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The Tragic Choral Group: Dramatic Roles and Social Functions

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"We can stitch back together and rearrange, or rip apart a second time the fraying shreds of the ancient tradition: this tradition tells us with utmost certainty that *tragedy was born from the tragic chorus*, that it was originally the chorus and nothing but the chorus." With this categorical assertion, Friedrich Nietzsche begins the paragraph in *The Birth of Tragedy* dedicated to determining the origin of the genre (1872: §7, 1.9). According to Nietzsche's claims regarding the "Dionysio-Apollonian genius" that produced classical tragedy (1872: §5, 1.2), Greek tragedy is thus anchored in the collectivity of the "fictional natural beings" that constitutes the satyrs' chorus. In this manner, Nietzsche privileges the satyric collectivity over the two other representatives in the romantic triad: on the one hand, epic poetic images, and on the other, lyrical individual being. While referring back to the Dionysian ecstasy supposed to free the self from civilized reality, this definition of the tragic chorus is in fact polemically opposed to August Wilhelm Schlegel's famous theory, as well as to Friedrich Schiller's practical application, visible in his own drama.

Like his successors, Nietzsche only retains from Schlegel's definition the formula that has gone down into posterity: "The Chorus, in a word, is the idealized spectator." He thus neglects, first of all, to specify that Schlegel proposes this definition in the context of his reflection on Aristotle's theory of catharsis: the chorus conveys to the actual audience the emotions that it feels through music. Second, for Schlegel, the Greek tragic chorus *qua* ideal spectator also represents the poet, and thus constitutes "the spokesman for the whole of humanity" (1846: 76–7). With his universalizing authority, the poet associates himself with the choral voice in order to collaborate with

the ideal spectator, disparaged by Nietzsche as a spectator without a spectacle, deprived of any aesthetic sense. Schiller, for his part, appears more worthy to Nietzsche because he compares the chorus to "a living wall that the tragedy erects around itself to isolate it from reality and to preserve its ideal place and its poetic freedom." The dramaturge's conception of the tragic chorus can thus synthesize, in a Hegelian vein, the natural and the fictional. In fact, by transposing a Euripides-like tragedy into medieval, Christian Sicily, Schiller intended his *Braut von Messina* (*Bride from Messina*, 1803) to be a "tragedy with choruses." In his preface, the romantic playwright conflates his representation of the tragic Greek chorus with his self-imposed rule for his own dramatic work.[1] In this normative view, based on the supposed role of the choral group in Greek tragedy, the chorus corresponds to "a general concept," empirically represented by "a powerful, feeling crowd." The function of the tragic chorus, both as a real and ideal entity, would thus be to accompany, and comment on, the dramatic action. It would draw lessons of universal importance from the staged drama.

Levels of Enunciation

Leaving aside these German romantic attempts to define the Greek tragic choral group, and to assign it functions ranging from the reality of an idealized audience to the philosophical ideal of an aesthetic poetics, let us turn to historical conceptions and categories. In the descriptive, genetic, and normative perspective that informs his *Poetics*, Aristotle famously singled out singing (*mélos*) as one of Attic tragedy's constitutive parts. The chorus is thus a part of the whole and, as such, is called upon to contribute to the action (*sunagonízesthai*).[2] With its focus on the *mûthos* as plot and driving force, however, Aristotle's thesis is primarily concerned with the narrative and moral dimension of tragedy. Conversely, in the famous debate between Aeschylus and Euripides portrayed by Aristophanes in *Frogs*, the technical term used for tragic staging is *didáskein*. In the context of the discussion on citizenship, this description in fact summarizes the function of the dramatic poet as he is defined by his contemporaries, as a *(khoro)didáskalos*. Indeed, it appears that the first tragedians, themselves dancers, were responsible for the choreography of the choral group. To participate in the dramatic competition of the Great Dionysia, the poet "requested a chorus" (*khoròn aiteîn*) from the archon-king, who assigned him one (*khoròn didónai*).[3]

In light of their references to the choral group, a good third of the surviving classical tragedies tell of the central role played by the chorus. Certainly it was not by chance that classical Athenians used the term *khoreegós*, the name of the choral group's leader, to define the function of the citizen responsible for constituting and financing tragic and dithyrambic choruses.[4] Through the choral group's chanted interventions, directed by the *coryphaeus*, tragedy thus fits into the "song culture" which was classical Greek civilization. More specifically, it fits into the great tradition of melic poetry, one of whose most illustrious representatives, Alcman, is referred to by the commentators of his Laconian poems as *khorodidáskalos*!

The question of the theatrical roles played by the chorus in the unfolding of the tragic plot – particularly compared with the functions of choral songs for the audience come to celebrate Dionysus in the sanctuary of his theater – leads us to the controversial nature of the "lyrical *I/we*," or rather, of the "melic" subject. The method of discourse analysis adopted here requires that we examine the choral voice's tragic authority from the standpoint of enunciation. As with other genres of melic poetry – paean, threnody, hymenaion, partheneion, and so on – the choral voice, the voice that says *I*, often auto-referentially designates the chanted action in which the choral group is engaged. That is, the chorus refers to the ritual action that it is collectively undertaking, guided by the choregos, through the ritual poetic forms that are the victory song, the song of lamentation and of mourning, the song of marriage, or the cultic song reserved for maidens. This self-referential and performative aspect of the choral melos is connected to its pragmatic dimension; from an enunciative, as well as anthropological perspective, this implies that the choral song forms part of a sequence of ritual gestures, and that it can generally be associated with a cult. The sung and danced enunciations of the choral *I/we* thus include both an internal auto-reference to the song's contents and an external auto-reference to the ritual act that the chorus is accomplishing.

From an enunciative standpoint, then, the insertion onto the tragic stage of the choral group's songs multiplies the choral voice's levels of expression, transforming it into a true polyphony. In this manner, the present of enunciation, inscribed in the chanted choral discourse by such pronominal forms as *I/you*, or by *here* and *now*, can successively and sometimes simultaneously refer to the textual speaker and to the "ideal" author, as well as to the real historical author; it can refer to the textual addressee and to the "virtual" or "implicit" audience, as well as to the real spectators. Furthermore, this mimetic insertion onto the stage of the dramatized choral action involves a mask and costume that in turn refer to a Dionysiac cult. This ritual dramatic mimesis leads to a doubling of the choral voice, with a stage identity determined by the play, on the one hand, and the civic identity of the choristers as members of the Athenian social community on the other. There are thus a large number of internal and external figures, both intra- and extra-discursive, that can employ the enunciative present.[5]

In his seminal study on the choral parts of Greek tragedy, Walther Kranz shows that the chorus facilitates the comprehension of mimed action onstage, both by prolonging it in other areas, and by drawing universal ethical conclusions. At the same time, he recognizes that the chorus members, themselves involved in the action, often express the conflicted feelings which the plot arouses in them, and that these emotions often prod them to ask the gods for their assistance. A more systematic study of the dramatic and semantic functions of choral voices in Greek tragedy reveals that the chorus is called time and time again to participate affectively in the action by voicing the feelings which it provokes, to comment on the action by revealing its narrative antecedents as well as its moral and theological implications, and even to take action by influencing the plot through ritual forms of melic chants addressed to

the gods. In terms of content, we can thus distinguish between an "emotive" voice, a "hermeneutic" voice, and a "performative" voice.[6] These voices superimpose themselves inside the reality of choral song, while being carried alternately by the five enunciative positions already defined. In this manner, we can measure the complexity of the polyphonic and polymorphous network that underwrites the authority of the chorus in classical Attic tragedy.

Theatrical Insertion: An Example

According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, Euripides can be distinguished from Sophocles in the following way: in Euripides' tragedies, the chorus does not participate in the action (*sunagonízesthai*). In other words, Euripides' choral songs, like Agathon's, would elude the function mentioned above, and constitute mere interludes (*embólima*) that have no relation to the development of the plot (*mûthos*).[7]

The following example, drawn from one of Euripides' tragedies, illustrates this point. The dramatic action in *Heracles* originates in a complex plot that was probably rewritten by the great tragedian. The action starts with Heracles' return to Thebes, the home he had left to complete the famous labors ordered by King Eurystheus of Argos, and where he had left his mortal father Amphitryon, his wife Megara, and his three young sons. During his absence, Lycos the Euboean has killed Creon, the father of Megara, and assumed the throne. He now plans to attack Heracles' sons, wife, and father, who have sought asylum at the altar of Zeus the Savior. The chorus, composed of 15 elderly men of Thebes loyal to Amphitryon and led by the *coryphaeus*, feels immediately involved in the dramatic action. It does not hesitate to advance its own arguments in the rhetorical debate in the first stasimon between Lycos, who justifies his intention to kill the descendants of Heracles; Amphitryon, who denounces the violence of the usurping king, and Megara, who has come to thank the chorus for its support against the impious and tyrannical insolence of Lycos. In spite of their weakness, expressed in a parodos which assumes the form of a funerary lament, the elders of the chorus, perhaps through the voice of their *coryphaeus*, thus participate in the agon itself. In this particular instance, the chorus does not intervene by chanting, but rather by exceptionally employing the same recited iambic trimeters as the protagonists.[8] While condemning Lycos' hubris, the *choreutai* or the *coryphaeus* nonetheless tell of their inability to intervene practically, in accordance with their status as elderly men. They can therefore have no impact on the usurper's decision to kill Heracles' children, whose father is presumed dead.

The first stasimon begins with a reference to one of the threnody's refrains. The usual invoking of the Muse is replaced by a prayer to Apollo, the god of music who has a lamentation follow the song of success. Then, in the same poetic movement which is found in the prelude to Hesiod's *Works and Days*, the voice of Apollo is swiftly replaced by that of the chorus. Singing in the first-person singular, the choristers describe the choral action of which they are a part; they thus have recourse

to the process of auto-referentiality, both intra- and extra-discursive, as we already noted, to express their intention of offering a "hymn." In the purest Pindaric vein, and in the tradition of funereal celebrations (as the choice of metaphors illustrates), this song of praise for Heracles' labors, described in the same terms as the feats of the participants in the Panhellenic games, is compared to the braiding of a crown (*stephánōma*), a crown that becomes a votive statue (*ágalma*).[9] In this manner, the list of the civilizing hero's 12 labors is introduced. From a formal standpoint, this list evokes the enumerative structure of the catalog of ships in the *Iliad*. The narrative character of each summarized episode, as well as the choice of words, points instead to the form of the citharodic nomos, as employed by Stesichorus: heroic narratives such as the *Geryonid*, of which Heracles is precisely the main character, but also lyric, or better melic narratives, with musical accompaniment and a mimetic choral dance.

After a first couple of strophes in an Aeolic rhythm, a second dyad mixes dactylic and trochaic forms, while employing epic diction to evoke the poetic genre of melic narration, which the poet of southern Italy allegedly established. This lovely narrative choral chant is thus self-enclosed, in the manner of a *Homeric Hymn*: when the past narrative shifts to the (dramatic) present, the chorus addresses Heracles, believed to have disappeared during his final underworld labor. Although adapting the invocative structure, which concludes such narrative hymns, by imploring the addressed god to intervene, the chorus cannot fail to acknowledge the hero's absence and to recapitulate its own powerlessness. We may thus understand how the chant narrating Heracles' successes (again, *agálmata eutukhē̂*, statues of happiness) morphs into a lamentation, as had Apollo's chant, referenced at the beginning of the ode. If the narrative and explanatory voice overpowers the emotive one in this long choral song, the hymnic form's efficiency is obviously diverted and condemned to failure. The tragic genre demands as much: at the end of its long choral intervention, it is the chorus or the *coryphaeus* himself who must announce the arrival on stage of Heracles' children, dressed for their final voyage.

The unexpected appearance of Heracles provokes an unanticipated reversal of fortune. After the protagonists respond to this positive turn of events, the choral group itself reacts – this is quite unusual in the middle of a tragedy – with a beautiful chant in Aeolic rhythm. The first strophe-antistrophe group of the second stasimon almost transports the auditor and the spectator into the context of the symposium. Probably inspired by Delphic wisdom, this web of sententious declarations on the merits of youth evokes the elegiac poems of Mimnermus. It is accompanied by utopian wishes regarding the possibility for mortal men to have a second youth that would distinguish the deserving from the undeserving: critical of the gods, these more personal reflections are often assigned by contemporary critics to the author's sophist voice. Whatever the case, in terms of the plot's unfolding they certainly refer to Heracles who has just returned from Hell and who has been destined to a second life among the gods.[10]

One thus understands better why the second strophic couplet falls entirely under the category of a "performative" chant. This second part of the stasimon finally

represents the victory song that the circumstances did not allow the chorus to sing up until now. Not only do the verbs' future performative tense in the choral celebration which punctuates this ode allow the *choreutai*, now under the influence of Dionysus' wine, to join in the dances of the Muses and the Charites, under the sign of Mnemosyne, incarnation of aedic memory; it also engages the chorus in a victory chant, a chant which Pindar explicitly borrows from Archilochus to sing the praises of a victorious wrestler at the Olympic games; a *melos* in which the iambic poet celebrated precisely Heracles and his young nephew Iolaos![11] No longer a threnody, it is a paean, introduced by a wish that it should never end, which recalls the appeals to perpetual memory that open and close, for example, the *Homeric Hymn* dedicated to Apollo. By reaffirming the contrast delineated in the preceding strophes between graceful youth and tiresome old age, the chorus does not hesitate, in conclusion, to rival the Deliades themselves. This celebrated chorus of maidens, already evoked in the same Homeric poem, dedicated its song and dance rituals to the service of Apollo at his sanctuary on the island of Delos. For the spectators of the drama, this large sanctuary had become the religious and economic center of the league of the same name, organized and controlled by the city of Athens. Beyond a strange collusion of gender and age roles, to which we will return shortly, and beyond the intervention of the handsome Apollo after that of Dionysus, one will notice the coincidence between the paean sung by the chorus of the elders of Thebes to celebrate the glorious return of the civilizing hero, and the paean of the young Deliades, known and heard by at least some of the spectators. For a tragedy that was most likely staged during the Peloponnesian War, this coincidence assures one aspect of the expected and complex relation between the heroic story dramatized onstage and the historical context of the representation.[12]

Following this lovely, self-referential choral song, Amphitryon must draw Lycos into the palace, where his own death will replace that of Heracles' sons. However, it is the chorus's responsibility to comment on this bloody turnaround which occurs out of the audience's sight, as required by the rules of tragedy. If Heracles' mortal father sees in his son's murder of Lycos an act of vengeance, as the restoration of justice to a murderer who has lost his sense of moderation, the chorus interprets this just turn of events as a reversal of fortune desired by the gods. Interrupted by cries from Lycos, who has fallen victim to Heracles' plot, the interventions of the chorus and the *coryphaeus* alternate between spoken iambic trimeters and danced dochmii, to express an overpowering emotion.

The third stasimon is introduced by this long iambic and melic prelude. Sung in a mix of iambic and choriambic meter, and concluding in a choreographic development in Aeolic rhythm, this ode aims to include the whole city of Thebes in the lively choral celebration of Heracles' victory. In this repeat of the victory song, already performatively expressed in the second stasimon, the elders' voice no longer mingles with that of the Deliades, who serve Apollo at Delos, but with that of the local nymphs, daughters of the Asôpos, if not of the Helicon Muses of Boiotia. Through the self-referential presentation of the current poetic celebration; through the commen-

tary inspired by the present event; through the sententious affirmation of the moral and lawful lesson that the gods have thus manifested; and finally, through the allusion to the celebrated hero's "mythical" genealogy, this choral chant contains the five components that modern critics have identified as constitutive of Pindar's *Epinikia*, and more generally of almost every melic poem.[13] If the joyful expressions celebrate primarily the reversal of fortune represented by Heracles' return from Hades, it is the hermeneutic voice that, by calling attention to this celebration, dominates the ritual and performative voice.

Just as in Sophocles' *Antigone* or *Trachiniae*, the song of hope and glory immediately precedes the true reversal of fortune: not an announcement of Antigone's or Haemon's death, or the fear of another return of Heracles, but the epiphany of Lyssa (Frenzy), accompanied by Iris, the gods' messenger. The chorus perceives these two divine figures but is unable to identify them; their appearance provokes a short apotropaic appeal to the god Paean, that is, to the Apollo who wards off catastrophes, before the frightened elders of Thebes withdraw. Nonetheless, it is the chorus which reacts when Lyssa announces that she will unwillingly accomplish Hera's revenge: carried away and blinded by Lyssa, Heracles will kill his own sons before his palace crumbles. If Lyssa, in her own concluding words, promises to make Heracles dance "to a flute song that inspires terror," it is the chorus itself that begins a lamentation in dochmiac segments, interspersed with dactylic or iambic elements recalling the third stasimon's prelude. The reversal of evil represented by Lycos' imminent death is thus transformed into a reversal of good fortune, willed by the gods, and which translates into the murder of the children by their father Heracles.[14] The prophetic lamentations of the chorus merge with Amphitryon's moans, before the messenger comes to confirm the death of the hero's sons to a chorus which expresses Amphitryon's agony, all the while claiming second sight. Anticipating events without being able to change their course, the choral group is once again deeply involved in the dramatic action, both from an affective and hermeneutic standpoint. Again, it is the elders who describe a divine epiphany in their chant: after Lyssa and Iris, Pallas Athena herself appears before the ruined palace of Heracles.

After the messenger has related how Heracles, confounded by Lyssa, killed his three children before Pallas herself restrained him from killing his own father, what might be the fourth stasimon presents itself as a lyrical dialogue with Amphitryon; once again, song and dance expressing powerful emotions in dochmii are combined with a few enoplians and some iambic measures. Having mastered its emotions by evoking other tragic murders, such as those committed by the Danaides or by Procne, the chorus wonders which song it should begin next: a moan, a lamentation, the ode to the dead, or the choral chant of Hades. Enunciated in the performative future (*akhḗsō*), the question recalls the famous doubt expressed by the chorus of elders in *Oedipus the King* about their own choral activity, upon hearing Jocasta question the truth of Apollo's oracles: "Why should I dance in chorus?"[15] Finally, echoing Amphitryon's plaintive and fearful voice, the chorus describes the pitiful scene of the children lying dead at the feet of their chained, sleeping father, before addressing the very master of

the gods with a fundamental reproach: "O Zeus, why this excessive hatred toward your own son? Why have you submerged him in this sea of misfortune?"

Apart from the two final, parting lines of the exodos, the chorus does not appear again. The end of the tragedy is given over to Theseus, who, having himself once been saved from Hades by Heracles, offers to shelter the fallen hero in Athens. At the moment of punishing Thebes, the action is thus displaced toward Athens, where King Theseus will share a sanctuary and future heroic honors with the glorious Heracles. All that the unwavering hand of fate and the will of Hera have left standing are the bonds of friendship and of reciprocal aid that can join two mortals.

Before giving way to the wise king who rules over the city of the spectators themselves, the elder Thebans never stopped focusing on the double tragic reversal that they witnessed. Unable as mortals to intervene pragmatically against the predestined blows of fate which divinity has sanctioned, they foresee them in their ethical and prophetic comments. This internal and external gaze upon the unfolding action would appear to inscribe an ideal spectator in the text; it indeed corresponds to the view of the real spectators, for the most part citizens and inhabitants of the very town where the dramatic action concludes. But it could also reflect Euripides' own vision of a plot inherited from the heroic tradition; a plot that the tragic author not only reoriented around Athens, with Theseus' final intervention, but also brought down to the level of us mortals who are tormented by the blows of fate and of divine powers beyond our control. Or simply, an invitation to pursue our investigation into the authority of choral voices in classical tragedy.

Emotive Voices

If only because reversals constitute, according to Aristotle, the essential element of tragic plots, the feeling which choral voices most often express is moral pain; this expression of grief can generally assume different ritualized forms of plaintive song. Fear and pity, as Aristotle notes in his *Poetics*; or more precisely, affliction and mercy.

The news of a violent death and the encounter with mortal remains in Attic theater generally provoke a plaintive chant, a threnody – or so they say. In fact, the funerary songs addressed to the public assembled for the Great Dionysia never present in their mode of delivery the formal "model" that scholars have sought to identify in Homeric verse. This model is based on two "prototypical" scenes. The first occurs at the end of the *Iliad*, when the Myrmidons lament the death of Patrocleus in a chorus of moans led by Achilles, who then salutes the fallen hero by guaranteeing him a bloody funeral. The second takes place with the return of Hector's corpse to Troy, amidst a more ritualized threnody: professional mourners provoke through their calls the lamentations of the Trojan warriors and the moans of the women, before Andromache the wife, Hecuba the mother, and Helen, the cause of all this grief, praise the dead hero in turn, accompanied by the plaintive cries of those assembled.[16]

In Euripides' *Suppliants*, the chorus is constituted by the women of Argos, mothers of the seven heroes who fell under the walls of Thebes with Polynices. Aided by Theseus, King of Athens, they seek to recover from the Cadmeans the corpses of their sons in order to bury them. As the main characters of the dramatic action, they voice their grief in the fourth stasimon: deprived of their sons, they are condemned in their old age to obey a tearful destiny of mourning. This choral chant of reflective lamentation concludes the scene where, led by a victorious Theseus, the remains of the Argive heroes are returned to Thebes. Introduced by a brief choral song (the third stasimon) announcing the theme of old age without children, which the concluding chant develops, the funeral procession is characterized both by Adrastus' eulogy for the heroes felled in the fight against Eteocles and by the laments of the chorus of Argive mothers. If the funerary catalog of heroic virtues listed by Adrastus recalls the customary funeral speech that the Athenians transposed onto this democratic city, the chorus's plaintive cries echo those of the old Argive king himself. The structure of this song in alternating Aeolic rhythms recalls the Homeric description of heroic threnodies. Before pronouncing the eulogy for those who died in battle, Adrastus, rather like Achilles in the *Iliad*, in fact instigates the plaintive cries that the choral group then develops. But the antiphonic chant of the threnody is here elaborated in the form of a melic dialogue, which, as Aristotle's *Poetics* observes, is characteristic of tragedy. In addition to the prologue, to the parados, to the alternation of episodes and stasima, and to the final exodos, one sometimes finds the *kómmos*, in a characteristically tragic manner.[17]

For this reason, in the central scene of the *Suppliants*, the antiphonic, funeral lamentation cries of Adrastus and of the chorus of Argive women are accompanied by brief plaintive chanted reflections that self-referentially describe the mourning gestures performed in grief. Emotionally voiced both by Adrastus and by the chorus, these performative remarks result in a hermeneutic expression: ultimately, the present despair is blamed on Oedipus' Erinys, a reference to the Theban king's curse on his two sons. If the tragic rearranging of the funeral chant form that Homeric poetry popularized enables the choral group to become a fully-fledged protagonist, the choral voicing of powerful emotions is once again intrinsically linked to auto-referential and interpretative modes. The same holds for an ultimate choral segment, a sort of fifth stasimon, where the chorus responds in melic strophes to the chants of the Argive children bringing onstage the ashes of their cremated fathers. To the reciprocal expressions of mournful pain corresponds the mothers' sense of liberation for sons who can finally access Hades, as their own young sons swear to avenge them.[18]

As in Euripides' *Suppliants*, Aeschylus' *Persians* clearly attributes, through its title, the leading role in the dramatic action to the choral group. The entirety of the conclusive segments of this tragedy, staged at the close of the Persian wars, presents itself as a long plaintive chant. Developed over 150 lines, the exodos is in fact a threnody increasingly stirred by grief and affliction. The tragedy's entire action – the reception at Susa of the news announcing the Persian army's and the Great King's defeat at Salamis – is placed under the sign of suffering and mourning for the lost

heroes. At the onset of the tragedy, the fears of the chorus, constituted by the Great King's counselors, and the Queen's premonitory dream are confirmed by the news that the "barbaric" army has been annihilated. After Darius' ghost, invoked onstage, uncovers the *húbris* of a son who, a mere mortal, dared to rival the Greek gods, and after the chorus realizes that the oracle's sudden reversal is desired by the gods, all that remains for Xerxes, when he finally returns to his palace at Susa, is to invoke Zeus and to lament in turn on the twist of fate, which has made him a true Greek tragic hero.

After a third stasimon in which the chorus celebrates Darius and his conquests, in sharp contrast with the present defeat, it falls to the recently arrived Xerxes to instigate a new series of increasingly emotional laments.[19] Following a first "hermeneutic" part in anapests, where the defeat is interpreted by both Xerxes and the chorus in terms of *daímōn* and *moîra*, the song of lamentation again adopts the form of melic exchange known as *kómmos*; it is introduced by a series of performative declarations about the grief to come. Beginning with a catalog of the Persian chiefs lost in battle, these mournful complaints traded by Xerxes and the chorus are punctuated by exclamations of profound grief in a crescendo whose culminating point coincides with the tragedy's close. Throughout this plaintive exchange, where iambic meters are interspersed with dochmii, Xerxes eventually assumes the role of the choregus of a choral group made up by his counselors. The agony of defeat and the tragic mourning are thus expressed in a ritualized form that recalls that of a threnody. If on a hermeneutic level, the *choreutai* merely confirm Darius' interpretation of the events, their performative voice helps them convey their collective emotional reactions in a ritual form that assimilates them with ideal spectators. Everything is seemingly designed so that the audience, at the end of the tragedy, will join in the "mournful sobbing" of the chorus and escort (*pémpsō*) a Xerxes who, after the interpretative intervention of his father Darius (in the role of an ideal author?), has recognized the power of the Greek gods and the truth of the values they defend.

But it is important to recognize that the chorus is not alone in expressing powerful emotions via different threnodic forms, pursued independently or in exchanges with one of the protagonists. In the final scene of Sophocles' *Antigone*, for instance, it is Creon who, while bringing onstage the corpse of his son who committed suicide after Antigone's death, strikes up a long threnody in dochmii interspersed with a few iambic trimeters. Expressing itself in anapest or iambic rhythms, the chorus of Theban elders, for its part (in an *amoibaion* that ends before the *kómmos*), only comments in terms of blame, justice, and finally fate on the despair of Creon, who still has to face his wife's suicide.[20] Everything is arranged as though, in the threnodic expression of grief and mourning, the chorus and the actors were ultimately interchangeable.

Performative Voices

Often revised on the Attic stage to dramatize the affective, collective, and individual reactions provoked by the plot's unfolding, the threnody's different forms compete

with the paean's in the exchanges between choral group and protagonists.[21] If the emotional scope of the chorus's voice is generally expressed through ritual lamentation forms, its performative and pragmatic dimension can mostly be found in different forms of the paean.

Indeed, the chorus of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, at the onset of the tragedy, chants a paean to celebrate Heracles' return home after his numerous civilizing labors. At the bequest of Deianira, the wife of the victorious hero, the women of Trachis strike up a chant which, in this first stasimon in iambic rhythm, presents all of the formal and traditional features of a victory song addressed to Apollo: a reference to the ritual *ololugé* cry, whose echo will fill the house; the young people's song in unison; a refrain evoking the god Paean; a self-reference to the paean itself; an evocation of the god Apollo and his sister Artemis at Delos. Moreover, this chant adopts the common enunciative gesture characteristic of the more performative melic poems: in an internally self-referential vocal gesture, the women of Trachis who constitute this tragic chorus solicit themselves in the imperative to sing and dance the paean, drawing attention to its important aspects.[22] But in this self-referential and performative gesture, which announces the paean, the chorus members refer to themselves first as maidens then as women; then they participate in the paean in order to address it directly not to Apollo, but to Artemis, and then finally to Dionysus, "the tyrant of my heart." Before pronouncing the ritual paean cry, the young women chant an invocation traditionally addressed to Dionysus, to express their rapture at the sound of the flute.

This choral song is thus once again completely ambivalent: while mentioning Apollo and assuming the choral role generally assumed by men, the young women invoke Artemis, in accordance with their gendered social role, before calling upon the god of theater and of tragic action, by mixing the poetic genres of the paean and of the *evohé* chant. In this choral, ritual, and performative manner, they thereby place the action not only under the auspices of Apollo, the *salvational* god, but also of Dionysus, the god liable to guarantee the plot reversal that will soon take place. From the perspective of the mimetic action, it is under the sign of Zeus, but also under that of Dionysus, that the reversal will occur: Heracles, the triumphant hero, will *morph* into a tragic hero, who meets a disastrous and torturous death.

These performative aspects of a choral intervention adopting the ritual forms of a cult can also be found in the final stasimon of Sophocles' *Antigone*.[23] In an Aeolic rhythm on a choriambic base, the chorus (formed here again by Theban elders) addresses Dionysus in the triadic structure characteristic of every hymnic poem. The invocation of the god in the third person singular, as in the *Homeric Hymns*, is first replaced by a direct invocation that recalls the "cletic," or cultic, hymn structure; Dionysus is addressed via his genealogy, as son of Zeus and the Cadmean Semele. Then the "hymnic" relative pronoun expected in this poetic context introduces the second part of this (as every) hymnic chant, more descriptive than narrative, by listing the different places that Dionysus and his maenads frequent. This "epic" section sets us on a spatial journey that leads from Thebes, where the dramatic action being staged

takes place, and where the mention of Semele in the first part of the hymn had already directed us, to southern Italy, then to Eleusis, where the god Bacchus is associated with Demeter, before arriving at the heights of Delphi, and at Mount Nyssa, and then finally bringing us back to Thebes, labeled the "mother-city of the maenads." At the end of this journey, Dionysus almost appears as one of the tutelary divinities of the Cadmeans' city. The mention of the honors given to the god and to his mother Semele by the citizens of the Boiotian town lead us back to the here and now of the choral hymn's chanted performance. In the usual manner of the *do ut des* (I give in order that you give back) ritual that characterizes the third part of every hymn, the chorus again addresses the god directly, to provoke an epiphany: by appearing amongst his maenads, he can purge the city (which amongst all others has always shown him the greatest honors) of its oppressive illness. This third part of the hymn, as dictated by tradition, assumes the form of a prayer.

As opposed to other cultic chants in Attic tragedy which are pronounced in the orchestra, however, this choral hymnic song shows itself to be particularly ineffective with respect to the mimetic action. Indeed, it is immediately followed by the messenger's news of the double disaster afflicting the city of Cadmos: Antigone's death and Haemon's suicide. The expected disaster is thus not averted and everything happens as though the cultic song, with regard to the unfolding of the plot, had lost the practical efficiency with which its performative dimension was endowed.[24] But to assume this is to forget that the Dionysus celebrated in this dramatized hymn is not only the tutelary god of Thebes – the god who provokes the Maenads' nocturnal and frenzied dances – but also the god of theater, who presides over the spectacle of disastrous reversals of fortune experienced by the heroic protagonists of the action staged on scene. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the evocation of the god elicits another confusion in the representation of gender relations: masculine and measured, the chorus members are enjoined to participate in the unrestrained dances of the women caught up in Dionysiac madness. From the parados onward, the choral group of *Antigone*, having lengthily recalled the fatal outcome of the expedition of the Seven against Thebes, places itself under the leadership of Bacchus, who shakes the Theban ground with his dance steps.

Hence in *Oedipus the King*, the basic self-referential question that the choral group performatively poses has an immediate effect on the unfolding of the plot, since at the close of the Theban elders' chant, Jocasta forgets her doubts about the oracles and pleadingly invokes Apollo himself to demand his aid.[25] In *Antigone*, however, the lengthy choral hymn addressed to Dionysus which requests the god's epiphany apparently establishes a performative link, less with one of the gods protecting the city where the plot unfolds, than with the Dionysiac ritual enacted by the Athenian spectators *qua* participants in the tragic performance, allowing for the numerous decenterings and reversals entailed by the heroic action being portrayed.[26] In both cases, the choral group self-referentially describes in its song the ritual action in which it is partaking here and now. In the first case, however, the reference is internal, with respect to the action performed mimetically onstage by masked actors; whereas in the

second case, the same self-referential gestures apparently refer beyond the dramatic action to the cultic celebration of Dionysus Eleuthereus in the Athenian Great Dionysia.

Hermeneutic Voices

Moreover, we have already noted how in Sophocles' *Antigone*, in particular, the choral interventions are essentially delivered by a hermeneutic voice that tends to clarify the motives and the different powers involved in the fulfillment of the tragic action.

In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, for instance, the group of young women from Troizen that Phaedra views as her companions are intrinsically tied up in the unfolding of a plot marked by the suicide of the heroine, the death of her young stepson, and the despair of his father Theseus in a triple tragic reversal. If it has often been said, as noted above, that the choral interventions in Euripides are only loosely connected to the dramatic action and to its protagonists, the main chorus of this tragedy is in fact very much involved in the heroic action represented through a palinode. Whether it be the coryphaeus or the entirety of the chorus, the choral voice intervenes not only in its assigned parts, but also in the exchanges between actors, generally in a lyrical dialogue. So if in the parados, the women of Troizen wonder aloud and in unison about the possible causes of Phaedra's lovesickness, evoking a number of exterior divine powers liable to drive women and men mad, doubt and questioning are no longer possible in the choral remarks that punctuate the first episode. Once Theseus' wife has revealed her passion for the young Hippolytus, its origin and cause become clear: it is the will of Cypris, manifested by the goddess herself in the tragedy's prologue. In the wake of the Nurse, it falls to the choregos, whom Phaedra addresses collectively as a community of Troizenian women, to acknowledge that the heroine has fallen victim to an abnormal passion and a disastrous destiny willed by Aphrodite. In a strophe chanted in the dochmiac rhythm of overpowering emotion, the chorus recognizes that Phaedra's ruin is complete. While empathizing with her loss, the chorus interprets her misfortune in terms of *túkhē*.[27]

In the following scene, however, after a famous first stasimon that begins as a hymn to Eros and ends as a denunciation of Aphrodite's power, Phaedra herself recognizes the inevitability of her future ruin. As before in the first stasimon where, following the Nurse's and the chorus's comments, she ultimately ascribes her mad passion to Cypris in order to invoke the goddess's power, the heroine now blames her lust and even the goddess of love for her certain and imminent suicide. This calamitous decision is expressed by the tragic heroine in a short dochmiac chant, which is the exact rhythmic counterpart to the choral chant at the beginning of the first episode. Echoing both the chorus's lament about her own *túkhē*, and the tragic destinies of Semele and Iole that the chorus evoked in its hymn to the fearsome Eros, it comes down to Phaedra to pass comment on the fate which so often awaits Cypris' female victims.[28] In other words, the impact of the choral group's hermeneutic voice is so

powerful that, buoyed by a sort of feminine sympathy, it engulfs the heroine, who expresses her own tragic situation in the same terms and sung forms as those employed by the choral group.

Similarly, in the long epirrhematic segment that comprises most of the fifth episode in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the choral group, constituted by the elders of Argos, engages in a long chanted dialogue with Clytemnestra, who has just avenged the sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia by murdering her husband on his return from Troy. In the course of its different strophic interventions, in dochmiac, choriambic, and iambic rhythms (the latter with anapestic refrains), it is the chorus that singles out the vengeful demon behind all the crimes that, from one generation to the next, plague the Atreidai family. It is the chorus that attributes this perpetual sequence to a merciless vendetta, spurred by this selfsame demon; and the chorus that inscribes this generational chain of vengeful acts within Zeus' order of justice.[29] At the close of the tragedy, furthermore, it is once again the chorus of elders that warns Aegisthus that he, too, will have to pay for his crime, and the chorus that calls attention to Orestes' presence, thereby foreshadowing the conclusion of the trilogy's plot, of which *Agamemnon* is only the first installment.

In its hermeneutic role, the chorus's voice can therefore interpret the meaning of the action unfolding before the spectators' eyes; the chorus explains the tribulations of a tragic destiny in terms of the ephemeral condition of all mortals subjected to a preordained fate willed by the gods. Following these laws of human destiny reflecting Delphic wisdom, this interpretative voice can also predict to a certain degree the future twists and turns, if not the very outcome, of the dramatic action, in which the chorus partakes alongside the spectators, and in which it intervenes more or less manifestly. Finally, it can also enlighten the audience as to what is occurring offstage, both in time and space. Hence in the famous parados of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, the chorus of women from Eteocles' city combines emotive, performative, and hermeneutic voices to express their fear and pain at the sight of the approaching Argian army.[30] While collectively expressing worry and distress, and invoking in ritual prayer form the divinities of the Theban pantheon one at a time, the chorus animates the messenger's announcement to Eteocles that the army of the seven is advancing. As is often the case in the choral parts of classical tragedy, it is both through the rhythmic expression of powerful feelings and through the ritual and cultic response given to these feelings that the choral group conveys the importance of this heroic action as the dramatization of tragic destinies. Its physical situation in the orchestra, in between actors and spectators, enables the choral group *qua* decentered entity to perceive what is occurring offstage, not only in time and space, but also in the ethical and theological dimensions of human actions, as they are determined by divine will and inexorable destiny.

But the chorus can only predict, never prophesy. Sustained by emotion and expressed in a performative manner, its knowledge remains that of mortals and does not transcend the human condition. Determined by the specific circumstances of events and by a marginal collective identity, this knowledge is relative and transient.

In Conclusion: Choral Identities

The tragic chorus thus possesses a strange dramatic identity, in particular when the choral group is composed of elders instead of youthful citizens, of Argive or Theban women instead of Athenian men or women, not to mention the counselors of barbarian Persia or enslaved women. If the collective character of the choral group contrasts sharply with the distinct individuality of the heroic actors, its social identity is nonetheless surprising. The chorus in Attic tragedy can therefore not be said to represent the group of citizen-spectators with which it has often been identified, of spectators able to decode the ambiguities of tragic language and to embody the values of the democratic city as opposed to the excessive world of heroes. Indeed, the choral group is often socially and ritually "rooted" in the spatio-temporal context of the dramatic action, or else on the margins of this geohistorical and religious root: a double shift and decentering for the Athenian spectators, emphasized by the traditional Dorian dialect of the chorus's songs, as well as by its social status, which can generally be described as "marginal."[31] Simply perusing the titles of the classical tragedies that survive (such as *Persians* or *Suppliants*) reveals not only a significant drop from Aeschylus to Euripides in titles that assign a lead role in the drama to the choral group even if in a majority of the Euripidean tragedies known to us the chorus is female, but also reveals how the choral group tends to be defined as a "segment" of the given community, a community which is geographically and culturally decentered with respect to the spectators' hometown, Athens.[32]

With respect to both the scenic and fictional community identified in time and space by the heroic action, as well as to the community of participants in the Great Dionysia of fifth-century Athens, the choral group is thus characterized by a generally decentered identity, not only concerned with gender. This peripheral status no doubt explains why the tragic chorus exhibits a constant tension between a powerful emotional implication and a critical distance that allows for universalizing commentary. In this regard, its ritual and performative voice functions as a decisive intermediary; a function underscored by the mask and costume which further mediate between the heroic and fictional action depicted onstage and the sociopolitical sphere of the spectators. The role of masks, which enable the young citizens that constitute the chorus to play young maidens or adult women from a non-Athenian community, has not yet been fully taken into account. These dramatic masks are in fact accompanied by discursive masks, which, for instance, allow the chorus of Theban elders in Euripides' *Heracles* to compare the paean it intends to sing in a performative fashion before the hero's palace, to the paean chanted by the Deliades, in the present tense of dramatic enunciation, honoring the Apollo of Delos.[33] Through the "broken mirror" effect of classical tragedy,[34] the signs of gender reversal are in this instance twofold: not only do the Theban elders identify, in their desire to perform a paean, with a choral group of young maidens serving Apollo at Delos, but the performance of the paean is exceptionally attributed to a feminine choral group, whereas in the reality of

the cult, this chanted and danced genre is performed by a masculine chorus, generally accompanied by the ritual cries of a group of women.

The voice of the songs performed by the choral group in Attic tragedy is thus characterized by a remarkable polyphony. This polyphony constantly vacillates between the scenic identity of the chorus members, who as masked actors participate in the heroic and fictional action performed onstage, and their extra-discursive identity, which seems to draw them closer, through their role as implicit spectators, to the actual spectators with different social status grouped together at the Theater of Dionysus. One cannot, therefore, overestimate the authority of the chorus.[35] But one must not forget that this polyphony is in fact arranged by the tragic author who writes both as an individual endowed with his own psychosocial personality, and as a poet invested with an "author-function" by the archon-king, and who, by extension, is at the service of the whole community of the Athenians. Designated by his contemporaries as a *didáskalos*, if not as a *khorodidáskalos*, this master of the chorus also instructs via the staging of the heroic and tragic action. On the other hand, the choreutai (themselves young citizens) are being paid by a wealthy citizen taking on the service of the choregia – another significant term referring to the choral activity, as already mentioned. Hence, the male "author" needs to orchestrate the hermeneutical voice of a male or female chorus in particular, through remarks that often clarify the ethical and theological meaning of the action, and that can thus acquire a universalizing scope. In a polyphony that transcends the action's closure, the tragic choral voice is thus where choral delegation can occur, as can be seen in the great genres of melic poetry such as Alcman's *Partheneia* or Pindar's *Epinikia*. The choral parts of classical Attic tragedy are truly the daughters of the great ritual melic poetry of the preceding and contemporary epoch.[36]

Notes

1 Significantly, this preface is entitled "On the Purpose of the Chorus in Tragedy." On the controversy that Nietzsche provoked with respect to Schlegel, Schiller, and implicitly Hegel, see Silk (1998b: 195–226).

2 Aristotle *Poetics* 1449b 35, 1450b 15–16, 1456a 25–32.

3 Aristophanes, *Frogs* 1025–62, *Ecclesiazusae* 809, *Knights* 513; other mentions can be found in Pickard-Cambridge (1968: 84–91).

4 On the public service of the *khoregía*, see now Wilson (2000: 3–8, 79–85), with the comments of Foley (2003: 3–8).

5 See the references in Henrichs (1994/5: 55–60) and in Calame (1999: 125–32, 148–53); see also Kaimio (1970: 36–157).

6 See the studies in Kranz (1933: 167–74, 214–25), and Calame (1994/5); see also L. Käppel in Riemer and Zimmermann (1998: 61–88); extended bibliography in Foley (2003: 1 nn. 1, 3).

7 Aristotle *Poetics* 1456a 25–32: see above, n. 2.

8 Euripides *Heracles* 107–37, then 252–74; on the attribution of this *rhêsis*, see Bond (1981: 128–9).

9 Euripides *Heracles* 348–441. See the excellent list of references to Pindar's *Epinikia* and to funeral speeches in Bond (1981: 153–5), as well as his remarks on the canonical sequence of Heracles' twelve labors. See also Hose (1990/1: II.120–2).

10 Euripides *Heracles* 636–700. See the commentary in Bond (1981: 231–3) for similar reflections on other Euripidean tragedies.

11 Pindar *Olympian* 9.1–2, echoing Archilochus fr. 324 West; see also *Nemean Odes* 3, 18 and Euripides *Bacchae* 1161, *Electra* 863–4, 880–1; the different aspects of choral auto-referentiality in the second part of this chant have been flawlessly analyzed by Henrichs (1996: 54–62).

12 On the debated date of *Heracles'* composition, see Bond (1981: XXX–II), who remarks (p. V) that this choral chant was the *Lieblingsstück* (favorite piece) of the philologist Richard Porson. On the paean performed by the Deliades, see below, n. 22.

13 Euripides *Heracles* 763–821; for instance, the repetition of *kallínikos* in 180, 681, 789 (see above, n. 10), and then again in 1046 is particularly noteworthy. Fränkel (1962: 511–12, 526–7) defines these five components as *Aktualität* (current events), *Religion, Poesie, Gnomik* (moral, or saying), and *Mythos*.

14 735 (*metabolà kakō̂n*) should be compared to 885 (*tòn eutukhē̂ metébalen daímōn*).

15 Euripides *Heracles* 1016–85; see Sophocles *Oedipus the King* 895–6, and the remarks by Henrichs (1994/5: 65–70, concerning the self-referentiality of this formula; see also below, n. 23.

16 Homer *Iliad* 23.12–29, 24.707–87; see Alexiou (2002: 29–47).

17 Euripides *Suppliants* 955–79, 777–93; for Oedipus' Erinys, see 835–6 as well as 1077. For Aristotle (*Poetics* 1452b 14–24), the *kómmos* is "a threnody performed by both the chorus and the actors onstage."

18 Euripides *Suppliants* 1115–64. Tellingly, Loraux (1990: 57–66) pays little heed to the melic and choral aspect of the lamentations by these "grieving mothers."

19 Aeschylus *Persians* 908–1077; for the historical context, see Broadhead (1960: 294–7, 310–17), as well as Pelling (1997: 14–19).

20 Sophocles *Antigone* 1257–1353; a very useful formal analysis can be found in Griffith (1999: 241–6).

21 See in particular Rutherford (1994/5).

22 Sophocles *Trachiniae* 205–24 (200–4 for Deianira's introduction); for detailed remarks on this point, see Henrichs (1994/5: 79–85). On the traditional forms of the paean with feminine and masculine refrains, see Calame (2001: 76–9) and Käppel (1992: 81–2, 176–9).

23 Sophocles *Antigone* 1115–52; see Henrichs (1996: 59–60), who lists the numerous interpretations that this paradoxical choral song has inspired.

24 On the structure and irony of this chant, see also Griffith (1999: 313–22). Dionysus' relation with Demeter at Eleusis and with Antigone *qua* "Hades' wife" is well explained by Zeitlin (1993: 154–64); see also Segal (1981: 197–206).

25 Sophocles *Oedipus the King* 892–923; see above, n. 14, as well as Calame (1999: 135–7).

26 On the different aspects of ritual performativity at the festival of the Great Dionysia and in its performances, see most recently Sourvinou-Inwood (2002: 67–120), and, regarding the choral songs in particular, Bierl (2001: 11–64).

27 Euripides *Hippolytus* 267–70, 359–61, 362–72; for a bibliography on the choral hymn to Eros (525–63), see Calame (1999: 144), as well as Hose (1990/1: II.156–9).

28 Euripides *Hippolytus* 415–19, 725–31, 668–79; for a recondite commentary of this chanted dialogue at a distance berween the chorus and Phaedra, see Barrett (1964: 224–6, 287–90).

29 Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 1560–6; see the recent study by Judet de La Combe (2001: 604, 704–9), which unfortunately does not address the rhythms employed in these choral interventions.

30 Aeschylus *Seven Against Thebes* 78–180; on the metric structure of this lovely song and for a list of studies, see Calame (1994/5: 139–41).

31 This is the thesis presented by Gould (1996: 215–24), which he opposes to J.-P. Vernant's "model" by drawing on S. Goldhill's nuances and additional comments.

32 On the significance of classical tragedy titles with respect to the role of the chorus, see Sourvinou-Inwood (2002: 265–89) and Foley (2003: 13, 23–5); on the geographical

decentering, see Zeitlin's works, notably 1993: 154–71.

33 Euripides *Heracles* 687–95 (see above, n. 11), and the relevant remarks by Henrichs (1996: 57–60).

34 To quote the title of a recent study by J.-P. Vidal-Naquet, *Le miroir brisé. Tragédie athénienne et politique* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2002), which only touches upon the chorus's role in the complex relations between Attic tragedy and the political reality of fifth-century Athens.

35 See notably Silk (1998a: 24), who notes: "The different varieties of choral lyric style that a given chorus presents, even perhaps within a single ode, themselves constitute different voices, *de facto*." Silk echoes the thesis advanced by Gould (1996: 219–32), who poses the question of the chorus's identity in terms of fiction and fictionality; see also Foley (2003: 13–25): "In short, choral action in tragedy seems to depend . . . on a need for, or duty or inclination to accept, *leadership* or commitment in a range of specific contexts."

36 On these different continuities, see in particular Herington (1985: 103–24) and Calame (1999: 130–2).

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