

Greek Influence

Assignment 30

- We are continuing to study how the Greeks influenced philosophy and literature. Next week we will be reading how Greeks influenced literary theory. Print out the following chapters from Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* and be ready to read it and discuss it in class with me. *You do not have to read it before class—it is quite difficult and needs an introduction!*
- Read Bulfinch, chapters 9–11.
- Work on your speech—your vocal quality, etc. *You will be giving the speech next week.*

The Birth of Tragedy¹ by Friedrich Nietzsche

Chapter 9

Everything that rises to the surface in the Apollonian portion of Greek tragedy (in the dialogue) looks simple, transparent, beautiful. In this sense the dialogue is a mirror of the Greek mind, whose nature manifests itself in dance, since in dance the maximum power is only potentially present, betraying itself in the suppleness and opulence of movement. The language of the Sophoclean heroes surprises us by its Apollonian determinacy and clearness. It seems to us that we can fathom their innermost being, and we are somewhat surprised that we had such a short way to go. However, once we abstract from the character of the hero as it rises to the surface and becomes visible (a character at bottom no more than a luminous shape projected onto a dark wall, that is to say, appearance through and through) and instead penetrate into the myth which is projected in these luminous reflections, we suddenly come up against a phenomenon which is the exact opposite of a familiar optical one. After an energetic attempt to focus on the sun we have, by way of remedy almost, dark spots before our eyes when we turn away. Conversely, the luminous images of the Sophoclean heroes—those Apollonian masks—are the necessary productions of a deep look into the horror of nature; luminous spots, as it were, designed to cure an eye hurt by the ghastly night. Only in this way can we form an adequate notion of the seriousness of Greek “serenity”; whereas we find that serenity generally misinterpreted nowadays as a condition of undisturbed complacency.

Sophocles conceived doomed Oedipus the greatest sufferer of the Greek stage, as a pattern of nobility, destined to error and misery despite his wisdom, yet exercising a beneficent influence upon his environment in virtue of his boundless grief. The profound poet tells us that a man who is truly noble is incapable of sin; though every law, every natural order, indeed the entire canon of ethics, perish by his actions, those very actions will create a circle of higher consequences able to found a

¹ adapted by William Walter

new world on the ruins of the old. This is the poet's message, insofar as he is at the same time a religious thinker. In his capacity as poet he presents us in the beginning with a complicated legal knot in the slow unraveling of which the judge brings about his own destruction. The typically Greek delight in this dialectical solution is so great that it imparts an element of triumphant serenity to the work, and thus removes the sting lurking in the ghastly premises of the plot. In *Oedipus at Colonus* we meet this same serenity, but utterly transfigured. In contrast to the aged hero, stricken with excess of grief and passively undergoing his many misfortunes, we have here a transcendent serenity issuing from above and hinting that by his passive endurance the hero may yet gain a consummate energy of action. This activity (so different from his earlier conscious striving, which had resulted in pure passivity) will extend far beyond the limited experience of his own life. Thus the legal knot of the *Oedipus* fable, which had seemed to mortal eyes incapable of being disentangled, is slowly loosened. And we experience the most profound human joy as we witness this divine counterpart of dialectics. If this explanation has done the poet justice, it may yet be asked whether it has exhausted the implications of the myth; and now we see that the poet's entire conception was nothing more nor less than the luminous afterimage which kind nature provides our eyes after a look into the abyss. *Oedipus*, his father's murderer, his mother's lover, solver of the Sphinx's riddle! What is the meaning of this triple fate? [...] This is the recognition I find expressed in the terrible triad of Oedipean fates: the same man who solved the riddle of nature (the ambiguous Sphinx) must also, as murderer of his father and husband of his mother, break the consecrated tables of the natural order. It is as though the myth whispered to us that wisdom, and especially Dionysian wisdom, is an unnatural crime, and that whoever, in pride of knowledge, hurls nature into the abyss of destruction, must himself experience nature's disintegration. "The edge of wisdom is turned against the wise man; wisdom is a crime committed on nature": such are the terrible words addressed to us by myth. Yet the Greek poet, like a sunbeam, touches the terrible and austere Memnon's Column of myth, which proceeds to give forth Sophoclean melodies. Now I wish to contrast to the glory of passivity the glory of action, as it irradiates the Prometheus of Aeschylus. Young Goethe has revealed to us, in the bold words his Prometheus addresses to Zeus, what the thinker Aeschylus meant to say, but what, as poet, he merely gave us to divine in symbol:

Here I sit, forming men
in my own image,
a race to be like me,
to suffer, to weep,
to delight and to rejoice,
and to defy you,
as I do.

Man, raised to titanic proportions, conquers his own civilization and compels the gods to join forces with him, since by his autonomous wisdom he commands both their existence and the limitations of their sway. What appears most wonderful, however, in the Prometheus poem—ostensibly a hymn in praise of impiety—is its profound Aeschylean longing for justice. The immense suffering of the bold individual, on the one hand, and on the other the extreme jeopardy of the gods, prefiguring a "twilight of the gods"—the two together pointing to a reconciliation, a merger of their universes of suffering—all this reminds one vividly of the central tenet

of Aeschylean speculation in which Moira, as eternal justice, is seen enthroned above men and gods alike. In considering the extraordinary boldness with which Aeschylus places the Olympian world on his scales of justice, we must remember that the profound Greek had an absolutely stable basis of metaphysical thought in his mystery cults and that he was free to discharge all his skeptical velleities on the Olympians. The Greek artist, especially, experienced in—respect of these divinities an obscure sense of mutual dependency, a feeling which has been perfectly symbolized in the Prometheus of Aeschylus. The titanic artist was strong in his defiant belief that he could create men and, at the least, destroy Olympian gods; this he was able to do by virtue of his superior wisdom, which, to be sure, he must atone for by eternal suffering. The glorious power to do, which is possessed by great genius, and for which even eternal suffering is not too high a price to pay—the artist's austere pride—is of the very essence of Aeschylean poetry, while Sophocles in his Oedipus intones a paean to the saint. But even Aeschylus' interpretation of the myth fails to exhaust its extraordinary depth of terror. Once again, we may see the artist's buoyancy and creative joy as a luminous cloud shape reflected upon the dark surface of a lake of sorrow. The legend of Prometheus is indigenous to the entire community of Aryan races and attests to their prevailing talent for profound and tragic vision. In fact, it is not improbable that this myth has the same characteristic importance for the Aryan mind as the myth of the Fall has for the Semitic, and that the two myths are related as brother and sister. The presupposition of the Prometheus myth is primitive man's belief in the supreme value of fire as the true palladium of every rising civilization. But for man to dispose of fire freely, and not receive it as a gift from heaven in the kindling thunderbolt and the warming sunlight, seemed a crime to thoughtful primitive man, a despoiling of divine nature. Thus this original philosophical problem poses at once an insoluble conflict between men and the gods, which lies like a huge boulder at the gateway to every culture. Man's highest good must be bought with a crime and paid for by the flood of grief and suffering which the offended divinities visit upon the human race in its noble ambition. An austere notion, this, which by the dignity it confers on crime presents a strange contrast to the Semitic myth of the Fall—a myth that exhibits curiosity, deception, suggestibility, concupiscence, in short a whole series of principally feminine frailties, as the root of all evil. What distinguishes the Aryan conception is an exalted notion of active sin as the properly Promethean virtue; this notion provides us with the ethical substratum of pessimistic tragedy, which comes to be seen as a justification of human ills, that is to say of human guilt as well as the suffering purchased by that guilt. The tragedy at the heart of things, which the thoughtful Aryan is not disposed to quibble away, the contrariety at the center of the universe, is seen by him as an interpenetration of several worlds, as for instance a divine and a human, each individually in the right but each, as it encroaches upon the other, having to suffer for its individuality. The individual, in the course of his heroic striving towards universality, de-individuation, comes up against that primordial contradiction and learns both to sin and to suffer. The Aryan nations assign to crime the male, the Semites to sin the female gender; and it is quite consistent with these notions that the original act of hubris should be attributed to a man, original sin to a woman. For the rest, perhaps not too much should be made of this distinction, cf. the chorus of wizards in Goethe's Faust:

If that is so, we do not mind it:
With a thousand steps the women find it;
But though they rush, we do not care:

With one big jump the men get there.
[Goethe's Faust, lines 3982-85.]

Once we have comprehended the substance of the Prometheus myth—the imperative necessity of hubris for the titanic individual—we must realize the non-Apollonian character of this pessimistic idea. It is Apollo who tranquilizes the individual by drawing boundary lines, and who, by enjoining again and again the practice of self-knowledge, reminds him of the holy, universal norms. But lest the Apollonian tendency freeze all form into Egyptian rigidity, and in attempting to prescribe its orbit to each particular wave inhibit the movement of the lake, the Dionysian flood tide periodically destroys all the little circles in which the Apollonian will would confine Hellenism. The swiftly rising Dionysian tide then shoulders all the small individual wave crests, even as Prometheus' brother, the Titan Atlas, shouldered the world. This titanic urge to be the Atlas of all individuals, to bear them on broad shoulders ever farther and higher, is the common bond between the Promethean and the Dionysian forces. In this respect the Aeschylean Prometheus appears as a Dionysian mask, while in his deep hunger for justice Aeschylus reveals his paternal descent from Apollo, god of individuation and just boundaries. We may express the Janus face, at once Dionysian and Apollonian, of the Aeschylean Prometheus in the following formula: "All that exists is just and unjust and equally justified in both." That is your world! A world indeed!— [Goethe's Faust, line 409.]

Chapter 10

It is an unimpeachable tradition that in its earliest form Greek tragedy records only the sufferings of Dionysus, and that he was the only actor. But it may be claimed with equal justice that, up to Euripides, Dionysus remains the sole dramatic protagonist and that all the famous characters of the Greek stage, Prometheus, Oedipus, etc., are only masks of that original hero. The fact that a god hides behind all these masks accounts for the much-admired "ideal" character of those celebrated figures. Someone, I can't recall who, has claimed that all individuals, as individuals, are comic, and therefore untragic; which seems to suggest that the Greeks did not tolerate individuals at all on the tragic stage. And in fact they must have felt this way. The Platonic distinction between the idea and the eidolon ["idol"] is deemed rooted in the Greek temperament. If we wished to use Plato's terminology we might speak of the tragic characters of the Greek stage somewhat as follows: the one true Dionysus appears in a multiplicity of characters, in the mask of warrior hero, and enmeshed in the web of individual will. The god ascends the stage in the likeness of a striving and suffering individual. That he can appear at all with this clarity and precision is due to dream interpreter Apollo, who projects before the chorus its Dionysian condition in this analogical figure. Yet in truth that hero is the suffering Dionysus of the mysteries. He of whom the wonderful myth relates that as a child he was dismembered by Titans now experiences in his own person the pains of individuation, and in this condition is worshipped as Zagreus. We have here an indication that dismemberment—the truly Dionysian suffering—was like a separation into air, water, earth, and fire, and that individuation should be regarded as the source of all suffering, and rejected. The smile of this Dionysus has given birth to the Olympian gods, his tears have given birth to men. In his existence as a dismembered god, Dionysus shows the double nature of a cruel, savage daemon and a mild, gentle ruler. Every hope of the Eleusinian initiates pointed to a rebirth of Dionysus, which we can now interpret as meaning the end of individuation; the thundering paean of the adepts addressed itself to the coming of

the third Dionysus. This hope alone sheds a beam of joy on a ravaged and fragmented world—as is shown by the myth of sorrowing Demeter, who rejoiced only when she was told that she might once again bear Dionysus. In these notions we already find all the components of a profound and mystic philosophy and, by the same token, of the mystery doctrine of tragedy; a recognition that whatever exists is of a piece, and that individuation is the root of all evil; a conception of art as the sanguine hope that the spell of individuation may yet be broken. as an augury of eventual reintegration.

I have said earlier that the Homeric epic was the poetic expression of Olympian culture, its victory song over the terrors of the battle with the Titans. Now, under the overmastering influence of tragic poetry, the Homeric myths were once more transformed and by this metempsychosis proved that in the interim Olympian culture too had been superseded by an even deeper philosophy. The contumacious Titan, Prometheus, now announced to his Olympian tormentor that unless the latter promptly joined forces with him, his reign would be in supreme danger. In the work of Aeschylus we recognize the alliance of the Titan with a frightened Zeus in terror of his end. Thus we find the earlier age of Titans brought back from Tartarus and restored to the light of day. A philosophy of wild, naked nature looks with the bold countenance of truth upon the flitting myths of the Homeric world: they pale and tremble before the lightning eye of this goddess, until the mighty fist of the Dionysian artist forces them into the service of a new divinity. The Dionysian truth appropriates the entire realm of myth as symbolic language for its own insights, which it expresses partly in the public rite of tragedy and partly in the secret celebrations of dramatic mysteries, but always under the old mythic veil. What was the power that rescued Prometheus from his vultures and transformed myth into a vehicle of Dionysian wisdom? It was the Herculean power of music, which reached its highest form in tragedy and endowed myth with a new and profound significance. Such, as we have said earlier, is the mighty prerogative of music. For it is the lot of every myth to creep gradually into the narrows of supposititious historical fact and to be treated by some later time as a unique event of history. And the Greeks at that time were already well on their way to reinterpreting their childhood dream, cleverly and arbitrarily, into pragmatic childhood history. It is the sure sign of the death of a religion when its mythic presuppositions become systematized, under the severe, rational eyes of an orthodox dogmatism, into a ready sum of historical events, and when people begin timidly defending the veracity of myth but at the same time resist its natural continuance—when the feeling for myth withers and its place is taken by a religion claiming historical foundations. This decaying myth was now seized by the newborn genius of Dionysian music, in whose hands it flowered once more, with new colors and a fragrance that aroused a wistful longing for a metaphysical world. After this last florescence myth declined, its leaves withered, and before long all the ironic Lucians of antiquity caught at the faded blossoms whirled away by the wind. It was through tragedy that myth achieved its profoundest content, its most expressive form; it arose once again like a wounded warrior, its eyes alight with unspent power and the calm wisdom of the dying.

What were you thinking of, overweening Euripides, when you hoped to press myth, then in its last agony, into your service? It died under your violent hands; but you could easily put in its place an imitation that, like Heracles' monkey, would trick itself out in the master's robes. And even as myth, music too died under your hands; though you plundered greedily all the gardens of music, you could achieve no more than a counterfeit. And because you had deserted Dionysus, you were in turn deserted by Apollo. Though you hunted all the passions up from their couch and

conjured them into your circle, though you pointed and burnished a sophistic dialectic for the speeches of your heroes, they have only counterfeit passions and speak counterfeit speeches.