

Song, Ritual, and Commemoration in Early Greek Poetry and Tragedy

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The relation between tragedy and song has a famous (to some, infamous) tradition in the study of Greek tragedy, for it is arguable that the modern phase of interpreting Greek tragedy opens with Nietzsche's attempt to relate its origins to the power of music in his *Birth of Tragedy*, with its celebrated antinomy between the Dionysian chorus and the Apollonian principle of individuation. I am not going to follow Nietzsche's approach (although like almost every modern student of tragedy I am indebted to it). Rather I am concerned with song as an aspect of tragedy's historical continuity with earlier literary forms, especially epic poetry and the song-culture of early Greece (to use John Herington's convenient term) from which the epic developed (Herington 1985).

We are accustomed to look at tragedy retrospectively, as a fully developed literary form and indeed as the jewel among the literary achievements that crown the culture of ancient Greece. Our familiarity with centuries of tragic drama and our use of the term "tragedy" and "the tragic" as categories that extend beyond the literary to the realm of moral philosophy make us forget how unique is the Greek's blending of the song element in their poetic tradition with that powerful, gripping staged narrative of human suffering and human questioning to which we give the name "tragic." If we view tragedy in prospect rather than retrospect, that is, as a creation that still lay ahead of the largely oral culture of archaic Greece, we become more aware of its indebtedness to some of the forms for commemorating noble deeds and lamenting suffering that the earlier poetry had developed. At the same time, we need to bear firmly in mind that tragedy is also a radically new development and that whatever it uses it also transforms.

For the predominantly oral culture of archaic Greece the commemoration of noble deeds takes the form of song, which for this period is coterminous with poetry. Theognis and Ibycus in the sixth

century make the same claims as Homer in the eighth, namely to preserve their chosen subjects into eternity with “glory imperishable.”¹ Sappho too holds out such a promise (frag. 147 Lobel-Page): “I say that someone will remember us in the future;” but she can also threaten the reverse in this fragment of a curse-like poem (frag. 55 L-P):

When you die, you will lie there, nor will there be any memory (*mnamosyna*) of you or any longing for you in after-time. For you will have no share in the roses of Pieria; but invisible (*aphanês*) in the house of Hades you will go flittering about among the dim corpses.²

For a Greek of the archaic age, to die without leaving a trace is the worst of fates. To pass unmarked into Hades, leaving no memory behind, is to have one’s life declared void of meaning, without further resonance for those among whom one has lived. Memory not only preserves a record of one’s actions; it also enables one to participate posthumously in the ongoing life of the community, to retain a place in its rituals, and to share a continuing existence on the lips of men. How much better to have died at Troy and received a tomb and glory than to perish “unseen” or “unsung” at sea (*aïstos*, *akleês*), Telemachus laments over his father in the first book of the *Odyssey*, and the point is made several times later.³ The fearful thing is to vanish away, to become “invisible” (*aphanês*, in the Sappho fragment above), “unseen” (*aïstos*), or “unheard” in song (*akleês*). It is like being snatched up by a storm-cloud to some unknown place, far from the world of men.⁴

At the lower end of the social scale, even the humble, foolish sailor, Elpenor, lost not in action but by a groggy misstep on the ladder after too much wine, begs Odysseus to “remember him” (*Od.* 11.72, *mnêsasthai emeio*) and requests a “marker” or *sêma* to commemorate his end, an oar set over his grave (*Od.* 11.75ff.). This is the oar, he says, “with which I rowed with my companions when I was alive” (11.78). “Among my companions”: the marker asserts the continuing validity of his bond with his community, those among whom his life had its work and its purpose. In a very different stratum of society, although in an analogous way, Pindar’s victory odes renew the bond between the vigorous young winner in athletic contests and the dead father, uncle, or grandfather, often

¹ E.g., Theognis 237-52; Ibycus, frag. 282 Page, espec. 47f. In general, see Gentili 1984: 172.

² For the importance of memory in Sappho, see Burnett 1983:277ff., espec. 299ff. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

³ *Od.* 1.234-40; cf. 14.369-71, 24.30-34.

⁴ *Od.* 1.240f., 14.370f.; also 4.727f., 20.63ff. See Segal 1983:42.

addressed by name and thus made to share in the great deed and the promise of ever-fresh memory that it brings in its train. The poet's song carries a living, vital voice to the sunless halls of death. It thereby re-establishes communication between the dead and the living and thus reintegrates the deceased kinsman into the life he knew in his clan and his city.⁵

For Odysseus the greatest danger is not death but the obliteration of his humanness and with it the memory that defines him in his mortal identity. The first of the trials beyond the familiar pale of the mortal world is the amnesiac drug of the Lotos-Eaters, which would make his men "forget their return" (*Od.* 4.97), that is, leave them trapped in the never-never land outside of mortal existence. Odysseus himself is firmly in control here; but he faces a deeper threat on Calypso's island, where his "sweet life ebbs away" (5.152f.). On Circe's island the Lotos adventure is reversed, and his men have to remind him of the homeland that he has forgotten after a year's dalliance with the fascinating enchantress. She has more than one way to deprive men of their humanity.

The danger embodied in the Sirens, whom Odysseus encounters soon after Hades and Circe, is directed entirely at the realm of memory. They embody a kind of anti-memory, a paradoxical commemoration detached from a human community. Their sweet, seductive song about Troy (12.184-91) would leave the hero in a flowery meadow, a place of both vaguely erotic and funereal oblivion, where the rocks nearby are putrid with the rotting bones and skins of nameless men (12.45f.).⁶ This decay and putrefaction are the complete antithesis of the "non-perishable glory" (*kleos aphthiton*) conferred by song, just as the remoteness of their voice from any human society is the negation of the context where life-giving memory has a place. The spell of their singing goes out over the remote waste of waters to lure the passing mariner. Odysseus hears it alone, the only one on the ship with unblocked ears. Nothing could be further from the bard in the human world. The Homeric singer is generally surrounded by a crowd of eager listeners and by the life of the palace. His place is at its feasts and dances (so Demodocus among the Phaeacians in *Odyssey* 8) or in its work-world (so the singer at the harvesting scene on the shield of Achilles in *Iliad* 18.567-72).⁷

⁵ For example, *Od.* 8.77-84 and 14.20-24; *Pyth.* 5.94-103; cf. also *Nem.* 8.44-48. See in general Segal 1985.

⁶ On the Sirens, see Segal 1983:38-43; Pucci 1979 and 1987:209-13; Vernant 1981:144-46.

⁷ The performer of the "Linus-song" in this scene, to be sure, is a boy (*pais*), not a professional bard (*aoidos*), as is appropriate to the rustic setting; but the scene still indicates the strongly social context of song. On the other hand, the dance at the palace of Cnossus

In a culture where written records, where they exist at all, are sparse and fragile, it is largely the task of the poet to preserve the memory of earlier generations and keep alive among men the name of those who would otherwise be “invisible” in Hades. Whereas the dead are unseen and unheard, the poet brings the radiant light and the clear “hearing” of fame, *kleos*. Both the visual and acoustic metaphors are recurrent attributes of poetry and among its most important means of triumphing over the dulled, sensorily deprived afterlife in Hades.⁸

In an oral society like that of archaic Greece, the bard is the primary repository of the society’s records of its past, the storehouse of the paradigms by which it asserts its values and regulates the behavior of its members.⁹ The verse narrative or encomium is a monument, analogous in function and effect to the dedicatory statue or bronze tablet.¹⁰ A sophisticated poet like Simonides can question the monumentalizing permanence even of stone in the face of time’s irresistible corrosion (frag. 581 Page),¹¹ but he nevertheless works squarely within the commemorative tradition. Thus when he praises the fallen at Thermopylae, whose tomb “neither rust nor all-subduing time will bedim” and whose fame is eternal (*aenaon te kleos*, frag. 531 Page), he is still performing the ancient bardic function of establishing an eternal monument of fame in song.

The analogy between monuments of stone or metal and monuments of song is not uncommon in late archaic poetry but is at best only vaguely implicit in Homer. There is not, I believe, a fully developed metaphor for poetry as a temple, statue, or other monumental art-work before Simonides. This is perhaps because poets like Pindar and Simonides already have a self-consciousness of their poems as texts, tangible artifacts, shipped over the sea like merchandise, as Pindar says, crafted with an artistry that is palpable, like the diadem of coral and ivory to which he compares his poetry in *Nemean* 7. This is an artistry that demands a recognition equivalent to sight and touch. These poets, however conscious

has no bard; instead two tumblers or acrobats “lead off the singing” (18.590-606). Are the Phaeacians, who summon the bard Demodocus to accompany their dancing of young men, more refined (*Od.* 8.250-65)?

⁸ In *Od.* 11.36ff. the gathering shades cannot speak unless Odysseus permits them to drink of the blood of the freshly slaughtered animals. In 24.4ff. the newly slain suitors squeak like bats in the hollow of a deep cave.

⁹ See., e.g., Havelock 1963:*passim*, espec. ch. 4 and 1982:122ff.

¹⁰ On the poem as monument, see Detienne 1973:23; Gentili 1984:214ff.; Svenbro 1976:154f., 186-93; Hurwit 1985:345, 353f. See also Pindar, *Nem.* 5.1ff., and Segal 1974. For a useful discussion of this conception of poetry in Pindar, see Auger 1987:espec. 40ff.

¹¹ On this fragment, see Gentili 1984:199; also Svenbro 1976:186-88.

of the performative aspect of their work and their direct, personal relation with their audience and their patron, have nevertheless already begun to cross the divide towards a poetics of textuality—that is, a poetics of an art that depends to some degree on writing and therefore also exists independently of recitation or of its immediate performative situation (see Segal 1986:155ff.)

Because he is immersed in the oral tradition, where “fame,” *kleos*, is what men “hear,” Homer does not draw explicit analogies (positive or negative) between the monumentalizing of poetry and the tangible monument of stone or bronze. In the few places where Homer implies an association between the intangible “hearing” of the song and the fame that it creates, the song’s monumentality is associated directly with its ritual expression (the funeral monument and the communal memory), rather than with a work of art. That is to say, the commemorative function of the poet is a direct expression of the society’s need to exercise and objectify its power of communal memory by remembering its heroes, as the noblest embodiments of its values. Only later does the poet produce the tangible solidity of a “monument” of song, like Pindar’s treasury in *Pythian* 6 or a beautiful art-work (such as Horace’s purely personal *exegi monumentum aere perennius*, to take a later instance of the poet’s claim to monumentality). In Homer the monument belongs not to the poet or his song *per se*, but to the warrior.

Hector’s fame, for example, the *kleos* or “hearing” among men that will live after him, is closely bound up with the visible “sign” or *sêma* of the conspicuous tomb-marker that is the reminder of a great victory (*Iliad* 7.86-91). He promises that if he is the winner in the duel to which he challenges the Greeks he will return the loser’s body and they “will heap up a marker on the broad Hellespont; and some one of men of later time will say as he sails in a many-oared ship over the wine-dark sea, ‘This is the marker of a man who died long since, whom brilliant Hector once killed, excellent in battle though he was.’ So will some one say, and my glory will never perish.”

The Homeric notion of commemoration and fame, however, is more complex than Hector’s statement implies. It belongs to the larger frame of the human condition as Homer presents it and, like all things human in the epic’s vision, is defined by the stark break between immortality and death. Hector himself, misled as often by confidence and optimism, misjudges the division. Indeed, it is an essential part of his tragedy that the barrier of his mortality always comes between himself and the eternal things to which he aspires. Thus in contrast to the far-seen tomb of his idealizing vision of battle and victory at the beginning of Book 7 stands the harsh reality of the wounded bodies jumbled together on the battlefield at the end. Here one can “only with difficulty distinguish each man.” Both sides “wash off the

bloody gore with water” and “pour forth warm tears” as “they lift (the dead) on the wagons” (7.424-26).

Looking to the future, Hector speaks of armor, fire, the sea, and his own “imperishable glory” as “radiant Hector” (7.78-91). Death in the here-and-now, however, is a matter not of bronze or stone but of the perishable fluids that mark the vulnerability and the grief of mortality: blood and warm tears. Indeed it is the life-fluid itself, the blood splattering the dead on the earth, that negates the individuality of conspicuous fame and makes it hard to tell one warrior’s body from another’s. Simultaneously, the disfiguring blood momentarily effaces the difference between Greeks and Trojans, for both sides perform exactly the same actions in exactly the same words (7.427-32). Is it a measure of Hector’s tragic failure that, though the Trojans weep over him at the end of the poem, nothing is said of his fame? When Andromache speaks of memory in the penultimate scene of the poem, it is in a purely personal, private sense; and her verb for “remember” is in the optative and the negative. “You did not leave me some close-set saying,” she says to Hector’s body, “that I might remember days and nights as I pour forth my tears” (24.744f.). Similarly, the tomb or monument that the Trojans construct for Hector—the last action in the *Iliad*—is done hastily and fearfully, with scouts watching out for a Greek attack—a far cry from the glory with which Hector had endowed the *sêma* in Book 7.¹²

Homeric commemoration never leaves the ground of mortality by escaping into images of metallic permanence or impersonal architectural solidity. Fame remains an attribute of its human bearer, and as such is always in touch with the preciousness and the fragility of mortal life. The contrast between Hector’s monumentalizing *sêma* and the blood and tears within Book 7, for instance, becomes sharper and more ominous as Hector enters the danger zone where triumph changes to doom. Here the contrasts of Book 7 ramify into those between the “immortal armor of Peleus’ son Achilles” that Hector dons in his moment of greatest success (*ambrota teuchea*, 17.194) and the “bloody armor” that Achilles strips from his body after he has killed him (*teuchea haimatoenta*, 22.368f.). It is a change from the special distinction of the victor to the common mortal fate, the vulnerability of flesh and blood, as that is expressed, for example, in the “bloody gore” (*broton haimatoenta*) washed off the fallen soldiers in one of the poem’s common formulaic descriptions of burial. “Immortal” for Achilles, the armor for Hector is covered with the blood that marks the

¹² Among these tragic reversals that develop from this passage may be added the contrast with the terms on which Hector fights his last duel in Book 22. When he confronts Achilles for the last time he proposes not fame or a monument, but the non-violation of the corpse and the return of the body (22.256-59)—the zero-grade, one could say, of the terms of Book 7; and of course Achilles brutally refuses.

mortal condition (*broton haimatoenta*). Between the two extremes defined by the “immortal armor” of Achilles and the “bloody armor” of Hector is the “immortal raiment,” *ambrota heimata* (16.670 = 680), in which Apollo wraps the body of Sarpedon after anointing it with “ambrosia” (playing on *ambrosia . . . ambrota*). This last phrase is also metrically equivalent to Achilles’ “immortal armor,” *ambrota teuchea*.

These four linguistically and metrically related formulas — “immortal armor,” “immortal raiment,” “bloody armor,” and “bloody gore” — mark out a hierarchy of positions for the Homeric warrior in relation to death. “Immortal armor” is a sign of immortality in this life for Achilles, son of a goddess. Sarpedon’s “immortal raiment” is the sign of immortality in the funeral rite and monument after death (cf. 16.675) that Zeus grants to the son whom he pities but cannot save. “Bloody armor” belongs to Hector’s full participation in mortality as a warrior whose monument (*sêma*) remains remote or precarious.¹³ “Bloody gore” characterizes the deadly battle and its aftermath, the basic ablutions that await the ordinary warrior in his mortal condition.

The *Odyssey* is more self-conscious than the *Iliad* about the commemorative function of poetry, as it is about all social contexts of song generally. The second *Nekyia* in particular reflects on the way in which the epic singer views himself as continuing and magnifying the memory of great deeds and great figures from the heroic past. Homer looks ahead to the future life of praise or blame that the two women will have. For Penelope, who “remembered well her wedded husband Odysseus, . . . the fame of her excellence will never perish, and the immortals will fashion lovely song for her among those who go on the earth” (24.195-98). But for Clytaemnestra, who “devised evil deeds, killing her wedded lord, there will be hateful song among men, and she has brought harsh repute to women, even to one who is of good works (24.199-202).¹⁴ Whereas Penelope gains the *kleos* that, like Hector’s in *Iliad* 7, “will not perish” (τῶ οἱ κλέος οὐ ποτ’ ὀλεῖται, 24.196; cf. *Il.* 7.91), Clytaemnestra receives only *aidê* and *phêmis*, both qualified negatively. The heroizing term *kleos* is reserved only for Penelope. The episode contains both the poetry of praise and the poetry of blame, inseparable sides of a single message. Later Pindar will separate out the two strands self-consciously to

¹³ This pattern of formulas has further ramifications and ironies in the story of Hector’s doom in the closing books. Thus Hector taunts the dying Patroclus in 16.840f. that Achilles told him not to return to the ships without having pierced Hector’s *haimatoenta chitona* (“bloody tunic”). The formula is grimly recalled in Athena’s deception of Hector in 22.245f. Disguised as Deiphobus, she urges him to stand and fight Achilles: “Let us see if Achilles will kill us and carry our bloody armor (*enara brotoenta*) back to the ships.”

¹⁴ For the distribution of praise or blame as one of the social functions of archaic poetry, see Gentili 1984:141ff.; Svenbro 1976:149ff.; Nagy 1976 and 1979:222ff.

distinguish his own art, and identify the one with Homer and the other with Archilochus.

Agamemnon, the major speaker in this episode, looks back to the heroic past of which he has been a part. His mood is an idealizing, somewhat self-pitying nostalgia characteristic of his role in the poem but also well suited to the tone of self-reflective distance on epic heroization in general. He replies to Achilles' account of his "death most pitiable" (24.34) with a description of Achilles' own glorious burial. Achilles' funeral marks the pinnacle of heroic glory, and it takes the form of song from the gods themselves. The nine Muses sing the dirge at his funeral, in responsive harmony with the keening of his mother, Thetis (24.58-65):

Around you the daughters of the old man of the sea took their places, lamenting pitifully, and they were clothed in raiment immortal. And all the nine Muses lamented over you, responding in lovely voice. Then you would not have seen anyone of the Argives without tears: so stirring a song rose from the clear-singing Muse. For seventeen nights and days we lamented over you, immortal gods and mortal men together; and on the eighteenth day we gave you over to the fire

One might compare the grandiosity of such a mourning-scene with the pictorial monumentalizing of the lament itself in the great Dipylon amphora of the mid-eighth century. What Homer achieves by the presence of the supernatural, the Dipylon Master achieves by the vast scale and complex design of his vase.¹⁵ This passage also indicates how a bard composing in a long-established tradition can imply his self-consciousness of the memorializing function of epic song.

The implications of the Muses' presence become clearer if we contrast the lament over Hector by the women of Troy at the end of the *Iliad* (24.720-24):

And when they brought him to the glorious halls, they set him in the well-bored bed, and they stationed singers beside him as leaders of the dirges, and they lamented him in grieving song, and over him the women groaned. Among these Andromache of the white arms began the lamentation, holding between her hands the head of Hector, slayer of men.

The two forms of lamentation characterize the two heroes: for Achilles, immortal song; for Hector, the anguish of the mortal women in his house. What for Hector is a possibly realistic description of a mourning ritual has for Achilles been transposed to the register of myth and mysterious divine intervention.

The *Odyssey* does not say that the Muses themselves wept; but their effect on the audience, both mortal and divine, is total emotional

¹⁵ For a valuable analysis of the Dipylon amphora (Athens, National Museum 804) in relation to the Homeric style, see Hurwit 1985:93ff.

participation: “You would not have seen anyone of the Argives without tears: so stirring a song rose from the clear-singing Muse” (24.61-64). Here mortals and immortals join in the weeping. In the epic world human grief can even involve the gods emotionally; in tragedy the gods are less pitying, more distant and self-contained, as we see in the separation between mortal and immortal grief near the end of Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, where the goddess Artemis states the divine law (*themis*) that she may not be “defiled” by the gasping and failing breath that herald death (*thanasimoi ekpnoais*, 1437; cf. *Alcestis* 22f.).

Homer’s Agamemnon goes on to describe the other, more tangible forms of monumentalization: a conspicuous tomb, overlooking the Hellespont, like the one that Hector envisages for his slain enemy, and funeral games, like those for Patroclus in *Iliad* 23. But the most striking “monument” is the song itself. It embodies divinity present among men, the extraordinary privilege of the Muses’ presence in the mortal world. This is accorded only to Achilles. It is virtually a guarantee that the memory of the hero will survive in the songs that are made about him after his death, for the goddesses of both song and memory have already irradiated his life with their lyrical intensity and marked his death as a sorrow significant even to the immortals.

This passage impressed Pindar, nearly two and a half centuries later, as the ultimate in poetic commemoration. Echoing *Odyssey* 24 in *Isthmian* 8, he describes “how even at his death songs did not abandon Achilles, but at his pyre and tomb the Heliconian maidens stood, and they poured forth the lament full of glory. For the immortal gods decreed to give over to hymns of the goddesses a man of noble achievement, perished though he had” (*Isth.* 8.63-66). Pindar shifts the emphasis slightly from the anthropomorphic figures of the divinities of song to the memorializing power of song itself: “Him not even in death did *songs* abandon,” (τὸν μὲν οὐδέ θανόντ’ αἰοδαί τι λίπον (62). Songs, *aidai*, not Muses, are the subject of the verb *lipon* (“abandoned”). The immediately following strophe makes it clear that the Muses’ song for Achilles is a mythical paradigm for Pindar’s own commemoration of the present victory: the poet’s “chariot of the Muses rushes on to sing a memorial for the boxer, Nicocles” (ἔσσυται τε / Μοισαῖον ἄρμα Νικοκλέος / μνάμα πυγμαίου κελαδῆσαι, 67-69). To the same end, taking his cue from his fellow-Boeotian, Hesiod, he redefines the geographically unspecific “nine Muses” in Homer as the local “Heliconian maidens.” Such is the reward that song can confer on the *esthlos aner* (*Isth.* 8.66), a man who fulfills the highest aspirations of the society, as warrior and as athlete.

For Pindar song is more than just words sung to honor a great hero or a successful athlete. Song itself is a mode of energy, a liquid flow of divine power into human life. Hence it can itself serve as a metaphor for

achieving supreme happiness. In *Pythian* 3 the highest blessings of happiness have bestowed on the pre-Iliadic heroes Cadmus and Peleus. These consist in hearing the “gold-veiled Muses sing on the mountain and in seven-gated Thebes,” for these goddesses came to Peleus’ wedding with Thetis on Mt. Pelion and to Cadmus’ wedding with Harmonia at Thebes (*Pyth.* 3.88-95). As in the case of Achilles too, the presence of the Muses and the privilege of hearing their song accompany a union of mortal man with divinity.

In a contrasting but complementary area, song is also the expressive mode for the vibrancy of the intensest grief. In the tragic poets weeping is itself a kind of song, an expressive discharge of emotional energy that focuses feeling. The tragedians are fond of using the lament of the nightingale as a motif for conveying this song-like intensity of emotion. But the nightingale is more than just a trite figure for grief. Its very voice is a distillation of unending lamentation, simultaneously songful and tearful. Such is the sorrowing chorus’ cry in Euripides’ *Helen*: “You, I call upon, bird most songful, tuneful nightingale, bird of tears” (σέ τάν ἀοιδοτάταν ὄρνιθα μελωδὸν / ἀήδονα δακρυόεσσαν, *Helen* 1109f.). In this way the poet gives nature itself a voice of lamentation whose almost mechanical regularity and constancy correspond to the singer/actor’s immersion in a lament that will never end.¹⁶

In Homer, Penelope’s ever-renewed abundance of restlessness and grief finds an equivalent in the ever-moving nightingale in its dense foliage, abundant in its flow of songful lamentation (*Odyssey* 19.513-25): the queen has “dense, sharp cares close around her heart,” just as the nightingale “sitting in the dense leaves of trees. . . pours forth her much-sounding cry” (516, 520f.: πυκιναὶ δέ μοι ἀμθ’ ἀδινὸν κῆρ. . . ; δενδρέων ἐν πετάλοισι καθεζομένη πυκινούσιν, / ἢ τε θαμὰ τρωπῶσα χέει πολυηχέα φωνήν)¹⁷ The assonance of *che-ei* and *poly-êchea* not only emphasizes the fullness of tearful lamentation but also suggests the equivalence between pouring (*che-ei*) forth liquid tears and pouring forth the voice in the cry or sound (*-êchea*) of grief. Homer, however, does not go quite so far as the tragedians in making song a figure for grief. The nightingale to which Penelope is compared in *Odyssey* 19, to be sure, “laments its child, Itylus” (522), but “the much-sounding voice” that it “pours forth” has an acoustic distinctness of its own: it is definitely a “voice” and a “lament,” not a “song” (πολυηχέα φωνήν, ὀλοφυρομένη, 521f.). The language here indicates the oral poet’s greater sensitivity to the vocality of lament, to its physical reality as sound, “a much-sounding voice.” A later poet like Aeschylus, who vividly recreates the shrill sound

¹⁶ Cf. Sophocles, *Electra* 145-52 and *Antigone* 824-33.

¹⁷ On this passage, and the repetitions, see Cook 1984:49f.

of the voice and the thud of breast-beating in ritual lamentation, particularly in the great *kommos* of the *Choephoroe* (306-478), allows the ritual chanting to slip into metaphor. So, for example, the chorus prays that “in place of the dirges at the tomb a paean may *bring back* the beloved (Orestes) with new force” (342-45).¹⁸

In epic, song and its divinity, the Muse, belong to a realm apart. She is protected from the pain and destruction of her songs by the vast temporal perspective of her eternal fame. As Homer implies in his invocation of the Muse in the Catalogue of Ships, she belongs to an order of being different from that of men; we mortals only know by hearing, but the Muse has actually been there (*πάρεστέ τε ἴστέ τε πάντα*, *Il.* 2.485). As goddesses, they are free from the mortal limits of time and space. They know past, present, and future all at once (*Iliad* 2.484-87). Thus Helen in *Iliad* 6 finds it a comfort of some sort to think that her suffering will be a subject of song, much as Hector draws comfort from the “imperishable fame” embodied in the far-seen tomb in Book 7. Even Achilles, in the clarity of recognizing his fast-approaching death and the consequences of his wrath, can find solace in telling Agamemnon that “the Achaeans will long remember our strife, yours and mine” (19.63f.). Tragedy, with its far greater presentational immediacy of suffering, calls this kind of comfort into question. The potential meaninglessness of suffering itself becomes a central issue in the tragic situation, in a way that it is not in epic.

Greek culture, like many other societies, recognizes the therapeutic value of expressing sorrow openly in lamentation, whether in the family or in the larger community, and knows of the benefits of solidarity in such rituals.¹⁹ In our society, despite the publicity given to concerts of popular singers, song remains marginal to the “serious” issues of life, at least for most adults. It is pure entertainment, and it is largely restricted to a well-defined age group. It literally makes news when medical authorities report the beneficial influence of rock music on psychotic adolescents; and of course this is observed in the privacy of the psychiatrist’s office.²⁰

Tragedy draws heavily on the traditional view of song in Greek culture as a quasi-tangible power, something that can cast a spell, place a curse, heal a sickness, arouse or quiet powerful emotions. Greek *oidê*, “song,” like Latin *carmen*, can carry the connotation of magical spell,

¹⁸ For the motif of sound in this passage, see Scott 1984:13f.

¹⁹ See Gentili 1984:ch. 3, espec. 44ff.; Havelock 1963:154ff. Plato, of course, saw in this emotional release effected by poetry a primary reason for banning it from his ideal state.

²⁰ Observations on this musical treatment, at the Horsham Clinic, Ambler, Pennsylvania, were reported in the Associated Press in the summer of 1986 (*Valley News*, Connecticut River Valley, July 21, 1986, pp. 17 and 19).

especially in the compound form, *epaoidê*, “incantation.”²¹ But tragedy goes farther than Homeric epic in stylizing songful lament and transforming it into the aesthetic frame of the work itself, the song and rhythms of the performance. It also intensifies the emotional responses to the events by calling attention to the motif of song itself and by making the song pervade even the iambic portions of the play through images and metaphors. Its choruses perform song in the orchestra, while its complex verbal structures (like the image-patterns of Aeschylus) make song an active element in the story, either directly or figuratively. Both performed and described, song in tragedy occupies a place somewhere between metaphor and ritual enactment.²²

In Aeschylus’ *Suppliants* the chorus of Egyptian maidens call down blessings on the Argive land that has received them; and among these is the prayer that no disaster “arms Ares, the one of no choruses, of no lyre, begetter of tears, nor arms violence within the city” (*Suppl.* 679-83, especially 681, *achoron akitharin dakruogonon Arê*). War is the enemy of song. The sounds within the city blessed with peace are those of the dance and the lyre. The sounds of the city at war are of tears and lamentation.²³ Stesichorus began his *Oresteia* with an invocation to his Muse to drive war away when he makes his songs. He asks his Muse to join him in “expelling wars” (πολέμους ἀπωσαμένα μετ’ ἐμοῦ) as she sings of the “marriages of the gods and the banquets of men and festivities of the blessed ones” (frag. 12 D = 210 P). Such an invocation indirectly reminds the audience that in listening to this song they too, like the poet, are, at that very moment, enjoying the blessings of peace. In the case of tragedy, they are attending to the festive music and dance of the performance, not hearing the martial dissonances that Aeschylus, for example, evokes so vividly at the beginning of his *Seven Against Thebes* (cf. 83-108, 150-73). The martial sounds also have political overtones for the theatrical audience, for these are the citizen-soldiers and sailors who have faced and will face such crises when they fight in behalf of their city. Aristophanes makes Aeschylus boast that his *Seven Against Thebes*, a play “full of Ares,” has filled the spectators with warlike valor (*Frogs* 1021f.).

The close association between the emotions and their musical expression applies to joy as well as grief. In Sophocles’ *Trachinian Women*, for example, the chorus, at two moments of joy, not only holds

²¹ See, e.g., Pindar, *Pyth.* 3.51, 4.217; *Nem.* 4.1-5, 8.49. The notion of poetry as word-magic is perhaps most fully developed in Aeschylus; see Walsh 1984:63ff.

²² This double character of song is especially clear, for instance, in the Great Kommos of the *Choephoroe*, cited above.

²³ For the contrast of festivity, especially in song and dance, and war, cf. *Il.* 3.393 and 15.508. See Schadewaldt 1966:63f.

out the promise of flute-song as an expression of their happiness, but in one case actually identifies their exultant mood with the song itself (205ff., 635ff.). In the first strophe of the ode on Heracles' long-awaited return, they cry out for song in the house to welcome back their lord. In the next strophe, however, they more closely identify their mood with the music, calling the flute "tyrant of my mind."²⁴ Conversely, Admetus, in his promise to his dying wife, would banish from his house all symposia "and the Muse who used to dwell in my halls." For, he goes on, addressing Alcestis, "You have taken the joy from my life" (*Alcestis* 343-47).

Song in tragedy not only expresses the emotions aroused by that action. It can sometimes constitute the action. The *Oresteia* carefully progresses not only from silence to juridical discourse but also from isolated, wild, and unintelligible lyrics (e.g., Cassandra's outcry at her first appearance) to the choral song that ends the play.²⁵ To bring the Furies into the civic framework is also to bring their utterance into the framework of the city's choral song, in this case transforming hunting cry or curse into communal lyric. Thus the resolution of the plot, with the incorporation of the Erinyes (now Eumenides) into the Athenian land, takes the form of a change from their opening grunts and shouts of pursuit (*labe labe labe labe phrazou*, *Eum.* 130; *iou iou popax*, 143) to their closing lyrics of celebration and blessing (996ff. and 1014ff.). There is a similar effect in the movement from the interior, metaphorical "singing" and "dancing" of fear "near the heart" when the Furies first appear to Orestes at the end of the *Choephoroe* (1024f.) to their choral songs of benison at the end of the trilogy.²⁶ The change renews the ritual function of song as an affirmation of communal health and solidarity, in contrast to the isolation of Orestes in incipient madness, pollution, and the solitary terror of his private vision of the Furies.

In the second stasimon of the *Trachiniae*, sung at the critical moment when Lichas exits bearing the poisoned cloak to Heracles, the flute is personified as the source of a happy sound that both returns to the house and spreads forth over the audience with its "not unfitting ringing of sound." In an untranslatable phrase, its music is "as of a lyre equal to the

²⁴"I will raise up and not drive away the flute, O tyrant of my mind," *Trach.* 216f.: *δείρομαι οὐδ' ἀπώσομαι / τὸν αὐλόν, ὃ τύραννε τᾶς ἐμας φρενός*. Some understand the phrase to refer to Dionysus, but this is unlikely as the god is not named at all and is referred to only after the lines cited above.

²⁵ On Cassandra's cry, see Scott 1984:8ff.; also Scott 1969:344; Knox 1979:42ff.; Thalmann 1985:108ff., with recent bibliography.

²⁶ On this motif, see Scott 1984:19; Thalmann 1986:501ff.

divine Muse" (*theias antilyron mousas*, 642f.).²⁷ As he does often, Sophocles insists on the literal situation of festive music, the sign of joy in the house. But the litotes, "not unfitting," and the *anti*-compound to express equivalency with the divine music on Olympus are full of the most bitter ironies. The "shouting" of Heracles soon becomes the opposite of "lovely" (*kalliboas*, 640; cf. 787 and 790). And the "echoing" effect (another implication of *antilyron*) will be far more discordant than that of any Muse on Olympus.

In different way Sophocles' *Antigone* utilizes a movement toward more songful utterance as a device to show the reversals that Creon's controlling plans undergo. The play progresses from his pragmatic, sententious discourse to increasingly emotional, song-like cries. The birdlike cries of the captured Antigone set the stage for the conflict that will lead to the doom of both protagonists (423-25; cf. *Electra* 242f.). Crushed by the misfortunes in his house, Creon at the end has his first lyric utterances in the play (with the exception of his authoritarian anapaestic exchanges in 931f. and 935f.). Apart from a very few isolated iambic trimeters, his entire concluding dialogue with the chorus takes place in lyric meters (1261-1346). This formal change to song rhythms marks a whole new relation to the world around him and to his fellow men, one that accepts his own mortal vulnerability and with it a less authoritarian, less defensive division between himself and others.²⁸

As such passages suggest, song in tragedy (like the rituals that song accompanies) is not simply a given event in the society represented but is drawn into the conflictual situation. Thus the motif of song as the release of grief often appears as part of deliberate paradox: it offers momentary relief to the mounting intensity, but it also expresses the destructive forces that dominate the tragic world.

A recurrent rhetorical figure in tragedy expresses one aspect of this paradoxical relation. This is the motif of negated song, "unmusic singing," "lyreless Muse," or "unchorused dance." By transforming the celebratory lyric of choral or symposiac music into the oxymoronic form of the "lyreless tune" or "unmusic Muse," the tragic poet marks his connection with the traditional, communal role of the poet in archaic society, but simultaneously also stakes out his unique, problematical place within that tradition. In the *Agamemnon*, for example, at the ominous moment of Clytaemnestra's symbolic victory over her husband, as he enters the palace walking on the purple tapestry, the chorus sings, "My heart within,

²⁷ On the interpretation of the passage, see Easterling 1982:*ad loc.* See above, note 23.

²⁸ For the importance of Creon's change to lyrics and the "deepening of an emotional dimension," see DiBenedetto 1983:10-13.

self-taught, hymns a dirge of the Erinys without the lyre” (τὸν δ’ ἄνευ λύρας ὅμως ὑμνωδεῖ / θρηῆγον’ Ερινύος αὐτοδίδακτος ἔσωφεν, 990f.),²⁹ *Autodidaktos*, “self-taught,” here implies the suffering mortals’ isolation and enclosure within grief and anxiety for which no divine relief is envisaged. It is interesting to contrast the Homeric bard’s description of himself as *autodidaktos* in *Odyssey* 22.347f. The term in Homer has a corollary in the helping presence of the gods or Muses: “I am self-taught, but a god breathed into my breast lays of every sort” (*Od.* 22.347f.).³⁰ The vengeful spell in the Furies’ “binding song” of the *Eumenides* is “a hateful muse” and “a hymn without the phorminx” (μοῦσαν στυγεράν, 308; ὕμνος ἀφόρμικτος, 331f.). Whereas the Olympian songs of Homer, Hesiod, or Pindar are characterized by imagery of liquidity, abundant flow, and fertility, this lyreless song is “a parching for mortals” (αὐονὰ βροτοῖς, 333).³¹

Euripides is particularly fond of the figure of negated music. In the parode of the *Trojan Women*, for example, Hecuba’s grief at Troy’s calamity appears under the figure of an inverted Muse. Hecuba utters “elegies of tears,” and the Muse “sings her disasters, unchorused, to the unfortunate” (119-21). This is a Muse of Sorrows, whose only song is lament. In the next ode the chorus of Trojan women calls on the Muse to “sing a song funereal, of new hymns, in accompaniment to tears, for now I shall cry out my tune to Troy” (511-15). “How sweet a thing for those in misfortune are tears and the groanings of dirges and the Muse who holds pain,” the chorus says in iambic trimeters, just after the ode (608f.), alluding to the Homeric “joy in lamentation.” These lines bring together the motifs of tears, song or music (the Muse), and the ritualized lamentation of the dirge or *threnos*, itself a form of song (see Pucci 1980:32-45). In the *Suppliants* the shared grief takes the form of “smitings that sing in harmony” and “a dancing that Hades reveres” (ξυνωδοὶ κτύποι . . . χορὸν τὸν Ἀΐδας σέβει, 73-75) or “an insatiable joy in lamentations” that “leads one forth,” as in the dirge or the dance (ἄπληστος ἄδε μ’ ἐξάγει χάρις γόων, 79). Iphigeneia, lamenting her loneliness in the Taurian play, sings to her attendants how she holds to “ill-dirged lamentations, unlyred elegies of a song unfavored by the Muses, in pitiful cries over the dead” (*Iphigeneia in Tauris* 143-47). The chorus replies with “antiphonal songs” that consist of “a woeful Muse amid dirges

²⁹ On the perverted rituals of this “self-taught” song see Fraenkel 1950:*ad loc.*, 11:446: “The awful chant which the heart sings as a *threnos* of the Erinys is set against the background of that festal song which is the delight of all.”

³⁰ On this passage, see Schadewaldt 1966:79f.; more recently, Thalmann 1984:126f. and Pucci 1987:230.

³¹ The threat is to be cancelled in the song of blessings at the end: cf. *Eum.* 980ff. See Walsh 1984:76f.; Thalmann 1985:109.

for corpses that Hades hymns in his singing, far removed from paeans” (179-85). Helen, in her play, calls out to the Sirens of the Underworld to accompany her grief, “songs joined with her tears” and “deathly music in harmony with her lamentations.” She would offer Persephone a grim “paeon for the perished corpses in her dusky halls below” (*Helen* 167-78). When the chorus responds sympathetically, she sings “a lyre-less lament” (*alyron elegon*, 185).

In Sophocles this figure of the “unmusical song,” and indeed the metaphorizing of song in general, is relatively sparse (at least as far as the limited remains allow one to generalize). Electra’s lament in her opening *kommos* with the chorus comes perhaps closest, but even here, as in Homer, the lamentation remains distinct as lamentation. Thus when Electra compares her constant weeping to the nightingale (the metamorphosed Procne) that cries “Itys, Itys” for her son, her verb is the direct “lament” (*olophuretai*, 147), not a metaphor for singing. A little later she uses a bolder metaphor, “wings of sharp-toned laments” (πτέρυγας ὀξύτόνων γόων, 242f.), but here too the “laments,” though qualified by an adjective that can also apply to singing, have their proper, non-figurative word, *goos*. So too the similar description of Antigone crying over Polyneices’ body like a bird bereft of its young “laments in the sharp voice” of sorrow, but not actually in song (ἀνακωκύει πικρᾶς ὄρνιθος ὀξύνη φθόγγον, *Antigone* 423-25).

Where Sophocles does use a full-fledged metaphor drawn from song, he describes not the personal emotions of the speaker or chorus but the mortal situation generally. In the third stasimon of the *Oedipus at Colonus*, on the ills of old age, the chorus describes death as “the hymnless, lyreless, unchorused portion of Hades” (Ἄιδος μοῖρ’ ἀνυμέναιος / ἄλυρος ἄχορος, 1221f.). The three epithets mark death’s negation of the joys of social life, and therefore of festive music, as parallel to the isolation of the aged protagonist. The passage reveals the tacit assumption that the social rituals, accompanied by music, are an indispensable part of what makes life worth living for men and women in society. But Sophocles is more restrained than Euripides in relating the emotional quality of lamentation to the emotional expressiveness of music.

For all the emotionality of his characters, then, Sophocles is perhaps deliberately reacting against the Aeschylean lyricizing of grief that we have seen in the passages discussed above. Euripides, however, with his taste for archaic ritualizing effects, seems to be deliberately recalling the practice of Aeschylus (who is still closer to the pre-Sophistic song-culture) and combining it with the newer intellectual reflectiveness on the verbal representation of emotion and on the power of language to evoke and manipulate feelings (e.g. the *Helen* of Gorgias).

Even Euripides, however, works in the social and performative

context of the music that accompanies his action. He is particularly conscious of incorporating within his fictional, literary structure the rites of lamentation such as those described by Margaret Alexiou (1974) or Loring Danforth (1982). He thus calls attention to the paradox that the festive joy of the songs and dances being performed have as their goal the representation of joylessness. Oxymora like “unmusic song” or “unchorused dance” express this tension between the mythical account of sufferings that result from the threatened disintegration of community enacted on the stage and the celebration of community inherent in the performance itself within the City Dionysia, Lenaea, or country Dionysia.

Euripides reflects explicitly on this paradox in the parode of his *Medea* (191-203):

You would not be mistaken in calling foolish and in no way clever those men of previous time who invented songs as pleasurable hearing at celebrations and feasts and banquets. But no one has invented a way, by music and many-stringed songs, to put an end to the hateful sufferings of mortals, from which deaths and terrible misfortunes overturn houses. Yet it would be a gain for mortals to heal these things by song. But for banquets to produce their happy feasting, why do men strain (exert) their voices in vain? The present fullness of the feast, from its own self, holds pleasure for mortals.³²

As a part of civic and religious festivity, the aim of tragic poetry is the same as that of Homeric recitation and choral song, namely *terpsis*, “pleasure.” But in tragedy the line between pleasure and pain is even more problematical than it is in the case of the epic “delight in weeping.” The tragic Muse shifts between dirge and hymn.

Euripides certainly knows the tradition, going back to Hesiod and indirectly also to Homer, wherein song does provide a “healing,” or at least a distraction, for sufferings of this kind (Hesiod, *Theog.* 52ff.; cf. Homer, *Od.* 4.594-98). Indeed the lines in the *Medea* echo Odysseus’ praise of Alcinous’ banquet in *Odyssey* 9.1-11. But for Euripides’ banquet the aim of song is not just physical or sensual, but also moral and in a sense even psychological, the alleviating of the distress and pain inherent in the condition of mortality. Whereas symposiac or hymnic song suspends the sorrows of life in joyful oblivion and beautiful diversion (Hesiod, *Theog.* 98-103), the music of tragedy produces almost the opposite effect in its performative setting and thereby constitutes a kind of inoculation against the sudden reversals and misfortunes that life may hold.³³

The tragic poet is aware of creating a pleasure whose essential

³² For an important dimension to this passage, see Pucci 1980:25ff.; also Gentili 1984:54f.

³³ For this view of tragedy, see Diano 1968:215-69; also Pucci 1980:28ff.

content is grief. His songs constitute a public celebration whose action at numerous points threatens to dissolve into incoherence and silence. In Aeschylus' *Niobe* or Sophocles' *Ajax* the protagonist's suffering is conveyed at the beginning of the play through a powerful stage silence that only reluctantly (and unexpectedly) breaks into the sharp painful lyric lament.³⁴ Aristophanes brilliantly parodied the effect in the *Frogs* (919f.). Silence, because of terror, threat, or vehement passion, is often a major theme of tragedy, as in the *Oresteia* or Sophocles' *Electra*. The worst effect of terror is the paralyzing numbness of the tongue and the silencing of the voice, for then we cannot even give shape to the fears or communicate them to others, for help or solace. We need only recall the mood of anxiety that hangs over the silenced events in the first scene of the *Agamemnon*.

The poet of tragedy is absent from the performance a way that the epic poet is not. Unlike the epic singer, he speaks only through the voice of others. When his Muse is present, it is often paradoxically, under the sign of her negation. The oxymoron of the "unmusic Muse" itself mirrors the joylessness of the tragic world. Even when the chorus celebrates its song as the source of festivity, it does so in an atmosphere of tension and paradox, as in the parode of the *Medea* cited above. In a famous ode of the *Heracles*, the chorus expresses its devotion to the Muses (673-86):

I shall never cease mingling the Graces with the Muses, a yoking most sweet. May I not live without musicality, but may I always be in the company of garlands. The old singer still celebrates Mnemosyne. I still sing the victory-song of Heracles, in accompaniment to wine-giving Bromios and the song of the seven-stringed lyre and the Libyan flute. Never shall we cease from the Muses who have set me in the choral dance.

Interpreters have read this passage as Euripides' personal *cri de coeur*, the poet's affirmation of his calling and the steadiness of his aims. That may be so, but the expression "Never shall we cease from the Muses" is an allusion to the hymnic formula, "I shall never ceasing singing such and such a god," common as a closing motif of the Homeric Hymns. Thus it reminds us of the traditional, generic character of this song as a hymn to poetry and the Muses. As a formal hymn, it also participates in the transformations that the ritual functions of song undergo in the play.³⁵ In this case, the joy of celebrating Heracles in the victory-song here (*tan Hêrakleous kallinikon aeidô*, 680f.), as previously (cf. 570, 582), becomes

³⁴ See Aeschylus, frag. 277 in Lloyd-Jones 1971:556-62; also Sophocles, *Ajax* 333ff. See in general Reinhardt 1979:11f.

³⁵ For the dramatic function of these shifts in the function of a song, see Parry 1978:159ff.; Foley 1985:149f., 183f. For the implicit poetics of the ode, see Walsh 1984:116ff.

part of the massive change from songful celebration to horror (cf. 891-99), from cries of joy to sounds of lamentation (914, 1025ff.), from epinician to dirge.

In such cases the Muse of tragedy is not only the divinity behind the technical skill of the bard as singer and composer, as she is in Homer and Hesiod. She is also available to the poet as the figure who registers the horror in his world. She is the index by which he can measure the distance of this tragic world from the happiness of men, both communally and individually—the festive happiness that is associated with song in archaic culture. We may again recall the reflections on this association in the *parodos* of the *Medea*. In Euripides' *Trojan Women*, for example, as Cassandra generalizes about silence as the appropriate response to her overwhelming suffering, she reaches at once to the divinity of song itself, the Muse (384f.): “Better to be silent about shameful things; may I have no Muse as singer to hymn my woes” (μηδὲ μουσά μοι / γένοιτ' ἀοιδὸς ἥτις ὑμνήσει κακά). A little later in the same play, Hecuba, to arouse pity for her misfortunes, would “sing out” her sufferings (472f., *exaisai*).

Given the importance of song as the medium for articulating meaning in archaic society, not being able to sing is itself a constituent element of the suffering. Thus in the celebrated second *stasimon* of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* (884-96), the chorus frames the question of justice in terms of their own choral performance in the city: if there is not reward for justice and if the unjust man can flaunt the gods, they sing, then “why should I dance?” Or, in other words, why should they participate in choral songs that honor the gods and their harmonious world if the laws of that world do not work?

Tragedy, like epic, draws heavily on the function of song in an oral culture as the ritualized expression of intense emotion and as a mode of personal interaction among friends and kin (both *philo*i in Greek) to provide comfort, solace, and security amid anxiety, confusion, and loss. But unlike epic, tragedy is everywhere stamped by the fact that it is an imitation of a ritual within a ritualized communal context.³⁶

In archaic Greece song is directly tied to performance and often to a specific, ad hoc cultic performance. A *threnos*, paeon, marriage-song, or encomium is sung at that specific cultic occasion.³⁷ The tragedian cuts the song loose from the specific occasion. His chorus, performing its song for the fictional rites within the play, is freer of its immediate social function.

³⁶ I do not mean that the plays constitute a worship of Dionysus in a formal sense. There is obviously a big difference between going to a temple of the god and going to the theater. But they do form part of a celebration which is, in the broad sense, religious and therefore contains heavily ritualized elements.

³⁷ For the problem of specific and traditional in the occasional nature of archaic lyric, see Gentili 1984:154ff.; Burnett 1983:3ff.; Rosier 1984:200-2.

Thus in composing a particular ode, the poet can choose among the whole range of possible choral forms, or combine several different forms, or play one lyric genre off against another. To recast the famous lines of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* cited above, what song should he sing? The chorus of the *Heracles* quoted above, for example, uses a hymnic form in the opening and closing “I will not cease singing.” But it also alludes to symposiac song and to the epinician ode. Eventually, it undergoes an even harsher inversion as the dirge or *threnos* for the “victor’s” slain children.

This interplay among different kinds or genres of choral song not only shows tragedy’s capacity to synthesize elements from the pre-existing song-traditions; it also fosters its artistic self-consciousness. The dirge that we hear and watch is sung over an actor or even a dummy, not an actually dead body. We are thus involved in the paradox of voluntarily submitting to what we would normally consider unfortunate, if not calamitous. This paradox of deriving delight from pain is already explicit in the *Odyssey*. Tragedy extends it to the area of choral lyric and expresses it through the repeated oxymora of “songless song,” through the mixture of contradictory genres (e.g. epinician and *threnos* in *Heracles*), and of course through indirect discussion, as in the parade of the *Medea*.

By absorbing the cries of grief into the lyricism of choral lament, the tragic poet is able to identify the emotional experience of suffering with the musical and rhythmic impulse that lies at the very origins of the work. This transformation of cries of woe into song constitutes at least part of the creative power of the poet-maker and of his divinity, the Muse. Pindar is perhaps aware of this process when he relates how the wail of the dying Medusa is transformed by Athena into the flute-song performed at musical competitions (*Pythian* 12). Euripides specializes in this technique of tearful lament, doubtless expertly performed by virtuoso singers able to milk the emotions with the quavers that Aristophanes parodies in the *Frogs*.³⁸

In tragedy the motif of the joyless song of lament occupies an intermediate stage between metaphor, enacted gesture, and the ritualized expression of intense grief as we see it in the funeral laments of Homer. How evocative and emotionally complex such moments are we can see from the end of Euripides’ *Hippolytus*. These closing lines of the play seem to connect the mourning ritual evoked here with the survival of Hippolytus’ story in the memory of the community (1462-66):

κοινὸν τόδ’ ἄχος πᾶσι πολίταις
ἦλθεν ἀέλπτως.
πολλῶν δακρύων ἔσται πίτυλος·
τῶν γὰρ μεγάλων ἀξιοπενθεῖς
φῆμαι μᾶλλον κατέχουσιν.

³⁸ See *Frogs* 1309-63; cf. Euripides, *Heracles* 348ff.; *Trojan Women* 511f.; *Helen* 168ff. and 1107ff.

This woe came without expectation as common to all the citizens. There will be an oar-beat of many tears; for the tales of the great that are worthy of grieving do more prevail.

The “oar-beat” or *pitylos* of tears in the chorus’s “common grief” for the dead youth refers to the rhythmic beating of breasts, hands, and feet in communal mourning. Here the metaphor describes the tangible, physical expression of emotion, both by the chorus of Troezenian women. But it also alludes to the unexpressed emotion of the citizens in the theater, those who are thus united in a community of grief. They share in the ritualized expression of emotion as a fundamental part of the theatrical experience (cf. κοινὸν τὸδ’ ἄχος πᾶσι πολίταις, “This came as a common grief for all the citizens,” 1462). The “tales of the great” that endure as the memory of a past suffering in the last lines also refer to the task of the tragic poet, here viewing himself as the voice of the communal memory, as the epic singer was.³⁹

Pindar exploits this ancient tradition when he “directs his glorious wind of words” toward the victor and then generalizes, “For men who are gone, songs and tales attend (preserve) their lovely deeds” (*Nem.* 6.28-30: παροιχομένων γὰρ ἀνέρων / ἀοιδαὶ / καὶ λόγοι τὰ καλὰ σφιν ἔργ’ ἐκόμισαν). The situation of the tragic poet, however, is far more complex, partly because the drama contains many competing voices and because the values to be transmitted are more controversial, in fact are defined precisely by the tragedy as controversial.

Euripides’ “tales of the great” also include the ritual songs promised by Artemis shortly before, in which Hippolytus’ story, entwined with Phaedra’s passion, will be saved from oblivion and anonymity (1425-30):

Maidens unyoked, before their marriage, will cut their hair for you, and you throughout long time will pluck the greatest grievings of their tears. Forever there will be for you the muse-fashioned concern (in song) of maidens, and Phaedra’s love-passion toward you will not fall in namelessness and be kept in silence.⁴⁰

This cultic song is to be performed by anonymous maidens, *korai*. The metaphorization of this song, however, as a “muse-fashioned concern” and a grieving that Hippolytus will “pluck” (1427-29) pulls it away from its

³⁹ For the end of the *Hippolytus* in this perspective, see Segal 1988:62-70.

⁴⁰ With namelessness and silence here cf. the motif of being “invisible” and “unseen” (*aphanês, aïstos, akleês*) in Homer and Sappho, above. The expression in 1430, that Phaedra’s passion will not be kept in silence, is of course a final turn of the inversions of speech and silence in the play. Just that “not keeping silence” of the passion has in fact produced the tragic result before us now. On the motif of speech and silence see Knox 1979:208ff.; most recently Zeitlin 1986:91ff.

social function as ritual and toward the aesthetic self-awareness of the poet's art. The grief to be expressed by these future (and anonymous) performers of cultic song is made tangible as a "fruit" of tears that Hippolytus will "pluck"—in place of the sexual ripeness of such maidens that he has renounced. The distancing effect of metaphor is analogous to the geographical remoteness of the grief of Phaethon's sisters, "dripping amber-bright beams of tears into the purple wave" of their western river in the second *stasimon*, the so-called *Escape Ode* (737-41). In this last passage the aesthetic framing of grief by metaphor is reinforced by the combination of imbedded myth and geographical distance.

Such a transposition of ritualized grieving into metaphor is very different from the objectified communal moment of the Muses' dirge that joins gods and mortals at Achilles' funeral in Homer and Pindar. Artemis' words at the end of the *Hippolytus* do not even convey much sense of emotional participation on the part of the maidens (their thoughts are elsewhere anyway). Her emphasis is therefore on the contrivance of song, the artifice of the "Muse-fashioned concern." It is left for the human sufferers at the end to blend singing and grieving, to strike their breasts with the "oar-beat of many tears" and to feel the *koinon achos*, the "common grief" for loss.

The effect of tragic song and ritual is often to open rifts between the human social order and the realm of the gods rather than allow the two to overlap and communicate. Tragedy's transposition of ritual performance into the dichotomy between god and mortal renders problematical the symbolic transparency between human and divine that characterizes the celebratory songs of much other choral lyric. In the proem to Pindar's first *Pythian*, for example, the ordering and creative power of divine song, symbolized by the Golden Lyre next to Zeus on Olympus, is the divine prototype for the poet's lyre on earth in the present performance. It is the source of the immortal brilliance that the poet can bring into the mortal world through song. The ode goes on to develop a series of interlocking parallels between the beauty and permanence of song, the victory of cosmic order over chaos, and the good order of cities. The performance brings the effects of that Golden Lyre, "beginning of Radiancy," tangibly among men. The lyre is a sign of the justice that song (through fame) exercises and also of the festive joy that it helps to spread.

The ending of the *Hippolytus* is characteristic of the way in which the tragic poet is both heir to the ritual and commemorative functions of poetry in early Greek society and at the same time questions, probes, and inverts those traditions. As a narrator of inherited cultural property the tragedian is, as Herington has recently emphasized (1985:chs. 5-6, espec. 118-29 and 140ff.), the successor of the epic *aoidos* and rhapsode. On the other hand, he "narrates" those myths in a unique way, for unlike the

rhapsode or choral lyricist he is himself absent from the performance and his dramatic staging of the myths leaves the action with no single, unambiguous authorial voice as a firm point of reference for evaluating the actors and the action. Instead, the questions of justice, vengeance, and loyalties to city or family are framed in conflictual situations where there is some measure of right on either side, or at least a lot that can be (and is) said on both sides.

Euripides, who is so fond of ending his plays with the foundation of a cult, goes furthest in this probing or ironizing of ritual.⁴¹ But in Aeschylus and Sophocles too one can see this special property of tragedy, namely achieving full ritual closure on the one hand (signalled obviously by the closing choral pronouncement and exit) and on the other hand opening the myths to the maximum questioning of the social and ritual forms. Sophocles' *Ajax*, for example, ends with a burial ritual performed for a murderer and would-be traitor; but the rite deliberately excludes the man whose fairness, compassion, and eloquence made that burial possible.⁴² The *Oedipus Coloneus* closes with lingering tensions between the joy of Athens in its future salvation from the heroized stranger it has received, and the inconsolable grief of the daughters who will return to their doomed family and doomed city of Thebes.

How profoundly Euripides can transform the closure effected by traditional rites and replace it with the open-ended questioning characteristic of his tragedy can perhaps best be seen from the *Trojan Women*. The play ends with a burial rite for the murdered infant Astyanax, child of Hector and Andromache.⁴³ Euripides introduces the original detail of having the body buried in the shield of his father, Hector. The long scene of ritual lamentation, punctuated by several exchanges with the chorus, contains Hecuba's address to this shield both at the beginning and at the end. Her lament over the child is like the lament over a fallen warrior, but this child will never grow up. The shield is a monument of a sort to Hector, but its presence is a reminder of Hector's defeat and the failure of the toils or efforts, *ponoi*, to which the shield physically attests. First she addresses the dead child (1187-99):

Gone are my endearments, my nurture, and those sleepless nights.... What would the muse-fashioning poet write on your tomb? "This child, in fear, the Argives once did slay?" Shameful that epigram for Greece. Though you did not, as heir, receive your father's goods, receive this bronze-backed

⁴¹ See Foley 1985; Segal 1982a:318ff., 345.

⁴² *Ajax* 1393ff. On this point, see Knox 1979:151. On the tensions of the ritual at the end, see Segal 1981:138-46, 150f.

⁴³ For a sensitive analysis of this scene in a Derridean perspective, see Pucci 1977:182-84.

shield, in which you will be buried.

She then turns to the shield, as if it were the tomb:

You who saved the strong right arm of Hector, your best guardian is lost. How sweet the impress that lies upon your strap; and sweet in your orb's well-turned circumference the sweat that often Hector, in the midst of toilsome efforts, dripped from his brow, as he lifted you to his beard.

Everything in this ritual is a figure of absence. Hecuba herself, as she addresses the shell of Astyanax's body and the hollow circle of the shield, takes the place of the child's parents: Andromache has just been carried off in Neoptolemus' ship (the opening news of the scene, 1123-35), and Hector is dead. Hecuba's replacement of Andromache in performing the funeral rites over Astyanax also evokes another incomplete burial of a child. Earlier in the play Andromache told Hecuba how the latter's daughter, Polyxena, was sacrificed at the tomb of Achilles, an atrocity that had only been hinted at to the mother (620-25). There Andromache, as Hecuba's surrogate, covered the body with a "robe" (*peplois*, 627) and performed the ritual lament of beating the breast. Here at the end we see the ritual breast-beating enacted onstage (cf. 1235ff.); and Hecuba buries Andromache's child, also covering the body with a "robe" (*peplois*, 1143). She is then led off to the ship of her Greek master, as Andromache had been shortly before.

The shield that serves as Astyanax's coffin is also a figure for Hector's absence. The impress of his right arm on the leather strap is the visible symbol of the body that is not there. The sweat that dripped into the shield reminds us both of his mortality and the failure of those "toilsome efforts," *ponoi*, from which the sweat flowed. Even the "beard" reminds us of the non-adolescence of Astyanax, the truncated life-cycle of the son who, though buried in the father's shield, will not grow up to be like his father. Euripides here draws on the end of *Iliad* 6 and possibly also of Sophocles' *Ajax*; but his recasting of the traditional *threnos* adds a new intensity of pathos.

The figures of absence culminate in the closing lyrical exchanges between Hecuba and the chorus about the disappearance of the land and the name of Troy, the absence of the *un*-buried Priam, and the non-hearing of the gods (cf. 1312f., 1320ff.; cf. 1277-81). "Troy the unfortunate ceases to exist," *oud' et' estin* (1323f.). The cries of lamentation over the city, rather than perpetuating its memory, seem to "wash over it" (ἔνοσις ἄπασαν ἔνοσις / ἐπικλύζει πόλιν, 1326). Thus they add burial or drowning to the other forces of oblivion.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ For drowning and burial in the obliteration of the monumental works of men, see Poseidon and Apollo's destruction of the Achaean sea wall in *Il.* 12.17-34. Cf. the imagery of flooding and oblivion in Pindar, *Isthm.* 5.48ff., where Aegina is "set upright" by the

Addressing the shield as if it were a tomb, Hecuba had also invoked the commemorative epigram, the work of one who works with the Muse, *mousopoios*, the same word as that describing the cult song for Hippolytus (*Tro.* 1189; *Hipp.* 1428f.). But here the Muse-fashioned work is only an epigram of shame. She returns to this commemorative function of poetry at the end of her lament and again personifies the shield (1221-25):

You, in songs of victory once the mother of myriad trophies, Hector's dear shield, receive your garlands now. For though not dead you will die with this corpse. And yet it would be better far to honor you than those arms of base and clever Odysseus.

In war's interpenetration with the house, the surrogate human mother invests the inanimate weapon with maternity. The trophy of victory is now the tomb of the defeated warrior's son; and the monument itself seems to be involved in his death (*thanê(i) gar ou thanousa*, 1223). The passing on of arms now recalls the debasing of the heroic tradition in the award of Achilles' weapons to the undeserving Odysseus. Hecuba goes even farther in these reversals a few lines later, when she calls into question the entire value of commemorative song (1242-50):

If the god did not overturn our mortal world and enclose it beneath the earth, we would not, having vanished (*aphaneis*), be the subject of hymns, giving song to the Muses of mortals after us.

Come, then, and bury the corpse in his miserable tomb. He has such garlands of the dead as he should have. It makes, I think, but little difference to the dead if they get wealthy tomb-offerings; these are the empty extravagance of those who are still alive.

As showy funeral rites are reduced to vanity for the living and indifference for the dead, so too the lasting songs of epic fame, Muses and all, become an empty, even an unwelcome tribute. Helen's reflection in *Iliad* 6 that her sufferings will make her a subject of song for later men (6.356-58) holds bitterness, but it is at least accepted as an explanation. For Hecuba in Euripides' play, everything in the heroic tradition, fame included, has disintegrated into brutality, vanity, and shame.

Euripides is clearly the most self-conscious and self-reflective of the extant tragedians in exploiting the tensions between tradition and innovation, between the communal voice and the voice of criticism and iconoclasm. In the ritual acts or cultic foundations with which he often ends his plays, he calls attention to the community of the theater, the solidarity of feeling produced by the group experience of those ritual actions (as in the closing dirge of the *Hippolytus*); but he simultaneously "much-destroying storm of Zeus" at the battle of Salamis, in contrast to the silence that must "drench" boasting—a silence about ill-fame that might attach to those of the Greeks who did not fight but medized.

intimates the unsatisfactoriness or even the emptiness of those communal forms in the face of the suffering that the audience has just experienced (as in the *Trojan Women* and the *Bacchae*). The technique is not unique to Euripides. There is a similar divided perspective, overt or at least potential, in the endings of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Sophocles' *Ajax*, *Trachiniae*, or *Electra*.

One of the special properties of the dramatic form perfected by the Athenian tragic poets would seem to be just this achievement of full ritual closure on the one hand and opening the myths to their problematical dimensions as explanations of the meaning of human life on the other. May we see here a characteristic stamp of the Athenian genius, continuing the traditional function of the poet as the voice of communal norms and at the same time transforming the poet's relation to the tradition in decisive ways?⁴⁵

In this perspective we can appreciate afresh why tragedy develops in Athens alone of the Greek city-states. The tragic poet reflects a society where values have become complex, divided, multiple, a subject of debate and discussion rather than a given. We may think, for instance, of the Mytilenean debate or the Melian dialogue in Thucydides. During the acme of tragedy, Athens in particular experimented with other models for the intellectual's relation to society. It welcomed the traveling Sophists, professional questioners of local norms in unconventional ways. And for a time at least it tolerated the gadfly-questionings of Socrates. But Socrates is also the figure for whom Plato, in the next century, creates a specifically anti-tragic memorial and (in works like the *Crito*, *Apology*, or *Phaedo*) a kind of non-lamenting "poetry" of death that aims at making tragedy obsolete.

If we look back to the poetry of, say, the Megarian Theognis a couple of generations before the development of tragedy, or even to Pindar, roughly contemporary with tragedy, we see a very different relation between the poet and changing social and economic conditions. Instead of deploring change or elaborating the existing edifice of the traditional values with increasingly intricate and magnificent structures (as Pindar, for example, does), the tragic poet draws on the oral poet's inherited role as spokesman for communal values and the continuities of social and religious forms. But he examines the eventuality that these forms are no longer adequate to the difficult questions of life. Like epic and choral lyric, tragedy depends upon its rich poetic heritage from the past, especially the myths and the techniques of narrative. It is

⁴⁵ For the Athenian spirit of synthesis and innovation see Else 1965:ch. 2; also Herington 1985:chs. 4 and 6. I would not want to minimize the innovative spirit of Peisistratus in reorganizing the Athenian festivals, but the tendencies must have been already present in the culture.

inconceivable without the proto-tragic vision of Homer and the use of myth as allusive, multi-leveled paradigms for events in the present. Yet by removing himself from the performance and by projecting the voice of unified truth into the dialogic structure of conflict among sharply opposing personas, the tragedian effects a revolutionary change in the conception of the poet's role in society.⁴⁶

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⁴⁶ For this view of tragedy as marking a radical modification of the oral performance, see Segal 1982b, in 1987:espec. 266, with note 6. There is no doubt that to some extent tragedy has many continuities with the oral tradition, as has been argued by Havelock (1980, in 1982:261-313). But the situation of drama is, I believe, far more complex than Havelock allows.

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