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Nietzsche and the Death of Tragedy: A Critique *

WALTER KAUFMANN

I

The idea of "the death of tragedy" goes back to Nietzsche. He did not only proclaim, first in *The Gay Science* and then in *Zarathustra*, that "God is dead"; in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, we read:

Greek tragedy met an end different from her older sister-arts: she died by suicide, in consequence of an irreconcilable conflict; she died tragically. . . . When Greek tragedy died, there rose everywhere the deep sense of an immense void. Just as Greek sailors in the time of Tiberius, passing a lonely island, once heard the shattering cry, "Great Pan is dead," so the Hellenic world was now pierced by the grievous lament: "tragedy is dead! Poetry itself has perished with her! . . ." (sec. 11)

In the first half of the twentieth century, it was Nietzsche's discussion of the *birth* of tragedy, and of what he called the Apollinian and the Dionysian, that established the fame of his first book. The so-called Cambridge school in England developed his ideas on this subject, and a host of scholars accepted them by way of Jane Harrison's and Gilbert Murray's books. But Gerald Else has contested their theories and argued for a different hypothesis.¹

Since World War II, Nietzsche's discussion of the death of tragedy has become more influential, and his ideas have become almost a commonplace. It will be one of the central points of the present chapter to show that these popular ideas are untenable, regarding the death of both *Greek* tragedy and tragedy in our time.

One of the systematic flaws of the popular argument is that one type of

* The present chapter consists of passages excerpted from Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1968), sections 34, 37, 38, 40, 48 and 50, reprinted by permission of the publisher. All translations from the German and the Greek are by the author, excepting several instances from Homer's *Iliad* where the translation is by E. V. Rieu. In such cases, the reference given first is the page number from his Penguin translation (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1950), then the book and verse numbers of the original Greek version.

¹ Gerald F. Else, *The Origin and Form of Early Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965).

tragedy is treated as if it were the only one; when writers speak of the death of tragedy they usually mean that no tragedies like *Oedipus Tyrannus* were written after the fifth century B.C., or are being written in the twentieth century. But Sophocles himself, once he had written *Oedipus Tyrannus*, wrote no more tragedies like it: neither *Philoctetes* nor *Oedipus at Colonus* ends in catastrophe, and *Electra* ends on a note of triumph. Even in *Ajax* the hero's suicide occurs at line 805, and most of the remaining 555 lines are concerned with the question of whether he is to receive a hero's burial or not, and in the end he does. In other words, of Sophocles' extant tragedies, only three end tragically.

My argument might be countered as follows. Although Sophocles was older than Euripides, both died in 406—Euripides a few months before Sophocles. If Euripides was responsible for the death of tragedy, or if he at least embodied the spirit of a new age in which tragedy was no longer possible—and this is Nietzsche's thesis—it stands to reason that Sophocles, particularly in his old age, during the last twenty years of his career, was infected, too.

Nevertheless, the admission that Euripides' tragedies were not really tragedies and that Sophocles, too, wrote only three bona fide tragedies would reduce the whole notion of the death of tragedy, either around 406 B.C. or in our time, to the absurd—unless we could introduce Aeschylus at this point, saying that *he* was the creator of tragedy and that we must turn to his plays if we want to know what real tragedies look like. This is what Nietzsche clearly implies, and if this point could be sustained his argument would not be absurd. For in that case we could say that Aeschylus' seven extant tragedies are the paradigm cases of the genre to which Sophocles contributed three great masterpieces before he, like Euripides, succumbed to the essentially untragic outlook of the dawning fourth century.

The facts of the matter are, however, quite different. Perhaps in large part because so much philology is microscopic and pedestrian, those who aspire to deal with our subject philosophically go to the opposite extreme and take it for granted that it would be sub-philosophical to dwell on particular Greek tragedies. As a result, the philosophical dimension of Aeschylus and Sophocles remains unexplored—in *The Birth of Tragedy* no less than in the *Poetics*. Hence it never struck Nietzsche, or those who have refurbished his thesis in our time, that the very attitudes they associate with the death of tragedy are found preeminently in Aeschylus.

Nietzsche's account of the death of Greek tragedy is diffuse, flamboyant, and shot through with interesting ideas. Instead of offering a detailed summary and lengthy polemics, let us stress three central themes. Nietzsche repeatedly calls the new spirit of which tragedy died "optimism"—and this he professes to find not only in Socrates but also in Euripides, along with a delight in dialectic and an excessive faith in knowledge. The passage in which he attributes "the death of tragedy" to optimism and rationalism will be quoted and discussed below; for the moment, it will suffice to link these two motifs with a third that helps to clarify

the other two: the faith that catastrophes can and ought to be avoided. If men would only use their reason properly—this is the optimistic notion of which tragedy is thought to have perished—there would be no need for tragedies.²

I will argue that this was the faith of Aeschylus. Euripides, far from being an optimist, was indeed, as Aristotle put it, albeit for different reasons, “the most tragic of the poets.” Aeschylus was, compared with Sophocles and Euripides, the most optimistic: he alone had the sublime confidence that by rightly employing their reason men could avoid catastrophes. His world view was, by modern standards, anti-tragic; and yet he created tragedy.

On this perverse fact most discussions of this subject suffer shipwreck. How can we resolve the paradox? We should cease supposing that great tragedies must issue from a tragic vision that entails some deep despair or notions of inevitable failure and, instead, read Aeschylus with care.

One point may be anticipated: tragedy is generally more optimistic than comedy. It is profound despair that leads most of the generation born during and after World War II to feel that tragedy is dated; they prefer comedy, whether black or not. Tragedy is inspired by a faith that can weather the plague, whether in Sophoclean Athens or in Elizabethan London, but not Auschwitz. It is compatible with the great victories of Marathon and Salamis that marked the threshold of the Aeschylean age, and with the triumph over the Armada that inaugurated Shakespeare’s era. It is not concordant with Dresden, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. Tragedy depends on sympathy, ruth, and involvement. It has little appeal for a generation that, like Ivan Karamazov, would gladly return the ticket to God, if there were a god. Neither in Athens nor in our time has tragedy perished of optimism: its sickness unto death was and is despair.

II

Gilbert Murray said of Aeschylus: “He raised everything he touched to grandeur. The characters in his hands became heroic; the conflicts became tense and fraught with eternal issues.”³ After World War I it became fashionable to contrast our own paltry and unpoetic time with the great ages of the past, lamenting that the modern writer lacked that store of myth on which an Aeschylus and Sophocles could draw.

The Greeks did have many myths, but if Aeschylus and Sophocles had not brought off this feat, nobody could have said that these myths furnished good

² The last motif is more prominent in the twentieth century than it was in Nietzsche, though he did associate tragedy with the incurable.

³ Gilbert Murray, *Aeschylus: The Creator of Tragedy* (1940; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 205.

material for great tragedies or for serious literature of any kind. In his own genre, Homer could not be surpassed; hence it was pointless to retell what he had told. There were stories on which he had barely touched, like that of Oedipus; and one might well have thought that this tale would lend itself to treatment as a horror story or a comedy—certainly not to tragedy. Yet by the time Sophocles composed his masterpiece, he even had the added disadvantage that one of the greatest poets of all time—none other than Aeschylus—had preceded him in writing a tragedy on Oedipus, which was first performed the year after Sophocles had first defeated him in the annual contest, barely more than forty years before. Moreover, Sophocles wrote *Oedipus Tyrannus* in a city at war, its population decimated by the plague, its policies adrift in the contention among demagogues, its spiritual climate saturated with both superstition and enlightenment, its many moods including both an optimistic faith in reason and deep disillusionment. Had he not succeeded in becoming a great poet, he could easily have said that “the damage of a lifetime, and of having been born in an unsettled society, cannot be repaired at the moment of composition.”⁴

It may be objected that Sophocles was born long before the devastations of the Peloponnesian War. But when he was a child the Persians invaded and pillaged Greece before they were stopped at Marathon, about twenty miles from Athens; and ten years later they sacked Athens before they were beaten at Salamis—and the following year, they sacked Athens again, before their defeat at Plataea. After that, to be sure, Athens was rebuilt along with the temples on the Acropolis whose ruins we still admire, and she enjoyed unexampled prosperity—and precisely the well-being and smugness that are often considered the worst climate for artistic achievements and above all for tragedy. Yet it was in those years that Aeschylus created his extant tragedies and Sophocles, too, his early works, including *Antigone*.

Great art comes into being in spite of the age to which it is linked by its weaknesses. And Aeschylus triumphed not on account of the myths he could use but in spite of them.

Gilbert Murray has shown in detail “what raw material Aeschylus found to his hand when he set to work” on his *Prometheus*.⁵ First, there was a local cult in Athens “of a petty daemon called Prometheus, who was a trade patron of the potters and the smiths”; and what was related about him was “just the sort of thing for a cunning fire-dwarf to do; and so, of course, Zeus punished him.” But there was also another poet who had dealt with this material some time ago: the great Hesiod. Murray cites the relevant passages from Hesiod before asking: “Now what does Aeschylus make of this very trivial and unimpressive story? He drops the undignified quarrel about the dividing of the burnt sacrifice. He drops the

⁴ T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), p. 26.

⁵ Murray, pp. 19–26.

rustic wit about Pandora."⁶ And he answers his own question in part by finding in the tragedy "the will to endure pitted against the will to crush."⁷

What we have found in Homer about the slaying of Agamemnon and Orestes' revenge is certainly far from being trivial and unimpressive. Neither, however, is it fraught with eternal issues. What makes it impressive is more Homer's poetry than the plot. But that might have served as a warning against picking this theme: why choose an essentially unpromising tale that a previous poet whom everyone knows has already told and varied several times?

Aeschylus changed the story, feeling quite free to create his own myth. Without contradicting Homer he added what Homer had not said: that Orestes killed his own mother. He moved the mother into the center in the first play of his trilogy in which he dealt with the murder of Agamemnon. In the second play he let Orestes kill both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus at the express command of Apollo, but let the Furies pursue the matricide. And in the third play he presented the rival claims of Apollo and the Furies, showed them unable to come to terms, and brought them to Athens where Athene finally founded a new court and cast the decisive vote for Orestes' acquittal. Most of this has no basis whatever in Homer, and the plot of the last play may be almost entirely Aeschylus' own invention.

In *Agamemnon* Aeschylus does what many critics of modern playwrights consider a sign of bankruptcy and a warrant of second-rate literature: he takes a story already told by a very great poet and makes some changes in it. These will be considered in a moment. In *The Libation Bearers* he takes a terrible deed, matricide, not mentioned by Homer, and makes it the crux of the play. One can imagine a critic exclaiming, "First a pastiche and then outright decadence!" In *The Eumenides*, finally, we encounter in absolutely climactic form that rationalism and optimism of which tragedy is said to have died—and find them at the culmination of the greatest work of the so-called creator of tragedy.

A court is founded in Athens not only to adjudicate the case of Orestes, who is acquitted, but also to sit on all capital cases henceforth so that future tragedies like that of *The Libation Bearers* may be prevented; and the action closes with hymns of jubilation. In heroic times Orestes' vengeance was justified, but in civilized Athens a man in such a dilemma needs only to come to the Areopagus, and all will be taken care of without catastrophe. Men have only to learn to employ their reason properly, and their most terrible moral problems can be solved. In this respect, as in others, Athens has led the way, and the joyous choruses in the end celebrate the great triumph of reason and, patriotically, Athens.

One can imagine the outcry of intellectuals in our time at any poet's concluding a tragedy with such a show of patriotism, glorifying his own society

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

instead of exposing its dry rot—of which there was plenty in Athens, along with so much conceit and self-satisfaction that most citizens of the other Greek cities hated her. And Aeschylus sang her praises because he thought that she had an institution by means of which tragic dilemmas could be avoided!

A modern writer has said, voicing the common sense of his generation in his uncommonly vigorous prose: "Any realistic notion of tragic drama must start from the fact of catastrophe. Tragedies end badly. The tragic personage is broken by forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence. This again is crucial. Where the causes of disaster are temporal, where the conflict can be resolved by technical or social means, we may have serious drama, but not tragedy. More pliant divorce laws could not alter the fate of Agamemnon; social psychiatry is no answer to *Oedipus*. But saner economic relations or better plumbing *can* resolve some of the grave crises in the dramas of Ibsen. The distinction should be borne sharply in mind. Tragedy is irreparable."⁸

A page earlier we are told that, while "in the *Eumenides* and in *Oedipus at Colonus*, the tragic action closes on a note of grace," "both cases are exceptional." We have already seen that the conclusion of *Oedipus at Colonus* was not exceptional for Sophocles; none of his later tragedies ends "badly." We have also seen in the first section of the present chapter that the whole theory of the death of tragedy depends on Aeschylus.

It is not enough to say of *The Eumenides* that it "closes on a note of grace." It exemplifies the very view held to be incompatible with tragedy, namely that the conflict can be resolved by reason, by social means, by sound institutions like those at Athens.

A play like *The Eumenides*, if written in our time, would not be called a tragedy. Nor did Aeschylus write many, if any, tragedies in the modern sense of that word. Like most of his plays, six of his seven extant tragedies were parts of connected trilogies, and not only the *Oresteia* voiced the very temper of which tragedy is supposed to have died a few decades later, but the trilogies of which *The Suppliants* and *Prometheus* were the first plays gave expression to the very same experience of life. Scholars agree that both of these trilogies ended happily, not in catastrophe.

Only in *Seven Against Thebes* is catastrophe final, but Aeschylus goes out of his way to tell us that all of it, including Oedipus' tragic fate, could have been avoided but for Laius' "folly" (745 ff.); he had been told by the oracle to save his city by not having children. This version of the oracle seems to have been original with Aeschylus,⁹ and its introduction (or repetition) at this point in the final play

⁸ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New York: Knopf, 1961), p. 8. Similar statements by Nietzsche (much briefer) and Max Scheler (much less eloquent) are cited in secs. 58 and 59 of *Tragedy and Philosophy*.

⁹ H. W. Parke and D. E. W. Wormsell, *The Delphic Oracle* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1956), I, 299. Neither Sophocles nor Euripides retained Aeschylus' version.

of the trilogy tells us a great deal about Aeschylus' outlook.

In the case of *The Suppliants*, too, we need not go beyond the play that has survived to find that "as in *The Eumenides*, reason and persuasion are put forward as the proper principles of civilized life."¹⁰ In fact, the parallel is striking and extends to the crucial point: no sooner has the poet stressed the tragic dilemma of the king of Argos who must either deny asylum to the suppliant maidens, thus outraging Zeus, the patron of suppliants, or plunge his city into war with the Egyptians who pursue them, than he cuts the knot by having the king announce that he knows an honorable solution. Being a king of free men with fine institutions, he needs only to bring this matter before them, take counsel, weigh both sides, and take a vote. Once the citizens have voted to protect the suppliants, the issue is clear. And when the Egyptian herald says in his last speech but one, "the judge is Ares," the good king reminds him that, if the maidens were willing or could be persuaded, he would let them go with the Egyptians, but the unanimous vote decreed that they must not be surrendered to force. And what has thus been resolved by vote is the law and the voice of freedom.

In the *Oresteia* we gradually move from the Homeric age to the founding of the supreme court of Athens. In *The Suppliants* the spirit of Athens is boldly projected into the heroic past by a poet who clearly felt, having fought at Marathon, that if a free people resolved to resist aggressive force this was not morally problematic. In the Prometheus trilogy the same ethos is projected on a cosmic scale: in the surviving first play, the titan with whom we cannot help sympathizing defies naked force and threats; and to remove any doubt about this he is crucified by two demons, Might and Force. The crescendo of the last hundred and fifty lines in which Prometheus hurls his defiance of Zeus into the face of Hermes, the messenger of the gods, is indescribable. But when Zeus thereupon casts him into Tartarus that is the end only of the beginning; two more plays follow: *The Unbinding of Prometheus* and *Prometheus the Fire-Bearer*. On the basis of surviving fragments and many references in ancient literature, at least the outlines of the plot can be made out. Prometheus knew that Thetis' son was destined to be greater than his father, and if Zeus had followed through his plan of having a son with her this would have been his undoing. But Zeus and Prometheus come to terms: the titan reveals the secret and is set free—and then a great festival may have been founded in the titan's honor in the third play. If Gilbert Murray's reconstruction is right,¹¹ the analogy to *The Eumenides* is very close.

In any case, we may here recall a sentence from the *Iliad*: "Why do we loathe Hades more than any god, if not because he is so adamant and unyielding."¹² Pride wins Aeschylus' admiration, and he finds words for it more majestic than

¹⁰ Philip Vellacott in the preface to his Penguin translation.

¹¹ Murray, pp. 99 ff.

¹² IX.158 f.; sec. 29, *Tragedy and Philosophy*.

almost anyone else; but what must be learned, not only by men but also by titans and Furies and gods—Apollo in *The Eumenides* and Zeus in *The Unbinding of Prometheus*—is the willingness to reason with one's opponents and to come to terms. It is violence that makes for catastrophes that prudence could prevent; and in democratic institutions such prudence is embodied.

Plainly, Aeschylus himself embodied the very spirit of which tragedy is said to have died first in the ancient world and later, after its rebirth in Shakespeare's time, again in modern times. And yet Gilbert Murray voiced a view shared by scholars and critics generally when he subtitled his book on Aeschylus: "The Creator of Tragedy."

It might seem as if no more than Aeschylus' reputation were at stake. Suppose we simply said that most of his plays were not tragedies; that *The Persians* and *Seven* represent two early forerunners of tragedy, while the works of his maturity that we know—*Suppliants*, *Oresteia*, and *Prometheus*—represent an altogether anti-tragic spirit. Who, in that case, did write tragedies? We have already seen that Sophocles' last three plays were not tragedies in the narrow, modern sense either, and that only his *Antigone*, *Women of Trachis* and *Oedipus Tyrannus* end in complete catastrophe. And according to Nietzsche, tragedy died under Euripides' violent hands.¹³ Clearly, Nietzsche's reputation, too, is at stake; for from what we have found it appears that he was utterly wrong both about Aeschylus and about the alleged death of tragedy. And yet more is at stake. It has been said that it was "not between Euripides and Shakespeare that the Western mind turns away from the ancient tragic sense of life. It is after the late seventeenth century."¹⁴ What becomes of the ancient—or any—"tragic sense of life?" If the Greek tragic poets lacked it no less than Ibsen and the moderns, was it merely an Elizabethan phenomenon? And if some few of the so-called tragedies of the Greeks really were tragedies in the more exacting sense of that word, can poets without a tragic sense of life write great tragedies, if only occasionally? In that case, is there any close connection between the tragic sense of life and tragedy, and are there any good reasons for saying that tragedy is dead?

III

What Aristotle did to some extent, modern critics have done with a vengeance. He thought that tragedy had "found its true nature" when Sophocles wrote *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and in many passages of the *Poetics* he made this tragedy the norm. But this did not prevent him from arguing in chapter 14 that, other things being equal, the best type of plot was one that involved a happy ending.

¹³ GT, sec. 10, final paragraph.

¹⁴ Steiner, p. 193.

Most critics, as we have seen, have balked at this conclusion and tried to show, albeit unsuccessfully, that he did not really mean it. But there is every reason for believing that he did mean it, and that the great Greek tragic poets would not have taken offense at this preference.

Modern critics go much further than Aristotle in their single-minded admiration for Sophocles' *Tyrannus*. They postulate this one play, for the most part quite unconsciously, as the standard of true tragedy and feel uncomfortable with all Greek tragedies that are not very similar to it. They want a tragic hero, but *The Persians*, *Suppliants*, *Eumenides*, and even *Agamemnon* do not have one (four out of the master's seven); and in *The Women of Trachis*, in *Antigone*, in *Philoctetes*, and to some extent even in *Ajax* there is a dual focus. The same is true not only of *Romeo and Juliet* and of *Antony and Cleopatra* but also, very strikingly, of *Julius Caesar* and, in a different way, of *King Lear*.

Tragedies, alas, are not what they're supposed to be. Aristotle, living so much closer to the evidence, came far closer than recent writers to doing justice to the wide range of Greek tragedy when he said that tragedies are plays that evoke *eleos* and *phobos* but provide a sobering emotional relief. Such relief is obviously quite compatible with non-tragic conclusions. What is decisive is not the end but whether we participate in tremendous, terrifying suffering.

No poet before Aeschylus and hardly any after him equalled either his majestic, awe-inspiring poetry or the immensity of human misery he captured in it. His belief in progress through the use of reason has no parallel in Homer and seems basically untragic. His preoccupation with moral issues, which concern him more than individuals, points in the same direction. He is not interested in Agamemnon and Clytemnestra beyond what is relevant to what one might call philosophic issues; he does not dwell on Agamemnon's life or his adventures, on the queen's relation to him, her upbringing; he does not raise the question what it felt like to be the sister of the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen; nor does he care what became of Orestes. Aeschylus does not approach Homer's interest in his heroes, in their deeds of valor, and in hundreds of details: he is centrally concerned with justice. Yet it would be utterly absurd to say that Homer wrote a tragic poem and Aeschylus destroyed the tragic spirit. Aeschylus is more tragic than Homer and everyone else before him in his determination and ability to show *how* tragic life is without reason, compromise, and sanity.

Homer's radiant appreciation of the countless aspects of human experience distracts from the tragic element—that is irremediable, but there is so much that is beautiful and interesting; there remains the possibility of leading a short but glorious life; and telling and hearing of men who covered themselves with glory is exhilarating. For Aeschylus the tragic is remediable and represented as a foil for progress through the use of reason. But misery is no less great for having been avoidable. One might even argue that the belief in necessity spells comfort, while the sense that a catastrophe was not inevitable heightens our suffering. But at this

point Aeschylus does not insist on being metaphysical; he simply pictures suffering with a concentrated power, piling image upon image, overwhelming us with the whole weight of human grief, leaving a mark on our minds that no eventual insight, institution, or joy can wipe out. All the glory of the triumph at the end of *The Eumenides* cannot silence Cassandra's cries: they stay with us, like Prometheus' defiant anguish; they echo through the centuries and change world literature.

Tragedy is not what the philosophers and critics say it is; it is far simpler. What lies at the heart of it is the refusal to let any comfort, faith, or joy deafen our ears to the tortured cries of our brothers. Aeschylus believed, like Hegel, that though history was a slaughter bench, the monstrous sacrifices of men's happiness and virtue had not been for nothing. But the founding of the Areopagus does not erase Cassandra's anguish any more than the establishment of the state of Israel wipes out the terrors of Auschwitz.

To call the poet who created Cassandra an optimist would be grossly misleading; but to call the author of *The Eumenides* and *Suppliants* a pessimist would be worse. Admittedly, the Cassandra scene alone is not conclusive, although it ranks with Lear on the heath and Gretchen in the dungeon as one of the most magnificent and heartrending dramatic creations of all time. Nothing is more moving than a noble mind gone mad; and Aeschylus was the first poet to realize this. (The author of the First Book of Samuel did not depict the madness of King Saul in a comparable scene.) But if one had to call Goethe either an optimist or a pessimist, one would surely have to choose the former label, in spite of the dungeon scene; and Aeschylus' case is similar.

Optimism and pessimism are simplistic categories, and Nietzsche did us a disservice when, as a young man under Schopenhauer's influence, he introduced them into the discussion of tragedy. Unfortunately, others have accepted the suggestion that tragedy perished of optimism and faith in reason; but we have said what needs to be said about this as far as Aeschylus is concerned.

IV

We are brought back to Nietzsche and the death of tragedy. The step Aeschylus took from Homer's world toward the realm of the Platonic dialogue was far bigger than the further step in that direction taken by Euripides. It is even arguable that Aeschylus' interest is more purely philosophical than Euripides', considering the later poet's more intense concern with character and with psychology. Parts of Euripides' plays are certainly closer to Plato than anything in Aeschylus; for example, the scenes in which Clytemnestra in *Electra* and Helen in *The Trojan Women* are confronted with the charges brought against them and permitted to try to defend themselves. But no Euripidean tragedy as a whole is as close to Plato as the *Oresteia*, taken as a whole, or *The Eumenides* in particular. *The*

Trojan Women, for example, is far from being a particularly philosophical play.

The *Oresteia*, on the other hand, is preeminently about justice. Not only are Agamemnon and Orestes incidental to this larger theme, even the house of Atreus is. As the trilogy ends, the house of Atreus is out of the picture. The joyous conclusion celebrates neither Orestes' acquittal nor the passing of the curse from Atreus' house; both are forgotten when Orestes leaves the stage (777). The whole final quarter of the drama is concerned with the very matter that modern critics consider most incompatible with tragedy: the founding of an institution that will resolve conflicts by eliminating the causes of disaster, namely a court of justice.

I love and admire *Agamemnon* more than its two sequels, and Cassandra's scene above all; but this cannot change the plain fact that the first play merely sets the stage for Orestes' dilemma, which in turn allows the poet to pose problems about justice and to weigh different conceptions of justice. In no sense is the conclusion merely tacked on: like Homer and Sophocles and the builders of the Greek temples, Aeschylus was a master craftsman with a superb sense for architectonics. In retrospect it becomes perfectly clear, if it was not at the time, that Cassandra, too, confronted us with a conception of justice—not, of course, her own.

All this is as foreign to Homer as the conception of Cassandra as a prophetess; in the *Iliad* she is merely Priam's most beautiful daughter (XIII, 365) and the first to see Hector's remains brought home by her old father (XXIV, 699 ff.). Justice is of no central concern in the *Iliad*, and the question whether the Trojan or the Achaean cause is just does not agitate Homer. The vague poetic notion that there is some balance in human affairs suffices him. When Hector, having killed Patroclus, who had been wearing Achilles' armor, strips the corpse and puts on the armor, the Homeric Zeus says:

... For now I grant you your moment of power,
recompense for your not coming home from the battle
to Andromache—not she will take from you
Achilles' glorious armor. (XVII, 206 ff.)

The free rendering of Rieu puts the point as we usually do, "But you must pay for it" (321)—and falsely suggests that Hector has become guilty of hybris.

A more precise conception of justice is encountered in another passage, where Acamas, a Trojan, taunts the Achaeans: "Look at your man Prómachus, put to sleep by my spear, in prompt repayment for my brother's death. That is what a wise man prays for—a kinsman to survive him and avenge his fall" (269; XIV, 482 ff.). Any argument about this notion of justice would be totally out of place in the *Iliad*; but Aeschylus examines this very idea in the *Oresteia*.

Here, finally, is a passage from the *Iliad* in which justice is mentioned expressly. When Menelaus is about to take Adréstus, a Trojan, alive, as a prisoner to be ransomed, Agamemnon reproaches him: "'No; we are not going to leave a single one of them alive, down to the babies in their mothers' wombs—not even

they must live. The whole people must be wiped out of existence, and none be left to think of them and shed a tear.' The justice of this made Menelaus change his mind" (118; VI, 57 ff.). Or more literally: "he turned the heart of his brother, for he urged justice." One cannot imagine Aeschylus letting such a conception of justice pass unchallenged. Euripides later presented its inhumanity in his *Trojan Women*. But we have already noted that this play is less philosophical than the *Oresteia*; and we have found ample reasons for rejecting Nietzsche's notion that tragedy died at the hands of Euripides, as well as the popular variant that it was destroyed by the currents of thought and feeling that Euripides represented to Nietzsche's mind.

The question remains how in that case tragedy died, for it remains a striking fact that the fourth century evidently did not produce tragedies that could be ranked with those of the three masters, nor is Roman tragedy in the same class with fifth-century tragedy. Indeed, no tragedy at all was, for two thousand years after the death of Euripides and Sophocles in 406 B.C. What, then, happened in the fourth century?

At first glance, it may seem easier to say what did not happen. The demise of tragedy was not due to a changed attitude toward the gods. To be sure, Aeschylus had used the myths and figures of traditional religion, but not in order to shore up its ruins, and least of all to counter the iconoclastic spirit of the Greek enlightenment with miracle, mystery, and authority. On the contrary, he had attacked tradition. Even as Homer had found the language of polytheism ideally suited to a poem about war, Aeschylus, sublimating Homer's contests into moral collisions, had found that he could side against Apollo with Athene, and that he could blast Zeus through Prometheus.

A critic whose eloquence and erudition "almost persuade" has said that "tragedy is that form of art which requires the intolerable burden of God's presence. It is now dead because His shadow no longer falls upon us as it fell on Agamemnon or Macbeth or Athalie."¹⁵ This comes close to being an inversion of the truth. Did His shadow really fall on Macbeth? And are there not millions of believers today? And if one were a believer, what further evidence could one possibly require that His shadow has indeed fallen upon us?

Nietzsche, incidentally, associated precisely our age with His shadow.¹⁶ But more to the point, *Oedipus Tyrannus* does not require "the intolerable burden of God's presence"; neither does *Antigone*, nor *Philoctetes*. Indeed, in *Philoctetes* the outcome would be tragic but for the sudden appearance of a *deus ex machina*. And while the Delphic oracle is involved in the tragedy of *Oedipus*, the presence of the gods—not to speak of God—is not, and at the very least it is not indispensable. The

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

¹⁶ FW, sec. 108—included in my edition of GM (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 191, and in my *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1968).

situation in which Oedipus finds himself at the outset is preeminently tragic, and neither its genesis nor the development to the final catastrophe requires the supernatural. That adds a note of inevitability, but the keen sense that great calamities were not inevitable can be just as tragic. The gods can add great weight; but this can be achieved without "the intolerable burden of God's presence": witness *Lear*, *Othello*, or—the critic's own example—*Agamemnon*.

Tragedy requires no reverence for the gods, and it is doubtful whether Aeschylus had much of that. It would certainly be difficult to name many great poets who composed blasphemies to match Prometheus'. No less than in the *Iliad*, belief is out of the picture. Indeed the great tragic poets experienced traditional religion as an intolerable burden. Obviously, most poets during those twenty centuries when tragedy was all but dead had more religious beliefs than Aeschylus did—or Shakespeare.

To understand what happened after Aeschylus, we will have to consider Sophocles and, above all, Euripides. To wind up our consideration of Aeschylus and the death of tragedy, it will almost suffice to quote a remarkable but all too little known passage from Goethe's conversations with Eckermann. On 1 May 1825, not quite fifty years before the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Goethe contested "the widespread opinion that Euripides was responsible for the decay of Greek drama." His remarks are worth quoting at length:

Man is simple. And however rich, manifold, and unfathomable he may be, the circle of his states is soon run through. If the circumstances had been like those among us poor Germans, where Lessing wrote two or three passable plays, I myself three or four, and Schiller five or six, there might have been room for a fourth, fifth, and sixth tragic poet. But among the Greeks with their abundant productivity, where each of the Big Three had written over a hundred, or close to a hundred, plays, and the tragic subjects of Homer and the heroic tradition had in some cases been treated three or four times—given such an abundance, I say, we may suppose that material and content had gradually been exhausted, and a poet coming after the Big Three did not really know, what next.

And when you come right down to it, why should they? Wasn't it really enough for a while? And wasn't what Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides had produced of such quality and depth that one could hear it again and again without making it trivial or killing it? After all, these few grandiose fragments that have come down to us are of such scope and significance that we poor Europeans have been occupied with them for centuries and will yet have food and work enough for a few more centuries.

Amen.

Or is Goethe too serene? Was Nietzsche not right after all that there was a somewhat sinister development from Aeschylus to Euripides? He was. With the loss of the great war that had lasted almost thirty years, and the passing of Euripides, Sophocles, Thucydides, and Socrates, all within less than ten years, a great age

ended. The new generation that was born during and after the war had a different attitude toward life and suffering. War was no longer the glory of Marathon and Salamis, heroism seemed futile, and Euripides' skepticism became much more popular than it had been during his lifetime. Aeschylus came to appear somewhat archaic, Sophocles old-fashioned, while Euripides' mistrust of convention and pretension, his social criticism, and his pioneering tragicomedies (*Ion*, for example, and *Alcestis*) became paradigms for the new age. Gradually the confidence that had grown in the wake of Marathon and found its ultimate expression in Pericles' great funeral oration gave way to doubt and increased self-consciousness, and eventually the New Comedy replaced tragedy.

V

No other poet of the first rank has been underestimated as much as Euripides. It was his great ill fortune that nineteen of his plays survived, compared to seven each by Aeschylus and Sophocles.

The extant tragedies of the two older poets represent selections of what were considered their best plays. There is reason to suppose that most of their lost plays were no better than, if as good as, *The Suppliants* and *Seven*, or *Ajax*. Suppose Aeschylus and Sophocles were each represented by another dozen of such dramas, while Euripides were known to us only through *Alcestis* and *Medea*; *Hippolytus*, *The Trojan Women*, *Electra*, *Ion*, and *The Bacchae*!¹⁷

Like his two predecessors, and other major poets, Euripides should be ranked according to his best works. And we should also be grateful to him for his share in making possible Sophocles' best plays. All but two of Sophocles' seven were

¹⁷ Of these seven, *Hippolytus* won first prize, as did *The Bacchae* posthumously. *Alcestis* and *The Trojan Women* won second prize. *Medea* placed third in a contest in which Euphorion, Aeschylus' son, won first prize and Sophocles placed second. For the way in which the judges were chosen by lot, see Gilbert Norwood, *Greek Tragedy*, rev. ed. (1920; rpt. New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), p. 61. It is also noteworthy that the extremely wealthy and popular Nicias was often choregus, paying for the production, and he was never defeated (Plutarch's *Life of Nicias*, p. 524).

In antiquity ten of Euripides' plays were selected for school use, along with all of the surviving plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles: *Hecuba*, *Orestes*, *Phoenician Women*, *Hippolytus*, *Medea*, *Alcestis*, *Andromache*, *Rhesus*, *Trojan Women*, and *Bacchae*. Five of these are surely inferior to some of the other nine extant plays, which survived purely by accident, as they were close to each other in an alphabetical arrangement: *Helen*, *Electra*, *Heracleidae*, *Heracles*, *Ion*, *Suppliants*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, and *Cyclops*, the only satyr play that has survived in its entirety.

For the history of these manuscripts see Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, *Einleitung in die griechische Tragödie, unveränderter* [sic] *Abdruck aus der ersten Auflage von Euripides Herakles I Kapitel I-IV* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1906), chapter III; Norwood, *ibid.*, 21; Bruno Snell, "Zwei Töpfe mit Euripides-Papyri," *Hermes*, 70 (1935), 119 f., and Denys L. Page in the introduction to his edition of *Medea* (1938; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), xli ff.

written in competition with Euripides, whose influence is often striking. But the point is less that this influence is writ large in *The Women of Trachis*, *Philoctetes*, and elsewhere, than the infinitely more important fact that the younger rival, who was a great innovator, kept the older poet from getting into a rut. Sophocles repeats himself a good deal even in his extant plays; the marvel is that he did not copy his own successes even more, considering that four or five of his seven were written after he was seventy. Not only did the competition of Euripides and the presence of a master poet whose critical powers were second to none force Sophocles to be satisfied with nothing less than his very best, Euripides was also one of the most original dramatists of all time, and his new ideas provided never-failing stimulation.

The myth that tragedy died at Euripides' hands is thus almost the obverse of the truth; only one of Sophocles' masterpieces, the *Antigone*, antedates his influence. Nor was this influence what Nietzsche thought it was when he charged Euripides with an anti-tragic optimism. If there is a sense in which Aeschylus is more tragic than Homer, and Sophocles more tragic than Aeschylus, Euripides is indeed "the most tragic of the poets."¹⁸

Nietzsche's point is clear but nonetheless mistaken:

Socrates, the dialectical hero of the Platonic drama, reminds us of the kindred nature of the Euripidean hero who must defend his actions with arguments and counter-arguments and in the process often risks the loss of our tragic pity; for who could mistake the *optimistic* element which, having once penetrated tragedy, must gradually overgrow its Dionysian regions and impel it necessarily to self-destruction—to the death-leap into the bourgeois drama. Consider the consequences of the Socratic maxims: 'Virtue is knowledge; man sins only from ignorance; he who is virtuous is happy.' In these three basic forms of optimism lies the death of tragedy. For now the virtuous hero must be a dialectician; now there must be a necessary, visible connection between virtue and knowledge, faith and morality; now the transcendental justice of Aeschylus is degraded to the superficial and insolent principle of 'poetic justice' with its customary *deus ex machina*. (GT, sec. 14)

Here the relationship of Euripides to Socrates and Plato is inverted, and both the poet's historical significance and his philosophical dimension are totally misapprehended. There is no evidence that Euripides was under the spell of Socrates, as Nietzsche claimed, and there is every evidence that he did not accept the three Socratic dicta of which Nietzsche says: "in these three basic forms of optimism lies the death of tragedy."

An intense interest in arguments and counterarguments is present in Euripides, but there is not the slightest reason to attribute it to the influence of Socrates, that of the Sophists will do. It should also be recalled how much of this is found in

¹⁸ Aristotle's *Poetics* 13: 53a.

The Eumenides and, not quite to the same extent, in *Antigone*. While the superabundance of dialectical fireworks in some Euripidean tragedies dissipates our tragic emotions, it usually illustrates the futility of reason, its inability to prevent tragedy.¹⁹ At this point, Aeschylus is infinitely more optimistic than Euripides.

Aristotle says that Euripides was criticized for having more tragic endings than the other poets.²⁰ To have had more than Aeschylus cannot have been difficult, but evidently the surviving nineteen plays give a misleading picture of the way most of his tragedies ended. Of the seven that most critics would probably agree in calling his best, four end in catastrophe; the two earliest, *Alcestis* and *Medea*, are, however, no less relevant. The former ends happily, but was performed in lieu of a satyr play. While it provides some laughs at the drunken Heracles, it was, no doubt, incomparably more tragic than any satyr play. The portrait of the king is anything but optimistic, the less so if we recognize it as a cutting attack on the men of that, and not only that, time. His wife, Alcestis, belongs with Antigone and Deianeira and foreshadows Euripides' later heroines who die for others—few critics question that the Sophoclean Deianeira was profoundly influenced by her. Admetus needs someone to die for him, or he will have to die; he eagerly accepts his wife's self-sacrifice, and then feels that others should feel sorry for him because he has lost his wife. Eventually, Heracles brings her back from the underworld, but it is difficult to find any optimism in this play; rather is it a bitter tragicomedy, perhaps the first one ever written, and quite possibly the best. It is doubtful whether anybody before Shakespeare wrote a tragicomedy that merits comparison with *Alcestis*.

Medea, Euripides' earliest surviving tragedy, ends with a *machina*, but hardly with "poetic justice." Having killed her husband's new wife and slain her own children, because they were also his, the triumphant sorceress flies off, unscathed. Where is virtue? Where happiness? Where optimism? What makes the play great, apart from the poetry, is, once again, the telling attack on the callousness of men, the poet's subtle understanding of the feelings of a woman, his insistence that barbarian women wronged suffer no less than other human beings, and his probably unprecedented portrait of impassioned jealousy. *The Women of Trachis* might well show the influence not only of *Alcestis* (438 B.C.) but also of *Medea* (431 B.C.) and possibly even of *Hippolytus* (428 B.C.). We cannot be certain whether Sophocles meant to counter the younger poet's Phaedra and Medea, or whether Euripides felt provoked by the idealized portrait of Deianeira and resolved to show the Athenians how a jealous woman really feels. Either way,

¹⁹ Cf. John H. Finley, Jr., "Euripides and Thucydides," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 49 (1938), 43: "Both Thucydides and Euripides lost faith in debate, although both, it must be added, were molded intellectually by it." Also E. R. Dodds's introduction to *Bacchae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944), p. xliii: "There never was a writer who more conspicuously lacked the propagandist's faith in easy and complete solutions."

²⁰ *Poetics* 13:53a.

one might say that Sophocles portrayed people as they ought to be, Euripides as they really are.²¹

We have previously discussed *Hippolytus* and *The Bacchae*:²² neither they nor *The Trojan Women* fit Nietzsche's account of Euripides' untragic optimism. The point is not that Nietzsche was devoid of insight; he scarcely ever wrote on any subject without noting something interesting. The few exceptions are comprised by cases in which he repeated the prejudices of earlier writers, for example, about women. The opinion, widespread at one time, that in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche vilified Socrates cannot be sustained, and it is odd how regularly those who have made this charge have simply ignored the vehemently anti-tragic outlook of Socrates' most famous pupil, Plato. But Nietzsche was exceedingly unfair to Euripides, falling in with an old prejudice against that poet, which Goethe already had attacked. The most relevant passage from Goethe's conversations with Eckermann has been quoted above; here is another: After noting that classical philologists have long ranked Aeschylus and Sophocles far above Euripides, Goethe said: "I have no objection to the view that Euripides has his flaws." But he felt outraged by August Wilhelm Schlegel's treatment of Euripides: "If a modern man like Schlegel should have to censure flaws in such a grand old poet, decency demands that he should do it on his knees" (28 March 1827).

A passage in Goethe's diaries (*Tagebücher*, 22 November 1831) is more extreme. Exactly four months before his death, he jotted down these words: "I reread the *Ion* of Euripides to be edified and instructed again. It does seem odd to me that the aristocracy of the philologists fails to grasp his merits and, putting on traditional airs, subordinates him to his predecessors, feeling justified by the buffoon Aristophanes. . . . Have all the nations since his day produced a dramatist who was even fit to hand him his slippers?"

²¹ Aristotle ascribes this remark to Sophocles himself (*Poetics* 25: 60b).

The date of *The Women of Trachis* is utterly uncertain. Cedric H. Whitman, *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951), p. 48, stresses its "unmistakably Euripidean flavor" and the influence of *Alcesteis*, but dates it rather early, between 437 and 432 (p. 55). His argument that "the immense technical superiority of the *Oedipus* [*Tyrannus*], however, seems to demand that we allow a few more years to elapse between the two" (p. 257, note 40) carries little weight, as Sophocles' last two plays do not approximate its perfection either. G. M. Kirkwood, *A Study of Sophoclean Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), p. 293 f., devotes a whole appendix to the question; he concludes that "the evidence for early dating is not really strong," but favors "a date after *Ajax* and before *Antig.*" In the end he acknowledges that H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study*, 3rd rev. ed. (1939; rpt. Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, n.d.), placed the play "about 420" and Gennaro Perrotta, *Sofocle* (Messina and Milan: Principato, 1935), "at the end of Sophocles' career." Wilamowitz argued at great length in his 162-page introductory essay in his edition of Euripides' *Herakles* (2nd rev. ed., 1895) that the influence of *Heracles* (after 425 B.C.) was writ large in *The Women of Trachis* (I, 152-57), and Gilbert Murray was of the same opinion (*The Literature of Ancient Greece*, 3rd ed. [1897; rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Books, 1956], p. 246).

²² Sec. 42, *Tragedy and Philosophy*.

The fact that *Ion*—a magnificent tragicomedy—is quite generally considered Euripides' most anti-clerical play throws a good deal of light on the old Goethe who had just finished his *Faust* (writing Act IV after Act V). Goethe's implicit slur on Shakespeare is surely unintentional; his many references to Shakespeare testify to that. But even if one considered Euripides as merely the fourth greatest tragic poet of all time, it would be utterly absurd to suppose that this was grounds for censure.

We will resist the temptation to consider his plays, one by one, conceding weaknesses but showing again and again how, "even though Euripides manages his plays badly in other respects, he is obviously the most tragic of the poets."²³

VI

E. R. Dodds argued in an early article, long before he succeeded to Gilbert Murray's chair at Oxford, that Euripides, though, of course, a "rationalist" in the sense that he was anti-clerical, was more importantly an "irrationalist."²⁴ By this Dodds meant two things. His first point, to which most of "Euripides the Irrationalist" is devoted, is grist to my mill. Euripides steadfastly opposed the three claims "that reason (what the Greeks called rational discourse, *logos*) is the sole and sufficient instrument of truth"; "that the structure of Reality must be in itself in some sense rational"; and "that moral, like intellectual, error can arise only from a failure to use the reason we possess; and that when it does arise it must, like intellectual error, be curable by an intellectual process."²⁵

Dodds shows this in some detail, calling attention, for example, to *Medea*'s words "in vv. 1078 ff. 'I recognise,' she says, 'what evil I am about to do, but my *thymos* (my passion) is stronger than my counsels: *thymos* is the cause of Man's worst crimes.' Her reason can judge her action, which she frankly describes as a 'foul murder,' (1383) but it cannot influence it: the springs of action are in the *thymos*, beyond the reach of reason."²⁶

Dodds's second point, on the other hand, seems dated. He *applauds* what he has spelled out in the above three claims and calls rationalism. "The philosophy thus summed up in its most generalised traits was the decisive contribution of the Greeks to human thought."²⁷ "Socrates affirmed the supremacy of reason in the

²³ Gilbert Murray says very neatly: "There is not one play of Euripides in which a critic cannot find serious flaws or offenses; though it is true, perhaps, that the worse the critic, the more he will find" (*The Literature of Ancient Greece*, p. 273). Murray and Wilamowitz did *not* rank Euripides below his predecessors.

²⁴ "Euripides the Irrationalist," *Classical Review*, 43 (1929), 97-104.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

governance of the universe and in the life of man; in both these spheres Euripides denied it. . . . Some of the passages about the relation between knowledge and conduct do at any rate look like a conscious reaction against the opinion of Socrates, or of other persons who thought like Socrates."²⁸

It is surely uncertain whether Socrates really affirmed that reason governed the universe, and Dodds himself goes on to admit that "some of the characteristic features of this [Euripidean] outlook appear already in the *Alcestis*, produced in 438 B.C.; and it is very doubtful if Socrates had emerged as an independent thinker at so early a date."²⁹ But in that case Dodds might be almost as wrong as Nietzsche, who thought that Euripides got his ideas from Socrates. The truth of the matter might be that Socrates, of whom ancient tradition relates that he attended only the plays of Euripides, was stimulated by this poet—to develop countertheses.³⁰ This hypothesis goes well with what Socrates says in the *Apology* about the poets: "upon the strength of their poetry they believed themselves to be the wisest of men in other things in which they were not wise."³¹ And Plato's attitude toward the tragic poets supports my reconstruction far better than either Nietzsche's or Dodds's.

Philosophers have rarely had any great influence on poets, and that a young philosopher should have decisively influenced a mature poet in whose *oeuvre* we can find no break at all is so improbable that we can safely discount it. The philosophers who did influence important poets did it posthumously; for example, Aquinas, Kant, and Nietzsche. That a mature poet whose work obviously has strong philosophical relevance should influence younger philosophers, even some of his contemporaries, is much more likely; Goethe's strong influence on Schel-

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ I find corroboration for this surmise in Bruno Snell, "Das früheste Zeugnis über Sokrates," *Philologus*, 97 (1948), 125–34. He argues that *Medea* 1077 ff. may have led Socrates to formulate his counterthesis, and that *Hippolytus* 380 ff. may be Euripides' reply to Socrates. That Plato's polemic against the view of the multitude (*Protagoras* 352) represents his reply to the *Hippolytus* passage has long been noted, as Snell himself emphasizes (p. 129, note); e.g., by Wilamowitz at the end of a long footnote that documents the ways in which Plato was stimulated by Euripides (*Einleitung*, pp. 24 f.).

In the 2nd rev. ed. of *Die griechische Tragödie*, II (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1954), pp. 112 f., Max Pohlenz accepts Snell's demonstration that Phaedra's words in *Hippolytus* constitute a direct polemic against Socrates, but not his claim that *Medea*, 1378–80 [sic!], led Socrates to formulate his counterthesis. Pohlenz's brief note bears the signs of haste (he also refers Snell's article to the wrong year) and is unconvincing. See also Snell's *Scenes from Greek Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), chapter 3.

The first to adduce *Hippolytus* 374 against Nietzsche's claim that Euripides shared Socrates' outlook was Wilamowitz in *Zukunftsphilologie! Eine Erwiderung auf Friedrich Nietzsches "Geburt der Tragödie"* (Berlin: Gebrüder Borntraeger, 1872), p. 28. Rohde's defense of Nietzsche on this point lacks all force (*Afterphilologie. Zur Beleuchtung des von dem Dr. phil. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff herausgegebenen Pamphlets: "Zukunftsphilologie!"* [Leipzig: E. W. Fritsch, 1872], pp. 39 f.).

³¹ Plato's *Apology* 22.

ling, Hegel, and Schopenhauer provides a striking example. Even so, Euripides' influence on Socrates remains only probable; but his decisive influence on Plato appears indisputable.

We have noted earlier that Aeschylus stands halfway between Homer and Plato, and Euripides halfway between Aeschylus and Plato. The dialogue between Electra and her mother and other such scenes in Euripides are not great poetry or theatre but point toward a new genre: the Platonic dialogue. To try writing better tragedies than Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides was not an inviting prospect, and Plato, who had tried, destroyed these early efforts when he met Socrates. To try writing better philosophic dialogues than Euripides, wedding the poet's talent to the legacy of Socrates, was the challenge Plato tried to meet.

Dodds's conclusion is utterly unfair to Euripides:

The disease of which Greek culture eventually died is known by many names. To some it appears as a virulent form of scepticism; to others, as a virulent form of mysticism. Professor Murray has called it the Failure of Nerve.

My own name for it is systematic irrationalism. . . . To my mind, the case of Euripides proves that an acute attack of it was already threatening the Greek world in the fifth century. . . . He shows all the characteristic symptoms: the peculiar blend of a destructive scepticism with a no less destructive mysticism; the assertion that emotion, not reason, determines human conduct; despair of the state, resulting in quietism; despair of rational theology, resulting in a craving for a religion of the orgiastic type. For the time being the attack was averted—in part by the development of the Socratic-Platonic philosophy. . . . Greek rationalism died slowly. . . .³²

Nietzsche thought that rationalism put an end to the great age of Greece, and found rationalism in Socrates, Plato—and Euripides. Dodds blames irrationalism and considers Socrates and Plato the culmination of the Greek genius—but Euripides is again on the losing side. As Goethe remarked long ago, the classical philologists—and when Nietzsche wrote *The Birth of Tragedy*, he was one—are hard on Euripides.

Suppose we ask for a moment, not of what Greek culture “died”—a rather questionable and misleading metaphor, when you come to think of it—but rather whether the three claims that comprise “rationalism” happen to be true. If, as I think, none of them is, Euripides was wiser than the rationalistic philosophers. What philosophers nowadays would consider reason “sufficient” for the discovery of all truth, particularly when reason is expressly juxtaposed with sense-perception?³³ And who would hold that all moral errors are curable by a purely “intellectual process”? And why speak of “despair of rational theology”? If rational theology is not sound, why not give our poet credit for renouncing it?

³² Dodds, p. 102 f.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Since my outlook is close to that with which Euripides is charged by Dodds, I might be considered partisan; and this is not the place for detailed arguments against the kind of rationalism Dodds extols. But we should at least note that a double standard is implicit in this criticism of Euripides: like Hegel and Nietzsche, he is fair game, while Sophocles is not. Surely, Sophocles was not a rationalist in Dodds's sense; he did not believe the three crucial claims, nor did he credit rational theology. But it would never do to use language so negatively charged when speaking about Sophocles.

Dodds's later book on *The Greeks and the Irrational* is not only far more judicious than his early article but an outstanding contribution to our understanding of Greek culture. His early article on Euripides, of which he made some use in the chapter on "Rationalism and Reaction in the Classical Age," is no more representative of Dodds at his best than is *The Birth of Tragedy* of Nietzsche in his prime. And Dodds's edition, with introduction and commentary, of *The Bacchae* is a masterpiece. But it should be plain that we do Euripides a monstrous injustice if we associate him with "the Failure of Nerve." Without any optimistic faith that he could stem the tide of superstition that, seven years after the poet's death, claimed Socrates as one of its victims—and during Euripides' lifetime, it had driven into exile, probably Aeschylus and, without a doubt, Anaxagoras and Protagoras—Euripides fought his public his life long, and died in voluntary exile.

That Sophocles always remained a popular favorite, even at such a time, might raise questions about *him*. But he led his own chorus in mourning for Euripides when the news of his death reached Athens; and in our reading of *Oedipus Tyrannus*—and, of course, of *The Women of Trachis*—we find how far he was both from popular superstition and from "rationalism."



In sum, in his first book Nietzsche was wrong about the birth of tragedy, about Aeschylus and Euripides, and about the death of tragedy. Yet the remarks about Hamlet in section 17, much of section 15, and the "Self-Criticism" added as a preface in 1886, are magnificent; and nobody has ever found a better characterization of Nietzsche than the image of the "artistic Socrates" in section 14. All in all, however, neither *The Birth of Tragedy* nor his other early books can brook comparison with Nietzsche's later works, beginning with *The Gay Science*. *The Birth of Tragedy* is widely overrated, but the later Nietzsche is inexhaustible.