euripides was a hard-line "realist." Euripides' use of stage machinery such as

the *mechane* and *theologeion* were much more frequent. In fact, the use of stage

machinery began to take a central place in the plot of the play. This use of machinery in

the plot came to be known as the *deus ex machina,* i.e. the use of a god placed on a

platform or some other machine to rescue characters from hopeless situations. When

Euripides came to an insurmountable problem in the course of his play, he did not turn to

the meta-expectation of the Dionysian release for comfort but rather to the *mechane* to fly

in a god and save his heroes. The regularity of such acts is recorded by Plato's comment

that when faced with a problem the poet merely needs to "have recourse to the *mechane*,

and suspend their gods in mid-air."[41]

As a result of Euripides' vulgar use of the method *deus ex machina*, the essential

purpose of the tragic chorus was lost. No longer was the chorus an independent entity or,

to use an analogy, boundary separating the spectator from the tragic stage and offering

intoxicating mystery to all whom dare partake. Instead, they were reduced to a mere

spectacle and expletive tool: a piece of eye candy to fight off boredom and confusion.

The spiritual chorus was gone. Nietzsche says that this is one of Euripides' most

disastrous alterations to tragedy:

> "...It is sufficient to say that Euripides brought the *spectator* onto the
> stage. He who has perceived the material out of which the Promethean
> tragic writers prior to Euripides formed their heroes, and how remote from
> their purpose it was to bring the faithful mask of reality onto the stage,

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[40] Walton, Michael J., 127.

[41] Haigh, 215.

will also be aware of the utterly opposite tendency of Euripides. Through him everyday man forced his way from the spectators' seats onto the stage; the mirror in which formerly only grand and bold traits were represented now showed the painful fidelity that conscientiously reproduces even the botched outlines of nature."[42]

Tragedy in the writings of Euripides no longer sought to communicate the necessity and primordial importance that the myth holds in communicating the mysterious and monstrously frightening characteristics of life, i.e. the *metaphysical* aspects of life. In doing this, Nietzsche charges that Euripides necessarily undermines any value that tragedy attempts to give to everyday life because the primordial nature of the will to the Dionysian release is cut out of the picture. Thus one necessarily begins to lose sight of the mystery of the will and asks itself "What beyond the material is left to will for? What is left to love that is metaphysical?" In other words, any and all transcendent meaning to life is lost.

The proper use of tragic chorus is an essential element to tragedy because the death of the "spiritual chorus" is the announcement of the death of myth, and, overall, the death of poetry. Nietzsche writes, "Tragedy is dead! Poetry itself has perished with her!"[43] While Euripides was able to compose moving verse and interesting stories, the aesthetic will of his work was anti-tragic.

The aesthetic mode of Euripides does not allow one to be satisfied with the beauty of mystery. Instead, one must theorize and construct meaning, no matter how vulgar and harmful, over every mystery that life holds. This seems to have a profound parallel with the scientific modes of investigation found in most modern and contemporary analytic

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[42] Nietzsche, 77.

[43] Ibid., 76.

philosophy, e.g. the positivists and neo-positivist. Nietzsche says of such a mode of investigation, "…because you abandoned Dionysus, Apollo abandoned you."[44] We can also see that the subtle semantic paradox that was first seen in Sophocles is grown to dominance in Euripides' verse—that words seem to have no meaning beyond empirical use (i.e. the use of referencing things) and all use of "non-denoting" phrases in the empirical sense are utterly meaningless.[45] As Euripides writes "Zeus, whoever Zeus be, for I know not save by report."[46]

After Euripides, the telos of tragedy, according to Nietzsche, was for the most part lost to the Greeks. The epistemological centrality of the myth and mystery was a thing of the past. How far is too far to go in scientific inquiry? How clear and accessible are the "deeper" mysteries of life? Is it more harmful to actually "solve them" or, at least, fool ourselves into thinking that they are solved? It is true, if you dig too far down into the garden you will lose site of the important parts: the fruit—the manifestations of *life*.

However, let us return to the subject at hand. What is the value of Nietzsche's evaluation of Greek Tragedy? The evaluation seems to hold much insight into the nature of Greek culture and the nature of the early theatrical stage. It also seems to indicate the importance of having a beauty of mystery in the context of every scientific inquiry. In aesthetic judgement, mystery and sublimity are usually some of the greatest aspects and indicators of beauty itself. How to approach the mysterious in aesthetic judgements is one of the main points that can be drawn from Nietzsche's book. Mystery must be appreciated as it is in order to be truly "understood". If there is any disturbing the waters,

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[44] Ibid., 75.

[45] A good exhibition of the distinction made here is found in *On Sense and Nominatum* by Gottlob Frege.
[46] Haigh, 346.

so to speak, of the mysterious then it is necessarily destroyed rather than learned. The mysterious is to be approached as something that one wants to understand as it is without changing it. The mysterious must remain mysterious insofar as aesthetic judgement is concerned otherwise it is lost. One can "understand" the mysterious as it is and not "solve" it. In this initial work, this seems to be the way that Nietzsche would like science to be conducted. In order to conduct scientific inquiry in this fashion calls for a dramatic paradigm shift. It must be performed more in the spirit of the humanities than the traditional modern sciences—a call for more of a conglomerated "picturing" or "depicting" of the world as is seen from many points of view that do not continually overthrow each other on the basis of better clarity for the purpose of yielding a greater power over nature. Yet, these thoughts lead us too far afield. This subject can be better investigated in the context of other thoughts. However, we can see that the answers yielded in Nietzsche's analysis of Tragedy seem to hold to and promote these standards and methods of aesthetic and scientific judgement.