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## THE DEMOCRATIC IDEAL AND THE ORESTEIA BETWEEN "BACK TO BASICS" AND CULTURAL STUDIES, BETWEEN OLD AND NEW HISTORICISM

### 1. Introduction and warning

It is the general opinion of our history books that the creation of Athenian democracy has to be considered one of the greatest achievements in the history of the West. It clearly belongs to the "best of the West". And, indeed, "democracy ... (as) the right held universally by all citizens to have a share of political power, that is, the right of all citizens to vote and participate in politics"<sup>1</sup> is one of the landmarks of Western civilization, one of the great cultural creations which liberated men both from the constraints of nature and from oppressive systems like oligarchy and tyranny.

Surely, we are also entitled to say that the birth of Greek tragedy during the same historical period represents a second major historical and cultural event, another creation of Greek genius that has survived the ages and spread its influence throughout the world. Especially after the victory of Salamis, nothing could stop the Athenians from developing what has been called ever since the first "golden age" in Western civilization.<sup>2</sup>

But before we go any further, let us first distinguish between the two lines of approach which will be used in discussing the birth of democracy and tragedy. First, there is the purely political perspective which says that ever since the political reforms of Solon – and in spite of many pitfalls – there has been a pronounced will to engage the middle and lower classes and to achieve more equality with the nobility, a longing that illustrated their firm decision to become politically involved. After 480, an increased sense of responsibility for the city united those two classes in a new demand for solidarity. Christian Meier called it a "significant transformation in anthropological terms", a step which "created a new identity".<sup>3</sup> Globally, one can say that the central idea which guided this (r)evolution was based upon *isonomia*, a view which no longer respected birth alone as a reason for holding political positions. From then on, every Athenian citizen stepped into a new sociological and mythical construction and became part of an artificial order which was qualified by

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, London, 1992, Penguin Books, p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Murray, *Aeschylus. The Creator of Tragedy*, Oxford, 1940; Robert Holmes Beck, *Aeschylus: Playwright Educator*, The Hague, 1975, Nijhoff.

<sup>3</sup> Christian Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge, 1993, Polity Press (1988), pp. 9-43.

equality before the law. Ever since the fifth century, historians and political scientists have studied processes like these as part of both the birth of "classical" Athens and the beginning of the history of the West.<sup>4</sup> Often enough, the *Oresteia* (458 BC) has been studied, in a very direct and one to one way, as a documentary text which allowed interesting views on historical events.<sup>5</sup> Of course, this trilogy is really packed with allusions to contemporary politics and even military campaigns, and the last decades of the twentieth century did not tire of mentioning every possible reference to the internal and external life of the city.

Secondly, there is the idea that political processes can only enter the trilogy in an indirect way, as elements of the global artistic creation. As Christopher Rocco mentions, most of the appealing details were inventions of the poet, "the acquittal of Orestes, the reconciliation of the Erinyes, their acceptance in Athens, and their transformation into the new cult of the Eumenides sprang of his very rich imagination". Especially during the twentieth century, this trilogy which deals both with democracy and tragedy, and therefore addresses politics and aesthetics, two completely different "zones" as Stephen Greenblatt would say,<sup>6</sup> served as one of the first "master narratives" of the West (*les métarécits* de Lyotard), one of the founding stories of Western democracy and progress.

Mostly, people connect art and politics in an unreflective way and this combination of perspectives makes me feel a bit uncomfortable. Therefore, at first glance, a title like *The democratic ideal as portrayed in ancient Greek drama and its relevance to today's world* frightens me and obliges me first to discuss a number of naïve and dangerous presuppositions which would serve contemporary programs of extreme right politicians very well. Indeed, since

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<sup>4</sup> George Thompson, *Aeschylus and Athens. A Study in the Social Origins of Drama*, London, 1966, Lawrence & Wishart (1941); W. G. Forrest, *The Emergence of Greek Democracy*, London, 1966.

<sup>5</sup> Political allusions in the *Oresteia* have been studied by E. R. Dodds, *Morals and Politics in the Oresteia* (1960), in: E. R. Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress and other Essays on Greek Literature and Belief*, Oxford, 1998, Clarendon Press, p. 45-63. Cf. G. Thompson, *Aeschylus and Athens*, London, 1941; id., *Aeschylus: the Oresteia*, 2 vols., Amsterdam, 1966.

A. Podlecki, *The Political Background of Aeschylean Tragedy*, Michigan, 1966; M. Ostwald, *Nomos and the Beginnings of Athenian Democracy*, Oxford, 1969. A. Lebeck, *The Oresteia*, Washington, 1971; Christopher Rocco, *Tragedy and Enlightenment. Athenian Political Thought and the Dilemmas of Modernity*, Berkeley, 1997, University of California Press, p. 138. For "other striking innovations" by Aeschylus, see: *The Oresteia*, Edited and translated by Michael Ewans, London, 2000, Everyman (1995), p. XXVIII-XXIX.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Berkeley, 1988, University of California Press; id., *Culture*, in: Frank Lentricchia & Thomas McLaughlin, *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, Chicago & London, 1990, University of Chicago Press, p. 225-232.

the beginning of the twentieth century, the Western world has to face several implosions of its traditional value system, and for many intellectuals and artists it became tempting, in order to take a fresh breath and to start up a process of cultural regeneration, to blame this continent and to look for solutions in older periods of Western history or to address other nations and countries. One remembers Antonin Artaud's search for ritual theater, his visit to Mexico, his fascination for the temple of Emesa in Syria, his amazement caused by the Balinese theatrical performance in Paris in 1931.<sup>7</sup> One also recalls Peter Brook's production *Orghast* staged in Persepolis (1971) and his *Mahābhārata* (1985),<sup>8</sup> as well as the attraction exerted by No and Kabuki techniques used in the performances of Tadashi Suzuki (cf. his *Klytaemnestra*, 1983).<sup>9</sup> The East was the only pure continent in the eyes of Pasolini, not yet polluted by Western capitalism (see his *Medea*, 1969 and *Appunti per un'Orestide africana*, 1970),<sup>10</sup> and in the opinion of a number of frustrated Western Europeans, becoming a Buddhist monk, leading the life of a Zen disciple or developing a totally new "alchemy of the eye", was much more appealing than pursuing the boring career of the Western business man.<sup>11</sup>

Hence, this article asks our attention for a very specific and interesting question: why *today* should *we* be interested in Athenian politics and drama which lie 2500 years in the past? Are we searching for good old examples and new oxygen for a new morality? Do we aim to recover and discover ancient roots? Are we longing for a socio-political restoration, or, indeed, a new kind of conservatism? The latest discussion about *Black Athena* made us aware of the political and cultural "construction" that was the "Classics" and informed us about the lack of objectivity and neutrality in the historiography of "Clas-

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<sup>7</sup> A. Virmaux, *Antonin Artaud et le théâtre*, Paris, 1970 ; H. Gouhier, *Antonin Artaud et l'essence du théâtre*, Paris, 1974; Monique Borie, *Antonin Artaud, le théâtre et le retour aux sources*, Paris, 1989, Gallimard.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Helfer & Glenn Loney (Eds.), *Peter Brook. Oxford to Orghast*, Amsterdam, 1998, Harwood Academic Publishers; Albert Hunt & Geoffrey Reeves, *Peter Brook*, Cambridge, 1995, Cambridge University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Marianne McDonald, *Ancient Sun, Modern Light*, New York, 1992, Columbia University Press, pp. 21-73.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony R. Guneratne, *Notes for an African Oresteia. Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Pier Paolo Pasolini's Challenge to Documentary*, in: Savas Patsalidis & Elizabeth Sakellaridou (Eds.), (Dis)Placing Classical Greek Theatre, Thessaloniki, 1999, University Studio Press, pp. 441-455.

<sup>11</sup> Theodore Shank, *American Alternative Theater*, New York, 1982, Grove Press; Tadashi Suzuki, *The Way of Acting. The Theatre Writings of Tadashi Suzuki* (Translated by J. Thomas Rimer), New York, 1986, Theatre Communications Group; William W. Demastes, *Theatre of Chaos. Beyond Absurdism, into Orderly Disorder*, Cambridge, 1998, Cambridge University Press; Arthur Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, Cambridge, 1996, Cambridge University Press (3. Alchemy of the eye, pp. 76-120).

sics".<sup>12</sup> A question like this leads us very quickly into the heart of contemporary discussions about the nature of history (Metahistory, New Historicism, ...) <sup>13</sup> and science (empiricism, post-empiricism), about the neo-mythic need for identity and roots, about the way we have been trained to look, to judge and to construct knowledge, Western knowledge of course.

Twenty five centuries after the first performance of the *Oresteia*, the West has lost many of the great expectations created by the birth of democracy. The twentieth century as a whole turned into the most cruel of all historical periods; after Auschwitz no overall belief was left in the civilized and enlightened vision the West had once developed. Moreover, the postmodern era professed a deep disbelief in all master narratives, which in the past, as a large umbrella, provided the main answers, like Christianity, Marxism, Socialism, and the Enlightenment itself. Postmodernism led us into a world full of questions and fragments, revisions and rewritings of the past. As a typical aspect of the twentieth-century critical awareness of ourselves, we became very conscious of the way everything has been constructed in the past.<sup>14</sup> And, of course, this criticism even led us to doubt the West in a fundamental way,<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Bernal, *Black Athena. The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. Volume I. The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985*, London, 1987, Vintage; Martin Bernal, *Black Athena. The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. Volume II. The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence*, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1991, Rutgers University Press. Cf. Mary R. Lefkowitz & Guy Maclean Rogers, *Black Athena Revisited*, Chapel Hill & London, 1996, The University of North Carolina Press; Jacques Berlinerblau, *Heresy in the University: the Black Athena Controversy and the Responsibilities of American Intellectuals*, London/ New Brunswick, 1999, Rutgers University Press. Cf. some answers by Bernal himself: David Chioni Moore (Ed.), *Black Athena Writes Back. Martin Bernal responds to his critics*, Durham & London, 2001, Duke University Press.

<sup>13</sup> J. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History. Aims, methods and new directions in the study of modern history*, London & New York, 1984; Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore, 1973, J. Hopkins University Press. Claire Colebrook, *New Literary Histories. New Historicism and Contemporary Criticism*, Manchester & New York, 1997, Manchester University Press; Jürgen Pieters, *Moments of Negotiation. The New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt*, Amsterdam, 2001, Amsterdam University Press. Cf. Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History. How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past*, New York, 1996.

<sup>14</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, 1992, Free Press; id., *Our Posthuman Future*, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, München, 1923; R. Aron, *Plaidoyer pour l'Europe décadente*, Paris, 1977; Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'ère du vide. Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain*, Paris, 1983; M. Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion*, Paris, 1985; M. Henry, *La barbarie*, Paris, 1987; S. Latouche, *L'occidentalisation du monde: essai sur la signification, la portée et les limites de l'uniformisation planétaire*, Paris, 1989; Ton Lemaire, *Twijfel aan Europa. Zijn de intellectuelen de vijanden van de Europese cultuur*; Baarn, 1990; Alain Finkielkraut, *La défaite de la pensée*, Paris, 1987; id., *L'Humanité perdue*, 1997.

generating a number of pessimistic and "fin de siècle" views, presented on the scene as the final *Endgame* (Beckett, 1958), as the ultimate *Shopping and Fucking* (Mark Ravenhill, 1997), as the last possible psychosis (*4. 48 Psychose*, Sarah Kane, 2001). Deconstruction, multiculturalism, globalism, multidisciplinary and feminism became new keywords for a new generation.

Certainly, this postmodern, posthistorical, postcolonial, poststructural and posthuman awareness of our Western identity involved the loss of a number of traditionally cherished emotional and psychological protections. It also meant the loss of old romanticizing and idealizing clichés. Today many classicists do understand that Baroque, Romanticism, Classicism and Neoclassicism are not the only possible ways of looking at Greek civilisation, moreover, they realize that they belong to the great number of historical or emotional styles or filters that gave us a new interpretation of the classics every century. Philosophy of science would call them "paradigmatic" shifts, having their own presuppositions, their own instruments for research, their own study programs.<sup>16</sup> In their analysis of "le grand tour" which obliged the European aristocracy to visit Rome and Italy, Beard and Henderson say: "And some of the most powerful representations of classical Greece, those which have formed the ways we still see and understand the classical past, were the creations of men who had never visited Greece itself, whose Greece was, quite plainly, "imaginary". John Keats, for example, whose poetry celebrated the splendour of Greek art and culture in early nineteenth-century England (most famously, perhaps, in his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*), had visited Rome; but he never ventured to make the crossing to Greece".<sup>17</sup>

Classicists, just like all other kinds of philologists, had to wait for the arrival of the many faced twentieth century human sciences, in order to learn that all new methodologies (psychoanalysis, structuralism, receptiontheory, semiotics, anthropology, poststructuralism, cultural materialism, poetics of culture...) had in common the idea that history in general and classics in particular are neither neutral nor scientific concepts, but very open constructions, characterized by a lot of presuppositions (Kuhn), power structures (Foucault), open spaces (Iser), "différences" and "différences" (Derrida), and silences (Aram Veese). On top of that, classics can not deny that their successive historical identities very often resulted in the ideology of a conservative and elitist cultural public, which, often enough, proclaimed to be the one

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<sup>16</sup> At the present day, both reception history and philosophy of science clearly show that all classical authors have been studied through shifting 'paradigmatic' interpretations. A brief look at Ann Norris Michelini's book *Euripides and the Tragic Tradition* (1987), which presents a good survey of two centuries of the interpretation of Euripides, illustrates this point sufficiently.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Beard & John Henderson, *Classics. A very short introduction*, Oxford, 1995, Oxford University Press, p. 15.

and only guardian of Western humanism. Today we discover many aspects that till now were hidden consciously and unconsciously (for instance about sexuality, racism, ideology) and which during the twentieth century resulted in a totally different look at and presentation of the classics. However, Hanson & Heath consider this approach a release of the "Beast", a catalogue of all possible misbehaviours the Classics could be accused of.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore this warning. A discussion of the value of the *democratic ideal as portrayed in ancient Greek drama and its relevance to today's world* could easily lead us into the pitfalls of old moralism, it could seduce us to listen to old nostalgic memories, it could make us think that the supremacy and the authority of the Classics might be able, after all, to dig up the "right" answers and a "proper" way of living for a new era.<sup>19</sup> In order to face twentieth-century doubts, criticism and accusations, I want to situate a number of problems from a methodological point of view, hoping to stimulate a contemporary epistemological debate about the Classics.

In the rest of this paper I would like to place the discussion about the democratic ideal and the **Oresteia** in the context of a number of recent methodological discussions about history and the classics. I refer on the one hand to the discussion between the "Back to Basics" ideology and "Cultural Studies", on the other to the debate between Old and New Historicism.

## 2. Back to Basics

Born during the government of president Reagan (1981-1989) the "Back to Basics" discussion encouraged a return to the central values of the past. Some leading intellectuals were complaining that cultural literacy was declining, that youngsters did not read enough and that, if they were reading at all, they did not read books belonging to traditional high culture. A number of classical scholars, in their wake, complained that, on the one hand, the number of students of Latin and Greek, esp. Greek, had diminished all over the world in a drastic way and, on the other, that classicists published too much, often on minor subjects that no five other colleagues would ever read.<sup>20</sup>

Best sellers written by Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) and E. D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy. What Every American Needs to*

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<sup>18</sup> Victor Davis Hanson, John Heath & Bruce S. Thornton, *Bonfire of the Humanities. Rescuing the Classics in an Impoverished Age*, Wilmington, Delaware, 2001, ISI Books.

<sup>19</sup> Freddy Decreus (Ed.), *New Classics for a New Era*, Gent, 2002, Faculty of Letters.

<sup>20</sup> The "machinery of academic production" really became overwhelming "If we are writing so much, why are all the others reading so little of it? In our identity-obsessed age, why haven't we Westerners been led by our very busy professors and scholars back to the beauty and the wisdom – and the power – of our own culture?" (Hanson & Heath, o. c., p. 2- 5).

*Know* (1988)<sup>21</sup> tried to justify faith in a continuous Western tradition rooted in classical civilization. They believed that schools "failed to fulfill their fundamental acculturative responsibility", which led to a decline in cultural literacy and a "surprising ignorance of the young", since, in the meantime, children believed that Homer wrote the "*Alamo*" instead of the *Iliad*.<sup>22</sup>

Allan Bloom is a typical example of a pessimistic fin-de-siècle, fin-de-civilisation mentality. In his book<sup>23</sup> he deplored the loss of common (sense) culture (i.e. traditional high class culture), the loss of seriousness in dealing with leisure and the loss of good taste (of course, a taste like his own). Life became cheap leisure, leisure resulted in pure entertainment. For a number of Back to Basics-thinkers, Western European culture remains the treasure-house of civilization *tout court*, and the best of the West has to be seen in terms of a collection of books that pupils have to memorize in order to become good and involved citizens. Young people have to read a number of first class books and develop the right social virtues in order to become members of the upper class. Such a protective and often moralizing politics heavily depended upon contents and books as the necessary tools to create a cultivated public, which was thought to constitute the true defenders of democracy and truth. In such a view, borders between good and bad literature were well defined, one knew which national literatures delivered the proper contents, which geographic, ethnic and historical groups helped to define the real canon.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, New York, 1987, Simon & Schuster; E. D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy. What Every American Needs to Know. With an Updated Appendix what Literate Americans Know*, New York, 1988, Vintage Books. Some ten years ago, American classicists formulated their complaints, griefs and doubts in a book called *Classics. A Discipline and Profession in Crisis?* (Ed. by Phyllis Culham & Lowell Edmunds, Lanham, 1989, University Press of America): see p. VI: "Bloom and Bennett (sc. William Bennett, former Secretary of Education) in particular have identified feminism, politicization, affirmative action, and concern for "relevance" in education as threats to the propagation of western culture".

<sup>22</sup> E. D. Hirsch, o. c., p. 5-18. See p. 19: "We have ignored cultural literacy in thinking about education – certainly I as a researcher also ignored it until recently – precisely because it was something we have been able to take for granted. ... Only when we run into cultural illiteracy are we shocked into recognizing the importance of the information that we had unconsciously assumed".

<sup>23</sup> Victor Davis Hanson & John Heath, *Who killed Homer. The Demise of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom*, New York, 1998, The Free Press, p. XX: "Our generation of Classicists, faced with the rise of Western culture beyond the borders of the West, was challenged to explain the relevance of Greek thought and values in a critical age of electronic information and entertainment. Here they failed utterly, failed to such a degree that the Greeks now play almost no part in discussions of how the West is to evolve in the next millennium".

<sup>24</sup> Ronald Soetaert, Luc Top & Guy van Belle, *Creating a new borderland on the screen*, in: *Educational Media International* 32, 1995, 2; cf. L. A. Fiedler, *English Literature. Opening up the Canon*, Baltimore / London, 1979, The John Hopkins University Press; E. Hobsbawm & T.

Therefore, the most appropriate way to react against the "dying" culture in the eyes of the silent and conservative majority was a defensive one: let us reformulate the most important books produced by our culture, let us reconsider essential "cultural literacy". E. D. Hirsch (1988) created a special (though strongly) American list of the knowledge shared by literate people. Harold Bloom (1994) discussed twenty-six authors central to the Canon, placing Shakespeare at the center, the real "touchstone" for all writers who came before and after him. In the eyes of Hirsch, the solution was a simple one: more than ever we have to teach traditional "myths and facts" described as "the oxygen of social intercourse" (1988, p. xii). Like a number of his colleagues, he mainly dealt with shared knowledge, past forms of literacy, and never questioned the borders within which such a discussion took place. Clearly, a discussion like this involved only one kind of ideological structure, but in the meantime the world became more complex, new standards, new visions, new cultures became popular.

### Conclusion:

This first discussion reveals that, from the sixties onwards, notions like centre, tradition, humanism, canon, classical roots, "democratic ideal", etc..., have lost their traditional places and functions in education and culture. *Back to Basics* was a strong patriarchal reaction which hoped to reaffirm both the importance of written books and Western culture and democracy. A return to the years preceding the sixties was felt to be a necessary and healing operation, since this period was not yet "affected" by an immoderate individual liberty and imagination. As one of the major stories about the birth of democratic ideals, the *Oresteia* definitely belongs to the list of important books which has to be read and preserved at any cost.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. Cultural Studies

In contrast to the "Back to Basics" philosophy which has been understood as a right-wing, conservative and mainly American reaction (Harold

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Ranger (Ed.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, 1983; Ch. Altieri, *An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon*, in: R. von Hallberg (Ed.), *Canons*, Chicago & London, 1984, p. 41-64.

<sup>25</sup> E. D. Hirsch, o. c., p. 193: In his *Appendix What Literate Americans Know the Oresteia* is only mentioned in an indirect way, as a part of an enumeration like: "... Oregon, Oregon Trail, Orestes, organic chemistry, organic molecule, organization man, Organization of American States (OAS), Orient, original sin, (The) Origin of Species...". Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon. The Books and School of the Ages*, discusses 26 writers "with a certain nostalgia", knowing very well that "things have however fallen apart, the center has not held, and mere anarchy is in the process of being unleashed upon what used to be called "the learned world". He mentions the *Oresteia* as part of the first of his four Ages: I. The Theocratic Age (...*Oresteia*...); II. The Aristocratic Age (Shakespeare, Center of the Canon); III. The Democratic Age. The fourth periode, our Age, is of course considered to be "The Chaotic Age".



Bloom, 1994:4), from the very start, Cultural Studies (CS), was mainly situated in Britain, was animated by Marxist ideas and focused on solutions coming from the left.<sup>26</sup> In general, it studied the effects of power in our everyday social life and especially our reactions to the whole network of structures determining our cultural position. Before analyzing this new line of approach, let us first remember what Marianne McDonald wrote about Classics in 1992. In her brilliant book *Ancient Sun, Modern Light. Greek Drama on the Modern Stage*, she warned that "(t)hroughout this century, the notion of what precisely constitutes "the classics" has more and more become a political issue".<sup>27</sup> Indeed, even for classical philologists it is not obvious anymore how to behave in a "politically correct" way in the academic world. Should we only privilege Western texts or allow non-Western and feminist ones to be present in new canonical lists? Whose culture should we promote, or in fact who are the "we" we are talking about? Whose literature do we have to read, when there is no longer a canonical "we"<sup>28</sup> nor a canonical nation,<sup>29</sup> when there is, next to "Literature", a number of literatures written with a small "l" (popular literature, colonial literature, lesbian literature, literature of minorities),<sup>30</sup> when there is next to textual studies a growing attention to media studies and cultural studies, when the class populations do no longer reflect homogeneous social and cultural strata?<sup>31</sup> In the eyes of Marianne McDonald some drastic changes have already been made recently: "scholars of previous generations were historically oriented in the sense that they tried to preserve the past; now scholars are actively reinterpreting the past to make it acceptable to the present and to assure that the future will not in the least resemble it. In literary studies this can take the form of defacing monuments: (...) Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is seen as a vehicle for the "Politics of Misogyny" (to use Froma Zeitlin's phrase)" (1992:3).

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<sup>26</sup> Seth L. Schein, *Cultural Studies and Classics: Contrasts and Opportunities*, in: Thomas M. Falkner, Nancy Felson & David Konstan (Eds.), *Contextualizing Classics. Ideology, Performance, Dialogue*, Lanham, 1999, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 285-299. Cf. S. Huddleston Edgerton, *Translating the Curriculum. Multiculturalism into Cultural Studies*, New York, 1997, Routledge; Baldwin E. A. (Eds.), *Introducing Cultural Studies*, London, 1999, Prentice Hall Europe.

<sup>27</sup> Marianne McDonald, *Ancient Sun. Modern Light. Greek Drama on the Modern Stage*, New York, 1992, Columbia University Press, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Gerald Graff, *What should we be teaching – when there is no "we"?*, in: *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 1988, 1/2, p. 189-211.

<sup>29</sup> Andy Green, *Education, Globalization and the Nation State*, Houndmills, 1997, Macmillan Press Ltd.

<sup>30</sup> Leo Lowenthal, *Literature, Popular Culture and Society*, Palo Alto (California), 1968, Political Books Publishers.

<sup>31</sup> Gerald Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars. How Teaching the Conflicts can Revitalize American Education*, New York & London, 1992, W. W. Norton & Company.

A symposium dealing with *The democratic ideal as portrayed in ancient Greek drama and its relevance to today's world* has many aspects which appeal to the type of investigation presented as CS. Cultural Studies is no longer interested in a narrow-minded interpretation of the text, but nowadays openly asks questions, provokes reactions both in the camps of academics and practitioners, in those of students and professionals. It is worth remembering that all the symposia organized here in Cyprus by the local ITI have been calling into question the whole of the cultural field: the organization of an International Theatre Festival as well as an International Scientific Colloquium on Greek tragedy, the creation of Summer Courses as well as the staging of a local performance. The splendid isolation of classics, to be its worst enemy, the local ITI committee has fought for an integration between the university and the rehearsal room and declared a regular war on all those who were still caught in the traditional assumptions of their discipline and would still like to consider classics an elitist profession. It is clear that Greek tragedy and the discussions about democratic ideals can amount to a well chosen battlefield for contemporary and interdisciplinary discussions, obliging us to question both ourselves and our relations to the intellectual, religious and emotional worlds we are living in. Thinking critically, in all freedom, transforms our consciousness and makes us reflect upon the way we have been constructing the world around us. In the opinion of Seth Schein, one can say that: "Classics courses..., informed by approaches drawn from Cultural Studies, can help students to see the contingency, circumstantiality, and arbitrariness of their own civilization and values. Critically self-aware courses in the classical tradition, in particular, can help them to understand the genesis and constructed character of attitudes and values that otherwise might seem given and in the nature of things" (1999: 297). Various contemporary productions of the *Oresteia* testify to this will to take into account larger political contexts: Ariane Mnouchkine (*Les Atrides*, 1992) was sensitive to Hélène Cixous' feminist thinking, Daniel Scahaise & Laurent Van Wetter (*Le Sang des Atrides*, 1996, Théâtre en Liberté) laughed at the very limited Greek biological interpretation of the sexes, Luk Perceval (*Aars*, 2001, Toneelhuis) contested the ideology of progress and suggested an atmosphere of constant sexual threat in the house of the Father.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Freddy Decreus, *The Oresteia, or the Myth of the Western Metropolis between Habermas and Foucault*, in: Nicos Shafkalis, Elladios Chandriotis & Costas Hadjigeorgiou (Eds.), *Fifth International Symposium on Ancient Greek Drama*, Leucosia, 1999, pp. 286-308.

**Conclusion:**

Cultural Studies contests established male and elitist authority (including the so-called phallogocentric tradition) and is more interested in the way that a topic like the struggle for a democratic ideal is connected with a number of sociological and political decisions which are made in reading and performing the trilogy, hoping that this critical distance will free us from old fashioned cultural positions. Therefore, every question about the democratic ideal has to be situated in the large pragmatic field between an author and a public and is supposed to raise questions about the use or abuse of power, about those who are considered to take part in these discussions and those who have always been supposed to stay out of it.

**4. Old historicism**

The next two sections will discuss "Old Historicism" and "Old Philology"<sup>33</sup> in terms of an opposition to "New Historicism" and "New Philology". Older forms of historical and philological research mainly centred on authors and works and used to be interested in the lives and times of writers, in their relations to so-called historical "facts" and, from the sixties on, in the composition (structural analysis) of their texts. Indeed, the old positivistic analysis of sources often resulted in the well known big comments on the lives and works of authors, where every textual detail was explained in terms of the social and economic reality of historical times. For these older literary historians, literature mainly reflected history in a direct and one-to-one way: literature was "embedded" in social reality, or was thought to be the product of an historical moment.

Positivistic criticism of Greek tragedy often emphasized the transhistorical character of literary works (Oedipus as *the* blinded hero, Pentheus as *the* stubborn king, Clytemnestra as *the* bitch). Human beings were thought to be endowed with certain essential, immutable characteristics, a position that implied that art is timeless and that tragedy allows us to meet human essences which reveal themselves in autonomous and closed systems, art being the opposite province of social life. From the 1920's on, literary analysis was mainly interested in formalist principles (Russian Formalism) and later on, in the (hidden) harmonious unity of the work of art which was supposed to transcend the chaotically conflicting reality of all earthly matters (New Criticism). Steven Greenblatt, remembering his student years, said: "Behind these exercises was the assumption that great works of art were triumphs of resolution, that they were, in Bakhtin's term, monological – the mature expression

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<sup>33</sup> Michelle Gellrich, *Interpreting Greek Tragedy. History, Theory, and the New Philology*, in: Barbara Goff (Ed.), *History, Tragedy, Theory. Dialogues on Athenian Drama*, Austin, 1995, University of Texas Press, p. 38- 58.

of one single artistic intention".<sup>34</sup> Fundamental contradictions, which inevitably addressed the arena of political and ideological conflicts, were avoided or reduced. In the words of Marilyn Skinner: "Since the late nineteenth century, Anglo-American classical scholarship has committed itself to a positivistic belief in objective, verifiable truths. The ancient texts (or at least those texts deemed most significant) were up until recently regarded as transparent vehicles of meaning relevant to all human beings in all cultural circumstances, and the hermeneutics of literary studies and history magisterially assumed the existence of a single recoverable and demonstrable explanation, its persuasiveness stemming from its facile control of the available evidence. Readings of texts or historical data accepted as definitive were therefore accorded permanent truth-status".<sup>35</sup>

Consequently, Old Historicists (defending positivist and formalist aims) prefer to stay close to mythic truth and its tendency to construct a centre, a point of mediation. In their opinion the *Oresteia* ends in a definitive reconciliation between conflict and harmony, chthonic and Olympian divinities, female and male, old and new, clan-based blood vengeance and civic justice. Moreover, reconciliation often has been seen as the triumph of the rational and creative male principle over the female and the natural. H. D. F. Kitto, in his *Greek Tragedy. A Literary Study* (1939), illustrates these firm beliefs as follows: "The end is neither happiness nor unhappiness, but illumination, the vision of the world as we know it coming to its birth... Murder and vengeance, guilt, punishment and doubt are all forgotten as Athena herself leads the Eumenides out of the Theatre of Dionysus to pass, in imaginary procession, from the southern to the northern face of the sacred rock",<sup>36</sup> a conclusion shared by Gerald F. Else (1965): "The ray of light has finally transformed darkness itself into light, a sun of tranquillity and blessing for men".<sup>37</sup>

Simon Goldhill, seeing Kitto (1961) as a representative of the Old Historicism, synthesises the former's longing for a monological reduction as follows: "The triumph of Athene's persuasion is the triumph of Zeus and the triumph of the return to order from chaos. Dikè, as the expression of the bonds, order, maintenance of social relations, has become coextensive with the glories of the Athenian *polis*. ...It is the humanist virtues of mercy, tolera-

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse. Essays in Early Modern Culture*, New York, 1990, Routledge, p. 168.

<sup>35</sup> Marilyn B. Skinner, *Expecting the Barbarians: Feminism, Nostalgia, and the "Epistemic Shift" in Classical Studies*, in: Phyllis Culham & Lowell Edmunds (Eds.), *Classics. A Discipline and Profession in Crisis?*, Lanham, 1989, University Press of America, p. 202.

<sup>36</sup> H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy. A Literary Study*, London, 1939, Methuen & Co, p. 93-94.

<sup>37</sup> Gerald F. Else, *The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1965, Harvard University Press, p. 98.

tion, and justice that the *Oresteia* appeals to". Therefore, he says, for critics like Kitto, Stanford, Kuhns, Podlecki and Lesky, Aeschylus' masterpiece "takes its place in a long line of political texts glorifying the city as such, the state as harmonic organization. The *Oresteia* reflects the ideals of these critics, who find in it an expression of "our hopes". And therefore Goldhill sums up: (w)hen Kitto concludes "the problem of dikē is solved, his optimism is shared by numerous readers of the *Oresteia*".<sup>38</sup> One cannot refrain here from recalling the *Oresteia* produced by Vittorio Gasman in 1960, a performance which invited the public to participate in the last scenes of the *Eumenides* and to dance exuberantly, in order to celebrate the birth of democracy.<sup>39</sup>

### Conclusion:

Old Historicists, followers of a positivist and formalist methodology, developed a special eye for patterns of underlying unity in works of art. Apparent paradoxes and structural oppositions were reduced and resolved, an activity which was legitimated by the hypothesis that every work of art had to be considered a special dimension of social life itself. Discussing some Old Historicist interpretations of Shakespeare, Jürgen Pieters qualifies their thinking as the search for "two separate, monolithic circuits that can be linked to one another on the basis of an unchanging referential one-to-one relationship". "Consequently", he says, "critics have to look for the existence of points of contact between the two circuits, either in terms of the *Zeitgeist*'s literary reflection, or alternatively, in terms of the social sources which an author has used in the production of his work. The detection of these points of contact is taken as the unmistakable proof of the central axiom that underlies the critical practice of Old Historicism; texts are grounded in their context, and their meaning is contained within it".<sup>40</sup> Therefore, in the eyes of Old Historicists, the safest way to interpret the *Oresteia* was to take the newly created order for a guaranteed solution, one single artistic intention dominating the whole conception of the trilogy (eventually in function of a marxist or feminist teleological construction of western history).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge, 1986, Cambridge University Press, p. 40-1.

<sup>39</sup> Hellmut Flashar, *Antikes Drama auf der Bühne Europas*, in: *Gymnasium* 100, 1993, 3, p. 197.

<sup>40</sup> Jürgen Pieters, *Moments of Negotiation. The New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt*, Amsterdam, 2001, Amsterdam University Press, p. 33.

<sup>41</sup> Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge, 1986, Cambridge University Press, pp. 50-56.

### 5. New Historicism

New Historicists consider themselves plain historical subjects, fully characterized by the specific place and moment they hold in history. In their opinion, the past cannot be disclosed and discovered in archives, but has to be made up in terms of a specific construct. As they say, literature is one of the many elements participating in a culture's representation of reality to itself and all the texts that share a given historical moment (a given "discursive formation", to borrow Foucault's term) take part in the social production of the image of the real, as it is collectively adapted by the society to which these texts belong. As Greenblatt puts it: "(T)he work of art is one of the places in which (a culture) gets shaped and transmitted and empowered and questioned as well as represented and expressed".<sup>42</sup>

As poststructuralism has been proclaiming over and over again, New Historicists probe into the distinction between literary and non-literary texts and challenge the stable difference between the fictive and the real, looking at discourse not as a transparent glass through which we glimpse reality, but as the creator of what Barthes has called the "reality-effect", which means that we should not remain blind to all the perplexities and the localized strategies in particular historical encounters. In contrast to the monological view of Old Historicism, New Historicists do not impose one schematic order or one orthodoxy on the historical real. Everything that fails to conform to this order and is likely to provoke some sociological resistance is not considered irrelevant or non-existent. Therefore, New Historicists do not refrain from analysing elements which disturb the apparent harmonising will of a work of art. In their opinion, every loose end that seems to upset a preconceived balance and threatens to interfere with a traditional view of high culture, deserves specific attention.

Aeschylus was anything but a monolithic author. His tragedies were among the many instances which shaped and transmitted Greek culture. His *Oresteia* was not simply an open window to contemporary society, but a vast excavation area where different construction blocks, styles and manners were fighting each other in order to create a certain effect of reality. Fifth-century Athens does not present itself in a specific and dominant sense; in numerous ways it was the battlefield between old and new, local and international, mythic and rational, permanent and dynamic... Over the last decades, several authors have started to study the ambiguities surrounding the notion of moral and social order (*dikè*). They have noticed how language, situated as it is within pragmatics, functioning in unreliable communicative situations, and using many rhetorical techniques, creates large zones of uncertainty and generates considerable fears and doubts. They have not failed to see how the

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<sup>42</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Introduction* (to Stephen Greenblatt) (Ed.), *Representing the English Renaissance*, London & Berkeley, 1988, University of California Press, p. VIII.

creation of exact meanings mostly escapes from a sure control and have illustrated how *dikè*, permeating the language of each and every character, kept on playing a very disturbing game. Therefore, tragedy, in their opinion, questions the self assurance which makes us believe that we hold the key notions of our human presence in our own hands, suggesting rather that the city's discourse and identity only exist in tentative ways. This latest form of criticism is thus convinced that, after the final scene of the *Oresteia*, many problems still remain, final solutions have not been reached. Instead, this criticism has identified a generalized irony aimed at expressing exactly the opposite of what has been said. Consider for instance the wholly ambiguous speeches pronounced by Clytemnestra. As Christopher Rocco has said: "Clytemnestra exploits (them) to create a discrepancy between what she says and what she means. She is adept at meaning both more and less than she says. Her purposeful deceit resides in her ability to dissociate what she means from what she says".<sup>43</sup> And what about the unmotivated departure of Apollo? In his analysis of Aeschylean techniques dating from his "Last Phase" C. J. Herington has said: "Instead of a proof of Apollo's ultimate healing and reconciling power (as which it was surely intended by its inventors) it has become, in the context of this play, a proof of Apollo's inefficacy"<sup>44</sup> But, of course, of all gods and goddesses present in Greek tragedy, it is Athena who plays the most ambiguous part in the whole of Athene's sexual economy. Both a virgin and a warrior, acting like a man and having no memory of a mother's womb, she disturbs all possible boundaries of social and sexual definition and achieves the manipulative use of language which already characterized Clytemnestra.

### Conclusion:

On the one hand, one must admit that the *Oresteia* displays a serious attempt at establishing the newly created democratic order, proving that the old social hierarchies do not function any more in an efficient way, but, on the other hand, it is also clear that the new political and social revision becomes transgressed from the very start. In order to become a firmly established series of rules and dictates, the democratic ideal, as expressed in this artistic creation, specifies from the beginning a number of new boundaries, but very soon realizes that the outcome can only be tentative, to be considered in terms of a mere ideal. Taming the shrew, in this case, the old Furies, through manipulation of language and a number of promises, reveal how imperfect the newly established peace between old and new still is.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Christopher Rocco, o. c., p. 148.

<sup>44</sup> C. J. Herington, *Aeschylus: The Last Phase*, in: Erich Segal (Ed.), *Greek Tragedy. Modern Essays in Criticism*, New York, 1983, Harper & Row, p. 127.

<sup>45</sup> Christopher Rocco, o. c., *Democracy and Discipline in Aeschylus's Oresteia*, pp. 136-170.

## 6. The democratic ideal and the tragic mask

But precisely this fundamental ambiguity and the ever incomplete nature of human knowledge have to be considered the main issues of Greek tragedy. As Charles Segal says about *Oedipus Rex*: "By utilizing a structure of opposing characters, protagonist and antagonist, tragedy focuses the myths more sharply on conflict, on opposing principles and definitions, on questions of individual choice and responsibility, on the clash between public and private good and between competitive and cooperative virtues, and on the problem of the man of exceptional greatness in an egalitarian ideology".<sup>46</sup>

And after all, is not that exactly the price that every non soteriological or ideological solution implies from the start? In every closed religious and political system the outcome is clear: you are thought to be a believer or a good citizen, because the system has established rules and regulations, most of the deviations and anomalies being sanctioned right from the start, that is detected and known in advance. The product of a growing awareness of a new political situation after Marathon and Salamis, and of a new anthropological way of aiming at *isonomia*, Athenian democracy clearly developed new rules both for voting and behaving and for delimiting personal and collective responsibility. As a new sociological reality, this view had to be delimited, elaborated and protected as accurately as possible, as a network and structure which could function independently from its inventors.

Athenian tragedy, as a heathen philosophical construction, develops a totally different kind of knowledge. As Barthes said, literature knows history only through "l'effet du réel", it does not function as a real window which gives us direct access to historical facts. This "secondary model" of the real (Lotman) departs from the real in order to create a secondary modelling vision. As one of those secondary constructions, tragedy chose the tragic feeling as the underlying philosophical and existential category for considering human nature, its limits and purpose. Tragedy deliberately undermines and distorts all human self-assurance and self-definition and explicitly questions political decision making, its only hero being Dionysus, patron of every transformation and metamorphosis, the supreme master of illusion and ambiguity. The *Oresteia* re-structures and de-structures at the same time, reverses and inverts social and sexual roles, opens up new political patterns and undermines them afterwards, calms down old mythic violence and envisages new

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<sup>46</sup> Charles Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus. Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*, NY, 1993, Twayne Publishers, p. 43.



trouble.<sup>47</sup> Let us not forget that after every *Oresteia* (458) comes an *Hecuba* (430-425), a moment where the old queen mother brutally takes revenge on Polymestor, the slayer of her son, and is told to turn into a she-dog afterwards, a bitch, with bloodshot eyes, an implacable avenger, a doglike creature closely associated with the Erinyes, the bloodhounds mentioned in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*.<sup>48</sup>

Only recently, has Greek tragedy started to be studied from the perspective of the New Historicism, but from the very beginning it has shared its preoccupations with repressed, hidden and distanced feelings. Tragedy has never dealt with a complete reconciliation of desires and wishes as the expression of the harmonising will of high culture or religion; rather, it always dissociated, disrupted, resisted.

Studying the evolution of the *Democratic ideal as portrayed in ancient Greek drama and its relevance to today's world*, we have to realize that the only possible answers have to come from tragedy itself and its dominant tragic atmosphere. Tragedy cannot teach us how to become good citizens, its main concern being the tragic truth about human life. But maybe this is the most adequate strategy to explore important political notions like responsibility, autonomy and freedom: using the imagination of the classical past surely helps us to define and specify the ambiguities, exclusions and boundaries that a modern society has to confront.

Greek tragedy no longer reflects the values of a barbaric past; on the contrary, the West finally accepted that the tragic feeling belongs to the most central of its cultural intuitions. As a typically Western attempt at self-definition the tragic is extremely useful in stimulating its citizens to reflect about every possible ethical and political problem. In order to define the democratic ideal, it is really appropriate to pass through the tragic experience, or, put into other words, in order to become a good Western citizen, please first wear the mask of a tragic hero. Tragedy, as the literature of the impossible and the fragile, has the ability forever to measure our capacity to deal with dimensions that exceed us, with a game (called the game of life) where no rules and regulations are provided in advance. Therefore we can do no better service to democracy than study her from within the deepest depths of Greek tragedy, in the belief that the tragic feeling is a major form of education, one of the highest forms of art in the West.

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<sup>47</sup> Christopher Rocco, o. c., 146-147; cf. Ch. Segal, *Greek Tragedy and Society: A structural perspective*, in: id., *Interpreting Greek Tragedy: Myth, Poetry, Text*, Ithaca, 1986, Cornell University Press.

<sup>48</sup> Euripides, *Hecuba, Introduction, Text and Commentary*, by Justina Gregory, Atlanta, 1999; cf. Dorothea Gall, *Menschen, die zu Tieren werden: die Metamorphose in der Hekabe des Euripides*, in: *Hermes* 125, 1997, p. 396-412.