THE GREEK TRAGIC CHORUS AND ADAPTATIONS OF IT IN MODERN DRAMA IN ENGLISH

by

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Preface

To all the professors at Arizona State University who have guided my college education, I wish to express my thanks. I am especially indebted to Dr. Collice Portnoff, who has been my adviser and the director of this dissertation, and to Dr. Louis M. Myers, for their wise counsel and unflagging encouragement. The other members of my committee, Professors J. E. Zimmerman, Richard Landini, and Brice Harris, have been most generous with their time and their advice. To all of them, and to Professor Ernest L. Parker for his special guidance, I am deeply grateful.

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INTRODUCTION

All modern Choruses in the Western tradition are direct descendants of the Greek Chorus,[1] from the narrative Chorus of Henry V, who opens the play with a noble appeal to the imagination of the audience, to the dramatic Chorus of Murder in the Cathedral and the narrative Chorus of A View from the Bridge. This observation is accepted as a general truth, but its apparent simplicity is deceptive, as anyone who undertakes to examine the nature and use of the classic Chorus soon discovers. He is suddenly confronted with the question, What is the classic Chorus like? or, to narrow the question down, What is the classic Tragic Chorus like?

Various descriptions by thoughtful observers from Aristotle to twentieth-century critics furnish answers. According to some of these observers, the Tragic Chorus is: an actor; a group personality; a general conception; the ideal spectator; the quintessence of the audience; "archetypal drama"; the Voice of Society; the Voice of Humanity. In the same vein, the function of the Chorus is: to share in the action; to forsake the present action in order "to dilate itself over the past and the future"; to proclaim a truth that issues from the heart of the world; to give expression to the moral and religious sentiments evoked by the action of the play; to mediate between the action and the audience; to provide metaphysical comfort; to represent the universal experiences of man; to reveal, "in its widest and

[1]Gilbert Highet, The Classical Tradition (New York, 1957), p. 130.

most mysterious extent, the theater of human life which the play, and indeed the whole Festival of Dionysus assumed."

In order to gain a comprehensive knowledge of the nature and use of the Tragic Chorus, I found it profitable to return to source material. I reviewed what scholars believe to be the development of tragic drama; examined more closely the purpose and procedures of the Festivals of Dionysus, since all classic drama was composed for one of these Festivals; and examined some good translations of the Choruses of the extant tragic dramas.

The search, aided by criticism from responsible writers, brought what I was looking for into better focus. The first five chapters in this work contain material which shaped my interpretation of the classic Tragic Chorus and furnished criteria for the succeeding chapters, my analysis of it in modern drama in English.

The point of this study is to discover how the Greek Tragic Chorus or adaptations of it helps modern dramatists in English express their concepts.

CHAPTER I

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GREEK TRAGIC CHORUS AND THE FESTIVALS OF DIONYSUS

Until we come to the wholly preserved plays of Aeschylus, beginning conjecturally in 472 B.C., we are dependent upon fragments for examples of Greek drama, but from these fragments we know that by the end of the sixth century B.C., tragic drama presents the twofold character which in classic Greece it never lost, the lyric Chorus and the actor speaking dialogue. Initially, at some time in the latter part of the sixth century, tragic drama had begun to take shape from the dithyramb, and as it did, it drew liberally on a Greek-wide legacy of epic and lyric poetry.

Especially waiting to be gathered up into the nascent Tragic Chorus was all the richness of Greek lyric. Flourishing as far back as pre-Homeric times, lyric had developed by the latter part of the sixth century into a mature art designed particularly for communal ceremonials and celebrations, with a variety of artistic forms, including hymns, processionals, laments, victory songs, and joyous odes, each of which embodied that special quality of Greek lyric: the combination of poetry, music, and dance.

One of these early lyric forms was the dithyramb, peculiar to the worship of the nature-god Bacchus or Dionysus. The specific nature of the religious rites involved remains a mystery, but it is known that the worship had both a sacred

and a secular side, so that it inspired not only spiritual hymns but also songs of revelry.[2] The dithyrambic hymn became especially popular in the luxurious city of Corinth early in the sixth century, at which time Arion the Lesbian first gave it a literary form, adapted it to Choral poetry of an artistic type, and set it on the path of development which was to lead to the Tragic Chorus.[3]

It was in Athens, however, that tragedy took shape. The word "tragedy" means literally a goat-ode, that is, the Choral song chanted by satyrs, the goat-footed nature sprites who were attendants of Dionysus. In a circular dancing-place called the orchestra, the dithyrambic song and dance in honor of Dionysus was performed by a Chorus of men dressed in goatskins, who represented the satyr companions of the god; a Chorus leader sang solo chants which evoked Choral responses, and very possibly at times this leader impersonated Dionysus himself.[4] Tragic drama developed slowly, Aristotle says. As the dithyrambic lyric underwent transformation into serious drama, various elements helped shape it: the enrichment from both lyric and mythical sources, the development of iambic

[2]Arthur Pickard-Cambridge, Dithyramb, Tragedy and Comedy (Oxford, 1962), pp. 31 ff.

[3]H. Rushton Fairclough, "Tyrtaeus, Archilochus and their Successors in the Development of Greek Lyric (700-450 B.C.)," Library of the World's Best Literature, Ancient and Modern, XXVI, ed. Charles Dudley Warner (New York, 1896), 15176.

[4]D. W. Lucas, The Greek Tragic Poets (Aberdeen, 1959), p. 27.

dialogue, the addition of actors, the harmonizing of the lyric and dialogue elements, and the applied genius of fifth-century Athens.

Regarding dialogue, the great impetus had been given to it in Attica through the recitations of Homeric poetry by professional bards. The classic dramatist, finding the epic meter unsuited to dramatic dialogue, hit upon the more conversational, twelve-syllable iambic meter which Archilochus had used so effectively for satire.[5] This the dramatist used for the direct speech of his main characters. In the odes of the Chorus, however, he retained the complex meter and the lyricism which seemed to lend the Chorus power to touch some universal chord of feeling. An element that became a characteristic feature of the structure of classic tragic drama was the interaction of this lyric ode and the iambic episode.

Thespis, who was awarded first prize at the initial Festival competition in 534 B.C.,[6] introduced the first actor, who seems to have performed at intervals between the odes, taking several parts and conversing at times with the leader of the Chorus. Aeschylus introduced the second actor and Sophocles the third. In The Oresteia (458 B.C.), Aeschylus also made use of the third actor, and in a manner never surpassed in classic literature.

Exclusive of mutes, it seems there were never more than three actors (protagonist, deuteragonist, and tritagonist)

[5]Fairclough, p. 15184.

[6]Lucas, p. 28.

in any classic Greek tragedy,[7] yet any of the three, aided by a change of mask or costume, could play a number of parts, making possible a varied cast of characters, complex situations, and swift-moving drama. Obviously the Chorus was a practical necessity in staging the drama. Since there was no curtain, the Chorus made the transitions between the scenes, giving actors the chance to enter and leave the playing area, and even announcing what characters these actors portrayed. The Chorus, like the rest of the players, were men, and presumably all players were masked. At the time of Thespis the number of members in the Chorus was conjecturally fifty, a number which Aeschylus used in The Suppliant Maidens; but after some experimenting, the competing dramatists seem to have settled for fifteen members, and from about 455 B.C. to the Hellenistic period, this became a general, but flexible, standard.[8]

As Kitto says, "The technical history of Greek Tragedy is largely an account of efforts to make the Chorus an integral part of a continually changing system. Several times the balance was lost and found."[9] When it was achieved, the result was usually a play of tremendous power. During the course of the fifth century, the Chorus lost its position as controlling element, but as an integral part of the drama it gained new powers by which it contributed vitally to the

[7]See pages 7-8 of this work.

[8]Albin Lesky, Greek Tragedy, trans. H. A. Frankfort (New York, 1965), p. 72.

[9]H. D. F. Kitto, Greek Tragedy (New York, 1954), p. 57.

content and structure of the whole drama.

In all of the tragedies, Choral participation takes three verbal forms. In the odes the Chorus sings alone. In the episodes the Chorus participates in commoi, that is, lyrical passages in which it sings with the actors; and also it speaks iambic lines, mainly through the coryphaeus, the Chorus leader, whose thoughts always represent the thoughts of the group. The emphasis placed on each of these forms by the three main classic dramatists reveals a shifting Choral pattern. Although none of the three dramatists worked to a formula, their later plays (excepting Euripides' last tragedy) exhibit in varying degrees some decline in the use of the Chorus alone (although solo lyric remained its most important contribution), and an increase in the use of commoi. The importance of the iambic contribution of the Chorus varied, but it was far less important than the other two forms. It is interesting to note that in the episodes there was an increase in lyrical solos and lyrical dialogues by the actor only, the Chorus taking no part. Choral participation in the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles is always closely and realistically related to the stage action, but Euripides at times includes Choral lyrics that are decorative and otherwise unrelated to the action.

The Festivals of Dionysus had a great bearing on the role of the Chorus. These Festivals were essentially national celebrations glorifying the city of Athens herself through a State religion, and since these were religious celebrations, drama remained religious in outlook for two or three generations. Yet the dramatist was free to choose his subject, and although with one exception, The Persians of Aeschylus,

all thirty-two extant tragic dramas and Euripides' satyr-play deal with Greek myth, each of the dramatists freely altered the story to suit his dramatic concept. The audience knew the myths but they never knew when the dramatist might give a story a surprising turn, as Aeschylus did in The Eumenides.

The audience at these Festivals was the Athenians, a fairly homogeneous audience, for whom the tragic dramatist appeared not only as chosen laureate working solely for love of his art and hope of renown, but as a teacher who taught by showing examples of how to live,[10] and a spiritual leader with a responsibility far greater and graver than that of successive political leaders.[11] The populace, apart from being drawn by the intrinsic fascination of the plays themselves, came because it was the right and duty of citizens to attend; with this in mind the State arranged for free admission, or at least admission at a nominal cost. In the century of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides the audience must have possessed on the whole a high degree of seriousness and intelligence, and though there was always the possibility of lower elements gaining the upper hand for a moment, the great poets never played down to them. Attic tragedy has many great characteristics, and one of its greatest was its intimate bond with the life and thought of the

[10] Leo Aylen, Greek Tragedy and the Modern World (London, 1964), pp. 30-31.

[11] Werner Jaeger, Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture, I, translated from the second German edition (1935) by Gilbert Highet (New York, 1945), 247.

people. This made it a communal art in the best sense of the word.[12]

One of the three important Festivals, the Great Dionysia at the Theater of Dionysus in Athens, was a five-day festival devoted mainly to tragedy. The celebration opened with two days of processions, pageantry, hymns, and dances in honor of Dionysus. The last three days were taken up entirely with drama. In preparation for this competitive performance, the archon, the authority who governed the whole Festival, had selected the tetralogies of three tragic poets from among all those submitted to him for reading, and had shown acceptance by "granting a Chorus," which meant assigning to each chosen poet a choregus, some wealthy patron who paid for the training and equipping of the Chorus, thereby sharing expenses with the State.[13] Since each member of the Chorus had to undergo rigorous training in music, dance, and speech, and then be costumed, perhaps sumptuously, the expense involved was considerable. Yet the necessity of the expenditure was never doubted, since the finest music, choreography, poetry, costuming, and scenery that the dramatist could create, and he was responsible for all of them, would be thrown away without a skilled Chorus that could deliver the dramatic concept lyrically to a receptive but critical audience.

As for the actors, the State took care of expenses involving them. For about a century, beginning with 449 B.C.,

[12]Lesky, p. 86.

[13]A. E. Haigh, The Attic Theatre (Oxford, 1907), p. 50.

the State annually engaged three tragic protagonists to be assigned by lot to the three dramatists who were about to compete with plays. Each protagonist seems to have hired his own subordinate actors (deuteragonist and tritagonist) and with their assistance presented all the plays (three tragedies and one satyric drama) which his dramatist had composed for the occasion. The victorious actor in each year's contest was automatically entitled to appear the following year. The other two protagonists were perhaps selected by means of a preliminary contest. Although the restriction of the number of regular actors to three has sometimes been challenged in modern times, it has been proven physically possible to stage every classic tragedy with three actors--in fact the technique of each of the dramas is explicable only on the assumption that such a restriction was in force, due no doubt to a paucity of competent actors rather than to economic reasons.[14]

Among the conditions at the Festival which shaped the role of the Chorus was performance in an outdoor theater. Since the performance took place only in daylight, there was no need for artificial lighting, and the torchlight processions of the Chorus, a fairly frequent spectacle, were for effect only. All of the theaters were vast, but the acoustics were amazingly good. As a typical theater,[15] the Theater of Dionysus had the rounded and terraced _theatron_ where the audi-

[14]Roy Caston Flickinger, _The Greek Theater and Its Drama_ (Chicago, 1918), pp. 182-184.

[15]Arthur Pickard-Cambridge, _The Theatre of Dionysus in Athens_ (Oxford, 1946), pp. 30-59.

ence sat, on a hollowed-out hillside, with seats of honor for public officials and priests, especially the priest of Dionysus. The seating capacity was somewhere between fourteen- and twenty-thousand. Facing the theatron was the orchestra, the dancing place of the Chorus and the place where the actors performed. Located in the orchestra was the altar of Dionysus, a pivotal point in the drama, which could represent a number of things, including the altar of any of the gods; an indoor temple or an outdoor shrine which, like the altar, was a magnet for the suppliant; or the tomb of a hero like Agamemnon. Behind the orchestra was the proscenium, which was the facade of the skene building (the dressing room for actors). This facade, with its three doorways, was part of the stage-setting for the play, usually representing the front of a palace or temple. The parodos, a passageway on either side of the proscenium, was the usual point of entry and exit of the Chorus. (This term also meant the introductory ode the Chorus sang while entering the orchestra.)

Scenery other than that furnished by the skene facade was of the simplest sort or even non-existent. Interior scenes could be revealed to the audience either by means of the ekkyklema, a kind of platform which could be rolled out through the skene doors, or by the sudden opening of the doors. Typical of Greek drama is the tragic tableau, the result of violence off-stage, suddenly revealed, the whole effect heightened by the reaction of the Chorus. The most important of the other stage devices was the "machine," a

kind of crane useful in making gods appear and disappear or fly through the sky, a device Euripides was particularly fond of. The scant use of scenery, along with the custom of banning scenes of violence from the stage, made the classic dramatist dependent upon the power of speech to a greater extent than the modern dramatist. However, the Greek dramatist made capital use of the Chorus and the Messenger to convey the necessary verbal pictures.

Fine as the intellectual content and poetry of classic drama is, it represents only part of the dramatic whole; the rest--the music, the dance, and the spectacle--is lost, except to imaginative interpretation. Of the quality of Greek music we know very little, since our knowledge of it (except for a single fragment) begins two hundred years after the time when Choral odes were an essential part of drama; but there can be no doubt that the musical score was quite important, even though it was considered best that it be strictly subordinate to the words. This music was composed not only for voice, but for any accompanying musical instrument, mainly the flute, although the lyre, trumpet, drum, and timbrel were also used.

About the emmeleia, the dance executed by the Chorus, we also know very little, except that in the fifth century at least, the movements were elegant and graceful.[16] The Greek meaning of "dance" applied to all movements of the body which were intended to aid in the interpretation of poetry or the expression of emotion. Thus gestures, postures, and atti-

[16]Editors' Introduction to Chapter IV, "The Greek Chorus," Theatre and Drama in the Making, I, eds. John Gassner and Ralph G. Allen (Boston, 1964), 64.

tudes were most important forms of dancing, and the hands and arms played a much larger part than the feet. According to Aristotle, dancers sought to imitate action, character, passion, and thought by means of gestures and rhythmical motion. From this it can be seen that the spirit which animated Greek mythology and Greek art--the desire to give form and body to mental conceptions--was characteristic of Greek dancing, and by extension, of the Greek Chorus.[17] Describing a modern production of a Greek tragedy at Epidaurus, one author writes:

> The chorus movements are directed with great beauty and skill. Now advancing on the audience, now retreating, now crossing the orchestra in a diagonal pattern, now draping themselves frieze-like along the front of the stage, they maintain an unbroken formal unity against which the action proceeds. Their movements echo and emphasize the emotions expressed on the stage. They cower at moments of fear, raise their arms aloft in triumph, swirl apart and come together in excitement. The chorus is used not only to deliver its own part but as a constant balletic accompaniment of the actors.[18]

An imaginative reading of the classic tragedies gives the impression that this description might essentially fit a Tragic Chorus of fifth-century Athens. Certain other dance movements have been suggested as accompanying those odes, called stasima, which, from about 600 B.C., under the Sicilian poet Stesichorus,[19] took the formal pattern of strophe, antistrophe, and epode. Technical questions of meter aside,

[17] Fairclough, pp. 15171-72.

[18] Peter D. Arnott, An Introduction to the Greek Theatre, (New York, 1961), p. 212.

[19] Fairclough, p. 15180.

the strophe can be described as a stanza containing a complete unit of thought; the antistrophe is another stanza, metrically identical with the strophe and containing another unit of complementary thought; and the epode is a short concluding stanza. The meaning of the words "strophe" (turn) and "antistrophe" (counter-turn) have led some scholars to assume that during the strophe the Chorus, dancing in block formation, executed a number of figures while moving in one direction, then for the antistrophe turned abruptly around and performed the mirror image of those movements until it arrived at its initial position.[20] The way in which stanza balances stanza is of greater concern to Aeschylus and Sophocles than it is to Euripides.[21]

Contributing to the thrill of spectacle, in its entry and departure the Chorus was usually preceded by the flute player, who as a rule was richly dressed. The entry of the Chorus in Agamemnon, with its anapaestic marching measure, is a typical entry of one of the earlier plays, and the last fourteen lines of the torchlight procession of The Eumenides is a typical finale. In those plays which have no anapaestic opening for the Chorus (Antigone, Oedipus the King, Hippolytus, and others) the Chorus entered perhaps singing the strophes and antistrophes of the parodos. Sometimes, as in

[20] Editors' Introduction to Chapter IV, "The Greek Chorus," Theatre and Drama in the Making, p. 64.

[21] Aylen, p. 37.

Orestes, the Chorus entered silently, with the flutist playing a prelude. At the close of the entrance song the members of the Chorus took up a position, or "station," very possibly a rectangular formation presenting a block of three files and five ranks. From this starting point the Chorus was poised to dance and sing its first ode, or "station song," or stasimon.

Generally the Tragic Chorus remained on the stage throughout the play. The few exceptions include the Furies in The Eumenides and the Salaminian Sailors in Ajax; the Furies leave Apollo's sanctuary at Delphi in pursuit of Orestes, appearing again when the scene changes to the temple of Athena in Athens; the Sailors leave Ajax's camp in search of the hero, appearing again when the scene changes to the seashore.

Generally also the Chorus remained a unit, but sometimes it did split up. The most frequent division was that of two semi-Choruses, with a leader for each, as in Hippolytus, when the Women of Troezen divide into halves to express to each other their anxiety and foreboding aroused by the guilty confession of Phaedra. Occasionally, as in the opening lines of Alcestis and in the dialogue among the vacillating Elders of Argos at the outcry of Agamemnon, individual members of the Chorus sang or spoke short single speeches.

In speaking of the Greek Tragic Chorus, it is well to bear in mind that there is no such thing as the Greek tragedy, the form of which was something created anew, and differently, year by year, play by play, by dramatic poets of individual genius. So it was with the Chorus, although some general

facets of its character and function were in all likelihood present in pre-Aeschylean drama. While it is true that neither about the dramatic structure nor the essential spirit of pre-Aeschylean drama do we have any direct evidence, it seems likely that the dithyramb Chorus originally represented a big collective idea or emotion, either joyful or serious, and that as tragic drama emerged, the serious thought took on a new emphasis.

Of the two forces that must clash if we are to have drama, one would have to be the Chorus. Kitto conjectures,[22] not without some evidence, that the normal pre-Aeschylean Tragic Chorus was surely a group of citizens, senators, captives or the like, representing in its passionate formalism some big emotion--the city, the vanquished, the wronged. Against this Chorus stood the single actor, a rather shadowy figure, who must have represented the complementary idea to the Chorus--the King, the Victor, the Wrongdoer. The Chorus was doubtless essentially dramatic, expressing in its long movements the urgency of some tragic situation and bringing to bear on the actor some moral or spiritual force.

By the time of Aeschylus, the single actor was no longer a shadowy figure but had become the protagonist, the center of our most poignant interest and the focus of the moral forces working in the play. Kitto tentatively, but again not without some evidence, suggests the following as a type, not the only one but the best, of early pre-Aeschylean tragedy with Chorus and one actor:

[22]Kitto, Greek Tragedy, pp. 29-32.

First Ode.
Entrance of the Actor and disclosure of the general situation.
Second Ode (in which pressure is brought to bear on the Actor).
The crisis grows. (Commos?)
Third Ode.
Actor faces the crisis and makes his decision.
Fourth Ode.
The result. (Messenger?)
Fifth Ode.[23]

It is a simple form, but it permits the most exquisite and most powerfully dramatic lyricism, and can express the profoundest and most moving of tragic situations. Pre-Aeschylean drama already held a key to something for which modern dramatists have been desperately striving: freedom from the bonds of naturalism.[24]

The addition of two more actors made for richer complexity of plot and swifter action. Allowing for the dramatist's prerogative to shape his own dramatic concept, we can consider the following as an example of the rhythmic action of the mature drama: After an exploratory prologue by the actor or actors, the Chorus sang their entrance song or processional ode, the parodos, usually as they danced into the orchestra from the west gateway. After the parodos came a scene between the characters of the drama, an episode, followed by a Choral ode, or stasimon. Odes and episodes alternated until the action of the play was completed,

[23]Ibid., p. 23.
[24]Ibid.

whereupon the Chorus sang its recessional ode, the exodus, as it left the stage.

As an example of how the proportion of lyric lines allotted to the Chorus varied, Aeschylus, in six of his seven extant plays, allotted to the Choral element some three-fifths to one-half of the lines of the whole play. (Prometheus Bound was an exception in that the Choral element was allotted only one-sixth of the lines.) Sophocles varied the proportion from about one-fourth to one-seventh; and Euripides about one-fourth to one eighth.[25] Broadly speaking, in Aeschylus the odes are still the dominant element in the drama; in Sophocles the odes and episodes achieve a harmonious balance; and in Euripides the work of Choral disintegration sets in, although in his last tragedy, The Bacchae, he returns to the great tradition with a Chorus that is an important actor in a well-constructed drama, singing sweeping odes with delicacy, profundity, and great lyric beauty.

[25]Flickinger, p. 82.

CHAPTER II

GENERAL CHARACTER, MODE OF ACTION, DRAMATIC STRUCTURE, BACKGROUND, AND SPIRIT OF THE GREEK TRAGIC CHORUS

The Tragic Chorus is a group personality, with its own traditions, its own habits of thought and feeling and its own mode of being. Further group characteristics are discernible, but with qualifications. The Chorus exists as a living entity, but not with the sharp actuality of an individual (barring a few Aeschylean Choruses whose personalities are rather vivid). The Chorus perceives, but its perception is at once wider and vaguer than that of a single man. (However, in a few Aeschylean Choruses perception is fairly sharp, and in certain Euripidean Choruses, particularly where the Chorus is a confidante, breadth of perception is not particularly noticeable.) The Chorus shares in its way in the seeking action of the play as a whole. (In this seeking action, Aeschylean and Sophoclean Choruses convey an attitude of continuous attention, but certain Euripidean Choruses have an air of diffidence and susceptibility to distraction.)

The Chorus depends upon the chief characters to supply reasoned purpose, to instigate the action, and carry it out by stages, while the Chorus itself thinks deeply over the conflicts of character and other action of the play, experiencing the joy or enduring the suffering occasioned by the action. At certain moments it gives vent to thoughts, emotions, and visions in the ode, manifesting a passion felt at

so general, or rather, so deep a level, that it intimates a potential for both the frenzy and mob ferocity that Nietzsche later felt in it and, at the other extreme, the patience of prayer.[26]

The action of the Chorus is an advising, a sharing, an enduring, a suffering, informed by the faith of the tribe in an unseen, divinely sanctioned natural order. Unlike the action of the protagonist, which reflects a limitation to a sharp, rationalized purpose in a particular situation, the action of the Chorus is cognate with a wide, if not too sharply defined awareness of the scene of human life. In fact, as Fergusson says, it is one of the most important functions of the Chorus to reveal, "in its widest and most mysterious extent, the theater of human life which the play, and indeed the whole Festival of Dionysus assumed."[27]

The fundamental and most conspicuous role of the Chorus is to sing lyrical songs, and Choral styles can be distinguished roughly according to how the dramatist uses the odes in the structure of the drama. It is possible to delineate, in a very general way, two basic styles. One, in which the Choral odes provide lyrical comment on the various stages of the action of the play, has been called the "classical style."[28] The other has no name, but in it the odes carry

[26]Francis Fergusson, The Idea of a Theater (Princeton, 1949), p. 30.

[27]Ibid., p. 31.

[28]G. M. Kirkwood, A Study in Sophoclean Drama, (Ithaca, 1958), p. 196.

the theme, as in Agamemnon and The Trojan Women. Since the perception of the Chorus is wider than that of the chief characters, and since the Chorus brings to the action a faith in an unseen order, it is understandable that in both styles there should be odes that contain fundamental comments in the form of general reflections. In Aeschylean odes, for example, there are reflections on the idea that excessive pride and self-will invite the punishment of the gods, that wisdom lies in moderation, that there is retribution for sin, that from suffering comes wisdom, and that man has limitations and must subordinate himself to wise authority both in the State and among the gods. Sophoclean odes contain general reflections, for example, not only on themes similar to those in the Aeschylean odes mentioned, but on the nature of man, the necessity for piety toward the gods, the loneliness of old age, and the power of love. Euripidean odes contain general reflections on, among other themes, the horrors of war, the helplessness of women, the advantages of being childless, and the power of Necessity.

In all of their Choruses, Aeschylus and Sophocles demonstrate an interest in keeping the thought and manner of Choral participation appropriate to the personality and situation of the particular Choral group. Therefore, those odes which contain general reflections, and have at the same time an air of being detached from the immediate action of the play, are sung by a Chorus which maintains an air of independence and detachment throughout the whole drama. Only Euripides at times writes odes that are clearly out of keeping with the

personality or the immediate situation of the Chorus speaking them, and these odes do break dramatic illusion and suggest authorial interpolation. But generally speaking, the sentiments of the Chorus can be accepted as the in-character comments, and the spontaneous outbursts of song, of an actor in the drama.

Of the two suggested basic Choral styles, Aeschylus and Euripides use both, while Sophocles uses only the "classical style," in which the odes organize and give rhythm to the action; they do not primarily convey the theme but lyrically amplify, interpret, and illustrate the various stages of the action.[29] Both styles add a further dimension of meaning and dramatic force to the drama.

Despite the fact that a Chorus may seem detached in some of its odes, in the episodes it is always closely connected with the immediate action. In iambic dialogue the Choruses call attention to newly arrived persons. They ask predictable questions and make purely factual or conventional answers to questions. They tender advice, mostly urging moderation in argument, grief, and action. After long speeches they offer comments, mostly unexciting, which nearly always simply carry on the tone of what has preceded, and sometimes are no more than throw-away buffers which allow for applause that otherwise might drown out a good succeeding speech.[30] Occasionally, however, there is appreciable dramatic value in

[29]This describes the odes of what Kitto in Greek Tragedy calls "Middle Tragedy."

[30]Gilbert Norwood, Greek Tragedy (London, 1953), p. 80.

these small comments. For example, in The Women of Trachis the Chorus urge Deianeira to defend herself against Hyllus' angry accusations; in Antigone the Chorus suggest that maybe the forbidden burial may have had the aid of the gods; and also in Antigone, Creon asks the Chorus for advice and when he receives it, acts on it. In the commoi, the value of Choral participation is much more substantial. The basic function of the commos is to signal and emphasize moments of great emotional stress, but it performs other functions, as will be brought out in the analysis of Sophocles' use of the Chorus.

The role of the Chorus obviously includes both verbal and physical participation. Some examples of the physical participation of individual Choruses in their unique situation, participation which goes far to illuminate their personality, will emerge in succeeding chapters.

Mention has been made of the Chorus as having faith in an unseen, divinely sanctioned natural order. Without exception, all of the tragic dramas posit an unseen order in the universe, sanctioned by a "divinity," cruel, merciful, or just. The Chorus accepts, as part of this order, numerous supernatural elements. Prophecies, oracles, appearances of gods, family Houses under an evil curse, and other supernatural or magical elements are found in all of the tragedies. Certain of the Choruses of Aeschylus are themselves endowed with supernatural powers; for example, the Counsellors in The Persians are able to raise the ghost of Darius; the sea-nymphs of Prometheus Bound are the daughters of Oceanus, and in The Eumenides, the ghastly Furies are primitive earth deities

of great power.

While none of the Choruses of Sophocles or Euripides have supernatural powers of their own, they accept supernatural and magical phenomena as part of their environment. For example, in Sophocles' Oedipus the King, the Theban Elders are grateful for the deliverance of the city from the Sphinx; in Philoctetes, Neoptolemus' Sailors see the magic bow of Heracles and later witness the divine appearance of that apotheosized hero; in The Women of Trachis, these women see the tragic results of the deadly magic of the centaur Nessus. In Euripides' Alcestis, the men Citizens of Pherae associate with Heracles, who has power to wrestle and overcome Death; in The Bacchae, the Maenads associate with a magic-working Stranger who turns out to be Dionysus in disguise; in Medea, the Women of Corinth see her escape in a chariot of the Sun; in Electra, the Argive Peasant Women question the Dioscuri as to why they could not shield Orestes from the Furies.

Obviously, the Choruses also accept action that clearly operates on two planes at once, the human and the divine, in which the behavior of the gods is not always to their credit. Although in The Eumenides Athena strives to establish justice both in Heaven and on earth, in Ajax she shows a gloating vindictiveness in degrading the hero for not knowing his limitations and for slighting her. In Hippolytus, Aphrodite punishes Hippolytus and the unoffending Phaedra for his scorn and neglect, and at the end of the play Artemis promises the dying youth that she will revenge herself and him by killing the next mortal that Aphrodite loves; in Ion Apollo is too cowardly to acknowledge openly that he had violated Creusa

and Ion is their child, so he sends Athena to put matters straight. The Greeks could attribute the baser human qualities to their gods, and even sometimes enjoy a comic treatment of them, such as Aeschylus' foppish Hermes who comes to threaten the chained Titan.

Though the Greeks could treat their gods lightly, the conviction that man is beholden to some higher purpose and power, some inescapable principle outside himself, is fundamental to all the plays, and the desire of the Greek mind to comprehend that purpose is reflected as much in the denunciation of divine morals in Hippolytus as in the shaping of myth toward a finer ethics in The Oresteia.

In all of the tragedies, with the possible exception of some of Euripides' thrillers, some spiritual force seems to exert an influence on the action, and the Chorus, especially aware of this influence, seeks to comprehend the moral, ethical, or religious injunctions which man must obey if he would exist in peace and avoid calamity. This search manifests itself in the Chorus whenever a concern for the welfare of the city, or for the ruler of the city, or for any particular person, reaches profound depths of understanding and feeling where the particular concern becomes a general concern that can embrace all mankind.

Primarily in the odes, the Chorus envisions the specific conflicts of the play against a background of eternal issues--life against death, honor against degradation, beauty and goodness against ugliness and evil. The most effective of the Greek Choruses, those of Agamemnon, Oedipus the King, and Antigone, perceive how the outcome of the action manifests

the operation of divine law. In showing how divine law operates through human life, the Chorus helps the characters in the play, and the audience, understand the grief and the glory of what it is to be a man.[31] The "spirit of the Chorus" is contained in the lyrical expression of fundamental ideas.[32] The greatness of a Chorus lies in the depth of its perception.

One critic has mentioned that a distinctive feature of Greek drama is that it invokes a sense of community involvement in the issue of the action, and he attributes this fact to Athenian awareness of the sanctity of national life, to the immense importance attached to the State and its claims. Through the Chorus as the Voice of Society this sense of community involvement is evoked.[33] Certainly the Chorus does evoke this sense, even when as oftentimes happens, the Chorus is the confidante of the noble hero or heroine and expresses no concern for community affairs, as in Medea, Helen, or Orestes. The three Choruses mentioned in the preceding paragraph are all deeply concerned for the welfare of the State. All of them are also male Elders of the community. To supplement what the aforementioned critic observed, I think very possibly this Chorus of respected Old Men can be traced back to the customs of Greek primitive religion and tribal instinct. In pre-Olympian days, when frightening emergencies arose, the

[31] The Orestes Plays of Aeschylus, trans. Paul Roche (New York, 1963), p. xv.

[32] Allardyce Nicoll, The Theory of Drama (New York, 1966), p. 159.

[33] Norwood, p. 137.

ancient Greek turned to the Gerontes, the Old Men of the Tribe, who knew what was Themis. Themis was ancient law, the way of our ancestors, the thing that has always been done and is therefore divinely right. Anything Not Themis was a source of public disaster. Even the king was careful not to gainsay these Elders. Should they fail, the last resort was to the Oldest of the Old Ones, the Chthonian earth deities lying in their sacred tombs.[34] The Chorus of Old Men of Argos and of Thebes had a significant depth of perception of what was Themis.

It does not require too great a stretch of the imagination to think of the Chorus as representing the Voice of Humanity, and the "universal aspect of human experience," and the Voice of Society. Even, on a more commonplace level, the Chorus can on occasion be the spokesman for compromise, for the everyday point of view as opposed to the heroic, unbending attitude of the hero. It does provide the necessary background for the heroic act. Without a reminder of how ordinary people think and behave, it might be impossible to recognize how extraordinary is the behavior of Oedipus, or Electra, or Hecuba.

Inherent in the character of the Chorus are many representations, but first of all the Chorus is a person concerned in the action of the play. In the Euripidean prologue the actor-character might sometimes introduce himself to the audience and tell his story directly to them, but no Tragic

[34]Gilbert Murray, Five Stages of Greek Religion, (New York, 1951), p. 35.

Chorus ever did. Nor was it ever a disembodied Voice. The voice was that of a flesh-and-blood collective personality that could murmur a few words to be thrown away in applause or transform the pathos of events into lyrical terms that exalt the human experience above the merely human view of it.

CHAPTER III

THE AESCHYLEAN CHORUS

How far does Aeschylus (525-456 B.C.) take the lyric Chorus and the single actor he inherited? As Lattimore says, it is as if the urge were in him "to transcend the limitations of dramatic presentation even before the limitations were firmly established," so that he struck out great rending thoughts in magnificent language that could never wait for the absolute refinement, for the perfect balance of a deliberate and conscious art.

His Choruses are part of a drama that reflects a vision of Heaven and earth that is both grand and overwhelming. Drawing on a wide range of experience augmented by a fertile imagination, Aeschylus does not shy at challenging the nature of Zeus himself, and he finds the behavior of men fraught with a significance that is tremendous because it is related to the divine.[35] In his odes he envisions noble perspectives of time, of space, and of the evolution of gods and men, as for example in Prometheus Bound. In Agamemnon he proves a master of dramatic time, working on several levels at once, transposing "past, present, and future into quickly sliding states of memory and consciousness."[36]

In deliberately avoiding the vocabulary and syntax of ordinary language, he transports his audience to a world of

[35] Lesky, p. 57.

[36] The Orestes Plays of Aeschylus, trans. Paul Roche, p. xxi.

higher reality.[37] He achieves his effects in an "incomparably daring and lofty imaginative language" which, even in translation is majestic, flaming, close-packed and loaded--"pegged and wedged and dovetailed" as Aristophanes called it.[38] His poetry is rich in effective rhythms and exciting imagery, sometimes harsh, but in general distinguished by "melopoeia," a sweet-sounding ease which makes it a delight to the ear. Compared to Sophocles it is less subtle but more vivid, heightened, and swift; compared to Euripides, it is more robust.[39] He forges iambic dialogue into an effective instrument, and his odes attain a richness unsurpassed.

Besides being a master of words, Aeschylus is a lover of spectacle, not only in song, but in stately dance, costumes, scenery, processionals and decoration--so that his dramas are visions as well as poems.[40] Sophocles creates two swift-moving and colorful Choruses in Ajax and Philoctetes, both sailor Choruses, and Euripides presents the lithe and ebullient Maenads in The Bacchae, but Aeschylus most of all appeals to the imagination with such Choruses as the delicate, effervescent Oceanids and the fiery Erinyes.

The Choruses of Aeschylus have varying degrees of perceptivity, and of all the Choruses in classical drama, there is none more profound than the Old Men of Argos.

[37] Lesky, p. 57.

[38] The Orestes Plays of Aeschylus, trans. Paul Roche, p. xxi.

[39] Ibid., p. 203.

[40] Ibid.

Of some ninety plays written by Aeschylus, the seven that have been preserved intact, with approximate dates of production are: The Suppliant Maidens (probably 463)[41] The Persians (472), The Seven Against Thebes (467), Prometheus Bound (not satisfactorily datable), and the sole existent trilogy, The Oresteia (458).

A brief analysis of the first four, including a description of the Chorus, their relationship toward the chief characters, the main theme (one of the advantages of the Greek tragic form is that the dramatist is able to say more than one thing at a time),[42] the Choral style, and some idea of the concern of the Chorus, along with a fuller treatment of

[41]Lucas, pp. 63-64, 254 (1959), discusses the publication in 1953 of a number of papyrus fragments dealing with Aeschylus' work, new evidence suggesting that The Suppliant Maidens, until then regarded as the earliest surviving Greek tragedy, dates from about 463 rather than 490. Kitto in Greek Tragedy, pp. 1-23 (1954), analyzes the play as the "splendid and assured triumph of the Tragedy of Thespis," with a fully grown "technique of choral composition." Aylen, p. 348 (1964), lists some scholarly analyses on the subject and himself accepts the evidence. Lesky, p. 59 (1965), points out that some scholars of standing, among them Max Pohlenz and Gilbert Murray, have refused to accept the implications of the new evidence, but avers that the manner in which the implications are evaded is either hard to follow or very questionable. Vellacott in Aeschylus: Prometheus and Other Plays, p. 7 (1961), mentions that scholarly opinion now places the play among Aeschylus' later works, about 463. The play seems to belong to the two-actor period; it is treated first in this study because it employs the second actor (Danaus) so sparingly as to afford a good idea of the possibilities of the one-actor play (see Kitto, Greek Tragedy, pp. 1-3, and Flickinger, p. 163).

[42]Aylen, p. 37.

The Oresteia, affords a view of the nature and use of the Aeschylean Chorus. The spirit of the Chorus resides, naturally, in its lyrics.

The Chorus of the fifty daughters of Danaus in The Suppliant Maidens, are unique in that there are just two Chorus-protagonists in classic tragic drama, and this is the more successful one.[43] The theme is a familiar one with Aeschylus, a struggle between opposing rights or principles.[44] Both the odes and episodes deal with the fate of these "barbaric" passionate Suppliants as they present to Pelasgus, King of Argos, what amounts to an unhappy choice: he can honor their plea for protection against their lustful cousins, and thus risk war with Egypt, or refuse their plea and bring down unknown terrors from Heaven through altars defiled by suicides (ll. 340-464).[45] Although the iambic dialogue seems artificial and forced, the odes are among the most beautiful Aeschylus ever wrote.[46] The Suppliants plead successfully, but nevertheless the play ends on a note of foreboding as the loyal Handmaids anxiously deplore their mistresses' immoderate worship of Artemis and their slighting of Aphrodite.

[43] See pages 80-81 of this work.

[44] Aeschylus: Prometheus and Other Plays, trans. Philip Vellacott (Baltimore, 1961), p. 7.

[45] Aeschylus II: The Suppliant Maidens, The Persians, Seven Against Thebes (The Complete Greek Tragedies), eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1956).

[46] Seth G. Benardete, Introduction to The Suppliant Maidens; Aeschylus II, p. 6.

The Persians dramatizes Xerxes' defeat at Salamis. The aged male Councellors of the Persian Empire are an anxious community Chorus which shape the action of the play. While the Choral songs are far inferior to those of The Suppliant Maidens, the iambic speeches, even though long, are dramatic. Only in The Oresteia did Aeschylus achieve a perfect balance between them.[47] In their odes this Chorus convey the theme of the overweening ambition of the absent Xerxes who impiously tries to 'yoke the Hellespont,' to control the powers of nature for his own purpose.[48] With a truly Hellenic, and especially Aeschylean, ascent from concrete happening to insight into universal truths, the Chorus sing of Ate, the most terrifying form of delusion, who seizes in her toils men who are tempted to acts of hybris and brings about their ruin.[49] The threat to the ruler of the State is a threat to the State, and the foreboding of the Chorus prepares us for news of the disaster in which all Persia shares.[50] The play ends with the wild strains of Asiatic keening. As for the victors, no Greek hero is mentioned by name: it was the Greek community which had triumphed, sustained by divine powers.[51]

In The Seven Against Thebes, the last play of a trilogy which deals with the fratricidal quarrel of the sons of Oedipus, the Chorus of Theban Women vividly embody the communal emotion of fear, although these women are definitely

[47] Ibid.
[48] Aylen, pp. 46-47.
[49] Lesky, p. 62.
[50] Aylen, pp. 46-47.
[51] Lesky, p. 61.

a personality. The theme is a family curse which pursues the house of Laius until it is utterly destroyed.[52] The unrestrained terror of these women which is evoked by the thought of the enemy at the gates, pitted against the strength of Prince Eteocles, results in a situation which grows in intensity and has a powerful effect, especially in the celebrated commos, the Choosing of the Champions (397-719).[53] The Choral style is roughly classical, marked by much vivid imagery and moving speech.[54] At the close of the play, as they join in the antiphonal keening of the sisters over the dead bodies of their brothers, this Chorus of Theban Women gravely perceive the whole tragic action as the fated ruin of the hero.[55]

In Prometheus Bound, the first play of a trilogy, the sea-nymphs are not a community Chorus, but a confidante of sorts, and the Choral style is classical. The theme is again a struggle between opposing rights and principles.[56] This gentle and rather timid Chorus strive to comfort the chained Prometheus and encourage him to tell his story of benefactions for mankind. The main movement of the play is the tragic drama taking place in the mind of the proud Titan,[57] a drama

[52] Lesky, p. 63.

[53] Aeschylus II: Seven Against Thebes.

[54] Aeschylus: Prometheus and Other Plays, trans. Philip Vellacott, p. 16.

[55] Kitto, Greek Tragedy, p. 92.

[56] Aeschylus: Prometheus and Other Plays, trans. Philip Vellecott, p. 7.

[57] Kitto, Greek Tragedy, p. 60.

which is brought out in his conversations, both with the Chorus and with his various visitors: the comical and irresolute Oceanus, the tormented Io, and Hermes, officious messenger of Zeus. Joining in Prometheus' talk with these visitors, the Chorus lyrically comment on the action throughout. Their lyricism is supplemented, sometimes superseded, by the sweeping lyricism of Prometheus and Io.[58] The end of the play confirms the Oceanids' fear of repercussions for the Titan's adamant challenge of Zeus and for his refusal to reveal the vital secret. Symbolically, though, the climax comes when, for all their fears, the nymphs prefer to face the catastrophe with Prometheus, rather than leave him alone.[59]

The Oresteia is the culmination of the art of Aeschylus. In it he uses the Chorus in a different way in each of the plays: the Agamemnon Chorus, rather than commenting on the action, envelope it and convey the dramatic theme with imposing grandeur; The Choephori Chorus begin as an enveloping Chorus, but in the progress of the drama they begin to comment on the various stages of the events and take a more active physical part in them; The Eumenides Chorus are an actor who ranks with the principals.[60]

In Agamemnon the Chorus of Elders of Argos are concerned not only for the suffering of Argos but for suffering humanity. The theme that men of violence do things which outrage

[58]Ibid., p. 65.
[59]Aylen, p. 68.
[60]Kitto, Greek Tragedy, p. 82.

justice, bring retribution, and provoke further deeds of violence finds its fullest expression and is made universal in the Choral odes. As Kitto puts it, "the whole movement of the play is the gathering of the storm clouds over the head of the hero and his house," and the Chorus are highly instrumental in conveying this movement.[61] The main element in creating a background of violence and ruin is the Chorus, and Aeschylus contrives that we should see the situation as a whole, with the actors standing, however vividly, against this background.[62] Of all the tragedies, in this play alone actors of great stature are made to move easily and harmoniously within the framework of the old enveloping Chorus.[63]

Complementing the powerful beginning in which the Watchman's joy at seeing the beacon is contrasted with his foreboding, the Chorus enter chanting as they march to take up their position, having come at Clytemnestra's bidding.

In their first ode (40-257),[64] the longest Choral movement in Greek tragedy, they increase the note of foreboding as they tell of the ten-years' war and dwell especially on the sacrifice of Iphigenia to her father's ambition. Justice, they know, must inevitably be exacted, and wisdom will come only through suffering. In conveying their thoughts, the Chorus are not interested in telling a tale -- logical

[61] Ibid., p. 75.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid., p. 77.

[64] Aeschylus: The Oresteian Trilogy, trans. Philip Vellacott (Baltimore, 1959).

and chronological order are nothing to them. They allow memory "to hover and to pounce on the memorable news and to omit the rest." They do not narrate, putting themselves at our disposal and arranging their material for presentation to us but rather they follow the "wheeling flight" of their own thought and we are to accommodate ourselves to it.[65] So skillfully is past blended with present, so closely do we feel past events influencing present action, that such an event as the sacrifice of Iphigenia (who is in a sense a type of all the innocent victims of war)[66] has the immediacy of an event that takes place within the drama. It is logical that a vivid picture of the sacrifice is the chief memory of the first ode, since clearly Clytemnestra's bitterness against her husband dates from it.[67]

The dual point of view which the Chorus afford is skillfully manipulated. This Chorus are remarkably perceptive where Agamemnon is concerned but far less aware of Clytemnestra's potential. Through their eyes we see her first, inferring her mind from her acts, and she keeps up the pose of welcoming wife marvelously well. Not until she accomplishes her purpose are the Chorus, and the audience, shocked into the realization that of course the background events over which the Chorus have been brooding are also part of the climate of her mind; but her brooding has been vengeful.

[65] Kitto, Greek Tragedy, p. 77.
[66] Aylen, p. 58.
[67] Lucas, p. 89.

The first three torrential odes are a stroke of dramatic simplification, and no greater lyric poetry than this has survived from ancient Greece.[68] By the time Agamemnon appears, we are steeped in the knowledge of Paris' sin of arrogance, of Agamemnon's pride and ambition, of urns coming back to Greece in place of living men, and of the sack of Troy. The Chorus note with foreboding that the gods take account of all who commit bloodshed and desecrate holy places, and that too much pride is dangerous. We are aware that Agamemnon is a sinner who presses onward to his doom, and when he does appear, rejoicing not unreasonably in his victory, he comes to us out of a murk of evil ambition and blood-guiltiness. In bringing Cassandra home as his mistress, he openly dishonors Apollo whose priestess she is.[69] The past is continued in the present and the future impinges.

In the fourth ode, after Agamemnon has entered the palace over the purple carpet and Clytemnestra has entered the house after him, the Chorus, left alone with the still-silent Cassandra are now thoroughly aroused to a sense of impending catastrophe;[70] they sing heavy-heartedly of a sense of coming "dissolution" with "soul in flame." A short time later, in the most astonishing scene in the trilogy,[71] a superb commos between the pitying Chorus and the doomed

[68] Lucas, p. 92.

[69] Aylen, p. 58.

[70] Aeschylus: The Oresteian Trilogy, trans. Philip Vellacott, p. 27.

[71] Lucas, p. 96.

and anguished Cassandra, it is she who soars lyrically, making the comments of the Chorus sound prosaic. In a tremendous telescoping of dramatic time, she envisions the past atrocities of Thyestes, the present imminent murders, and the future retribution on the murderers. A crowd of Erinyes, drunk with human blood, clings to the palace. "The Past is a menace to the Present, and even the Future casts its shadows behind."[72] As Kitto observes, the more horrors, past and future, that Cassandra brings into this "central horror of a circle of horrors," the more frightful does the immediately present one become, while the bewildered Chorus, although anxiously sensing catastrophe, demonstrate the working of Apollo's decree--Cassandra's vision is not understood until too late. When she goes to meet her death in the palace she gains tragic stature. For genuine tragedy the doomed hero should be fully aware of his fate, however terrible,[73] and Cassandra knowingly accepts her inevitable doom. In contrast to her tragic dignity, the Chorus, when the cry of Agamemnon is heard, can only huddle together, confusedly asking each other what action they should take.

Of course it is Clytemnestra who takes the next action, and in a tableau characteristic of Greek tragedy she stands exultant and bloodstained over the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra. There follows a lyrical dialogue between the

[72] Kitto, Greek Tragedy, p. 81.

[73] Lesky, p. 66.

outraged Chorus and Clytemnestra, in which, although the Chorus will not allow her to evade responsibility, recriminations and self-justification mingle with a mutual recognition that an evil curse has, from the beginning, dogged the house of Atreus.[74] For the adulterous, cowardly, draft-dodging Aegisthus the Chorus has only unconcealed contempt.

At the close of the play, although Clytemnestra, like Agamemnon before her, is self-persuaded that justice has been done and the evil may now end, the note of optimism is mingled with ominous undertones set in motion by the threat of the Chorus that Orestes may return.[75]

The Choephori Chorus are Trojan slaves, palace attendants who are close friends of Electra. In the early odes they present the moral and emotional background of the action: blood lies on the ground, fear reigns, Justice tarries; Agamemnon's soul is angry, and Clytemnestra's bad dreams will not let her sleep.

In the first episode, they suggest to the dispirited Electra that she disregard the errand of Clytemnestra and pour the libations in her own name while she prays for Orestes' return and for vengeance. Once Orestes makes himself known, the Chorus, having paid lyrical tribute to the king in the ancient manner, begin to take on a more active role, and their non-Greek character, suggested by

[74] Lucas, p. 97.

[75] Aeschylus: The Oresteian Trilogy, trans. Philip Vellacott, p. 29.

the extravagance of the words and actions that accompany their entrance, appears more clearly.[76] They begin to urge one point of view on Orestes, a savage appeal to the primitive law of retaliation, "a blow for a blow." Kneeling at the grave of Agamemnon, in a long commos, the Chorus, Orestes, and Electra lament the death of Agamemnon, exchanging thoughts on his greatness and the foulness of his murder as they swear vengeance. This commos is a kind of initiation through which the brother is brought into closer union with his sister, with the suffering people vaguely represented by the Chorus, and with his dead father.[77] At the end of the commos, Orestes' resolution is fixed, Electra has become a changed person, savage for revenge, and the Chorus, instead of wandering free in space and time, now begin to obey the rhythm of the piece and say what from time to time the development of the action suggests,[78] in the manner of the classical style.

In the ode following the commos, the Chorus sing that there is no greater terror than a man-killing woman, and list a number of them in antiquity; at last, they exult, the Furies have sent a son to pay for the murders in this house. The action after this becomes swifter and the Chorus is pressed into service as a minor actor. They set themselves to defeat Clytemnestra.[79] Intercepting the grieving

[76] Kitto, Greek Tragedy, p. 84.
[77] Lucas, pp. 98-99.
[78] Kitto, Greek Tragedy, p. 86.
[79] Ibid., p. 88.

Nurse, they persuade her to tell the King that he is to come alone. In an ode immediately after, they pray to Zeus for a reign of goodness, and ask that Orestes be given the courage he needs to perform "the scarlet stroke." When Aegisthus appears, they urge him to go into the house. Hearing him cry out, they hide behind Agamemnon's tomb until they are certain the battle goes in Orestes' favor. As Clytemnestra is being killed, a Choral ode expresses pity for Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, but joy for the house purged of crime. Time and holy ablutions will purge the palace of its haunting, they blindly predict. Immediately after, the doors open, this time to reveal Orestes standing over the bodies of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, and as Orestes displays the robe in which his father was murdered, his madness begins to take hold.

In a commos that ends the play, the Chorus weakly protest that all will be well, while Orestes' awareness of his imminent punishment grows stronger; he defends the killing of his mother in that Apollo had stressed the necessity for vengeance, promising him freedom from blame if he performed the vengeance and threatening untold agony if he did not. Despite assurances from the Chorus that he did right, Orestes sees the Furies, visible only to him, rising in the background, and he rushes out to seek Apollo and a healing purge. Now the Chorus understand that their hope was false, and the second play of the trilogy ends like the first, with no prospect but disaster:[80] "When shall the ancestral curse relent,/ And sink to rest, its fury spent?" the Chorus ask as they file off the stage.

[80]Lucas, p. 99.

In The Eumenides, Aeschylus presents the audience with a play that leads through a succession of dramatic surprises. The startling Chorus should prepare them for it. These Erinyes are a Chorus of terrifying ugliness, "misshapen crones, snorting and wailing, black-skinned and draped in black, scarlet tongues lolling from the masks of their mouths,"[81] whose sustenance is the blood of murderers.[82] They remain wonderfully lyrical, although they are entirely an actor and a realistic one. The theme of the play is the conflict between Apollo and the Furies, both of whom represent certain moral powers in the universe. Apollo is protector of the home and of the husband as head of it; his powers have been designated by Olympian Zeus. The Furies are avengers of crime, particularly the revolting crime of matricide; theirs is an ancient function allotted to them by the Moirai.[83] The resolution of the conflict is the chief interest of the play, a moral and intellectual interest rather than a tragic one. There is no single hero, and the Chorus, vitally interested in their own prerogatives, rank with the chief characters, with Orestes, Apollo, and Athena.

In the parodos, these Furies awaken in the temple of Apollo after having been rebuked in their exhausted sleep by the ghost of Clytemnestra, and bewail the escape of Orestes. In the middle of their danse macabre, Apollo returns, having sent Orestes as suppliant to Athena. In

[81] The Orestes Plays of Aeschylus, trans. Paul Roche, p. xxxi.

[82] Lucas, p. 100.

[83] Ibid.

a sharp verbal clash, full of loathing on one side, and protest on the other, Apollo pledges aid to Orestes, and the Chorus vow unrelenting pursuit. A year later, in the temple of Athena, the Chorus, "searching and scenting," find their suppliant prey and sing an ode swearing he has no recourse to forgiveness--the blood of a mother demands blood.

A succession of thrilling scenes follows: the Furies' terrifying and powerful "binding song" to mark Orestes as theirs for all eternity; the agreement to the trial; the powerful ode on the need for awesome laws to preserve justice and keep the community from disintegrating; the trial itself, which as debate is poor but as conflict magnificent; and the wrath of the Furies when Athena casts the deciding vote in favor of Orestes. Feeling themselves dishonored and wronged, in a long commos with Athena they threaten in malignant songs to bring disaster to Athens. The goddess, however, persuades them that Zeus and his merciful justice have prevailed and, through a new dispensation instituted by Zeus, she pledges them a home and high honors in Athens. Mollified, the Chorus in turn promise rich blessing on Athens and its people. A torchlight procession of Athenians, led by the goddess, with joyous chants escort the Chorus, renamed the Eumenides or Kindly Ones, to their new home in a cave in Athens.

In this last drama Aeschylus uses the legendary change in the character of the Furies to introduce to his audience, through the Chorus of Furies and its interaction with the other characters in the drama, the idea of the growth of moral, social, and political order out of primitive disorder,

both in Heaven and on earth. The usages of the city-State become the pattern of justice on earth, and Athena is made a member of that jury which is the prototype of all Athenian councils.[84] The last rebels against Zeus, the crude but sharply perceptive Furies, recognize Athena as Zeus' representative, and allow themselves to be persuaded to accept the Olympian ideal which holds the promise of a higher order.[85] The whole concept behind The Eumenides, an Aeschylean stroke of genius, must have left the Athenian audiences astonished, uneasy, and elated as the chanting torchlight procession made its exodus.

[84] Kitto, Greek Tragedy, p. 98.

[85] Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

THE SOPHOCLEAN CHORUS

Both Sophocles (496?-406) and Euripides (480-406) bring a fresh kind of interest to tragic drama. With the achievements of Aeschylus, drama reaches a vigorous prime, but to it Sophocles brings a new dramatic thrill without resorting to melodrama, and Euripides brings an adjustment of sympathies.

Sophocles shares with Aeschylus a high idealism, the ability to seize upon the essential tragic situation, and the gift to create great poetry, more restrained than that of Aeschylus, but more powerful in suggestiveness and subtlety. His own unique contributions include an understanding of human nature "as it ought to be," a dynamic interaction of characters afforded by the addition of the third actor, and a sophistication of the interplay between ode and episode. The religious element is less explicit in Sophocles than it is in Aeschylus, but it is there in the recurrent idea that all that happens is god-given.[86] From Aristotle on, Sophocles has been the acknowledged craftsman of the theater, the skilled portrayer of complex characters, the dramatist of striking contrasts, the master of construction. In his hands drama takes on the absolute refinement, the perfect balance of a deliberate and conscious art.

Sophocles is an easier dramatist to criticize than

[86]Lesky, p. 98.

either Aeschylus or Euripides, since on the whole he works steadily in one Choral style and presents as the mainspring at the heart of each of his plays the life-giving combination of strong character and revealing situation. A strong and noble character is confronted with a crucial situation and responds to it in his special way. This crucial situation is concerned with a moral, and sometimes a religious, problem, and always involves suffering on the part of the principal character.[87]

Each of the Sophoclean Choruses is a distinct personality, an "actor" as Aristotle says, meaning that it is a character that takes an important role in the action of the play rather than merely making incidental music between the scenes, as happens with Euripides. But it is never the protagonist, or any other principal character. In its relation to the chief character, each Chorus is either an independent community Chorus (the Theban plays); a wholly dependent and devoted follower (Ajax and Philoctetes) or a confidante (Electra and The Women of Trachis). To qualify the foregoing statement, the Chorus in Philoctetes is devoted not to the protagonist but to one of the other chief characters. In a very general way, all seven of the Choruses are in the classical style. The odes organize and give rhythm to the action, either as preparation for events or as a supplement to them. In those odes which contain general reflections, most of the time Sophocles works the concepts into the drama

[87]Kirkwood, p. 10.

by beginning with a generalization and ending with a particular that ties in with the action. All of the songs amplify and deepen the impression created by the action in the episodes, thus giving to the action a further dimension of meaning and dramatic force.

This chapter brings out the Sophoclean use of the Chorus as an integral and contributing part of the dramatic structure, focusing on his use of the ode but including as well examples of his use of the commos. It continues to demonstrate how effective the Chorus can be in giving to the audience not only the necessary background material and a body of common thought and feeling, but also an intimation of that material as part of the mingled thought and emotion--conscious or half-conscious, acknowledged or denied--of the principal characters.[88] It emphasizes the use of the Chorus to help establish, sustain, and intensify mood, and to build up or relax tension, but most of all to create suspense and to achieve strong contrastive effects. Neither Aeschylus nor Euripides uses the ode with the same immediacy as Sophocles.

Of some one-hundred twenty-five plays written by Sophocles, the seven that have been preserved intact, with approximate dates of production are: Ajax (441), Antigone (441), Electra (difficult to date), Oedipus the King (436), The Women of Trachis (429-420), Philoctetes (409), and Oedipus at Colonus (405). The last two, like Aeschylus' The Suppliant Maidens and The Eumenides, have a "happy" ending, but are

[88] Una Ellis-Fermor, The Frontiers of Drama (London, 1954), pp. 100-102.

classified as tragedies, using Aristotle's criterion of tragedies as being "serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude."

The Theban plays are given a fuller treatment than the others. Each analysis begins with a description of the relationship between the chief character and the Chorus, and a statement of the theme, followed by mention of the use of the odes and commoi.

In Ajax, the connection between the Chorus of Salaminian Sailors and the hero whom Athena humiliates for his pride is very close. The subject of the drama is the shame and death of Ajax which follows on his defeat in the contest for Achilles' armor, and the growth, after his death, of a sense of his heroic virtue and magnanimity.[89] A measure of the heroic in Ajax is the manner in which the other characters respond to him or his memory. From the opening words of their first ode (ll. 134-137):[90]

> Son of Telamon, lord of the firm floor
> Of Salamis, where the sea chafes and swirls
> Ajax, my lord,
> When you are fortunate, I too feel gladness . . .

the Chorus express both in odes and commoi their concern, dependence, and devotion, and emphasize the stature of Ajax.[91]

The story of Electra Sophocles handles as a revenge

[89]John Moore, Introduction to Ajax; Sophocles II: Ajax, The Women of Trachis, Electra, Philoctetes (The Complete Greek Tragedies), eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, (Chicago, 1957), p. 2.

[90]Sophocles II: Ajax.

[91]Aylen, p. 83.

theme, with no divine or other sanctions invoked against the murderer. The connection between the Chorus of Mycenean Women and Electra is very close; in fact, she addresses them as "you whose love responds to mine in all ways" (l. 135).[92] Sophocles uses both odes and commoi to express the intensity of Electra's grief, her desire for revenge, and the loyalty of the Chorus.

In The Women of Trachis, the Chorus is the confidante of Deianeira, seeing the absent hero Heracles through her eyes. The story has to do with the working out of the prophecy that the end of this last labor of Heracles will mean either his life's end or a happy life for the rest of his time. Through a series of revelations, Heracles comes closer and closer to the truth until he finally realizes he is vanquished by love and lust.[93] Both the odes and the single commos deal with the heroic stature of Heracles, with the force of love in his life, and with the fateful suffering that force brings.

In Philoctetes, the Chorus of Sailors is very close to Neoptolemus, protective toward him and addressing him as "boy," and "my son." In the story, Philoctetes, marooned for ten years on Lemnos owing to the noisome wound in his foot, suddenly becomes important when divine purpose insists on the value of his bow and himself for the capture of Troy. Like Oedipus, he is both tormented and honored by the non-human forces of the world. To the old myth Sophocles adds Neoptolemus, almost a second protagonist, who, without knowing

[92] Sophocles II: Electra.

[93] Michael Jameson, Introduction to The Women of Trachis, Sophocles II, pp. 65-66.

the whole story of the suffering of Philoctetes and his hatred for those who abandoned him, especially Ulysses, agrees to help Ulysses, through stratagem or persuasion, to bring Philoctetes and his bow back to Troy. This next-to-the-last play of Sophocles, with its "happy" ending, has aptly been described as "a psychological adventure with a brilliant plot as the subsidiary interest."[94]

The Chorus of Sailors, conniving and lively, are unswerving in their loyalty to Neoptolemus, acting as they think he wants them to act, but experiencing a growing pity for Philoctetes. The sympathy they express in odes and commoi seems either to influence or to mirror the attitude of Neoptolemus. This Chorus sees the outcome of the action as a manifestation of divine law working on earth: "It was the will of the Gods that has subdued you" (ll. 1118-1119),[95] an outcome confirmed by the appearance of the apotheosized Heracles.

The Theban plays, with their elastic treatment of myth, are discussed in the order that corresponds to the time element in the Oedipus story: Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, and Antigone.

In Oedipus the King, the community Chorus of Elders of Thebes are devoted to Oedipus as savior of the city. Oedipus breaks divine law without realizing that he is doing so, and the Chorus perceive how the destruction of

[94] Kitto, Greek Tragedy, p. 347.

[95] Sophocles II: Philoctetes.

Oedipus manifests divine law operating through society.[96] Having made the decision to banish the killer of Laius, Oedipus blindly defies all assaults, real or imaginary, upon that decision, until circumstances force a deadly self-knowledge. Although the action of this story is the disaster and misery caused by man's arrogance and folly, yet in all this arrogance there is something heroic. The parodos (151-215)[97] not only comments on the prologue but provides effective contrast with the first episode. Of the three themes in the parodos--inquiry about the meaning of the oracle, lament for the ravages of the plague, and a prayer invoking the aid of Athena, Artemis, Apollo, Zeus, and Dionysus--that of prayer is dominant, and just as the ode ends, Oedipus comes out to address the people and declares, in effect, that he will provide an answer to their prayer. The ironical contrast of solemn prayer addressed to the gods and the immediate answer with which Oedipus assumes the terrible burden of fulfilling that prayer is highly effective in the structural rhythm of the play.[98]

The first stasimon (463-512) has the effect of introducing serious and unresolved doubts and building up tension

[96] David Grene, Introduction to Sophocles I: Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone (The Complete Greek Tragedies), eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, Chicago, 1954), p. 3.

[97] Sophocles I: Oedipus the King.

[98] Kirkwood, p. 203.

through the bewilderment and excitement of the Elders as they deliberate over the terrible prophecy of Teiresias.[99] Their attitude of anxious questioning and their vacillating emotions before they affirm their faith in Oedipus, all presented in lyrics deeply impressive in tone, add greatly to the atmosphere of doubt and fear and search that keeps gathering all through the first part of the play.[100]

The first commos (649-696) fulfills its basic function of signalling and emphasizing a moment of great emotional stress, and it does more. At the height of the quarrel between Oedipus and Creon, the Chorus intervene to plead for peace, and their intervention also makes a transition from the quarrel to the scene between Oedipus and Jocasta in which Oedipus begins to fear.[101]

The second stasimon (863-910) continues to build up the atmosphere of questioning and foreboding. The first part of the ode is a prayer for piety and reverence and a condemnation of hybris; the second expresses the hope that evil practices may be punished, the fervent wish that Apollo's oracles may be fulfilled, and the fear that religion is vanishing from the earth. This ode, with its lyrical expression of uneasiness and fear, of desire for the security of some stable refuge, continues and amplifies the spirit of the preceding episode and is peculiarly relevant to the

[99] Kirkwood, p. 209.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid., p. 190.

episode which follows it.[102] The episode before this song is the tense and disquieting scene in which Jocasta, the skeptic, aiming to calm Oedipus' fears, sets out to discredit belief in oracles. But her "proof" of the error of the old oracle that Laius would die at the hands of his son leads to Oedipus' strong suspicions that it was he who killed Laius. At the end of the episode she has succeeded in winning a half-hearted agreement from Oedipus, but the outcome leaves one with a profound sense of uneasiness. At this point the ode is sung. Immediately after it Jocasta enters and prays to Apollo, and just as she ends the prayer, as if in answer to it, the Corinthian Messenger appears to tell of Polybus' death, news that is cheering at first but leads to calamitous revelations. This second ode expresses quite simply, in language of vigor and beauty, the religious thoughts of the Chorus evoked by their doubts and anxiety, and it contributes effectively to the tragic rhythm.[103]

Sophocles frequently uses a recognizable pattern of a deceptive reversal of the action in creating suspense and achieving a strong contrastive effect: at some crucial point in the play the Chorus has wild and enthusiastic hopes of some happy outcome, only to have those hopes dashed by catastrophic news immediately after the song.[104] This is no mere trick of the theater. It reveals a profound reality. The audience, like gods, know what is to happen, and they see

[102] Ibid., p. 212

[103] Ibid., pp. 212-213.

[104] Ibid., p. 199.

in the Chorus the image of their own blindness, the blindness of all men who perpetually mistake the signs, rejoice on the brink of disaster and fail equally to recognize the approach of good fortune; and all the time the gods look down on the unending drama, their hearts, it is to be hoped, not quite empty of pity for the human victim. This is the essence of tragic irony.[105]

The effect of this pattern is nowhere greater than in this play. Oedipus, having learned that Polybus and Merope are not his parents, with feverish optimism declares his determination to discover his origins, however lowly. Catching his spirit, in a joyous ode (1086-1109) the Chorus, almost with an air of abandon, prophecy that he will prove to be a Theban, perhaps even the son of Pan or Apollo, or Theban Bacchus. Immediately after the ode comes the taut, harrowing scene of final revelation between Herdsman, Messenger, and Oedipus.[106]

After this episode, in which emotional stress has been built up beyond endurance and Oedipus has fled the stage, the Chorus sing an ode (1186-1222) that has the effect of relaxing to some degree the intensity of the situation. The Oedipus ode begins with an agonized lament for the fate of mankind:

> O generations of men, how I
> count you as equal with those who live
> not at all!
> What man, what man on earth wins more
> of happiness than a seeming
> and after that turning away?

[105] Lucas, pp. 135-136.

[106] Kirkwood, p. 200.

Then, in a lyrical review of the greatness and suffering of Oedipus, the Chorus give voice to their emotional stress, and in doing so bring a measure of relief. Gloomy and despairing though their cry is, it yet calms and brings a lull in the action; there is a relaxing of tension before the excitement of the report of what has happened within the palace. Structurally the function of the ode is modest, but its fine emotional consummation of the catastrophe makes it at once lyrically great and dramatically appropriate.

In the second commos (1297-1366), after the blinding, the Chorus provide a background of horrified commentary to Oedipus' cries of grief and self-reproach.[107]

Left alone on the stage, after the children, Creon, and Oedipus have gone, the Chorus sum up the terrible reversals of the fortunes of Oedipus: "Count no mortal happy till / he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain."

The community Chorus of Elders of Colonus in Oedipus at Colonus emanate pride in their district, in its integrity, its charm, its enlightenment. Similarly, they take pride in Theseus, the embodiment of the civilized spirit of Athens itself. The plot deals with two distinct themes, the reception and death of Oedipus and the attempt made by Creon and Polyneices to claim him for some Theban interest. The old man, admittedly a kind of monster, is conscious of his guilt and his innocence, and he accepts without protest or thanks the honor of his extraordinary end.

Most of the five commoi contribute to the element of

[107]Ibid., p. 190.

spectacle in addition to creating emotional effect. For example, in the parodos, which is in commatic form, Oedipus, assisted by Antigone, slowly moves from his sacrilegious place in the grove of the Eumenides. His pitiful stumbling and the horror of the Elders at his appearance and his transgression affirm the obstacles Oedipus must overcome to find sanctuary. Another commos between Chorus and Creon enhances the spirited action of Creon's seizing of Oedipus' daughters. Another, in which the Chorus cries out in alarm and terror while Oedipus takes leave of his daughters, increases the sense of excitement and stir when the thunder peals, summoning Oedipus. The rich physical action of this play is derived to a large extent from these commoi.[108]

One of the odes in this play is a familiar and instructive example of the difference between the odes of Sophocles, which maintain close connection with the action of the play, and those of Euripides. Both in Medea (823-855)[109] and in this play (668-721),[110] the Chorus sing a song in praise of the beauties and splendors of Athens, and both odes have beauty. The Colonus ode is, in fact, one of the most beautiful of all Greek poems, praising the magic of Athens, watched over by the gods.[111] For the Corinthian Women, the provocation to sing so charmingly of Athens is very slight: in the preceding episode Aegeus had offered Medea a refuge there.

[108] Ibid., pp. 190-191.

[109] Euripides, Four Tragedies: Alcestis, The Medea, The Heracleidae, Hippolytus (The Complete Greek Tragedies), eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1955).

[110] Sophocles I: Oedipus at Colonus.

[111] Lesky, p. 130.

However, it is completely natural to the personality of the Old Men of Colonus, and valuable to the thought of the play that they should sing a song in praise of their land. Throughout the play the beauty of Colonus and the gracious and magnanimous spirit of Athens and its king are of primary importance. In the episode just before this stasimon, Theseus has welcomed Oedipus and pledged the strength and integrity of Athens to protect the fearsome and fearful old wanderer. In their song this Chorus do not lose any part of their personality, but participate in the manner of an actor. Almost invariably Sophocles works his odes into the fabric of the dramatic action in this way.[112]

Another of the odes (1211-1243) deserves mention as a good example of how Sophocles achieves a powerful effect of contrast. The Old Men of Colonus, in keeping with their character and the situation, sing a pessimistic ode on the sorrows and loneliness of old age. Their despairing gloom, coming just before the vigor and power of spirit displayed by Oedipus in what follows--his denunciation of Polyneices and his inspired and triumphant departure--has a fine contrastive effect.[113]

This Chorus of Old Men of Colonus plead with the mourning Antigone not to return to Thebes, but when Theseus pledges his aid in sending her back so she may make peace between her brothers, the Chorus is resigned: Now let the weeping cease, they say, "These things are in the hands of God."

The Chorus of Elders of Thebes in Antigone are quite

[112]Kirkwood, pp. 196-197.

[113]Ibid., p. 201.

independent of the two leading characters, and render their allegiance mainly to the city. Most often Antigone is regarded as the classical statement of the struggle between the law of the individual conscience and the central power of the State.[114] In this play there are two commoi, and both have great dramatic pertinence; in them the Chorus make their judgment on Antigone and Creon in turn (808-882 and 1261-1274).[115] These commoi emphasize the key part played in this drama by the Chorus in relation to each of the main figures, a part which has, for a Chorus, an unusual degree of independence.[116]

The parodos is valuable for two reasons; for one, it shows the prime concern of the Chorus: the theme of the ode is mainly joy and pride at the victory of Thebes over the Seven, although there is sorrow for the death of the two sons of Oedipus. The other reason is that the tone of the ode contrasts with what goes before and adapts itself to the mood of what follows.[117] In the prologue, Antigone has angrily told Ismene of her determination to flout the edict of the new monarch and bury her brother. By contrast, in the parodos that follows, the Chorus sing their song of rejoicing and victory. Immediately after it, Creon enters and makes his specious inaugural address. The dominant tone of victory in the Choral ode blends perfectly with that of

[114] Aylen, p. 85.
[115] Sophocles I: Antigone.
[116] Kirkwood, p. 191.
[117] Ibid., pp. 202-203.

the proud and confident opening address; then the tone of both Choral ode and Creon's speech provides ironic contrast to the tone of what follows--the tumultuous and undignified arrival of the Guard and his equivocation about the attempted burial.

While the parodos contributes the dramatic element of contrast, the first three stasima of Antigone are excellent examples of songs that contribute to an atmosphere of suspense through ambiguity, and the detached tone of all three is consistent with the personality of this independent Chorus. The first stasimon, the ode on man (332-375), is perhaps the most famous lyric in Sophocles, beginning "Many the wonders but nothing walks stranger than man." The intrinsic poetic merit of the ode is unquestioned, but its dramatic point has been variously interpreted. Creon, coldly furious that his decree has been disobeyed, has just dismissed the equivocating Guard. What wonderful thing motivates the song? Apparently not the daring act of burial, because the Chorus go on to talk not about the boldness of man but of his accomplishments, his skill. Yet the idea that it might be the burial still lingers, especially since the Chorus, to Creon's annoyance, has suggested that the gods may have had a hand in it. The ode closes on an ominous note casting a shadow of doubt over the whole proud statement of man's greatness and sufficiency: sometimes man's cleverness leads to good, sometimes to ill. Who is the evildoer who does not honor "the laws of the land and the gods' sworn right"? The burier of the body? Creon? Both? The question is deliberately left in doubt. The most important dramatic contribution of the ode is its

introduction of serious and unresolved doubts.[118]

The next stasimon (582-625) intensifies the atmosphere of doubt and foreboding.[119] The first part of the ode is a lament for the house of Labdacus, springing very naturally from the unhappy events of the previous scene in which Creon has condemned Antigone to death; the second is a deeply religious warning against the false hopes and transgressions of mankind. Again the Chorus speak with earnestness, but it is hard to settle on the object of their warning. It cannot be Antigone; they have never accused her of worse faults than stubbornness, offense against Dike (the natural balance of things), and lack of wisdom, while the sins they inveigh against seem to challenge the power of Zeus. Nor can it be Creon, even though the words are "suggestive and ominous," for at this point the Chorus are still loyal to him. The ambiguity is intended. The Chorus, having heard the quarrel between Antigone and Creon, are convinced that someone is going against the will of Heaven, but they do not know precisely who the sinner is. Later on, in the final commos, they will make their judgment on Creon, but at this point they can only express an intuition of evil. In dialogue such ambiguity would be intolerable, if not impossible; but in lyrics, where references can be indirect and general, the ambiguity is not only acceptable but dramatically valuable. It maintains and expands the feeling of impending calamity for wrongdoing without constituting a direct moral indictment which would weaken the tension of the plot.[120]

[118] Ibid., pp. 206-207.

[119] Ibid., p. 207.

[120] Ibid., pp. 207-208.

The third stasimon is a little song to Eros (781-800). It has a certain effect of shock, following hard on the scene of shouting and hatred between Creon and his son. It has also, like the songs that precede, the purpose of maintaining tension. Here, not long before the turning point of the play, when Creon's guilt will be clear, the Chorus appear to be censuring Antigone's cause: "Who has you [Eros] within him is mad. / You twist the minds of the just. Wrong they pursue and are ruined." Do they mean Haemon? They do not ever say that Haemon is guilty of injustice; only that his love for Antigone rivals in power "mighty laws." Once again there is ambiguity.[121]

All three stasima convey an impression of ominous doubt and suggest present and impending evil and disaster. Their dramatic contribution is to some degree separate from the action of the episodes.

Another ode (944-987), sung just after Antigone has been led off to be imprisoned, has the effect of relaxing to some degree the intensity of the situation. This song tells of three imprisonments: of Danae, Lycurgus, and Cleopatra. Instead of moral pronouncement we have poetic elaboration, very moving and vivid, on the single theme of imprisonment, forming a kind of lyrical finale to the foregoing scene.[122] After the stirring commos between Antigone and the Chorus, and the departure of Antigone, there can be no further development of the theme of defiance and punish-

[121] Ibid., pp. 208-209.

[122] Ibid., p. 211.

ment. The ode is a "transformation of the pathos of events into lyrical terms that fulfill and give respite from the tragic action."[123] Then the plot is renewed with the Teiresias-Creon scene, at the end of which Creon takes the advice of the Chorus and orders the burial of the corpse while he himself goes to free Antigone.

The stasimon that follows (1115-1151) is another in the joy-grief pattern. In an excited and hopeful song the Chorus invoke the aid of Dionysus. As the song ends the Messenger enters with his story of failure and death. In the final scene, after Creon and his attendants enter the house, the Chorus, left alone, sum up the issue:

> Our happiness depends
> on wisdom all the way.
> The gods must have their due.
> Great words by men of pride
> bring greater blows upon them.
> So wisdom comes to the old.

CHAPTER V

THE EURIPIDEAN CHORUS

Pertinent to Euripides' use of the Chorus is the fact that many of his dramas are not tragedies at all but more like tragicomedies and melodramas, that his characters are drawn on a different scale than those of Aeschylus and Sophocles, and that his view of the world as reflected in his plays differs from theirs. Although the structure of his plays remains classical, there are innovations in content and tone. More so than Aeschylus or Sophocles, Euripides demonstrates a desire to shock his audience into awareness,[124] so enthusiastic to convey his vision in his plays that he sometimes allows the form of the plays to suffer.[125]

Those plays that can be categorized, for want of a better term, as tragicomedies and melodramas are not controlled by any single dominant, serious or tragic conception, but rather are written for thrills, sensation, and good story--in short, exciting theater.[126] They are deliberately escapist, exploiting sheer theatricality; exciting spectacle, large casts, processions, battle preparations, and elaborate solo singing are all enjoyable in themselves, apart from their use in underlining any poetic point of the play.[127]

The Choruses of these plays, except for that of Alcestis,

[124] Aylen, p. 111.
[125] Ibid., p. 147.
[126] Kitto, Greek Tragedy, p. 348.
[127] Aylen, p. 145.

do not challenge the morality or wisdom or the action of the play; they raise no weighty question involving religion, public policy, or even private philosophy. The events in these plays are sufficient to the play itself, with no wider implications, or none that matter seriously.[128]

The tragedies of Euripides, on the other hand, are still controlled by a serious conception, even though the old, powerful community Chorus, reflecting largely upon what it means to be a man, in the manner of the Agamemnon Chorus, is not to be looked for in these dramas.

One of the most significant remarks about Euripides is that supposed to have been made by Sophocles, that he himself shows men as they ought to be, while Euripides shows them as they actually are. Whether or not Sophocles said this, it is true, even when Euripides demonstrates his fascination with their abnormality. He is basically a realist, despite contrary tendencies toward fantasy and romance.[129] He uses the material of old myths as if they told the story not of characters heroic in almost all dimensions, but of real everyday people. His Jason is a glib opportunist; his Admetus fights hard to deceive himself but patently he is a coward; his Orestes suffers from fits and seizures and acts sometimes out of a "howling spiritual lunacy"; his Hecuba is tormented to the point where she turns as brutal as her tormenters. This realism in his characters rings true even

[128] Kitto, Greek Tragedy, pp. 361-362.

[129] Richmond Lattimore, Introduction to Euripides, Four Tragedies.

when he simplifies them almost to a melodramatic degree, so that they seem all black or all white.[130] His tragic characters are most of the time in the grip of forces too strong for them to cope with, whether the forces are the destructive powers of human passion or the destructive powers of the gods. Unlike the complex Sophoclean tragic hero, whose fate is in his own hands, or the single-minded Aeschylean hero capable of grappling with his fate, the Euripidean tragic hero is more, as Kitto says, "a tragic specimen of humanity come to shipwreck."

The life Euripides imitates in his tragedies is primarily chaotic and fraught with suffering, and more so than either Aeschylus or Sophocles, Euripides passes judgment on the amoral gods who might be indifferent to the chaos and pain--or even compound it. Even in his lighter dramas, like Alcestis (in the prologue, Apollo engages in a squabble with Death, just before the dying Alcestis appears) and Ion (between comic episodes, mother and son come close to slaying each other), Euripides juxtaposes the grave and the gay, even the grave and the flippant, in a disturbing manner.[131] His view of the sordid state of the Greek world between 431 and 404 B.C. very possibly shows its effect in his war tragedies; war and its atrocities reflect what is for Euripides the central tragedy of man, his capacity for intelligence and self-control but his domination by unreason and folly.[132]

Whether from his reaction to the state of affairs, or

[130] Kitto, Greek Tragedy, p. 265.

[131] Ibid., p. 230.

[132] Ibid., p. 240.

from a pessimistic philosophy in general, or from failing time after time to win the approval of the judges of the Festival, a sense of defeat and disappointment is constantly there in Euripides. Perhaps this is what makes him bring to the fore those who are weak or oppressed, despised or misunderstood: women, children, slaves, captives, strangers, barbarians. Most of his Choruses are female, and women as his chief characters outnumber men; not that he is either "for" or "against" them, but he is fascinated enough by them to present action from their point of view. Many characters of Euripides spend a great deal of their time trying to run away from something or someone: Hippolytus from marriage, Andromache from Spartan persecution; Helen from the amorous, barbarian King of Egypt. As for his Choruses, they are not the first to long for the wings of the dove, but they do it oftenest.[133]

Euripides has often been criticized for writing what the poet and not the plot demanded. Lucan in antiquity said that "quite without dramatic necessity [Euripides] freely expressed his own opinions." This may be true, but from his plays it is difficult to tell what Euripides thinks. For example, a problem of the times was: How is man to live in a godless world? As one writer puts it, "Different individuals had different answers, and Euripides gives them all."[134] The violent twisting of some of his plays suggests propaganda. For instance, the unsatisfactory ending of The Heracleidae could

[133]Richmond Lattimore, Introduction to Euripides, Four Tragedies, p. vi.

[134]John Frederick Nims, Introduction to Andromache Euripides III: Hecuba, Andromache, The Trojan Women, Ion (The Complete Greek Tragedies) eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1955), p. 71.

be the result of this twisting. In this play Alcmene, after winning our sympathy as the compassionate and courageous protector of her grandchildren alienates it by her startling viciousness in demanding the slaughter of the unarmed prisoner, Eurystheus. Historically, about the time of the writing of the play, Athens meted out similar treatment to some unarmed Spartan envoys captured while en route to Persia.[135] In Andromache, another possible twisting toward propaganda may be present in the recurring denunciation of Spartan cruelty and cowardice through the actions of Hermione, Menelaus, and Orestes; some of the characters in this play have what one critic called "the stridency of caricature."[136] Whatever his reason, Euripides presents enigmatic elements in his characterization. He has what one critic calls a restless point of view, something like the "simultaneous point of view of Picasso," making it difficult to know exactly how he regards some of his characters.[137] Euripides' inconsistency in drawing his principal characters he sometimes applies to his Choruses.

Euripidean language comes in for its share of criticism. Lexicographers find Euripides using "boldly popular and even vulgar expressions" of his day, for example, in the "harsh-sounding, shrill, grating dialogue" of Andromache. The tone of this language, "utterly unheroic and unpoetic, but vigorous, terse, and idiomatic" as Norwood calls it, is far

[135] Ralph Gladstone, Introduction to The Heracleidae; Euripides, Four Tragedies, p. 111.

[136] John Frederick Nims, Introduction to Andromache; Euripides III, p. 72.

[137] Ibid.

removed from the Olympian resonance of Aeschylus or the subtlety and richness of Sophocles; far removed, in fact, from what the common reader thinks of as the tone of Greek tragedy.[138]

As Lattimore says, with Euripides classic tragic drama is either transcending itself or going into a decline; in any case, turning into something else. His greatest admirers will concede that he has faults. His pathos may degenerate into sentimentality. Besides the inconsistent characterization, many of his plays are marked by chaotic plots, an unsteady use of the Chorus, and undramatic speech-making.[139] Perhaps his most characteristic fault is to try to get too much into a single plot or character or situation.[140] Yet his greatest critics will acknowledge the genius that made him a master dramatist: the vigor of his thought; the fertility of his invention; the poetic lyricism; the sure instinct for a piquant turn or a telling juxtaposition; the command of the rhetoric of action, the macabre, and the ironic; and the creation of a host of unforgettable characters.

Of some ninety plays of Euripides, seventeen (exclusive of The Cyclops and also of Rhesus, which is only possibly a work of Euripides)[141] have come down to us.

[138] Ibid.

[139] Kitto, Greek Tragedy, p. 219.

[140] Richmond Lattimore, Introduction to Euripides, Four Tragedies, p. vi.

[141] Richmond Lattimore, Introduction to Rhesus; Euripides IV: Rhesus, The Suppliant Women, Orestes, Iphigenia in Aulis (The Complete Greek Tragedies), eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1958), p. 2.

Under tragicomedies come Alcestis (438), Ion (420-410), Iphigenia in Tauris (414-410), and Helen (this is difficult to date and is unique in that it is almost pure comedy).

Under melodramas come Electra (413), The Phoenician Women (411-409), Orestes (408), and Iphigenia in Aulis (405).

Under tragedy come Medea (431), The Heracleidae (430), Andromache (430-424), Hippolytus (428), Hecuba (425-424) Heracles (424-423), The Suppliant Women (420-415), The Trojan Women (416-415), and The Bacchae (405).

These are convenient categories that Kitto uses in Greek Tragedy. Most of the tragicomedies and melodramas were written in the latter part of Euripides' career, but obviously he moved from one genre to another and back. The tragicomedies are based primarily on the excitement of a deft and intricate plot,[142] while the melodramas are based primarily on the thrill of character imagined not tragically but sensationally.[143]

The Choruses of these eight plays, except for that of Alcestis, raise only the question of whether so-and-so will escape, and how. Therefore it becomes a little difficult for them to remain both dramatic and interesting. The Chorus never did become a conventional lyrical appendage which could be simply ignored on the stage; the audience expected the players to notice the Chorus, and it remained an integral part of the play.[144] What the Choruses sing about in these

[142] Kitto, Greek Tragedy, p. 327.
[143] Ibid., p. 348.
[144] Ibid., p. 363.

eight plays depends, naturally, on the dramatic context; if there is suitable material lying to hand they use it, if not they fill the gap with something else. In either case the ode does not profess to be anything but an effective diversion filling the gap which the actors have left. Very seldom can these Choruses contribute in the old way to the drama, but they can please or astonish us lyrically, as for example, in the Demeter ode in Helen, which is irrelevant, but which is also a picturesque and brilliant piece of decoration.[145]

These Choruses enter realistically, giving some simple and logical excuse for coming, generally in a lyrical conversation: the Athenian Women in Ion enter like wide-eyed tourists and query Ion about the sights in the temple; the Captive Greek Women of Iphigenia in Tauris come in response to her summons to hear the disturbing dream of Orestes' death; the Argive Peasant Women of Electra come to invite her to a festive religious procession. In general these Choruses are in the classical style. Of all the Choruses of the tragicomedies and the melodramas, only the Alcestis Chorus brings to bear on the action a strong point of view different from the protagonist's.

Of these eight Choruses, five are unswervingly loyal confidantes of the female heroine (Ion, Iphigenia in Tauris, Helen, Electra, Orestes); one (Alcestis) is a male community Chorus interested mainly in the personal problems of the king and queen; and two (The Phoenician Women and Iphigenia in Aulis) are somewhat detached female spectators. The

[145] Ibid.

Choruses of Alcestis and Electra will be discussed last and a little more fully as examples of Euripides' use of the Chorus in this new type of drama. For the rest, a brief description will suffice.

The tragicomic Choruses are, for Ion: a group of Athenian Women, palace attendants devoted to Queen Creusa and co-conspirators with her in the plot to poison Ion; for Iphigenia in Tauris: a group of Temple Maidens, captive Greek women, loyal to their priestess-in-bondage and co-conspirators in helping her and Orestes escape from the barbarian King Thoas; for Helen: a group of captive Greek Women, attached this time to the palace of the barbarian King of Egypt; they are devoted to Helen and are co-conspirators in helping her and Menelaus escape (this devotion to Helen is quite a switch, but Euripides employs the legend that the real Helen was guiltless and much maligned; the gods spirited her away to Egypt, while a Helen-image went into action with Paris and caused the Trojan War).[146]

The Choruses of the melodramas are, for Orestes: a group of Women of Argos, confidantes of Electra, and docile to her wishes; in a rather bumbling way they aid as look-outs in the abortive plot to kill Helen; for The Phoenician Women: a group of pleasant young maidens on their way to Apollo's temple at Delphi, caught in Thebes when the fratricidal war breaks out and marooned for the duration; they are excellent story-tellers, who sing the story of the whole house of Cadmus; they express sympathy now and then for the

[146]Richmond Lattimore, Introduction to Helen; Euripides II: The Cyclops, Heracles, Iphigenia in Tauris, Helen (The Complete Greek Tragedies), eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1956), p. 261.

misfortunes of the House of Laius, but for the most part they are polite spectators; they come to see the spectacular array of Greek ships, and unexpectedly witness the struggle between Agamemnon and Clytemnestra which ends in the sacrifice of Iphigenia; the first ode (164-304)[147] of this Chorus, a description of the ships, warriors, and preparations for war is a detailed, swift-moving, rich-imaged panorama deserving wide-screen motion picture presentation, in full sound and color. The unfinished Iphigenia in Aulis, although it is a second-rate play, initiated a movement toward a freer yet still poetic colloquial dialogue, a movement developed afterwards with wonderful grace and daring by Menander and copied much more loosely and heavily by Plautus.[148]

In Alcestis, the Chorus of male Citizens of Pherae set the mood in the parodos when they lament for the house that must lose the model wife and mother. Sadly they observe that marriage brings pain as well as pleasure. Having tried to comfort Admetus with the thought that all must die, they sing their first ode (435-475)[149] praising the goodness of Alcestis and promising that she has left a song for poets. Lyrically they describe the finality of the ferry crossing Acheron, wishing they had the strength to bring Alcestis back from "the dark of death." This is a fitting note for the arrival of Heracles. Alone with Admetus after Heracles

[147] Euripides IV: Rhesus, The Suppliant Women, Orestes, Iphigenia in Aulis (The Complete Greek Tragedies), eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1958).

[148] Gilbert Murray, The Classical Tradition in Poetry (New York, 1957), p. 22.

[149] Euripides, Four Tragedies: Alcestis.

has been welcomed, the Chorus remonstrate with him for withholding knowledge of the death of Alcestis, but they confirm his integrity as a considerate host in the second ode (469-605), which is an image-filled description of the benefits to the land, all through Admetus' noble treatment of Apollo when the latter was a guest.

After the funeral, the Chorus and the sorrowing Admetus share a commos in which the bereaved husband proclaims his cowardice and mourns, while the Chorus try to comfort him with the thought that he is not the first to know such sorrow. In the third ode (962-1005) they point out the futility of trying to fight Necessity. Alcestis is beyond recall. This ode has been criticized,[150] not for the content, which is appropriate, but for the bookish tone of the opening lines (ll. 962-965):

> I myself, in the transports
> of mystic verses, as in study
> of history and science, have found
> nothing so strong as Compulsion . . .

This ode does break dramatic illusion, but on the whole the odes amplify, illuminate, and interpret the various stages of the action, adding a further dimension of meaning and dramatic force to this drama. This Chorus, like that of Medea, The Bacchae, and a few others, employ the Euripidean tag ending, a few lines expressing wonder at the mysterious ways of Heaven.

In Electra, the Argive Peasant Women are a community

[150] Kirkwood, p. 202.

Chorus of a sort, but in the iambic dialogue and commoi they are interested mainly in the problems of their unwashed princess in her "country court." Euripides portrays an Electra extreme in her lust for vengeance, a Medea without the tragedy--but with all Medea's Grand Guignol effects.[151] She is completely lacking in that spiritual strength with which Sophocles had endowed her; this is melodrama, and Euripides deliberately sacrifices that sympathy for the protagonist which is essential to tragedy. Of the three odes in this play, the first (432-486)[152] turns aside completely from the context in order to sing of a remote marvel--the Shield of Achilles; the second (699-750) sings of certain miraculous events in the history of Atreus and Thyestes; and the third (1147-1163), sung just before Clytemnestra's cries are heard, tells something of the murder of Agamemnon. Two commoi present contrasting attitudes in moments of high emotion: in the first, upon learning that Orestes has killed Aegisthus, the Chorus are joyful and urge Electra to join them in dance; in the second, which follows the killing of Clytemnestra, the Chorus share the change of heart of Electra and Orestes and join them in a lament for the killings. Little can be said for the quality of these commoi. As for the odes, they are marred by irrelevance, the careless repetition of words, the falling out of character of the Chorus, and lack of poetic grandeur.[153]

[151] Kitto, Greek Tragedy, p. 353.

[152] Euripides V: Electra, The Phoenician Women, The Bacchae (The Complete Greek Tragedies), eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1959).

[153] Emily Townsend Vermeule, Introduction to Electra; Euripides V, p. 3.

Of the nine Tragic Choruses, six are in the classical style, but like Aeschylus, Euripides uses the Chorus also as protagonist (The Suppliant Women), and as conveyer of the theme (The Trojan Women and Hecuba). Of the six Choruses in classical style, two are confidantes of the heroine (Medea and Hippolytus), two are community Choruses (The Heracleidae and Heracles), one is a detached commentator and spectator (Andromache), and one (The Bacchae) consists of worshippers of Dionysus.

In Medea, the Chorus of Women of Corinth, Medea's confidante, behave much like the Chorus of Sophocles' Electra in the early part of the play in that they are strongly sympathetic to the point of view of the heroine. Then, like the Chorus of Antigone, they increase the dramatic momentum by changing sides.[154] As they begin to realize what it is that Medea is proposing to do, they veer from sympathy to protest, until in their last ode they see in Medea a defiler of Heaven and earth. Medea's will for vengeance animates the play, and her actions shape the tragic issues. This is the tragedy of the wronged one who commits a wrong.

These Women lament the deceitfulness of men, and express full sympathy for the dishonored Medea in the iambics and commoi up to Medea's final act of vengeance. In their odes they pray to Venus that they may not be a prey to love's passions, that they may never know the loneliness of an exiled state, and that the faithless lover may perish. They sing of the beauties of Athens and ask Medea how the city

[154]Kitto, Greek Tragedy, p. 274.

can shelter her if she slays her children. Seeing that Medea's rage has overcome her reason, they sing that it is better never to have had children than to suffer losing them. When the Messenger in sheer Grand Guignol style has described the appalling death of the king and his daughter, the horrified Chorus pity the girl, and when Medea, lamenting what she must do, goes in to kill her sons, the Chorus plead with the earth and sun to restrain her fury. When, in the end, the Chorus shrink from Medea in horror, they have done much to illuminate the tragic theme for us.

The Chorus of Hippolytus are a group of Women of Troezen attached to the palace, confidantes of Phaedra. A Chorus of Huntsmen, friends of Hippolytus, also appear, but briefly, at the beginning and toward the end of the play. Some of the most beautiful lyrics Euripides ever wrote are contained in this play whose theme is the irresistible power of sensual love. In contrast with the assurances of the Nurse that she will arrange everything well, with the help of "my lady Cypris of the Sea," the Chorus sing lyrically (525-562)[155] of the irresistible power of sensual desire, and of Heracles and Semele as victims of "Love's grim journeying." In the episode that follows, a commos signals and emphasizes a moment of high emotion when Phaedra, standing by the door of the palace, relays to the women the alarming details of Hippolytus' reaction to the Nurse's revelation. In despair Phaedra binds them by "holy Artemis" not to reveal what they have heard and discloses her intention of delighting "the Goddess Cypress who destroys me," by killing herself while at the same time she punishes Hippolytus for not

[155] Euripides, Four Tragedies: Hippolytus.

learning of "chastity in moderation."

The ode that follows (732-775) is Euripides at his best. The content starts with the euphoric and imaginary, and ends with the terribly real, while the rhythm complements the content and picks up an urgency which leads into the tumult of the succeeding episode. In the first and second stanzas of this ode the Chorus long for winged flight, described in rich imagery, to the "apple-bearing Hesperian Coast" where Heaven and earth meet in love and rich blessedness. In contrast, the concluding two stanzas lament Phaedra's ill-omened journey from her happy home in Crete, her spirit broken by Aphrodite, and this cruel moment when the shamed Phaedra, having chosen "good name rather than life" is tying the noose about her neck. Immediately as the ode ends, the Nurse cries out from within that the Queen has hanged herself. The frantic questions of the Chorus as they ask each other what to do is counterpointed by the details the Nurse cries out about the activity within. The tempo slows as the wailing Chorus repeat the Nurse's mournful report that the Queen is now lying dead.

After Theseus, having read Phaedra's note, curses and banishes his son, the Chorus sing sadly (1101-1150) of the difficulty of believing in a wise God who cares for men; the household will miss Hippolytus, the "brightest star of Athens," who goes guiltless and banished.

When Theseus, still bitter, commands the Messenger to bring the fatally wounded Hippolytus before him, in their last ode (1101-1150) the Chorus again sing of the bewitching and maddening power of sensual Love, ruler over man and

beast. In the epilogue which follows immediately, Artemis appears, and the play ends as she promises revenge on Cypris and sets things right between father and son.

In no other play of Euripides is the ode more lovely, the indictment of the gods more sharp, or the focus on the psychology of men and women themselves more modern.

The Chorus of Andromache, a group of Phthian Women attached to the palace of Neoptolemus, are neither involved immediately in the action, like the Chorus in Medea, nor are they close to the heart of the tragedy, like the Chorus in The Trojan Women, nor are they the driving force of the action, like the Chorus in The Suppliant Women. They are a sharply critical spectator, commenting objectively and unsympathetically on the action in the episodes, and are even more detached in the odes.

The Chorus are prolific in buffer speeches, some platitudinous, some conciliatory, some biting--especially when directed toward the unpleasant altercations that occur between Andromache and Hermione, between Andromache and Menelaus, and between Peleus and Menelaus. The point of view of this Chorus is difficult to gauge.

The Heracleidae Chorus are a community Chorus of feeble Old Men of Marathon who resist the efforts of the arrogant Herald of Eurystheus to take the suppliant children prisoner; in the final scene they compromise their concern for the good name of Athens when they agree to Alcmene's cruel and unethical killing of an unarmed captive. The odes in this play are lacking in breadth, power, and lyricism.

The Heracles Chorus are also a community Chorus of

feeble Old Men of Thebes, "defencelessness made manifest,"[156] who are loyal to the family of Heracles which is doomed to death by the usurper Lycus; their odes are full of praise for the prowess of the absent hero, lamentation for the sorrows of old age, praise of music, praise for Heracles when he returns and kills Lycus, and grief and horror for the ravages of his sudden madness. In general the odes are lyrical, but not always relevant.

In Hecuba, while the Greek fleet is becalmed on the shore of the Thracian Chersonese on the first leg of the journey home, the Chorus of Captive Trojan Women Slaves, now already allotted to the various Greek warriors, join Hecuba in lamenting continued torments. In the episodes they pity Hecuba on the murder of Polydorus, the sacrifice of Polyxena, and the inhuman treatment in general which finally degrades her almost to brute level. In their odes this Chorus carry the theme of the suffering war inflicts, not only on the persecuted but also on the persecutors, who are corrupted by their false logic that political necessity sanctions their crimes.[157]

In The Suppliant Women, the mourning Chorus of Mothers of the Seven Against Thebes (accompanied by a group of sons of the fallen chiefs), are the protagonist, although not so strong a one as Aeschulus' Suppliant Maidens. The play is best understood as a plea against inhumanity, especially in wartime, and an expression of the futility and cruelty of war, which keeps breeding new wars from old, kills the

[156] Kitto, Greek Tragedy, p. 261.

[157] Ibid., p. 231.

noblest men and lets an Adrastus survive.[158]

In their suffering, this Chorus become almost the symbol of suffering humanity. From the opening scene, as the Women kneel at the feet of Theseus' mother, their lyric appeal underlies the action as they seek aid from Theseus in getting back from Thebes the unburied corpses of their sons. The odes, brief and not too lyrical, are filled with the grief of compassionate, aging women who must bear the death of loved children in war. If this Chorus perceive the outcome of the action as a manifestation of divine will on earth, it is one of Euripides' most bitter indictments of the gods. Athena not only arrests the noble gesture of Theseus in aiding the Chorus and Adrastus to leave with dignity and grateful thoughts, but predicts a later war, sanctioned by the gods, in which the grandsons will be victorious. Athena addresses them as "true-bred lion-cubs / That you are, sackers of cities!" (ll. 1222-1223).

In The Trojan Women, the Chorus of Captive Women, by dwelling on one particular idea in their odes--the fall of Troy--become the focus of the tragedy. The Greeks are the collective arrogant tragic hero, the Trojans the collective victim, and the main theme is the communal suffering that comes from communal wrong-doing.[159] Again, as in Hecuba and Andromache, persecutors and persecuted alike are victims. These Women, in their iambic comments and commoi are sympathetic to Hecuba, commiserating with her in the allotment of Cassandra to Agamemnon, the departure of Andromache to

[158] Frank Jones, Introduction to The Suppliant Women; Euripides IV, p. 52.

[159] Kitto, Greek Tragedy, p. 221.

the Greek ships, the death and burial of Astyanax, and the debate between Hecuba and Helen, with Menelaus as umpire.

In their odes however, which are the shaping and unifying element of the play, the Chorus concentrate on one theme: Troy--why it fell, how it fell,[160] grief for children lost and husbands unburied, the anguish of past happiness remembered, dread for the life of slavery that awaits them in a strange land. In the closing scene, while Troy burns, they file to the doomed Greek ships. Through the Chorus of Trojan Women, the fall of Troy is made the symbol of suffering humanity.

In The Bacchae, the Chorus are a group of Asiatic Bacchantes whose songs also are the shaping and unifying element of the play,[161] but this play, the only one of the surviving thirty-three which handles a Dionysiac theme,[162] and the only true and profound revelation in all ancient literature of the inner meaning of Dionysiac ecstasy,[163] is a masterpiece.[164] In the Choral odes we get what is crucial to the play, "the full poetic resonance of the Dionysiac life; in the sweep and beauty of their language we are meant to feel what Dionysus means for suffering mortality, the direct eruption of deity in blessing and miracle." Dionysus, as we know, is ambivalent: "most terrible, and yet most gentle, to mankind." The exodus of the play emphasizes the terrible aspect of the god, and so

[160] Ibid., p. 225.

[161] Ibid., p. 403.

[162] H. D. F. Kitto, "Greek Tragedy and Dionysus," Theatre and Drama in the Making, p. 7.

[163] Jaeger, p. 352.

[164] William Arrowsmith, Introduction to The Bacchae; Euripides V, p. 142.

it is important for dramatic balance that the gentle side of Dionysus be given the fullest possible statement in the odes.[165] The theme is the sharp opposition between one mind and another, and at the same time the gradual revelation of the devastating harshness both minds possess.

In a typical Euripidean prologue, the disguised god narrates the background of the play and his own intentions directly to the audience: "I am Dionysus, the son of Zeus,/ come back to Thebes, this land where I was born . . ." He intends to vindicate his mother, initiate Thebes into his mysteries, and reveal himself as a god. The Chorus enter singing an ecstatic hymn to Dionysus accompanied by the music of their own timbrels and flutes; they tell of the miraculous birth of the god, of his miracles, and the blessings of his worship.

After the episode in which Pentheus arrests and mistreats the Stranger, threatens his followers with slavery, and berates Cadmus and Teiresias for joining the dancing revelers, the Chorus, in a colorful and rhythmic ode, call on Heaven to witness the blasphemy of Pentheus, declaring that man should know his limits; again they sing praises of the joys bestowed by Dionysus. There follows a turbulent commos between the Chorus and the voice of Dionysus in the imprisoned Stranger, as a flame spurts from the tomb of Semele and the prison is shattered. The returned Pentheus and the Stranger enter the palace, and the Chorus sing of the punishment that comes to the proud man who scorns the gods. What is wisdom but gathering the good of each day as it comes and observing the will of the gods (ll. 887-899):

[165]Ibid., p. 151.

The gods are crafty:
they lie in ambush
a long step of time
to hunt the unholy.
Beyond the old beliefs,
no thought, no act shall go.
Small, small is the cost
To believe in this:
Whatever is god is strong;
whatever long time has sanctioned,
that is the law forever;
the law tradition makes
is the law of nature.

When the Stranger leads the possessed Pentheus off to the mountains, the Chorus victoriously sing of Pentheus' coming death, calling on the Theban Maenads to kill him. Learning of the killing from the Messenger, the Chorus exult, despite the rebuke of the Messenger that it is not right to exult in disaster. They dance to the glory of Bacchus and the death of Pentheus. But when they actually confront the ecstatic Agave bearing her trophy, in a commos in which they question her about her "trophy of the chase" (the head of the "lion-cub" impaled on her thyrsus), the Chorus are moved unmistakably to horror and pity. Clearly the Chorus now separate themselves from the god with whom they have hitherto identified completely.[166] Bacchantes they may be, the scene seems to say, but they are human first. The very extremity and brutality of what Agave suffers when she comes to her senses exposes the brutal ferocity of the god. Against Dionysus in epiphany, who shows himself utterly inflexible and ruthless to the end, their reaction is decisive. Their tone of pity sets the stage for the exodus.

[166]Ibid., p. 152.

This Chorus is an indispensable character in a play which, for dramatic turbulence and comprehensiveness and the sheer power of its poetry is excelled by only a few of the very greatest among the ancient tragedies.

In 405 B.C. the last two plays of the great dramatists were produced posthumously, The Bacchae and Oedipus at Colonus. It is fitting that classic drama, inspired by the spirit of Athens, should pass from our view at Colonus, the birthplace of Sophocles, not two miles from the Theater of Dionysus. There were no more great tragic poets after the death of Sophocles, and the theater went into a decline. The significant dramas performed throughout the Hellenistic world were revivals, chiefly of Euripides. When Rome rose to power she emulated Greek literary genius, but her glory lay elsewhere.

CHAPTER VI

THE GREEK TRAGIC CHORUS IN MODERN DRAMA IN ENGLISH

Probably it was the imitation of the twelve-syllable iambic line of Greek and Roman tragedy that produced modern blank verse, Italian and English.[167] By the middle of the sixteenth century, English playwrights, greatly influenced by Renaissance Italian playwrights, were experimenting with this new drama, so different from their own national drama. The latter showed the influence of the grave religious pageants of the Middle Ages and the crude little conversational pieces of the fairs and festivals, sometimes countrified and sometimes farcical, out of which it had grown. The verse of these plays was a kind of lyric doggerel.

As Shakespeare saw and made Polonius say, the chief classical stimuli acting upon Renaissance drama were not the Greeks but the Romans Seneca and Plautus. After them came Terence, and then Euripides, and then Sophocles. The difficulty of the language of Greek tragedy probably accounts for the general lack of interest in the dramatist whose language was most difficult of all, Aeschylus.

It was Seneca in particular who stimulated and instructed the Renaissance dramatists of Italy from whom the English dramatists took over the ghosts, the revenge theme, the violence,

[167] Highet, p. 129.

and the Chorus. In the majority of his works Seneca uses the Greek Chorus mainly as the prologue to an act rather than as a character playing a sustained role throughout the drama.[168] Ten plays of Seneca survive (Hercules Furens, Thyestes, Thebais, Hippolytus, Oedipus, Troas, Medea, Agamemnon, Octavia, and Hercules Oetaeus), written around the Greek myths (Octavia excepted) and influenced by Greek drama, yet composed in an extreme style of Seneca's own[169] and, it is pretty generally agreed, not for stage performance.[170] The Elizabethan playwrights did not as a rule know Greek tragedy, and they did know Seneca, whose tragedies appeared severally in translation from 1559 onwards, and complete in 1581.[171] Less than ten years later the sharp and satirical Nashe was sneering at the writers who, from Seneca "read by candlelight," wrote of ghosts, revenge, the horrors of treachery, bloody cruelty, kinsmen's murder, witches, and madness, in a spirit of frenzied violence. These were the things, and this was the spirit--a far cry from the Hellenic loftiness of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and to some extent Euripides--that Shakespeare found i Seneca and converted into the "sombre fury" of his tragedies.[172]

The Elizabethan dramatists assimilated much of classical drama, added their own imagination to it (some of their plays

[168] Lesky, p. 206.

[169] Highet, p. 207.

[170] T. S. Eliot, Introduction to Seneca, His Tenne Tragedies Translated into English, I, ed. Thomas Newton, 1581; The Tudor Translations, Second Series, ed. Charles Whibley (London and New York, 1927), viii.

[171] Highet, p. 207.

[172] Ibid.

contain horrors Seneca himself would not have tolerated--for example, those in Titus Andronicus, The Spanish Tragedy, and King Lear),[173] reshaped its characters, its moods, and its conventions to suit their audiences, and left the rest. And just as Greek drama reached perfection when it met and mingled with the spirit of the nation and helped that spirit to express itself more eloquently, so it was with Elizabethan drama.

Elizabethan tragedy is like Greek tragedy in that it is full of varied emotion and crowd scenes. Where the Greeks use Choral songs and dances to achieve varied effects, the Elizabethans use song, sub-plots, and comic relief. In three of his plays, Romeo and Juliet, Henry V, and The Winter's Tale, Shakespeare does employ a character designated as "Chorus." Structurally these Choruses are in Senecan style. In Romeo and Juliet the Chorus recites two sonnets, "prologues" to Acts I and II; in Henry V the Chorus speaks a prologue at the beginning of each of the five acts; and in The Winter's Tale, "Time" as Chorus recites an introductory passage at the beginning of Act IV.[174]

The prosody in these Shakespearean Choruses, however, is not to be compared with Seneca's; although Seneca has mastery of several meters and sometimes achieves magnificent effects, his Choral passages tend to "fall heavily on the ear," and are generally monotonous.[175] On the other hand

[173] Eliot, Introduction to Seneca, pp. xxvi-xxvii.

[174] Ruth Leisure Roman, Shakespeare's Use of the Greek Tragic Chorus Device, Master's Thesis, Arizona State University, 1947, pp. 11-28.

[175] Eliot, Introduction to Seneca, p. xv.

Shakespeare, as he achieves his mastery of rhythmic effects and poetic colloquial dialogue, is continuing the Euripidean-Menandrian tradition and carrying it a step or two further.[176]

Shakespeare's "Chorus" characters are used in a manner similar to that of the Greek Tragic Chorus,[177] even though they do not play a sustained role. For example, the introductory sonnet in Romeo and Juliet compresses the background, gives the plot in miniature, sets the scene, posits faith in an unseen order in the universe (these are "a pair of star-cross'd lovers"), establishes mood, and even before the play begins, transforms the pathos of events into lyrical terms that fulfill and give respite from the tragic action. The second sonnet comments on the action that preceded it, prepares for further action, and further characterizes the lovers, ending with:

> Being held a foe, he may not have access
> To breathe such vows as lovers use to swear;
> And she as much in love, her means much less
> To meet her new-beloved any where:
> But passion lends them power, time means, to meet,
> Tempering extremities with extreme sweet.

This is the extent of any clear-cut pattern of ode-episode or of formal "Chorus" participation in the play.

But Shakespeare also elicits Choral functions from individual characters in his plays, and in Romeo and Juliet Friar Laurence is such a character.[178] As confidante of the willful

[176]Gilbert Murray, The Classical Tradition in Poetry, p. 22

[177]Elmer Edgar Stoll, Art and Artifice in Shakespeare, A Study in Dramatic Contrast and Illusion (London, 1933), p. 123.

[178]Roman, pp. 14-18.

lovers and as their co-conspirator he yet provides a dual point of view as he comments on the action; in his priestly role he is big enough to stand for the universal aspect of human experience; he helps sustain and intensify the mood of foreboding; he provides contrast and creates suspense. He advises moderation in passion, and warns Romeo of the danger in flouting the law of the State.[179] He sustains an undertone of foreboding when he admonishes the Capulets, "The heavens do lour upon you for some ill." When Juliet grieves over the body of Romeo, he pleads with her to leave the vault, telling her, "A greater power than we can contradict/ Hath thwarted our intents." At the end of the play, as he tells the Prince the story of the tragic love, he illuminates the eternal truth that hate breeds death, but love is a superior force that conquers even the fear of death.

The romantic genius of Shakespeare is like the genius of the classic dramatists in a very important way: it expresses tragic emotion that touches a chord of universal feeling. The Tragic Chorus as a conventional form, then, is clearly not necessary for the expression of true tragic emotion. But the "spirit of the Chorus" is. Shakespeare has individual characters express fundamental concepts lyrically, characters who sometimes, like Friar Laurence and Lear's Fool and Horatio, have an integral part in the working out of the tragic theme, and sometimes, like Enobarbus, remain somewhat apart.[180]

[179]Theodore Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man (New York, 1942), pp. 91-92.

[180]Nicoll, p. 159.

One poet of the seventeenth century did know all three of the Greek tragedians. This was John Milton, whose Samson Agonistes is a pure re-creation of Greek tragedy. The Chorus is a group of Samson's contemporaries, members of his "tribe," who comment on the various stages of the action, sometimes in beautiful lyrics. The play is far less effective than its Greek models, however. The conflicts are less urgent and the subordinate characters more shadowy than in Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound which was Milton's chief pattern. The conception of the play is majestic, the single character of Samson is grand, and several speeches contain immortal poetry, but the work was written for the study, and therefore it lacks the tension of Greek drama, which was written to be performed.[181]

In the neo-classic age, dramatists like Dryden, Addison, and Johnson, all scholars of the classics, were unsuccessful in writing drama, due in part to the specialized audience they appealed to and in part to the limitations they placed on themselves. Their primary limitation lay in their reaction against what they considered the emotional and verbal extravagances of the Renaissance, which resulted in their avoidance of colloquial diction and vivid imagery. Another limitation was their use of the couplet. And in part they hampered themselves with dramatic rules never laid down by the Greeks.

Toward the latter part of the eighteenth century in England, the quality of dramatic creation and performance was ebbing, and it reached a low tide during the nineteenth century. However

[181]Highet, pp. 294-5.

certain nineteenth-century critiques on the nature of the Tragic Chorus were to influence later English, Irish, and American dramatists and critics, and among these critiques were those of Nietzsche and Schiller.

Nietzsche was markedly interested in Greek tragedy. The Tragic Chorus was to him a source of metaphysical solace with which he believed all true tragedy sends us away, the solace that "despite every phenomenal change, life is at bottom indestructibly joyful and powerful." This was expressed most concretely, he thought, in the ancient Chorus of satyrs, imaginary "nature beings who dwell beyond all civilization and preserve their identity through every change of generations and historical movement." Even the most civilized Greek felt himself absorbed into this satyr Chorus, a reality sanctioned by myth and ritual.[182]

Nietzsche also thought of the dithyrambic Chorus as "archectypal drama," representing a Dionysian Oneness at the heart of nature out of which the rebellious individual emerged, shattering the Oneness. According to this theory, the profound Greek--himself like an Apollonian hero uniquely susceptible to the subtlest and deepest suffering--having penetrated the destructive agencies of both nature and history, and having experienced in the stark reality of daily living "the ghastly absurdity of existence," found art to be the "sorceress expert in healing" through which life reclaimed him. In classic drama, the spirit of comedy released him from "the tedium of absurdity" and the "spirit of the sublime" subjugated his terror. In the

[182]Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals, written in 1872 and 1887 respectively, trans. Francis Golffing (New York, 1956), pp. 50-52.

Tragic Chorus, lyrically expressing fundamental truths that issue "from the heart of the world," he experienced a healing as everything that separated man from man--State, society, or anything else--gave way before an overwhelming sense of unity which led back into the Dionysian Oneness of nature.[183]

In his criticism Kitto also sees in classic drama the combination of the universal and the particular, but he places much less stress on the mythic and ritualistic in the Chorus. For him the Chorus represents that universal aspect of human experience which, because it is universal and does not change, the Greeks thought of as Divine Law. Classic tragedy combines in perfect harmony, the vivid presentation of the character, motives, and fate of the individual hero--representing a particular aspect of human experience--and the steady and conscious presentation of the universal aspect--represented by the Chorus. As Kitto points out, the clarity of this combination is the outstanding feature of Attic tragedy.[184]

Even earlier than Nietzsche, Schiller in his Preface to The Bride of Messina (1803), had written of the value of poetry to the Tragic Chorus. He wrote that the poetic appeal to the imagination and to the senses, through imagery, rhythm, and melody, gave the Chorus its power to rise above daily reality and present life in a fuller reality, transcending the limits of photographic realism.

Modern dramatists have also been intrigued by the idea of

[183]Ibid., pp. 56-58.

[184]H. D. F. Kitto, "Greek Tragedy and Dionysus," Theatre and Drama in the Making, p. 17.

the value of poetry in their use of the Greek Tragic Chorus, and interested too in the idea of universality. Understandably, attempts at poetic lyricism and universality are among the criteria used in determining which twentieth century dramas in English include adaptations of the Greek Tragic Chorus.

In my preliminary search I looked for the following characteristics:

1. a play other than an adaptation of a Greek play;

2. any character specially designated as a Chorus or obviously meant to be one;

3. a play subordinated to one single action, excluding epics;

4. a Chorus that was part of the action yet commented on it or conveyed the theme, providing a dual point of view;

5. some structural division corresponding to the ode-episode pattern;

6. a Chorus which attempted to express fundamental concepts lyrically, providing universality of theme;

7. some intimation of faith in a divine or natural order in the Universe.

The first twentieth-century attempt at utilizing the Greek Chorus was Hardy's epic-drama The Dynasts (1903-1908), the stupendous result of his life-long interest in the Napoleonic Wars, and more than this, an exposition upon the amplest scale of his mechanistic determinism. In this play the Chorus of Pities, the commentator on the action and on the circumambient universe plays, as the author points out in the Preface, a part akin

to that of a Greek Chorus. This Chorus is wholly conscious of its function as commentator, even to the point of discussing it with the other spirit Choruses, and this distinguishes it from any one group of Thebans, Trojan Women, or Corinthians. Among its other functions may be found that of sympathetic revelation or amplification of underlying thought. However, the epic proportions and the intractable complexity of action in this drama eliminated it for analysis.

Jeffers' Medea and Tower Beyond Tragedy, and Pound's Women of Trachis were eliminated as adaptations of Greek plays. The Chorus of small-time gossips and babbiers in Mourning Becomes Electra serve to supply gaps in our information and throw sharp sidelights on the conduct and relations of the characters, but their contribution is negligible and spasmodic; certainly they have laid aside the poetic functions of the corresponding Chorus of The Oresteia. The Choruses in Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes, Family Reunion, and The Rock seem not to represent a sustained attempt. Williams' Glass Menagerie presents an ode-episode structure and poetic prose, but the narrator-protagonist telling the story in flashback, cannot provide a dual point of view, except his own two views.

Five dramas meet the criteria: Yeats's Deirdre (1906), O'Neill's Lazarus Laughed (1926), Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral (1935), Wilder's Our Town (1938), and Miller's A View From the Bridge (1955-1956). The analysis of these five dramas, besides dealing with parallels to the Greek use of the Tragic Chorus, reveals innovations in the modern use of it, and indicates the promise, or lack of it, the Chorus holds out to modern dramatists in expressing their concepts.

In addition to the basic characteristics by which they were selected, these dramas have other things in common. Each of the authors was seeking a freedom from the bonds of naturalism. Believing that the photographic technique presented only a partial approach to life, truth, and reality, each attempted to find a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are. Each of them also expressed a keen interest in Greek classics. Three of the dramas, Lazarus Laughed, Murder in the Cathedral, and Our Town, might be considered religious in outlook. All employ verse or attempt poetic prose.

All but one of the dramas (Our Town) have elements of myth (including the Bible as myth in the sense of its serving to explain the origin of man and the customs, institutions, and religious rites of a people). Deirdre is based on an ancient Irish legend. Lazarus Laughed includes Biblical myth and the Dionysus myth. Murder in the Cathedral employs Biblical myth. A View from the Bridge employs the atmosphere of the doomed Greek hero and of primitive Sicilian tribal law filtering down and operating in the present.

All include music as part of the drama. In Deirdre, the Chorus of wandering Women Musicians not only play "stringed instruments," but sing three ballads. In Lazarus Laughed, one of the Choruses, the Followers of Lazarus, dances and sings throughout the play; stage directions also include use of "appropriate music" by trumpets and cymbals and organ in various scenes. (Of all of the modern Choruses, those in Lazarus are the only ones that dance.) In the other three dramas, music not sung by the Chorus is pertinent to the action of the play.

In Murder in the Cathedral Eliot uses a choir in the near distance singing church music in Latin, including a Dies Irae and a Te Deum, and his Knights also sing parodies on hymns. In Our Town, the hymn "Blessed be the tie that binds" is heard a number of times, either sung by the Congregational Church choir of townspeople, partially hidden in the pit, or whistled by one of the chief characters; later, at the wedding scene, the choir sings "Love divine, all love excelling," and at appropriate times the organ plays Handel's "Largo," the "Lohengrin" March, and Mendelssohn. In A View from the Bridge, Rodolpho sings "Paper Doll" in an operatic high tenor and a phonograph plays for the young couple when they dance.

All of the authors sought audience participation in some way. Yeats desired that all should be caught up in one lofty emotion, tragic ecstasy, which he regarded as the aim of tragic drama; he strove to "reach down to life" by contriving a "ritual of passion" which would, he hoped, induce the condition of tragic reverie where player and spectator, forgetful of all else, draw upon the anima mundi, that soul which is alike in all men.[185]

O'Neill hoped the Lazarus audience would be caught up enough to join in the responses--the laughter and Chorus statements even, much as Negroes do in one of their revival meetings.[18

In Murder in the Cathedral, at certain times the protagonist, Becket, and also the Knights address the audience directly. By the occasion of its performance, the Canterbury Festival in

[185] Peter Ure, "The Plays," An Honoured Guest, New Essays on W. B. Yeats, eds. Denis Donoghue and J. R. Mulryne (New York, 1966), p. 161.

[186] Arthur and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York, 1962), pp. 602-603.

1935, this play would induce an expected response, although Eliot's test for any religious play is that it should be able to arouse the excitement of people who are not religious.[187]

The Stage Manager-narrator of Our Town addresses the audience directly, and also, as part of the play he has a feigned audience participation. Unexpectedly, in one scene the mother of the bride also addresses the audience. In addition, at the wedding scene the groom, and later the bride, approach the stage from the right aisle of the auditorium, and after the ceremony the couple walk to the front of the stage with dignity, then race up the aisle.

The lawyer-narrator of A View from the Bridge also addresses the audience directly. Miller sought the kind of community which he believed existed between the Greek dramatist and his audience. He assumed that today we also have "a kind of civilized sharing of what we would like to see occur within us and in the world," and that ideally the drama reveals the lack of values to an audience which itself is constantly trying to supply what is missing.[188] He hoped to raise the truth consciousness of the audience to a level of such intensity as to make for a higher civilization.[189]

Four of the dramas have no curtain (Lazarus Laughed is the exception), and analysis of the individual dramas shows great variety not only in stage-setting, but in lighting effects.

[187]T. S. Eliot, "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry, 1928," Selected Essays (London, 1934), p. 58.

[188]Arthur Miller, "Morality and Modern Drama," Educational Theatre Journal, X (October, 1958), 190.

[189]Arthur Miller, "The Family in Modern Drama," The Atlantic, CXCVII (April, 1956), 41.

In all of these modern dramas the Choruses convey the idea of community involvement, but quite obviously none of them is concerned for the welfare of a place as the Greek Tragic Chorus was sometimes concerned for the integrity and glory of Athens.

As in Greek drama, the action of the chief characters in these modern dramas reflects a sharp, rationalized purpose in a particular situation, while the action of the Chorus is cognate with a wide, if not too sharply defined awareness of the scene of human life, which they attempt to reveal in its widest and most mysterious extent. The fundamental role of the Chorus is still that of carrying the theme or commenting on the action in passages marked off from the action. Participation in the episodes, as with the Greek Tragic Chorus, presents varying degrees of involvement; like the Greek Chorus, all of the modern ones participate in commoi to signal and emphasize moments of great emotional stress, to emphasize closeness, and for other purposes.

Supernatural elements, other than the belief in an unseen order, are a significant part of the environment of three of the modern Choruses. In Deirdre, the most powerful threat to Deirdre's love is some "wonder-working stones" sewn into the curtains of the bridal bed secretly prepared by Conchubar; also, the characters believe in a legendary Queen who was part sea mew. In Lazarus Laughed, not only is Lazarus endowed by the power of his presence or the sound of his voice to freeze his audience like statues, but he himself is growing progressively younger and more godlike, while the light that emanates from him shines brighter, until at the end he actually resembles a young Dionysus.

In Our Town, the last act takes place imaginatively, on a windy hilltop, site of the cemetery, with a group of the fairly recent dead conversing among themselves and commenting on the action.

Each of the selected Choruses, like the Greek classic Tragic Chorus, is a group personality with its own traditions, its own habits of thought and feeling, and its own mode of being (one exception: Mr. Alfieri, the lawyer-narrator in A View from the Bridge is a single individual). All exist as a living entity, but not with the sharp actuality of an individual (again with the exception of Alfieri, who is a distinct, fairly well characterized individual). All of the Choruses perceive with a perception at once wider and vaguer than that of a single man (with two qualifications: one, the Choruses of Lazarus Laughed are sometimes quite in the dark about the meaning of what is progressing; and two, the Chorus Alfieri has the limited perception of a single individual). All of the Choruses share in the seeking action of the play as a whole (although the Lazarus Choruses are easily distracted).

The Choruses depend upon the chief characters to supply reasoned purpose, to instigate the action, and to carry it out by stages, while the Chorus itself thinks deeply over the conflicts of character and other action of the play, experiencing the joy or enduring the suffering occasioned by the action. (Again, with one exception. In Our Town the Stage-Manager Chorus frequently instigates the action or calls a halt to it with a statement like, "Thank you, ladies. Thank you. That will do." Also, because he is looking back on events of more than a generation earlier, and because, in a vaguely omniscient way he

perceives what life and death are all about, he is not unhappy; rueful, perhaps, in the knowledge that people don't know how to appreciate life while they live it, but not unhappy.)

At certain moments the Chorus gives vent to thoughts, emotions, and visions in a Choral passage, manifesting a passion felt at so general, or rather, so deep a level, that it intimates a potential for both the frenzy and mob ferocity that Nietzsche felt in it and, at the other extreme the patience of prayer. (This is especially true of the Choruses of Lazarus, which are gripped with frenzy and mob ferocity at certain times, and at others pray humbly. It is particularly true also of the passionate Chorus of Murder in the Cathedral.)

In the action of all of the Choruses there is an advising, a sharing, an enduring, a suffering (except for the Chorus of Our Town), informed by the faith of the tribe in an unseen, divinely sanctioned natural order, although the stress on this is lighter in the Chorus of Deirdre and A View from the Bridge than in the others. The action is on two planes at once, the spiritual and the earthly, but no god appears except for Lazarus, who is evolving into one.

Fundamental to these plays, as with the Greek dramas, is the conviction that man is beholden to some higher purpose and power outside himself. In Deirdre, the Women Musicians believe in an immortal realm for lovers who have not broken "Love's law." The various Choruses of Lazarus believe in Judaism, Christianity, the religion of Dionysus, and the newly revealed religion of Laughter, Love, and No Death, of which Lazarus is the prophet. The Women of Canterbury are Christians. The Stage Manager knows that Nature is continually "pushing and

contriving," and that "there's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being." The Lawyer Alfieri warns Eddie Carbone that he is going against the "Law of Nature" in trying to prevent his niece from getting married; also, he is aware of the primitive force of ancient Sicilian tribal law exerting itself on the Red Hook neighborhood.

Aware of the influence of a spiritual force exerting a steady influence on the action, all of the Choruses seek to comprehend the moral, ethical, or religious injunction which the main characters must obey if they wish to find peace and avoid calamity. The Wandering Musicians, concerned for Deirdre's fate, sing that her love exceeds human bounds, and the price to be paid for it will be high. The Choruses of Lazarus Laughed, Murder in the Cathedral, and Our Town show particular concern for Man. In their half-perceptive way, the Choruses of Lazarus Laughed try to grasp Lazarus' prophetic message that men should be happy on earth, accepting death as part of an eternal plan in which they become promising star dust. In Murder in the Cathedral the Chorus is concerned for the Christian salvation of mankind and for the individual as well; each has his own soul to save by recognizing good and evil and accepting a share of the burden for the evil in the world. The Stage Manager in Our Town comprehends that a man should appreciate the joyousness in daily life, willing in death to surrender his identity and memory as the "eternal comes clear" in him. Alfieri in A View from the Bridge seeks to comprehend primitive tribal instincts and the "Laws of Nature" that govern the actions of men.

All of these dramas are tragedies in the sense that

they are "serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude," and although all end with the death of the protagonist, in each drama the Chorus attempts at the end to transform the pathos of events into lyrical terms that exalt the human experience above the merely human view of it. In each of these dramas the Chorus also begins the story, two of them, Our Town and A View from the Bridge, through flashback. Four of them (Lazarus Laughed is the exception), incapsulate in the prologue such history as is needed to illuminate the action, a practice stemming from the Greeks.

Individual analysis of the Choruses of the five dramas follows.

DEIRDRE (1906)

W. B. Yeats

The Chorus of wandering Musicians and story-tellers of Deirdre are comely, middle-aged women who, from being complete strangers become the confidante of the heroine. The subject of the drama is the tragic homecoming and death of the mythical heroine and her lover. The main tragic theme of the play may be expressed as the danger to Deirdre's love and her fear lest she not be allowed to keep faith with Naoise.[190] In their songs the Chorus primarily carry the theme, remaining on stage throughout. In this one-act drama the Chorus divide the play into three scenes, singing three short ballads (one at the end of the play) in complex meter, and they participate significantly in the blank-verse episodes.

This early in the century Yeats presents the modern version of an age-old problem--the struggle for effective dramatic speech. In 1902 he wrote in Controversies, "We must find good literature in living speech," by which he meant the rich idiom of the Irish folk,[191] and he did write a number of earlier plays exclusively in this idiom. In Deirdre, however, Yeats looks both backward and forward. There are traces of the archaic nineteenth century literary language and a rhetorical, declamatory tone which he thought appropriate to the dignity of Greek drama;[192] but along with

[190] S. B. Bushrui, Yeats's Verse-Plays: The Revisions 1900-1910 (Oxford, 1965), p. 158.

[191] Ure, p. 161.

[192] W. B. Yeats, Essays (London, 1924), p. 413.

this there is a simplicity, a directness, a use of plain vivid imagery, of terse concentrated rhythms and of a rich idiomatic speech which shows that he was already working to solve the problem of dramatic speech in verse.[193] T. S. Eliot found Yeats's greatest achievement to lie in his having mastered that problem in his later plays.[194]

Despite the success of the play, Yeats was uneasy about the use of blank verse in Deirdre.[195] Like Eliot after him, Yeats found himself struggling against the dominating influence of Shakespeare, and as he continued to work to achieve the rhythms of actual speech and concentrated idioms, he discarded blank verse as outmoded for a modern audience.[196] Still, in Deirdre there are numerous passages in which what is true dramatic speech is at the same time high poetry, and even in old age Yeats relished the "tragic ecstasy" of Deirdre,[197] which results from a tight, swift-moving plot commensurate with rich poetic speech.[198]

The legendary Deirdre, like some Greek heroine, is doomed from the start. The curse on her is her beauty,

[193] Bushrui, p. 117.

[194] Ure, p. 161.

[195] W. B. Yeats, Letters to K. Tynan, ed. Roger McHugh (New York, 1953), p. 148.

[196] Ronald Peacock, The Poet in the Theatre (London, 1946), p. 119.

[197] W. B. Yeats, On the Boiler (Dublin, 1939), p. 14.

[198] John Gassner, The Theatre in Our Times (New York, 1954), p. 20.

which provokes love, violence, and ruin, and at last is the instrument of her doom. Yeats concentrates on a single situation in the legend: "One woman and two men; that is the quarrel / That knows no mending."[199] He changes the legend to suit his needs and adds the Women, with odes "somewhat in the Greek manner," as he puts it.[200]

In Yeats's version of the Deirdre story, after seven years of banishment, Deirdre and Naoise receive word that King Conchubar, who had coveted Deirdre before she eloped with the young warrior, has forgiven them and invites them to return. Despite Deirdre's apprehensions, they return, but it is to a trap. Having left their ship anchored on the shore, they arrive by horseback at the meeting place, a guest house in the woods near Conchubar's palace.

Only a group of wandering Women Musicians and old Fergus, a noble emissary who trusts the King's word, are there to welcome the royal pair. The arrival of a surly mercenary with a message from the King that Deirdre is welcome, "but not that traitor" Naoise, and the discovery that the darkening woods are full of furtive, murderous-looking foreign soldiers, confirms Conchubar's treachery. Fergus goes for help, and by trickery Naoise is lured into the dark woods and taken captive.

The ruthless and triumphant Conchubar enters the guest

[199] W. B. Yeats, The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats (New York, 1963), p. 128.

[200] W. B. Yeats, Plays and Controversies (London, 1923), p. 84.

house, followed by soldiers who bring in the captive, symbolically caught in a net. The scene is now set for the most dramatic moments of the play.[201] Conchubar tries to strike a bargain with Deirdre: Naoise's freedom in exchange for her consent to return to the palace with him as his bride, but Naoise will not let her make this sacrifice. While Deirdre pleads with Conchubar for Naoise's life, without her knowledge the King signals that Naoise be gagged and taken behind the curtain to be killed. Suddenly missing him, Deirdre pleads to know what Conchubar has done with him, and the King points to the bloody sword. Yeats's own favorite comment about the play is "red-heat up to Naoise's death, white-heat after he is dead."[202]

In the high scene of the drama, seeming about to yield to the old man's desire, Deirdre matches wits with his suspicion and his ruthlessness; she plays upon his desire and his vanity until he is manoeuvered into a position where his pride impels him to allow her to go behind the curtain to "make her farewells."

Fergus and an angry mob arrive a few moments too late. When the curtain is flung back on command of the gloating Conchubar, what is revealed is a Greek tableau: Deirdre, stabbed, lying across the body of her lover. Fergus refuses to allow Conchubar to touch the body, even though it is "but empty and tangled wire,/ Now the bird's gone." Recovering

[201] V. K. Narayana Menon, The Development of William Butler Yeats (London, 1960), p. 79.

[202] Ibid., p. 80.

from his rage and frustration, Conchubar challenges the mob as being traitors and cowards and closes the play defending his action:

> Howl if you will but I being King, did right
> In choosing her most fitting to be Queen . . .[203]

The cast of Deirdre in order of their appearance is as follows:

> Three Women Musicians, the Chorus;
> Fergus, an old nobleman;
> Dark-Faced Men, mercenaries from overseas;
> Deirdre, a young queen;
> Naoise, a young king;
> Conchubar, an old king, but still strong and
> vigorous, High King of Ulster;
> Crowd of Fergus' followers.

All of the on-scene action takes place in the one room of the guest house, which is sparsely furnished with a table (on which is a chess set), chairs, wall sconces for lighting, and a curtained alcove at the back which will screen violent action from the audience. From the entrance of the lovers onward, the bright sky of sunset, glimpsed through the rear window despite the density of the trees, progressively darkens, and the room, except for the fire in the brazier, and later, the flickering light in the sconces, is in shadows until the end of the last act when the stage is suddenly lit brilliantly with torches.

As the drama begins, two of the Women are on-stage, and another enters hurriedly:

[203]Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 134.

First Musician.
I have a story right, my wanderers,
That has so mixed with fable in our songs
That all seemed fabulous. We are come, by chance,
Into King Conchubar's country, and this house
Is an old guest-house built for travellers
From the seashore to Conchubar's royal house,
And there are certain hills among these woods
And there Queen Deirdre grew . . .[204]

The Chorus give the background of the story, skillfully focusing attention on Deirdre as the main character by presenting the past in terms of her life and consciousness.

In the episode immediately following the prologue, the commos between Chorus and Fergus prior to the arrival of Deirdre and Naoise is weighted with significance. The suggestion of impending tragedy, gradually built up by the foreboding of the Chorus, reaches a point where we know that if the lovers once cross the threshold it will be to meet with calamity, in spite of the reassuring words of Fergus.[205]

Gladly Fergus welcomes the Musicians, for they can speak "the welcome and the joy" that he lacks tongue for:

And if as seems--for you are comely women--
You can praise love, you'll have the best of luck,
For there'll be two, before the night is in,
That bargained for their love, and paid for it
All that men value.[206]

In this episode Yeats begins to weave a pattern in which the immediate experiences of the Chorus parallel those of Deirdre.

[204]Ibid., p. 112.

[205]Forrest Reid, W. B. Yeats, A Critical Study (London, 1915), p. 171.

[206]Yeats, The Collected Plays, p. 113.

Again and again the Chorus, and later Deirdre, are frustrated by characteristic attitudes of Fergus and Naoise who will not listen to words against the King until too late. These Women are skeptical of the King's promise, and introduce a thought that we learn later is part of Deirdre's apprehension:

> An old man's love
> Who casts no second line is hard to cure:
> His jealousy is like his love.[207]

Upon receiving Fergus' explanation that the murderous-looking strangers in the woods could very possibly be merchants who may have brought Conchubar "Libyan dragon-skin,/ Or the ivory of the fierce unicorn," the First Musician immediately jumps to the suspenseful truth. Deirdre also will immediately grasp the alarming truth when the Musicians tell her that in a room at the palace Conchubar has secretly prepared a bridal bed into whose embroidered curtains are sewn "strange, miracle-working wicked stones / Men tear out of the heart and the hot brain of Libyan dragons," which have power "to stir even those at enmity to love."[208]

Now the Musicians are consciously aware of impending danger, and their conscious awareness contrasts effectively with the unconscious fear from which Fergus suffers at first. Hearing horses approaching, Fergus excitedly asks the Musicians to sing a song of welcome, revealing to them his own unconscious fears[209] when he suggests:

[207] Ibid., p. 114.

[208] Ibid., p. 120.

[209] Balanchandra Rajan, W. B. Yeats, A Critical Introduction (London, 1965), p. 61.

> . . . a verse
> Of some old time not worth remembering,
> And all the lovelier because a bubble.
> Begin, begin, of some old king and queen,
> Of Lugaidh Redstripe or another; no not him,
> He and his lady perished wretchedly.[210]

Not the Chorus but Fergus foreshadows here, for the chessboard in the guest house is directly connected with this legend, as Fergus later recalls. Relaxing the tension of the preceding episode, although the note of foreboding lingers, the Musicians sing an old ballad, staying close to the tragic theme. This is a fine example of how Yeats, though not musical himself, makes excellent use of music to reinforce the theme of the drama.[211] The ode employs the Sophoclean technique of beginning with a generalization and ending with a particular that ties in with the action. The short ballad tells of the Irish goddess Edain, who is crying inexplicable tears. When she asks her mortal lover why she is crying, he explains to her that, since love is always an overflowing excess, "born out of immoderate thought," lovers who cannot laugh must cry--passionate love can never be confined, but must express itself either in wild delight or in deep grief.[212] No less pertinent to the theme of the play is the improvised ending to the ballad, in which the Musicians not only introduce the significant "hunter and hunted" imagery which expresses the experience of the lovers, but also describe the present attitude of Deirdre and Naoise who have

[210] Ibid., pp. 115-116.

[211] Eric Bentley, "Yeats as a Playwright," Kenyon Review, X (Spring, 1948), 200.

[212] Leonard E. Nathan, The Tragic Drama of William Butler Yeats (New York, 1965), p. 138.

entered with Fergus:

> . . . . . .
> But is Edain worth a song
> Now the hunt begins anew?
> . . . . . .
> What is all our praise to them
> That have one another's eyes?[213]

The Chorus and Fergus have already made enough of Deirdre's background known so that as the ode ends, she does not have to diminish her stature by explanation, but can dramatize what is immediately relevant. She addresses the Musicians:

> Silence your music, though I thank you
> for it;
> But the wind's blown upon my hair, and I
> Must set the jewels on my neck and head
> For one that's coming.[214]

When Naoise tells her she looks pale "As 'twere with fear" and there's no cause, Deirdre's answer establishes a mutual understanding with the Chorus, which gives her thoughts and actions and theirs a compounded depth and intensity. Replying to Naoise, Deirdre includes the Musicians in a fear that she herself is experiencing:

> These women have the raddle that they use
> To make them brave and confident, although
> Dread, toil, or cold may chill the blood o'
> their cheeks.[215]

[213] Yeats, Collected Plays, p. 116.

[214] Ibid., p. 117.

[215] Ibid.

Addressing the Musicians, she unconsciously reveals her fear of Conchubar:

> You'll help me, women. It is my husband's will
> I show my trust in one that may be here
> Before the mind can call the color up.
> My husband took these rubies from a king
> Of Surracha that was so murderous
> He seemed all glittering dragon.[216]

She too is a jewel her husband took from a "murderous king."[217] And then frankly she expresses to them her inner conflict:

> Now wearing them
> Myself wars on myself, for I myself--
> That do my husband's will, yet fear to do it--
> Grow dragonish to myself.[218]

In the next short scene, the Chorus, uneasily apprehending the action while helping Deirdre dress, have no speaking part. The basic situation of the arrival of the two lovers and the absence of a messenger is developed, not only against a background of tension and conflict within Deirdre herself, but also against the deceptive outward calmness of Fergus and Naoise, who nevertheless unconsciously show concern. Fergus' influence over Naoise might be explained in that he constantly reminds Naoise of the necessity of living by a code of honor and the "rules of the

[216] Ibid.

[217] Bushrui, p. 133.

[218] Yeats, Collected Plays, p. 117.

game."[219] Fergus suggests a game of chess to pass the time. Naoise replies that if he hadn't King Conchubar's word he'd think the chessboard ominous, for it calls up associations of the story of another hero and his "sea-mew wife" who had played chess many years ago on this very board while waiting for death. Fergus' earlier rejection of the song takes on more import as he expresses a dramatically ironic circumstance:

> I can remember now, a tale of treachery,
> A broken promise and a journey's end--
> But it were best forgot.[220]

Grown attentive, Deirdre expresses strong fears and suspicions to Naoise, who is constrained to ask Fergus to pardon her. Fergus replies:

> But now I had to threaten
> These wanderers because they would have
> weighed
> Some crazy fantasy of their own brain
> Or gossip of the road with Conchubar's word.[221]

The men exit to look toward the road for a messenger, and the Chorus is left alone with Deirdre.

A suspenseful commos follows, which enhances the closeness between the Chorus and Deirdre, and also signals and emphasizes a moment of great emotional stress. The Chorus (represented by the First Musician) take on the role of confidante and a mutual trust and understanding begins to

[219] Bushrui, p. 133.

[220] Yeats, Collected Plays, p. 117.

[221] Ibid., p. 118.

form, although the Chorus are anxious to keep out of trouble. Sensing an affinity with them, for she learns that like her they value love above all else, Deirdre speaks freely, and reveals herself as perceptive, articulate, quick-witted, and honest as she strips away verbal camouflage to get to the heart of the mystery of Conchubar's palace, which information the equally perceptive but more guarded Chorus want to reveal to her. The Chorus quickly gain a knowledge of Deirdre's character, even to the extent of reading her thoughts. More important, Deirdre is aware of this, and in the highest moment of the play she counts on them to read her unspoken thoughts even when these thoughts run counter to what she is saying. Therefore in her later confrontation with Conchubar she verbally shatters the "Laws of love" while in actuality she is striving desperately to preserve them. The Chorus now imply their own fear of Conchubar as they guardedly and metaphorically try to communicate their grim suspicions to Deirdre, and when she finally grasps their meaning--that Conchubar intends to murder Naoise and keep her alive--they confirm the meaning yet still hedge:

> 'Tis you that put that meaning upon words
> Spoken at random.[222]

When Deirdre's continued urgent questioning elicits the terrible truth about the bridal bed, she cries out:

> And I the bride?
> Here is worse treachery than the seamew suffered.
> For she but died and mixed into the dust

[222] Ibid., p. 120.

> Of her dead comrade, but I am to live
> And lie in the one bed with him I hate.
> Where is Naoise? . . .[223]

So the Chorus enable Deirdre to characterize herself, just before Naoise and Fergus hurry in.

The Chorus silently watch an important scene which underscores three parallels between Deirdre and the Chorus: 1) in the matter of not being allowed to speak against the King; 2) in being strangers to the customs of Conchubar's court, and therefore not appreciative of the integrity of Conchubar's promise; and 3) in the womanly intuition that Conchubar's plans for Naoise mean death. Deirdre is unsuccessful in urging Naoise to return to the ship, and the arrival of the Messenger confirms her fears. Fergus goes for help, while Naoise accepts the worst implications of what he has witnessed: "The crib has fallen and the birds are in it."

The role of the Chorus as artistic apprehenders of the tragedy is particularly pertinent in the next scene. Up to this point the lovers have suffered from fear and depression; now both finally see Conchubar's purpose, and they prepare to meet death in a heroic spirit. For them love is enough to have made a difficult, lonely life worth living. Deirdre addresses the Musicians:

> O singing women set it down in a book,
> That love is all we need, even though it is
> But the last drops we gather up like this;
> And though the drops are all we have known of life,

[223] Ibid.

> For we have been most friendless--praise
> us for it,
> And praise the double sunset, for naught's
> lacking
> But a good end to the long, cloudy day.[224]

As Naoise and Deirdre try to play chess with stoic calm, the Musicians sing in response to Deirdre's request, a song that serves a twofold purpose: it paces the story by filling in with lyric an otherwise quiet period, and more important, amplifies and reinforces the theme. Repeating the theme of their earlier ballad, that love is immoderate and cannot be contained in mortal bounds, they add a new idea: immoderate love is a longing for immortality that must destroy mortal life:[225]

> Love is an immoderate thing
> And can never be content,
> Till it dip an ageing wing
> Where some laughing element
> Leaps, and Time's old lanthorn dims.
> What's the merit in love play,
> In the tumult of the limbs,
>
> That dies out before 'tis day:
> Heart on heart, or mouth on mouth,
> All that mingling of our breath
> When love longing is but drought,
> For the things come after death?[226]

When the song is finished, Deirdre is kneeling at Naoise's

[224] Ibid., p. 125.

[225] Nathan, p. 139.

[226] Yeats, Collected Plays, p. 126.

feet, unable to dissemble. Lyrically she expresses her love:

> Do you remember that first night in the woods
> We lay all night on leaves, and looking up,
> When that first grey of the dawn awoke the birds,
> Saw leaves above us? You thought that I still
> slept,
> And bending down to kiss me on the eyes,
> Found they were open. Bend and kiss me now,
> For it may be the last before our death.
> And when that's over, we'll be different;
> Imperishable things, a cloud or a fire.
> And I know nothing but this body, nothing
> But that old vehement, bewildering kiss.[227]

The Chorus suddenly warn that Conchubar is present in the doorway. Conchubar disappears wordlessly, at which an aroused and scornful Naoise rushes out to challenge him to combat.

In the commos that follows, left alone with Deirdre, the Chorus protest when Deirdre snatches a knife from the girdle of the First Musician, intending to help Naoise. Deirdre, listening intently for some clash which will tell her which darkened path to follow, assures the Women that the knife has no distinguishing marks that would betray ownership should Conchubar learn she has it. This scene provides strong contrast between the reckless courage of the royal characters and the more prudential, commonsense, but nevertheless cowardly morality of the common people.[228]

As Deirdre listens, the Chorus read meaning into the silence:

[227]Ibid.

[228]Alex Zwerdling, Yeats and the Heroic Ideal (New York, 1965), p. 49.

> Listen, I am called wise. If Conchubar win,
> You have a women's wile that can do much,
> Even with man in pride of victory.
> He is in love and old. What were one knife
> Among a hundred?[229]

Again the Chorus foreshadow--Deirdre will later have need to resort to wile. Uppermost in Deirdre's mind now is the thought that she and Naoise may both die and only these Women can make known the nature of the love she shares with Naoise.

> Women, if I die,
> If Naoise die this night, how will you praise?
> What words seek out? for that will stand to you;
> For being but dead we shall have many friends.
> All through your wanderings, the doors of kings
> Shall be thrown wider open, the poor man's hearth
> Heaped with new turf, because you are wearing this
> (Gives Musician a bracelet.)
> To show that you have Deirdre's story right.[230]

The Chorus might almost be reading Deirdre's mind as the First Musician answers:

> Have you not been paid servants in love's house
> To sweep the ashes out and keep the doors?
> And though you have suffered all for mere love's sake
> You'd live your lives again.[231]

Deirdre but adds an affirmation, "Even this last hour."

At this point a triumphant Conchubar enters with the

[229] Yeats, Collected Plays, p. 127.

[230] Ibid.

[231] Ibid.

mercenaries and sums up what is for him the crux of the matter:

> One woman and two men; that is the quarrel
> That knows no mending.[232]

In the high scene that follows the Musicians do not speak but their presence is indispensable. When Conchubar offers Deirdre the proposition which may mean freedom for Naoise, Naoise tells her,

> O eagle! If you were to do this thing,
> And buy my life of Conchubar with your body,
> Love's law being broken, I would stand alone
> Upon the eternal summits, and call out,
> And you could never come there, being banished.[233]

When Naoise is treacherously murdered behind the curtain, and Deirdre moves to carry out her plan, she uses the Chorus as a responsive audience to help her disarm Conchubar's suspicions. It is the presence of the Chorus and their response which keeps uppermost in the minds of the audience Deirdre's sorrow and her tragic nobility. Her courage raises the action to a higher plane of significance, for she must convince Conchubar of a change of heart by supposedly betraying her love, in searing detail, while she counts on the Chorus to comprehend. When Conchubar persists in his suspicion, Deirdre gambles on his being influenced by the presence of the Chorus as the Voice of Society when, in a bold stroke she questions his courage:

[232] Ibid., p. 128.

[233] Ibid., p. 130.

> They'll say to one another, "Look at him
> That is so jealous that he lured a man
> From over sea, and murdered him, and yet
> He trembled at the thought of a dead face."[234]

Deirdre has her hand on the curtain. To Conchubar's voiced suspicion that she could have a knife concealed on her she disdainfully replies that he might have her, his queen, searched by one of the dark slaves. There is a short pause before Conchubar says, "Go to your farewells, Queen." Deirdre turns to the Chorus:

> Now strike the wire, and sing to it a while,
> Knowing that all is happy, and that you know
> Within what bride-bed I shall lie this night,
> And by what man, and lie close up to him,
> For the bed's narrow, and there outsleep the
> cockcrow.[235]

While Conchubar waits in triumph, the Musicians, singing alternate lines, softly chant a symbolic tribute:

> They are gone, they are gone. The proud may
> lie by the proud.
> Though we were bidden to sing, cry nothing loud.
> They are gone, they are gone. Whispering were enough.
> Into the secret wilderness of their love.
> A high, grey cairn. What more is to be said?
> Eagles have gone into their cloudy bed.[236]

When the triumphant Conchubar, with Fergus watching, orders the curtain flung back and the sad tableau is revealed, the Musicians begin to keen softly. As Fergus voices pity and indignation, as the mob howls furiously, and as Conchubar, anger and frustration gone, defends his treachery, the Musicians lament softly, and the play ends.

[234] Ibid., p. 132.

[235] Ibid., p. 133.

[236] Ibid.

This Chorus is woven into the very fabric of a drama[237] which resembles a Sophoclean tragedy in that the heart of it is "a life-giving combination of strong character and revealing situation"; a strong and noble character is confronted with a crucial situation, involving suffering, and responds to it in her special way. In their odes, this Chorus, like a Greek Tragic Chorus, give a further dimension of meaning and dramatic force to the action. The whole effect of the drama finally flows from Deirdre's deeply affirmed love,[238] and this effect is achieved through an especially fine stroke, the affinity between Deirdre and these Women. The last line of the closing ode takes on a resonance from Naoise's last speech, as if these Musicians perceive the outcome of the action as a manifestation of some divine order in the universe.

[237] Menon, p. 79.

[238] Peacock, p. 121.

LAZARUS LAUGHED:

A PLAY FOR

THE IMAGINATIVE THEATER (1927)

Eugene O'Neill

Lazarus Laughed, an imaginary reconstruction of the biblical Lazarus' second life on earth, is primarily an exposition of a philosophy of life and death.[239] The play expresses O'Neill's concern with what he called "the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fear of death with."[240] It includes among its prodigious cast nine Choruses of seven members each, all masked, whose role, according to O'Neill, is to chant in unison, emphasizing or "pointing" the action throughout. In actuality, the various Choruses almost always either echo someone or are themselves echoed. O'Neill sought the effect of "Crowd mind, Crowd emotion"[241] in the complementary Crowds that accompany each Chorus, and he gets that effect in both Chorus and Crowd.

O'Neill alone of all the modern dramatists attempts to emulate that special quality of Greek lyric, the combination of poetry, music, and dance. The play was presented as a spectacular pageant, "successfully and

[239] Barrett H. Clark, Eugene O'Neill, The Man and His Plays (New York, 1947), p. 117.

[240] Arthur and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York, 1962), p. 601.

[241] Eugene O'Neill, "Memoranda on Masks," O'Neill and His Plays, eds. Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin, William J. Fisher (New York, 1961), p. 120.

imaginatively" O'Neill thought,[242] by the Pasadena Community Players in 1928.[243] It was the first and only public presentation of the play.

The text, nowever, contains faults of a kind attributed to Euripides but without his saving graces. There is windiness, crudeness of diction, looseness of plot, and melodrama which sometimes, as in the antics of Caligula and of the infuriated Chorus of Old Men, becomes a "howling spiritual lunacy." The speeches of the Choruses resemble nothing in Greek unless it be the short opening chant of the Chorus of Huntsmen in Hippolytus. O'Neill thought that some of his best writing was contained in Lazarus Laughed, and despite criticism, could not bring himself to revise any of it.[244] Some of the speeches of Lazarus and some of the compendious stage directions do contain poetic prose, but the language of the Choruses, although written in verse form, is flat, repetitive, overpunctuated, and rhythmically monotonous.

O'Neill derived the title of his play from the "Jesus wept" of the gospel story of the miracle. The drama portrays the new attitudes of the resurrected Lazarus and his reception by various people (with the Choruses and the Crowds representing the masses) in the Jewish, Grecian, and Roman world of his day. However, into the shell of Christian myth O'Neill has poured the substance of Greek myth as he

[242] Gelb, p. 602.

[243] F. W. Hersey, "Lazarus Laughed," Drama, XVIII (May, 1928), 245-246.

[244] Gelb, pp. 599-600.

explicitly identifies Lazarus with Dionysus.[245] Midway through his year-long journey to Rome, Lazarus, who is about fifty years old when he first awakens from his trance, dark-haired, dark-skinned, his face still lined with suffering and sorrow, has already changed drastically. He now looks about thirty-five, erect and strong and radiant, "the positive masculine Dionysus, closest to the soil of the Grecian gods, a Son of Man, born of a mortal." This is not the coarse, drunken Dionysus, nor the effeminite God, but the God who is a symbol of "the soul of the stirring seasons, of living and dying as processes in eternal growth, of the wine of life stirring forever in the sap and blood and loam of things."[246]

Lazarus knows he is a prophet divinely chosen to preach a religion of Life, Love, Laughter, and No Death for Man. Divine Omnipotence has also communicated to him the knowledge that it is too soon for men to believe the message completely, too soon for men to begin to recreate the divine in themselves as Lazarus can with his new dispensation. Each of the nine Choruses (and a complementary Crowd) in turn comes temporarily under the sway of the spellbinding Lazarus as he fulfills what he recognizes as his appointed destiny in his second life: to preach the new gospel as he recreates the god in himself.

When Lazarus first awakens from his sleep of death in his home in Bethany, he finds waiting to hear his story the Chorus of Old Men, along with his family and neighbors. All

[245] Doris M. Alexander, "Lazarus Laughed and Buddha," Modern Language Quarterly, XVII (December, 1956), 357.

[246] Eugene O'Neill, Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill (New York, 1959), p. 415.

rejoice in his message. A few months later, most of these people, including the Chorus of Old Men, have turned on Lazarus because he has disrupted business and encouraged "paganism" by attracting a group of laughing young converts who call themselves the Followers of Lazarus. In a chaotic scene before Lazarus' home, now called the House of Laughter, the Crowd splits up into religious factions, Orthodox and Nazarene, and a bitter and bloody battle rages until the rapt Lazarus becomes aware of what is happening and calls a halt. During the melee, a squad of Roman soldiers has arrived on the scene to summon Lazarus to the court of the cruel, cynical, aging but still powerful Tiberius, who questions the story of the miracle, but who covets any knowledge of how to forestall death and renew youth. In a trancelike state Lazarus answers "Yes!" but the summons he accedes to is a divine one. Accompanied by Miriam he sets out, and when his laughter can no longer be heard, his Followers feel his message slipping from them and their fears return.

When Lazarus arrives in Athens he has attracted a new group of Followers; here he is met by the Chorus of Greeks, who hail him as Dionysus, and here he meets the young Caligula, chosen heir to Tiberius who finds him "perfect for serving my spite on mankind." Caligula comes to love and hate Lazarus by turns, wanting and not wanting to believe his message, since he himself rules men through their fear of death. At times he even gloats with a touch of madness that he himself is Death.

Accompanied by Caligula and the ever-swelling crowd of

Followers, Lazarus travels to Rome and faces a Chorus of Roman Senators who, cowed and disillusioned, despise the dissolute Emperor, his ambitious heir, and their own degradation. Here Lazarus, standing in a temple near the Roman wall, sends his inspiriting laughter over the wall to the thousands of his condemned Followers, and comprehends their joyous self-inflicted deaths when, laughing and unafraid, they stab themselves with the weapons snatched from the Legionaries sent out to kill them. He wins over the Chorus of Roman Senators and the whole rank of Legionaries with their seasoned leader, Crassus, and laughingly declines the proffered role of Lazarus Caesar and even Lazarus god. Joyously they hail him, but when Lazarus leaves, they too forget his message.

At Capri, on the marble terrace of the palace of the frightened Tiberius, Lazarus shows compassion for the expiring, crucified lion, above whose head is fastened the warning inscription:

> From the East, land of false gods, and superstitions, this lion was brought to Rome to amuse Caesar.[247]

Here he so affects the young patrician Marcellus, sent out from the palace to greet and slay him, that the young courtier stabs himself instead to prove he too is suddenly unafraid of death.

Lazarus ascends the steps into the shadowy archway of the hushed and darkened palace and provokes sheer terror by his luminous appearance in the darkened banquet hall.

[247] O'Neill, Nine Plays, p. 436.

When he assures the Emperor and his corrupt and bored court that he comes in love and peace, the terror is replaced by a more characteristic attitude of self-indulgence, mockery, and morbid cruelty. The Emperor's handsome and lustful young mistress, Pompeia, covets Lazarus, who now looks like a youth in his twenties. She is instrumental in poisoning Miriam, who welcomes release from suffering. For just a moment after her death Lazarus knows loneliness and anguish, until Miriam miraculously returns for a second to confirm Lazarus' message. Now he is all god, and his laughter makes even the sex-corrupted and warped Chorus of Roman Youths and Girls forget their boredom and fear of death.

Pompeia, furious because Lazarus' love does not include earthly passion, induces Tiberius, now half under Lazarus' spell himself, to condemn Lazarus to death. The Roman populace, with their Chorus, flock to the arena and, as their faces reflect the flames from the off-stage burning and crucifixion, they are treated to the excitement of the self-immolation of Pompeia, who surrenders to Lazarus' spell and dies free from fear; to the strangling of the suddenly converted, ecstatic Emperor by his maddened heir; and to the frenzied love-hate with which Caligula thrusts a spear into the dying, but still loving and laughing Lazarus.

As the play draws to a close, the terrified Caligula makes the plea, "Save me from death!" as he grovels in a paroxysm of panic, and the reassuring response is:

> Lazarus. (His voice is heard in a gentle, expiring sigh of compassion, followed by a faint dying note of laughter that rises and is lost in the sky like

> the flight of his soul back into the womb of Infinity.) Fear not, Caligula! There is no death!

For a moment Caligula laughs the "tender laughter of love."

> I laugh, Lazarus! I laugh with you! (Then grief-stricken.) Lazarus! (He hides his face in his hands, weeping.) No more! (Then beats his head with his fists.) I will remember! I will! (Then suddenly, with a return of grotesqueness--harshly.) All the same, I killed him and I proved there is death! (Immediately overcome by remorse, groveling and beating himself.) Fool! Madman! Forgive me, Lazarus! Men forget![248]

And the curtain falls.

O'Neill never quite succeeds in making a comprehensive philosophy of the message of Lazarus,[249] but Lazarus is voluble enough as he spreads "the saving truth to ears . . . inexorably deaf!" He knows "the greatness of Saviors is that they may not save! The greatness of Man is that no god can save him--until he becomes a god!" He tells the moody Caligula, ". . . As Man, Petty Tyrant of Earth, you are a bubble pricked by death into a void and a mocking silence! But as dust, you are eternal change, and everlasting growth, and a high note of laughter soaring through chaos from the deep heart of God! Be proud, O Dust! Then you may love the stars as equals! . . ." Perhaps then he may even be brave enough to love his fellow man without fear of vengeance.[250]

[248] Ibid., p. 485.

[249] Cyrus Day, "Amor Fati: O'Neill's Lazarus as Superman and Savior," Modern Drama, III (December, 1960), 303.

[250] O'Neill, Nine Plays, p. 417

Lazarus knows that the egotistic concept of personal immortality must surrender to the recognition that all matter is immortal, that all things eternally recur.[251] He explains to Miriam, ". . . Once as squirming specks we crept from the tides of the sea. Now we return to the sea! Once as quivering flecks of rhythm we beat down from the sun. Now we reenter the sun! . . . Flung off is that impudent insult to life's nobility which gibbers: 'I, this Jew, this Roman, this noble or this slave, must survive in my pettiness forever'. . ."[252]

After Miriam's death he realizes ". . . Man's loneliness is but his fear of life! . . . New stars are born of dust eternally! The old, grown mellow with God, burst into flaming seed! The fields of infinite space are sown--and grass for sheep springs up on the hills of earth! . . ." For Man there is no death, nor fear, nor loneliness. ". . . There is only God's Eternal Laughter! His Laughter flows into the lonely heart! . . ."[253]

Doubtless O'Neill was influenced by Nietzsche's idea of a Dionysian indestructible Oneness at the heart of nature. Lazarus pleads with Caligula, ". . . Believe in the healthy god called Man in you! . . . Believe! What if you are a man and men are despicable? Men are also unimportant. Men pass! Like rain into the sea! The sea remains! Man remains! . . . Believe in the laughing god within you!"[254]

[251] Janis Klavsons, "O'Neill's Dreamer: Success and Failure," Modern Drama, III (December, 1960), 270.

[252] O'Neill, Nine Plays, pp. 432-433.

[253] Ibid., p. 457.

[254] Ibid., p. 469.

To the question which is asked with such urgency throughout the travels of Lazarus: "What is beyond?" he answers with exaltation: "Life! Eternity! Stars and dust! God's Eternal Laughter!"

The play is in four acts of two scenes each. The cast of characters in order of appearance are:

Lazarus;
His wife, Miriam;
His father;
His mother;
His sisters, Martha and Mary;
An Orthodox Priest;
A Centurion and his squad of eight soldiers (Lazarus' escort to Rome);
Gaius Caligula, heir to Tiberius Caesar;
Crassus, a Roman General;
Flavius, a Centurion (a member of Tiberius' bodyguard at Capri);
Marcellus, a Patrician (a member of Tiberius' court at Capri);
Tiberius Caesar;
Pompeia, Tiberius' mistress;
Messenger, Serving Slaves;
Nine Choruses of seven members each;
Nine Crowds, most of them containing forty-nine members.

All of the characters, with the exception of Lazarus, who awakens "freed from the fear of death," are masked. The scenery is on a large scale; for example, the seven settings include the facade of the house in Bethany, with a staircase leading up to the roof, on which dance a Chorus of Followers and a complementary Crowd of forty-nine; the temple in Rome; the marble terrace in Capri; and the Roman arena. All of the action takes place at night, possibly to provide contrast for the halo that glows around

Lazarus' head and for the shiny aura he emits, both of which become progressively brighter as he grows progressively younger and more like a god. The darkness, like so much else in this play, is handled schematically. The opening action in Lazarus' home in Bethany takes place at twilight, and each scene thereafter takes place at a progressively later time of evening as the year goes by until the last act, when Lazarus is martyred at the stake just before dawn.

O'Neill uses masks and costumes to characterize his Choruses. All of the Choruses wear the double-life-sized masks of Greek tragedy. (The Crowds wear life-sized masks, and those characters with important speaking parts wear masks covering the upper part of their face.) Each full mask, besides expressing racial characteristics of the wearer, indicates a particular personality type, O'Neill specifying use of a set of seven types reminiscent of Jung:[255] Simple, Ignorant; Happy, Eager; Self-Tortured, Introspective; Proud, Self-Reliant; Servile, Hypocritical; Revengeful, Cruel; Sorrowful, Resigned.[256] Like the rest of the cast who wear full-sized masks (except for the soldiers), the Chorus are dressed in a certain color to represent the seven ages of man: Boyhood or Girlhood; Youth; Young Manhood or Womanhood; Manhood or Womanhood; Middle Age; Maturity; Old Age.[257] This experiment with

[255] Oscar Cargill, "Fusion Point of Jung and Nietzsche," O'Neill and His Plays, p. 411.

[256] O'Neill, Nine Plays, p. 381.

[257] Ibid.

masks as a method of dramatization had virtually no success.[258]

In order of appearance, the nine Choruses are as follows:

Chorus of Old Men of Bethany:
Semitic; Resigned and Sorrowful--Old Age.[259]

Chorus of Followers of Lazarus in Bethany:
Semitic; "an expression of fearless faith in life, the mouth shaped by laughter"--males, somewhere between Youth and Manhood.[260]

Chorus of Greeks:
Proud, Self-Reliant--Young Manhood.[261]

Chorus of Followers of Lazarus who accompany him to Greece and Rome, having joined him en route:
Egyptian, Syrian, Cappodocian, Lydian, Phrygian, Sicilian, and Parthian; "Lazarus" laughter mask--males, anywhere between Youth and Manhood.[262]

Chorus of Roman Senators:
Simple, Ignorant--Manhood.[263]

Chorus of Roman Legionaries:
Simple, Ignorant--Manhood.[264]

Chorus of Roman Guard at Tiberius' Palace:
Simple, Ignorant--Manhood; "Gorgeous uniforms and armor."[265]

[258] Gassner, Theatre in Our Times, p. 100.
[259] O'Neill, Nine Plays, p. 381.
[260] Ibid., p. 393.
[261] Ibid., p. 406.
[262] Ibid., p. 414.
[263] Ibid., p. 420.
[264] Ibid., p. 429.
[265] Ibid., p. 434.

Chorus of Roman Youths and Girls, part of the corrupt court of Tiberius:
Three males and four females; the three males and three of the females include among themselves each of three Types: Introspective, Self-Tortured; Servile, Hypocritical; Cruel, Revengeful; and one girl is Proud, Self-Reliant.[266]

Chorus of Roman Populace:
Servile, Hypocritical--males, Middle Age.[267]

The seven members of each Chorus always chant in unison. (The members of the complementary Crowd also chant in unison, except for a special group of seven members detached from three of the Crowds who, through conversation among themselves and with other characters in the play, are very important in giving the background, setting the scene, and keeping action moving through question and comment. Unlike the Choruses and the rest of the Crowd, these individuals generally appeal to the intellect.)

Both the Choruses and Crowds (with the exception of the Followers of Lazarus) represent the generality of fallible common man, in contrast to the one character who dominates the play, Lazarus. They are in general uninformed, imprudent, and irresolute, and do not try either to sublimate or to extirpate their destructive passions. They try instead to overcome and dominate others, and when they fail, they are themselves overcome by their own animality. Because they are afraid of death, they kill or

[266] Ibid., p. 473.
[267] Ibid.

threaten to kill their fellow men. They are all susceptible to the spell of Lazarus and have their moments when the spark of divinity in them responds to his message and they know exultation, but only a few members of mankind have the strength of will to recreate the God in them as Lazarus has been able to do.[268] (There are a few individual gentle characters in the play, such as Lazarus' mother, his sister Martha, and his wife Miriam, but they are helpless against the destructiveness of the common man.)

While the Chorus (and the Crowd) chant, they frequently laugh, but the laughter is not always spontaneous or joyful; sometimes it is forced and grotesque. (This holds true for the laughter of almost the whole cast.) Five of the eight scenes in the play open in a characteristic pattern. The following excerpts provide examples of the stanza structure, the echo pattern, the quality of the laughter, and the variety of Choral moods:

Act I, Scene I opens with:

Chorus of Old Men.
Jesus wept!
Behold how he loved him!
He that liveth,
He that believeth,
Shall never die!

Crowd. (on either side of the house, echo the chant)
He that believeth
Shall never die!
Lazarus, come forth![269]

[268] Day, p. 300.

[269] O'Neill, Nine Plays, p. 383.

Act I, Scene II opens with:

Chorus of Followers of Lazarus. (from within the house)
Laugh! Laugh!
There is only life!
There is only laughter.

Chorus of Old Men. (as if they were subjects moved by hypnotic suggestion--miserably and discordantly)
Ha-ha-ha-ha!
There is only laughter!
Ha-ha--

Crowd. (in the same manner)
Ha-ha--[270]

Act II, Scene I opens with:

Chorus of Greeks.
Soon the God comes!
Redeemer and Savior!
Dionysus, Son of Man and of God![271]

Act III, Scene I has the only opening Chorus that do not speak in exclamation points:

Chorus of the Senate. (intone wearily, as if under a boring compulsion)
The Roman Senate
Is the Roman Senate
The Mighty Voice
Of the Roman People
As long as Rome is Rome.[272]

Act IV, Scene II, opens with:

[270] Ibid., p. 390.
[271] Ibid., p. 407.
[272] Ibid., p. 421.

Chorus of the Roman Populace. (chanting mockingly)
Ha-ha-ha-ha!
Burn and laugh!
Laugh now, Lazarus!
Ha-ha-ha-ha!

Crowd. (chanting with revengeful mockery)
Ha-ha-ha-ha![273]

An example from Act I suffices to show how a Chorus interacts with other characters. Before Lazarus awakens, Miriam pleads with him to "come forth," the Chorus of Old Men echo her, and the Crowd echo the Chorus. Lazarus awakens and looks around him with an "all-embracing love" and an exultant "Yes!" At this point Lazarus' family crowd around him, grateful and happy. Lazarus' father, after joyfully calling for wine and music, is made pathetically uneasy by the strange majesty of his son and falteringly proposes a toast. The Chorus echo him and the whole company echo the Chorus. When one of the Guests, emboldened, blurts out the question which is in the minds of all, "What did you find beyond there, Lazarus?" the others take up the question:

All the Guests. (with insistent curiosity but in low awed tones)
What is beyond there, Lazarus?

Chorus. (in a low murmur)
What is beyond there? What is beyond?

Crowd. (carrying the question falteringly back into silence)
What is beyond?[274]

[273] Ibid., p. 473.
[274] Ibid., p. 387.

Then Lazarus answers, and there follows a pattern that is primarily Chorus-Crowd, one that is frequently repeated, especially during the first half of the play:

Lazarus. (suddenly again--in a voice of loving exaltation)
There is only life! I heard the heart of Jesus laughing in my heart; "There is Eternal Life in No," it said, "and there is the same Eternal Life in Yes! Death is the fear between!" And my heart reborn to love of life cried "Yes!" and I laughed in the laughter of God! (He begins to laugh, softly at first . . .)

Chorus. (in a chanting murmur)
Lazarus laughs!
Our hearts grow happy!
Laughter like music!
The wind laughs!
The sea laughs!
Spring laughs from the earth!
Summer laughs in the air!
Lazarus laughs!

Lazarus. (on a final note of compelling exultation)
Laugh! Laugh with me! Death is dead! Fear is no more! There is only life! There is only laughter!

Chorus. (chanting exultingly now)
Laugh! Laugh!
Laugh with Lazarus!
Fear is no more!
There is no death!

(They laugh in a rhythmic cadence dominated by the laughter of Lazarus)

Crowd.
Laugh! Laugh!
Fear is no more!
There is no death!

Chorus.
Laugh! Laugh!
There is only life!
There is only laughter!
Fear is no more!
Death is dead!

Crowd. (in a rhythmic echo)
Laugh! Laugh!
Death is dead!
There is only laughter!

According to the stage directions, "The room rocks, the air outside throbs with the rhythmic beat of their liberated laughter . . . discordant, frenzied, desperate and drunken, but dominated by the high, free, aspiring, exultant laughter of Lazarus."[275]

As one critic puts it, O'Neill apparently thought the generality of men act like animals, like "curs, dogs, roosters, pigs, swine, rats, jackals, and hyenas."[276] An example of this occurs in the transformation of the Chorus of Old Men. Like some of the other Choruses in the play, this Chorus do help establish and intensify moods, but their moods are so volatile and often so extreme that very early in the play they lose any effectiveness in sympathetically influencing the moods of a theater audience. For instance, after their piety in Act I, Scene I, the Chorus of Old Men become quite depraved in Scene II. The whole Crowd having whipped itself into a fury over religious differences, it now turns its combined fury against Lazarus when his Chorus of Followers appear on the roof of the

[275] Ibid., pp. 387-389.
[276] Day, p. 300.

House of Laughter, laughing and dancing.

A queer excitement, apparent first in the Chorus, begins to pervade the mob. They begin to weave in and out, clasping each other's hands now and then, "moving mechanically in jerky steps to the music in a grotesque sort of marionettes' country dance." Slow at first, this dance becomes more hectic and peculiar as they raise "clenched fists or hands distended into threatening talons" and begin to mutter and growl to themselves in voices "thick and harsh and animal-like with anger." Then they speak threateningly, their voices gradually rising in their hatred:

> Hear them laugh!
> See them dance!
> Shameless! Wanton!
> Dirty! Evil!
> Infamous! Bestial!
> Madness! Blood!
> Adultery! Murder!
> We burn!
> We kill!
> We crucify!
> Death! Death!
> Beware, Lazarus!
>
> (This last in a wild frenzy)[277]

Like the Chorus of Old Men, the Chorus of Greeks provide some melodramatic and spectacular scenes. O'Neill goes to extra lengths in describing them and their reception of Lazarus. These seven are dressed in goatskins, and their tanned bodies and masks are daubed and stained with wine lees, "in imitation of the old followers of Dionysus."[278]

[277] O'Neill, Nine Plays, pp. 395-396.

[278] Ibid., p. 406.

Just as the Greek Chorus and Crowd are on the verge of bloodshed with a force of Roman soldiers, the voice of Lazarus, proclaiming "There is no death!" freezes them and the Romans in their attitudes of murderous hate. Then they turn sheepish as, led by a band of masked musicians, the ivy-crowned Chorus of Followers and the multitude come laughing and dancing into the square. The Chorus scatter flowers about, whirling between the Soldiers and Crowd, "forcing them back from each other, teasing them, sifting into the Crowd, their Chorus in a half circle, confronting the Chorus of Greeks."[279] Now come the squad of Roman Soldiers led by the Centurion who had taken Lazarus captive, marching in with dancers' steps, "like a proud guard of honor," laughing, pulling a chariot in which Lazarus stands dressed in a tunic of white and gold, "his bronzed face and limbs radiant in the halo of his own glowing light," a veritable Dionysus. Hailing him, the Chorus of Greeks surround him and "throw over his shoulders and head the finely dressed hide of a bull with great gilded horns, force into his right hand the mystic rod of Dionysus with a pine cone on top," then prostrate themselves, crying:

> Hail, Savior!
> Redeemer!
> Conqueror of Death![280]

There are a number of other spectacular scenes, none more so than the final one. Before the curtain rises, the noise of crackling flames and an uproar of human voices

[279] Ibid., p. 414.

[280] Ibid., p. 415.

from the multitude, jeering, hooting, laughing at Lazarus in cruel mockery of his laughter is heard. It reaches its greatest volume as the curtain rises to reveal the throne of Caesar on a lower tier of the amphitheater, with the Chorus of the Roman Populace grouped on each side of the throne. The Crowd sit on the banked tiers of marble behind and to the rear of the throne. The billowing rise and fall of the flames is reflected on the masked faces. As previously mentioned, this craven Chorus and Crowd chant "Burn and laugh!" with vengeful mockery.

When Tiberius, both triumphant and disappointed because Lazarus, before being gagged, had admitted he was dying, calls Lazarus coward, craven, knave, duper of fools, and liar, and tells him, "Die, I laugh at you! Ha-ha-ha-ha!" and his voice breaks chokingly, this Chorus and Crowd dare to go Tiberius one better:

> Crowd. (led by their Chorus--in the same frenzy of disappointment, with all sorts of grotesque and obscene gestures and noises, thumbing their fingers to their noses, wagging them at their ears, sticking out their tongues, slapping their behinds, barking, crowing like roosters, howling and hooting in every conceivable manner) Yah! Yah! Yellow Gut! Bungkisser! Muckheel! Scumwiper! Liar! Pig! Jackal! Die! We laugh at you! Ha-ha-ha-- (Their voices, too, break.)[281]

Even this Chorus is converted though, and when the dying Lazarus tells them from the cross, lovingly, that beyond is "Life! Eternity! Stars and dust! God's Eternal Laughter!" led by the Chorus, the multitude pour down from the

[281] Ibid., pp. 475-476.

banked walls of the amphitheater, inspired:

Chorus. (chanting as they dance)
Laugh! Laugh!
We are stars!
We are dust!
We are gods!
We are laughter!

They are oblivious of Caligula as he snatches a spear from a soldier and disappears toward the flames, his spear held ready to stab. Suddenly Lazarus speaks, and at his first word there is a profound silence in which each dancer remains frozen in the last movement:

Lazarus.
Hail, Caligula Caesar! Men forget! (He laughs with gay mockery as at a child.)

Chorus and Crowd. (starting to laugh)
Laugh! Laugh!

There is a fierce cry of rage from Caligula and Lazarus' laughter ceases, and with it the laughter of the crowd turns to a wail of fear and lamentation. Caligula dashes back waving a bloody spear, and rushing up to the throne, stands on it and strikes a grandiose pose: "I have killed God! I am Death! Death is Caesar."

Chorus and Crowd. (turning and scurrying away--huddled in fleeing groups, crouching close to the ground like a multitude of terrified rats, their voices squeaky with fright)
Hail, Caesar! Hail to Death!
(They are gone.)[282]

The rest of the play is left with Caligula and Lazarus.

[282]Ibid., p. 479.

As pageant Lazarus Laughed was a success, the burden of the play being carried by two elements: Lazarus' philosophical arias, and the spectacular effects of crowd movements and colored lights.[283] As drama it is only a partial success, or even a failure, for a number of reasons, all having a bearing on the nature of the Chorus.

An important drawback involves the character of Lazarus. Considered as tragic hero rather than savior, he suffers from a curious and probably unique handicap: he has already fought the battle with himself that tragic heroes are customarily obliged to fight, and his inner peace is assured. He evokes no sympathy from the audience or from the Choruses. Nor do the Choruses, who are incapable of understanding the superhuman consciousness of Lazarus, evoke sympathy. The audience's grasp of the character of both Lazarus and the Choruses is uncertain, as is its grasp of the theme, as O'Neill indulges his tendency to set up abstract personalities (over-characterized by masks, costumes, and general description) and abstract issues. The Choruses he deprives of some of their life in order to present didactically a partially-formed religious concept.[284] The result in this play is a lack of focus: the point of view of the Choruses is inconsistent, and that of Lazarus at times is touched with the supernatural and at other times is simply vague, and is

[283] Francis Fergusson, "Melodramatist," O'Neill and His Plays, p. 278.

[284] John Gassner, "Homage to Eugene O'Neill," O'Neill and His Plays, p. 328.

therefore frequently incomprehensible. While O'Neill is successful in exploiting some matters of psychological import, he is unable to give artistic treatment to the ferment in religion, science, and existence.[285] There is some objection to the artist putting his talent at the disposal of the propagandist,[286] one critic calling it a tract in the guise of a play.[287]

Mention has already been made of the lack of variety in the naturalistic diction; it is difficult to envision any thinking audience participating in the pedestrian chants--there is barely time to absorb the effects of one violent episode before another one overwhelms, possibly accompanied by intolerably mechanical laughter, a melodramatic extravagance that a richer sense of humor would surely have prevented.[288]

These Choruses do present some background in their special characterizations and in their chants, but their purpose seems to be to provide a varied Roman audience for Lazarus, to lend some kind of resonance by a perpetual echo-echoed pattern, to provide spectacular action and spectacular tableaux, and to make manifest Lazarus' message that they are not yet ready to develop the god in themselves.

[285] Carl E. W. L. Dahlström, "Dynamo and Lazarus Laughed: Some Limitations," Modern Drama, III (December, 1960), 229.

[286] Clark, p. 119.

[287] Day, p. 305.

[288] Homer E. Woodbridge, "Beyond Melodrama," O'Neill and His Plays, p. 319.

The Choruses also foreshadow, keep to the tragic theme--man's fear of death--and in the aggregate do provide a universality. In addition, the Choral action presents one of the two major rhythms which occur simultaneously. Counterpointing the rhythm of Lazarus' steady progress from the flat level of common humanity to the high climax of godhood and stardusthood is the rhythm of the Choruses, an intermittent surging and receding, providing the effect of getting nowhere, an effect which O'Neill no doubt anticipated.

Perhaps one of O'Neill's main faults is that he tries to get too much into the plot, the situations, and the character-drawing; certainly the lengthiness of Lazarus Laughed tends to diffuse and weaken its dramatic force.[289] Coupled with this weakening of dramatic force is the insufficient resolution of the action of the play. O'Neill shows an understanding of man's infinite yearning and his limited possibilities, but he lacks the power or the desire to effect a great-spirited reconciliation of the two. In the last scene, protagonist and Choruses are gone, and what is left on stage is the mad, ambitious, vacillating, imperceptive Caligula.

[289] Gassner, The Theatre in Our Times, p. 43.

MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL (1935)

T. S. Eliot

The Chorus of Women of Canterbury is an unspecified number of working women who respect and admire Thomas Becket but are initially unwilling to be involved in the conflict arising from his differences with King Henry II. The subject of the drama is the homecoming and death of the Archbishop. The theme is the meaning of martyrdom. The dramatic conflict takes place not only in the immediate action, but in the minds of both Thomas and the Chorus.

As in Deirdre, at the heart of this drama is the Sophoclean combination of a strong, noble character and a crucial situation. This situation involves a moral and a religious problem, and deep spiritual suffering, not only on the part of the chief character but the Chorus also. In the classical style, the Choral odes organize and give rhythm to the action, either as preparation for events or as a supplement to them. All of the songs amplify and deepen the impression created by the action in the episodes, and more than that, taken consecutively, they lyrically manifest the working out of the theme in the lives of the Chorus.

Eliot constructs the drama in two parts, with an "Interlude" between. There are nine odes and one commos in which the Chorus participate with the Priests and the Tempters. Only once do the Chorus address someone on the stage directly: at the most crucial moment of the play they cry out to Thomas. Only twice are they themselves addressed: in the beginning the Priests admonish them; and later Thomas

tenders comfort in their time of deepest despair. The Chorus remain on stage throughout, fairly stationary, singing their odes almost as the Agamemnon Chorus does, following the "wheeling flight" of their own thoughts and giving, not a narrative, but a series of vivid thoughts.

The surface action of the story is simple. After seven years of self-exile in France, resulting from a period of conflict between him as Archbishop and King Henry II, Becket returns to England. He knows that his conviction that Church law is not subordinate to civil law must inevitably provoke Henry to silence him; but regardless of impending danger, Becket feels he must assume his duties as spiritual leader of England. This much is history, but from this point on Eliot draws an image of Becket which greatly simplifies the actual figure concerning whom historians are still divided as to whether he fought at the last for an ideal or for the humiliation of his opponent. In this play, just after he returns Becket is confronted with Four Tempters and overcomes all temptations, though the last one, the temptation to attain spiritual glory through martyrdom, shakes him. Having surrendered his will to the will of God, on Christmas day he delivers a sermon on the meaning of martyrdom. A few days later Four Knights come, somewhat drunk, ostensibly to carry out the will of King Henry. They face an Archbishop at peace with his conscience. Becket overlooks their personal insults while he counters their accusations and states his own cause clearly and without fear. After the murder, the Knights step forward to offer their specious arguments to the audience, justifying their actions and insinuating

that the contemporary audience is enjoying the fruits of their act. The Priests then assess the outcome of the murder intellectually, while the Chorus of the Women of Canterbury manifest the outcome emotionally.

Continuously in the center of the play, either physically or spiritually, Becket is a man of heroic stature and keen sensitivity who develops a keener comprehension of the spiritual situation as it builds up to the climax of a terrifying temptation and his decision. Never separate from the primary action, but absolutely integrated with it is a "kind of doubleness in the action" made manifest by the Chorus. The Chorus is of the "type of common man" who is unconsciously sensitive to the spiritual situation, aware of his "humble and tarnished frame of existence" but preferring that to upheaval. The play, therefore, has an underlying pattern of the spiritual progress of the Chorus.[290]

The two issues discussed in Murder in the Cathedral are, first, the persistent conflict between the values of the world and those of the spirit, and second, the idea of redemption from sin through the death of a martyr.

The language of the Chorus is the lyric, ambiguous, rhythmic, symbolist poetry of The Wasteland, generally iambic although Eliot avoids pentameter in lines of greatly varying length. The language of the Knights is at first iambic, then a colloquial prose. Unlike the other groups, the Chorus speak in unison. The poetic texture of the

[290]W. H. Mason, Murder in the Cathedral: T. S. Eliot (New York, 1962), p. 6.

odes merits examination in more detail than the scope of this paper allows, but wherever necessary, the odes are given a fairly full interpretation.

The cast of characters in order of their appearance is as follows:

A Chorus of the Women of Canterbury;
Three Priests of the Cathedral;
A Messenger;
Archbishop Thomas Becket;
Four Tempters;
Four Knights;
Attendants.

Part I takes place in the Archbishop's Hall on December 2, 1170; the Interlude in which Thomas delivers his Christmas sermon is set in the Cathedral; Part II takes place on December 29th, the first scene in the Archbishop's Hall and the second a short time later in the Cathedral.

The Women of Canterbury are on the stage as the drama begins. The first ode sets the time, place, background, and impending action. It opens in a mood of reluctant expectation and uncertainty as these Women are drawn to the steps of the Cathedral, almost against their will. They fear involvement in something they do not themselves understand:

Here let us stand, close by the cathedral. Here
  let us wait.
Are we drawn by danger? Is it the knowledge of
  safety that draws our feet
Towards the cathedral? What danger can be
For us, the poor, the poor women of Canterbury?
  What tribulation
With which we are not already familiar? There
  is no danger
For us, and there is no safety in the cathedral.
  Some presage of an act

> Which our eyes are compelled to witness, has
> forced our feet
> Towards the cathedral. We are forced to bear
> witness.[291]

Twice that "For us" is emphasized at the beginning of a line. They are, so they tell themselves, present merely as lookers-on. Quickly the atmosphere of strain and expectancy is evoked by a simple visual image being loaded from line to line with more and more significance:[292]

> The New Year waits, breathes, waits, whispers
> in darkness.
> While the labourer kicks off a muddy boot and
> stretches his hand to the fire,
> The New Year waits, destiny waits for the coming.
> Who has stretched out his hand to the fire and
> remembered the Saints at All Hallows,
> Remembered the martyrs and saints who wait? And
> who shall
> Stretch out his hand to the fire, and deny his
> master?[293]

The interest shifts from Peter (and Christ) to Thomas. They characterize Thomas as one who "was always kind to his people," but they fear that "it would not be well if he should return." It becomes clear that it is he whom the danger threatens directly, but the Chorus is tremulous at the thought of business and private peace interfered with.[294]

[291]T. S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral (New York, 1935), p. 11.

[292]John Peter, "Murder in the Cathedral," The Sewanee Review, LXI (Summer, 1953), 367.

[293]Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, pp. 11-12.

[294]Marianne Moore, "If I Am Worthy, There is No Danger," Poetry, XLVII (February, 1936), 279.

Fearing disruption of their routine of existence, they want to avoid being implicated in the dangerous actions afoot--"we are content if we are left alone." Like the laborer who "bends to his own piece of earth, earth colour, his own colour," they prefer to efface themselves, seeking a "peace" which is only the refuge of animals.[295] To appreciate this fully is crucial, for it is in terms of the modification of this attitude that much of the significance of the "murder" is embodied and expressed. Salvation is presented, not by talking about it but by showing it operating in the consciousness of the Chorus[296] as these Women come to represent the religious conscience of humanity.[297]

Clusters of imagery throughout the play reflect a cycle of the seasons, relevant to a drama which presents a cycle of spiritual experience.[298] Now the Women characterize the land as being a physical wasteland, become "brown sharp points of death in a waste of water and mud," and they fear further disturbance, winter "bringing death from the sea," "ruinous spring," "disastrous summer," and another "decaying October." They do not perceive that their reliance upon a worldly order alone is a parallel spiritual wasteland.

Now as prophetic Chorus they speak:

[295] Louis Martz, "The Wheel and the Point: Aspect of Imagery and Theme in Eliot's Later Poetry," T. S. Eliot; A Selected Critique, ed. Leonard Unger (New York, 1948), p. 446.

[296] Peter, p. 368.

[297] Martz, p. 461.

[298] Mason, p. 67.

> Some malady is coming upon us. We wait, we wait,
> And the saints and martyrs wait, for those who
> shall be martyrs and saints.
> Destiny waits in the hand of God, shaping the
> still unshapen:
> I have seen these things in a shaft of sunlight.
> Destiny waits in the hands of God, not in the
> hands of statesmen
> Who do, some well, some ill, planning and guessing,
> Having their aims which turn in their hands in the
> pattern of time.
> Come, happy December, who shall observe you, who
> shall preserve you?
> Shall the Son of Man be born again in the litter
> of scorn?
> For us, the poor, there is no action,
> But only to wait and to witness.[299]

For all its specificity, the concluding apostrophe to December is wide enough to suggest Thomas' own case and the redemption which is in turn to be made possible through his martyrdom.[300] The Chorus have only a fleeting intuition of the ominous event that "waits in the hand of God," but ironically they reiterate the word "witness," not knowing that "martyr" in Greek means "witness."[301]

The second ode continues to build up an atmosphere of apprehension. As the Chorus had fallen silent after the first ode, the Priests had entered, deploring the ceaseless intrigues, the violence, and the corruption under the rule of the King or the Barons. The First Priest makes an almost

[299] Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, p. 13.

[300] Peter, p. 368.

[301] Paul M. Cubeta, Modern Drama for Analysis (New York, 1963), p. 440.

offhand remark which foreshadows the inner panic the Chorus will experience during the temptation of Thomas:

> Shall these things not end
> Until the poor at the gate
> Have forgotten their friend, their Father in God,
> have forgotten
> That they had a friend?[302]

Unlike the Chorus, the Priests welcome the news the Messenger brings of Thomas' impending arrival; they will welcome Thomas whatever the outcome.

In sharp contrast, the Chorus cry out against change in their second ode. They know that the present is perilous and that Thomas' return will not be for the better.

> Ill the wind, ill the time, uncertain the profit,
> certain the danger . . .
> O Thomas, return, Archbishop; return, return to
> France.
> Return. Quickly. Quietly. Leave us to perish in
> quiet.
> You come with applause, you come with rejoicing,
> but you come bringing death into Canterbury;
> A doom on the house, a doom on yourself, a doom
> on the world.
> We do not wish anything to happen.
> Seven years we have lived quietly.
> Succeeded in avoiding notice,
> Living and partly living. . . .[303]

The Chorus have become accustomed to an animal existence. This they can handle. They have known secret personal fears in the past, but now they are gripped by a communal fear which none understand. They plead with Thomas to realize "The strain on the brain of the small folk who stand to

[302] Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, p. 14.
[303] Ibid., p. 18.

the doom of the house, the doom of their lord, the doom of the world. . . ."[304] At this stage they see Thomas as heroic in stature, sure of his purpose and equal to his fate. They beg him to return to France.

As the ode closes, the Second Priest reprimands them for being "foolish, immodest and babbling women" who, while the crowds are cheering, go on "croaking like frogs in the treetops," and urges that despite their "craven apprehension," they at least put on a pleasant face to welcome the Archbishop when he comes. Thomas has already entered without their knowledge. In an opening speech which gathers significance as the drama progresses, Thomas gently admonishes the Priest:

> Peace. And let them be, in their exaltation.
> They speak better than they know, and beyond your understanding.
> They know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer.
> They know and do not know, that action is suffering
> And suffering is action. Neither does the agent suffer
> Nor the patient act. But both are fixed
> In an eternal action, an eternal patience
> To which all must consent that it may be willed
> And which all must suffer that they may will it,
> That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is the action
> And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and still
> Be forever still.[305]

The whole passage is kept deliberately ambiguous; it will be

[304] Ibid., p. 18.

[305] Ibid., p. 21.

spoken again a little later on, when Thomas faces the Fourth Tempter, without seeming irrelevant there.[306] The opening word, "peace," in the Christmas sermon will itself become synonymous with martyrdom. These Women seem unconsciously to know they are fated to bear witness to martyrdom; they do not know their part in the eternal plan. When they do, the double meaning in the word "suffer" will become apparent. To suffer is not simply to undergo pain; it is also to permit and to consent; he who consents to an action, who suffers it, must accept responsibility for it. Later they will "suffer" the martyrdom, thus accepting their part in the eternal plan which is the means to their salvation.

As the Chorus listen to Thomas' rueful comments after turning down the first two temptations, they realize that they have themselves been willing to be only partly conscious, "to live and partly live"; they have been willing also to settle for worldly order, even though aware that "some malady" is coming upon them. When Thomas turns down the third temptation, refusing to crush the Kingly power he helped build, and comments, ". . . if I break, I must break myself alone," the Chorus are coming to the frightening realization that if Thomas breaks, it will not be he alone who fails. Up to now they have not thought of Thomas as being anything but "secure and assured in his fate." They have not anticipated Thomas' inner struggle over the fourth temptation. The Fourth Tempter, having confused Thomas with obliquities, then gives him explicit

[306] Peter, p. 370.

advice: "Seek the way of martyrdom, make yourself the lowest on earth, to be high in heaven." Thomas begins to see what this temptation involves--an ultimate martyrdom through hypocrisy and the path of ultimate damnation. He bursts out with a cry that the Tempter is tempting "with my own desires," offering "dreams to damnation." With the Tempter's retort that Thomas has often dreamt them, Thomas appeals to be freed from the damning weight of his pride and cries out in despair, "Can I neither act nor suffer without perdition?" We reach a point almost bloodcurdling[307] when the Tempter quotes to Thomas his own words spoken earlier, "You know and do not know . . ." Thomas' lonely and terrifying inner struggle at this point is the crux of the play, and in this moment he is silent. Other characters intone a series of passages of despair, disillusionment, fear, and finally panic.

In their third ode, a short one, the Chorus with shuddering apprehension respond first to Thomas' strife as their senses are assailed by forces of evil and despair:

> There is no rest in the house. There is no rest in the street.
> I hear restless movement of feet. And the air is heavy and thick.
> Thick and heavy the sky. And the earth presses up against our feet.
> What is the sickly smell, the vapor? The dark green light from a cloud on a withered tree? The earth is heaving to parturition of issue of hell. What is the sticky dew that forms on the back of my hand?[308]

[307] Ibid., p. 366.

[308] Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, pp. 40-41.

As Thomas remains locked in his anguished dilemma, the Four Tempters, one of whom has seemed to be the objectification of Becket's unacknowledged thoughts, denounce man's life as a cheat and a disappointment and harshly characterize Thomas as "the enemy of society, enemy of himself." The Priests in their turn now fearfully express their wavering confidence in Thomas' course, urging him to consider whether this may not be the time to flee to France. Then Chorus, Priests and Tempters join in a commos which shows how dramatic an emotion the expectation of death can be:

Chorus: Is it the owl that calls, or a signal between the trees?
Priests: Is the window-bar made fast, is the door under lock and bolt?
Tempters: Is it rain that taps at the window, is it wind that pokes at the door?
Chorus: Does the torch flame in the hall, the candle in the room?
Priests: Does the watchman walk by the wall?
Tempters: Does the mastiff prowl by the gate?
Chorus: Death has a hundred hands and walks by a thousand ways.
Priests: He may come in the sight of all, he may pass unseen unheard.
Tempters: Come whispering through the ear, or a sudden shock on the skull.
Chorus: A man may walk with a lamp at night, and yet be drowned in a ditch.
Priests: A man may climb the stair in the day, and slip on a broken step.
Tempters: A man may sit at meat, and feel the cold in his groin.[309]

To this rising crescendo the Chorus in their fourth ode lend a despairing cry. In the past they have known oppression and torture, extortion and violence, destitution and disease,

[309] Ibid., p. 42.

and yet have gone on "living and partly living"; but now they are in panic that in the conflict ". . . God is leaving us, more pang, more pain than birth or death." Image after image suggests a single sense of horror and terror, ending with:

> O Thomas Archbishop, save us, save us, save
> yourself that we may be saved:
> Destroy yourself and we are destroyed.[310]

It is with their last cry, identifying their own balance between hope and despair with his decision, that resolution breaks across Thomas' hesitancy:

> Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain:
> Temptation shall not come in this kind again.
> The last temptation is the greatest treason:
> To do the right deed for the wrong reason.[311]

The purification of Becket's motives, the main moral action of the play, is invisible and inaudible.[312] He realizes that no longer is his decision personal or autonymous. Included in the integrity with which he must resolve the struggle in his own conscience is the spiritual integrity and well-being of the whole Church, and particularly of these members of it, the Women of Canterbury.[313] Thomas has won through to the recognition that no man can will his way to martyrdom. After summing up the roles he has played in life, ending with this last one, servant of God, Thomas

[310] Ibid., p. 44.

[311] Ibid.

[312] Hugh Kenner, The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot (New York, 1959), p. 280.

[313] Peter, p. 374.

addresses the theater audience briefly, reminding them of their communal responsibility, of the responsibility of every individual for the sins of the society to which he belongs:

> . . . for every evil, every sacrilege,
> Crime, wrong, oppression and the axe's edge,
> Indifference, exploitation, you, and you,
> And you, must all be punished. So must you.[314]

Then the curtain falls on a scene in which Thomas submits his will to the will of God:

> Now, my Good Angel, whom God appoints
> To be my guardian, hover over the swords' points.[315]

The fundamental implications of the action are now clearly before us and it only remains for the dramatist to show the factual outcome of the inward struggle, Thomas' visible death, and equally important, its effects.

The short scene of the Interlude is enriched by a sort of duality as Thomas addresses his remarks both to his hypothetical congregation, the Chorus, and to the audience. He speaks pregnantly, revealing himself secure in a deeper reliance on God's will, as he draws from the celebration of the Christmas Mass the meaning of martyrdom, which involves both rejoicing and mourning:

> Just as we rejoice and mourn at once, in the Birth and in the Passion of Our Lord; so also, in a smaller figure, we both rejoice and mourn in the death of martyrs. We mourn, for the sins of the world that has martyred them; we rejoice, that another soul is numbered among the Saints in Heaven for the glory of God and for the salvation of men.[316]

[314] Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, p. 46.

[315] Ibid., p. 47.

[316] Ibid., p. 49.

He points out that the "peace" which was given to the Apostles turned out to be not peace as the world gives, but martyrdom. The whole meaning of Thomas's self-abnegation, and of the fourth temptation is explained: A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for Saints are not made by accident. Still less is a Christian martyrdom the effect of a man's will to become a saint, as a man by willing and contriving may become a ruler of men:[317]

> A martyrdom is always the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways. It is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr.[318]

After this a personal note is allowed to sound and the scene comes naturally to its conclusion.

The fifth ode, the opening lines of Part II, strengthens the play's unity by showing the effect of Becket's sermon on the Chorus. The Women of Canterbury are in a state of apprehensive suspension, waiting, wondering symbolically if the spring will be bitter or if the soil will be invigorated with new life. No longer do they call to Thomas to "leave us be." They wait.[319]

As the Chorus watch, in a rich display of spectacle to indicate the passing of four days, the Priests enter,

[317] Peter, p. 375.

[318] Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, p. 49.

[319] Cubeta, p. 440.

chanting from the Introits and carrying religious banners denoting the feast-days of St. Stephen, St. John the Apostle, and the Holy Innocents. Each of the Priests touches on the theme of martyrdom, implying in the background a deeply involved Thomas offering himself to redeem sin, his own and that of others. The fourth day, like any other day, the Priests intone, may in retrospect turn out to be a critical moment when the "eternal design" appeared. Now, with the interest fixed upon the fourth day after Christmas, as yet unsanctified, the Knights enter for the first time, and the banners disappear.

The sixth ode, sung just after the Knights and Thomas have left the stage, immeasurably heightens the dramatic tension of their first clash. The Knights have characterized themselves by their scurrilous scolding and blaspheming of Becket to his face:

> This is the man who was a tradesman's son: the backstairs brat who was born in Cheapside;
> This is the creature that crawled upon the King; swollen with blood and swollen with pride.
> Creeping out of the London dirt,
> Crawling up like a louse on your shirt,
> The man who cheated, swindled, lied; broke his oath and betrayed his King.[320]

Thomas, overlooking personal insults, had examined and refuted their charges, neither provoking violence nor flinching under threats. With what they had insisted to be the King's command, banishment, he had refused to comply: "Never again you must make no doubt,/ Shall the

[320]Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, p. 57.

sea run between the shepherd and his fold."[321] Thomas had left; then the Knights had also, threatening to return with swords, not words. The ode which the Chorus sings at this point is an extremely powerful passage crammed with horrifying imagery from the animal world to punctuate the situation.[322] It begins with the tormented cry, "I have smelt them, the death-bringers, senses are quickened / By subtle forebodings . . ."[323]

The Chorus create a nightmare vision of a universe corrupt and polluted, without order, and "out of time," expressed in the best way in which the "type of common man" can realize it, by all the quickened senses. The agony of the Women here, as the sexual imagery shows, comes from recognizing the degradation of humanity into the animal.[324]

In medieval tradition, the ordered world of nature is an expression of God's will, and here the imagery shows utter disruption of that order.[325] The order of time is abolished: the "merry fluting" of a summer afternoon is heard at night mingled with the owl's "hollow note of death." Bats, with the huge scaly wings of Lucifer, slant over the noon sky. The creative mind of God and Man is gone; the scavengers and the least sensitive, least conscious forms of life take over.[326] The threat of death exists even in

[321] Ibid., p. 62.
[322] Peter, p. 377.
[323] Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, p. 63.
[324] Martz, p. 454.
[325] Mason, p. 67.
[326] Martz, p. 458.

the most delicate flowers: "I have smelt / Death in the rose, death in the hollyhock, sweet pea, hyacinth, primrose and cowslip." And with this disorder and degradation humanity feels its involvement: "I have lain on the floor of the sea and breathed with the breathing of the sea-anemone, swallowed with ingurgitation of the sponge." And the image of "a pattern of living worms / In the guts of the women of Canterbury" reaffirms at an even deeper level that all evil is one and that the Women of Canterbury are caught in those "Rings of light coiling downwards, descending / To the horror of the ape."

But paradoxically, these Women are saved, not lost, by such a vision, for here gradually emerges the human consciousness at its highest intensity. The disorder of the first two-thirds of this Choral passage, with its long, irresolute lines, changes to a balanced order of versification, phrasing, and thought as the Chorus recognize their responsibility:[327]

> . . . Have I not known not known
> What was coming to be? It was here, in the
> kitchen, in the passage,
> In the mews in the barn in the byre in the
> market place
> In our veins our bowels our skulls as well
> As well as in the plottings of potentates
> As well as in the consultations of powers.[328]

They recognize their deep guilt. Since they have done nothing to prevent the imminent murder of their archbishop,

[327] Ibid.

[328] Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, p. 65

they have by implication consented to it:[329]

> I have smelt them, the death-bringers; now
> is too late
> For action, too soon for contrition.
> Nothing is possible but the shamed swoon
> Of those consenting to the last humiliation.
> I have consented, Lord Archbishop, have
> consented.[330]

In suffering their Lord to die, they feel "torn away" from the source of light. They recognize the deep need for a mediator.[331] "O Lord Archbishop, O Thomas Archbishop, forgive us, forgive us, pray for us that we may pray for you out of our shame."[332]

As the Chorus acknowledge moral responsibility, the rhythms of the poetry grow certain and ordered like those of Thomas, who enters now and for the first and only time speaks to them:

> Peace, and be at peace with your thoughts and
> visions.
> These things had to come to you and you to
> accept them.
> This is your share of the eternal burden,
> The perpetual glory. This is one moment,
> But know that another
> Shall pierce you with a sudden painful joy
> When the figure of God's purpose is made
> complete.[333]

Both the action and the suffering are part of the "eternal

[329] Cubeta, p. 440.

[330] Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, p. 65.

[331] Martz, p. 454.

[332] Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, p. 66.

[333] Ibid.

action" to which all must consent, that it may be willed. Now the Chorus stand and wait, not as they did at the opening of the play, but as Becket does now, yielding their will to the Divine purpose.[334]

The seventh ode is sung just after the Priests, alarmed for Thomas and despite his protests, have dragged him off to the cathedral. The scene changes during the ode. In these moments before Becket's murder, while a Dies Irae is sung in Latin by a choir in the distance, these Women sink to the nadir of absolute negation, futility, and despair.[335] The passage begins:

> Numb the hand and dry the eyelid,
> Still the horror, but more horror
> Than when tearing in the belly.[336]

Religious purgation leads the Chorus down through the stage of utter disgust with the physical until they reach at the bottom a state of vacancy, where sense and spirit alike are momentarily nullified. Detached from the world to face "a moment of reality" they see a vision of utter destruction which is really, although they do not know it, the road to exaltation.[337] Beyond death and judgment they see only:

> Emptiness, absence, separation from God;
> The horror of the effortless journey, to the
> empty land
> This is no land, only emptiness, absence, the
> Void . . .[338]

[334] Cubeta, p. 441.
[335] Ibid.
[336] Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, p. 68.
[337] Martz, pp. 455-456.
[338] Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, p. 69.

It is this state which the Chorus will describe in its final chant as "the loneliness of the night of God, the surrender required, the deprivation inflicted."[339] The soul sees itself "foully united forever, nothing with nothing," and who will intercede? In agony they turn to Christ, whose sacrifice is about to be renewed in Thomas' martyrdom:

> Dead upon the tree, my Savior,
> Let not be in vain Thy labor;
> Help me, Lord, in my last fear.
>
> Dust I am, to dust am bending,
> From the final doom impending,
> Help me, Lord, for death is near.[340]

This simple plea from Thomas' spiritual dependents might almost reflect the thought of Thomas at this moment, but is in contrast with the climate of his mind: Thomas is serene in the knowledge that for him "all things proceed to a joyful consummation."[341] For the Chorus, this is their lowest point, from which they can only turn upwards to grace.[342]

In the cathedral the Priests beg Thomas to bar the door against "beasts with the souls of damned men," but Thomas commands the door be opened. He overrides their vociferous protests with:

> We are not here to triumph by fighting, by
> stratagem, or by resistance,
> Nor to fight with beasts as men. We have
> fought the beast

[339] Martz, p. 455.
[340] Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, p. 69.
[341] Ibid., p. 68.
[342] Martz, p. 455.

> And have conquered. We have only to conquer
> Now, by suffering. This is the easier victory.
> Now is the triumph of the Cross, now
> Open the door![343]

Both the Chorus and Thomas have conquered the beast and now must conquer by "suffering," in both senses of the word. The door is opened and the Knights enter, slightly tipsy. The blasphemy of the Knights' deeds is underscored by the fact that they advance to their bloodshed with phrases borrowed from spirituals and revival hymns in a grotesque parody, just after the Chorus have voiced a despairing passage in the cadences of a Dies Irae.[344] To the strains of a spiritual of Daniel in the lion's den they taunt scornfully, "Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?" "Come down Daniel to the lion's den," they jeer. The saving rain of blood which the Chorus are about to experience is anticipated in Thomas' response:

> It is the just man who
> Like a bold lion, should be without fear.
> I am here.
> No traitor to the King. I am a priest,
> A Christian, saved by the blood of Christ,
> Ready to suffer with my blood.
> This is the sign of the Church always,
> The sign of blood. Blood for blood.
> His blood given to buy my life,
> My blood given to pay for His death,
> My death for His death.[345]

The Knights demand Thomas "absolve those excommunicated, resign powers arrogated, restore money appropriated, renew

[343] Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, pp. 71-72.

[344] F. O. Matthiessen, The Achievement of T. S. Eliot (New York, 1959), p. 164.

[345] Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, pp. 72-73.

obedience violated." Thomas' reply is that they are the traitors and he is ready to die for the Lord, and the peace and liberty of the Church. Just before the Knights rush him he commends to God and the Saints his cause and that of the Church. While the Knights kill him the Chorus express their horror and revulsion in a profoundly moving passage.

The eighth ode begins:

> Clear the air! clean the sky! wash the wind!
> take stone from stone and wash them.
> The land is foul, the water is foul, our beasts
> and ourselves defiled with blood.
> A rain of blood has blinded my eyes.[346]

The Chorus make an anguished confession of their guilt, into which they weave fragments of their earlier dialogue, now seen with deeper insight, "We did not wish anything to happen," "living and partly living." Every private horror, every sorrow had a kind of end before now, but this horror is out of life, out of time, "an instant eternity of evil and wrong."

> We are soiled by a filth that we cannot clean,
> united to supernatural vermin.
> It is not we alone, it is not the house, it is
> not the city that is defiled,
> But the world that is wholly foul.
> Clear the air! clean the sky! wash the wind!
> take the stone from the stone, take the skin
> from the arm, take the muscle from the bone,
> and wash them. Wash the stone, wash the bone,
> wash the brain, wash the soul, wash them, wash
> them![347]

[346] Ibid., p. 74.

[347] Ibid., p. 75.

The Women are on the upward way, but at this point they misunderstand, "they know and do not know." The blood of Becket is purification, not defilement, for those who are contrite and ask for cleansing. The rain of blood is akin to Eliot's usual symbol of redemption, the water for which The Waste Land cries.[348]

The Chorus had begun the action fearing a conscious life; they had seen some things "in a shaft of sunlight" but had tried to avoid the illumination. Now salvation comes to them through the gradual growth of consciousness and acknowledgement of sin.[349]

After the murder of Becket and recitation of one of the most exalted Choral passages in the play, Eliot demonstrates a striking example of his skill in offering grand contrast in tone and action. The Knights turn to the audience and, dropping into the prose of modern debate, proceed to justify their deed by all the rationalizations of expediency.[350] Eliot does not deny his Third Knight a chance to score against the twentieth-century audience:

> But, if you have now arrived at a just subordination of the pretention of the Church to the welfare of the State, remember that it is we who took the first step.[351]

This is the one part of the Knight's speeches the audience is likely to take seriously. Eliot is sarcastic but not bitter as he satirizes the audience in the murderers' attitude to their deed. They conclude their speech with the

[348] Martz, pp. 456-457.

[349] Ibid., p. 456.

[350] Matthiessen, p. 164.

[351] Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, p. 80.

assertion that it was obvious the Archbishop had used every means of provocation, had determined upon death by martyrdom, and the manner of his death could not but receive the verdict "Suicide while of Unsound Mind."

These speeches of the Knights serve at least three useful ends: first, simply, they hold the attention and help disguise the faint touch of anti-climax which just here might otherwise be felt; secondly, and more substantially, they serve to show us a broad clash of values and an inherent, conquering strength in those which usually seem most nebulous, the values of religion; and thirdly, and more simply again, they allow a pause to intervene between the initial revulsion heard in the penultimate Choral passage and the tone of reconciliation that we find in the last.[352]

When the Knights have finished speaking and have left, we feel sincerity in a deeper dimension return with a perceptible jar in the speeches of the Priests and the Chorus. The theme is stated quite fully in the speeches of the Priests and there is, in a factual sense, little to add to these. They explain how the Church has been strengthened by Thomas' death, how the Knights have been reduced to spiritual suicide, how the Archbishop is already translated. But there is, as yet, no emotional resolution. This comes from the Chorus.[353]

The last ode is accompanied by a Te Deum sung in Latin

[352] Peter, p. 379.

[353] Ibid., p. 368.

by a choir in the distance. Now the Chorus, like Thomas, have their illumination. For the first time they become resonantly affirmative, sounding their praises of God in terms of a Creation that has lost all its frightfulness. The purring leopard, the patting ape, the waiting hyena--these are all recognized as necessary units in an intelligible whole, implying, even by negation, the glory of God: "The darkness declares the glory of light." They recognize that all things affirm God in living.[354] Echoing all the seasonal and natural imagery of the drama, they affirm the spiritual regeneration of the earth through "the blood of Thy martyrs and saints." In strong liturgical rhythms, in homely detail, these laborers no longer seek to efface themselves but acknowledge their involvement in evil and sorrow. They see their part in the "eternal design," thanking God.[355]

> Therefore man, whom Thou has made to be conscious of Thee, must consciously praise Thee, in thought and in word and in deed.
> Even with the hand to the broom, the back bent in laying the fire, the knee bent in cleaning the hearth, we, the scrubbers and sweepers of Canterbury,
> The back bent under toil, the knee bent under sin, the hands to the face under fear, the head bent under grief,
> Even to us the voices of seasons, the snuffle of winter, the song of spring, the drone of summer, the voices of beasts and of birds, praise Thee.
> We thank Thee for Thy mercies of blood, for Thy redemption by blood.[356]

[354] Ibid., p. 379.

[355] Ibid.

[356] Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, p. 84.

Once again the martyr has redeemed the crumbling faith, and now the Chorus are free to sing triumphantly of what before they had so dreaded: the act of death and the benison proceeding from it. In a profoundly moving act of contrition they acknowledge "the sin of the world is upon our heads" and the blood of the martyr also, whose sacrifice is made for them as "type of common man." Gradually they build a firm statement of a recaptured peace. Their voices fall silent upon an impressive epitome: "Blessed Thomas, pray for us." Only by virtue of his martyrdom is Thomas "Blessed"; only by virtue of what they flinched from do the Women of Canterbury now have an intermediary and advocate with God.[357]

In this play written for the Canterbury Festival, as Eliot reintegrates drama into the framework of ritual, his peculiar power resides in the way he depicts through the sensuous presence of persons, particularly the Chorus, the reality of the spirit and its religious experience.[358] He succeeds in presenting the concept that men must learn by suffering and that only by accepting responsibility for sin and atoning for it does man find redemption and spiritual peace. A fellow poet says of Eliot that he "steps so reverently on the solemn ground he has assayed that austerity assumes the dignity of philosophy and the didacticism of the verities incorporated in the play becomes impersonal and persuasive."[359]

Eliot makes his Chorus an indispensable part of the

[357] Peter, p. 380.

[358] Peacock, pp. 10-12.

[359] Moore, p. 281.

play. The great strength of the play, in fact, lies in its convincing dramatic presentation of the spiritual conflict--the tension in the struggle with self--of both Thomas and the Chorus.[360] This Chorus of the Women of Canterbury, like an effective Greek Chorus, perceive how the outcome of the action manifests the operation of divine law in human life.

Looking back on Murder in the Cathedral in 1951, Eliot modestly and rather apologetically admits depending heavily upon the assistance of the Chorus. This was because the essential action of the play, both the historical facts and the matter he invented was "somewhat limited." And he adds, "The introduction of the Chorus of excited and sometimes hysterical women, reflecting in their emotion the significance of the action helped wonderfully." As a poet new to the theater, he felt much more at home in Choral verse than in dramatic dialogue, which helps explain his extended use of the Chorus and its exceptional quality.[361] Eliot made particularly good use of the Chorus as a dramatic audience projecting their response to the theater audience, particularly in Thomas' struggle with temptation, in his sermon, and in his murder; the stirring effect of this response is intensified by Eliot's masterly use of potent music that contributes directly to the theme of the play.

The play unites good theater and good poetry, blending two elements that at first one might think incompatible--

[360] Peacock, pp. 16-17.

[361] Mason, p. 55.

the liturgical and the homely--with the speeches of the Chorus as especially fine examples of the blending.[362] This is an example of how Eliot in this play has not only made a contribution towards reshaping the language of poetry but towards a new extension of modern poetry by an extension of the world it portrays. This play is a confirmation of Eliot's faith in poetic drama as a rich resource for transcending "the ephemeral and superficial" and for getting at the permanent and universal while concentrating on the permanent struggles of human beings--struggles significant in that only through them is character revealed.[363]

In characterizing the protagonist, Eliot makes good use of the Chorus. They keep the thought of Thomas in the foreground, always staying close to the theme of God's design in martyrdom. They provide a good contrast to him, his steadying influence being a perfect foil to the violent emotions that easily erupt through their own surface calm. It is Becket who initiates decisions that appeal mainly to the intellect and the Chorus that responds to them emotionally. The communal fear, cowardice, and evasiveness which crops up in the Chorus sets Becket's heroic personality in a frame which isolates it and makes it more impressive. Yet as the Voice of the common man the Chorus rise to the occasion and prove themselves courageous in suffering.

Although Eliot was addressing a special audience, he had not given up his idea expressed in 1933 of communication with the public at many levels; for everyone there is the

[362] Mason, p. 65.

[363] Matthiessen, p. 170.

expectation (we can hardly call it a plot) and ominous atmosphere of murder and death; for others the conflict, not of character, but of forces characterized in individual types; for others appreciation of words, for others the strong rhythms; for others the tragedy or the triumph of faith at the hands of the world; and for others the gradually unfolding meaning in the profound and ambiguous revelation of the meaning of martyrdom as seen in certain speeches of Thomas and in the Choruses of the Women of Canterbury.[364] In this latter revelation, Murder in the Cathedral rises to Eliot's exacting demand of verse drama, that it present an indisseverable double pattern of action, one of them the pattern of the surface action, which should be perfectly intelligible, and the other a musical underpattern in the poetry, which intensifies our excitement by reinforcing it with a feeling from a deeper and less articulate level.[365]

This Chorus is highly effective in establishing, sustaining, and reflecting mood, especially as it avails itself of a fine imagery which deepens the imaginative significance of the play simply and powerfully. The drama itself is imagined with intense emotion and demands heightened speech, yet the vocabulary, idiom, and rhythm of the language is wholly of our time. Eliot shows a fine dexterity throughout in organizing his speeches according to natural breath lengths. Felicitously he overlays everyday speech with delicate tones of poetry, demonstrating an achievement of the

[364] R. P. Blackmur, "T. S. Eliot: From 'Ash Wednesday' to Murder in the Cathedral," T. S. Eliot: A Selected Critique, p. 259.

[365] Matthiessen, p. 157.

new music of dramatic language he sought. In language that is for the most part precise and lucid (as is usual in Eliot's writing, some of the poetry is wrapped in mystery, elusiveness, and enigma), Eliot shows himself the master of the compressed insight, the sudden illumination, the felt comparison, the seminal suggestion, and the stable point of view. His verse shows dramatic concentration, resonance, variety through stylized patterns, and a "somber magnificence" in the Choral odes. It is poetry that allows the poet to unfold the life of the spirit as it recovers for drama "inwardness of detail in psychological portraiture."[366]

Always the language is dramatically relevant. The passages of the Chorus, for example, are always modulated to the changing experience of the Chorus so that the dramatic moment is realized in the verse itself, and as in the plays of Shakespeare's maturity as well as those of classical drama, the poetry fulfills the drama.[367]

At the time of writing Murder in the Cathedral, Eliot wanted his audience to know it was poetry they were listening to. It is interesting to note that some fifteen years later, like Yeats, he revised his ideas about poetry in drama. He saw much of the versification of the dialogue in Murder in the Cathedral as having only "negative merit," since the aim for poetic drama should be "to bring poetry into the world in which the audience lives and to which it returns when it leaves the theatre; not to transport it into some

[366] Peacock, p. 10.

[367] Mason, pp. 5-6.

imaginary world totally unlike its own, an unreal world in which poetry is tolerated."[368] Eliot did not elaborate further, but certainly his later dramas were different--not better, but different.

Not all of the criticism of Murder in the Cathedral was favorable, naturally. One adverse criticism involves the quality of the Choral odes and another their delivery. One critic finds the Choral passages "accumulating epithets around a single emotion," with no stable tone, and squandering dozens of arresting phrases in a "tumult of unfocused concern." He also mentions Ezra Pound's scoring of the "cawkney woices" of the Chorus as he listened to a radio broadcast of the play.[369]

A criticism to be expected of the play was that within its limits it is a masterpiece, but theology must always be thin on any stage,[370] and that the author's eloquent "ritual incantation" belongs more in the church than in the modern theater.[371] True, theology and religious ritual do normally belong in the church, but the enthusiastic reception of this play in packed public theaters seems to indicate that it meets Eliot's test for a religious play, which is that it arouses the excitement of people who are not necessarily religious.[372] Before Murder in the Cathedral is anything else, it is dramatic art.

[368] Ibid., p. 64.

[369] Kenner, p. 283.

[370] Herbert J. Muller, The Spirit of Tragedy (New York, 1956), p. 417.

[371] Gassner, The Theatre in Our Times, p. 60.

[372] T. S. Eliot, "A Dialogue of Dramatic Poetry, 1928," Selected Essays (London, 1934), p. 58.

OUR TOWN (1938)

Thornton Wilder

The Chorus of Our Town is a single individual called "Stage Manager," yet he is a collective personality in that he also plays the role of three other characters: Mrs. Forrest, an incidental character with one unimportant comment; Mr. Morgan, the druggist; and the Minister. The subject of the play is life in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire. The theme of the play is the life in life,[373] or as Brooks Atkinson expresses it, "the days and deaths of the brotherhood of man."[374] Wilder himself calls it "an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life."[375]

The story is told in flashback. The stage incidents had actually taken place about a generation before. The Chorus, speaking directly to the audience in the manner of a contemporary master of ceremonies, narrates that part of the play which is not dramatized. As Stage Manager, host, homespun philosopher and friend to the spectators, mainly from the vantage point of the right proscenium pillar, intermittently the Chorus sets the scene and signals its end, sometimes with a word of thanks to the actors. He interprets the action to the audience--any characters on the stage at the time conventionally not hearing--and moves

[373] John Gassner, Introduction to Our Town; A Treasury of the Theatre, Ghosts to Death of a Salesman, ed. John Gassner (New York, 1957), p. 927.

[374] Ibid.

[375] Thornton Wilder, "A Platform and a Passion or Two," Harper's, CCXV (October, 1957), 50.

onto the stage himself to explain something or to take part in the action. This down-to-earth Chorus quite casually takes on a supernatural and vaguely omniscient role in the last act, when he not only converses with the dead but shows an uncanny knowledge of the extent and limitations of their emotions and powers. He perceives how the outcome of the action manifests the operation of divine law in human life.

According to stage directions, the Stage Manager and the other characters sometimes speak with a New Hampshire dialect, which Wilder implies by such spellings as "mount'in," "Sattidy," and "traipsin'." In the opening Choral passage of Act III the Chorus comes as close to poetic prose as he ever gets. Although the quotation is long, it merits excerpting not only because of its poetic characteristics but because it contains a philosophy that is basic to the Chorus. Speaking of the newly dead in the cemetery on the hilltop, he says:

> We're all glad they're in a beautiful place and we're coming up here ourselves when our fit's over. . . . --everybody knows in their bones that <u>something</u> is eternal. And it ain't houses and it ain't names and it ain't earth, and it ain't even the stars...everybody knows in their bones that <u>something</u> is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. . . . You know as well as I do that the dead don't stay interested in us living people for very long. Gradually, gradually, they let hold of the earth...and the ambitions they had...and the pleasures they had...and the things they suffered...and the people they loved. They get weaned away from earth--that's the way I put it--weaned away. Yes, they stay here while the earth-part of 'em burns away, burns out, and all that time they slowly get indifferent to what's goin' on in Grover's Corners. They're

> waitin' for something that they feel is comin'. Something important and great. Aren't they waitin' for the eternal part in them to come out clear?[376]

Although the language, like the presentation, is informal, the appeal to the emotions is restrained. Wilder avoids vivid imagery, pulsing rhythms, and emotionally loaded words, and the informal tone is shot through with a controlled rhythm and a quality of measure and decorum attributable, I believe, to the stage-managing character of the Chorus.

The play has three acts, each of which the Chorus opens with a substantial Choral passage and closes with a short comment, all addressed to the audience. Altogether there are seven Choral passages, and in place of commoi there are three passages in conversational prose, two of them signalling and emphasizing moments of great emotional stress. The Choral style combines the mode of action of the Sophoclean Chorus and the enveloping Chorus of Aeschylus. The Choral passages organize and give rhythm to the action--more or less lyrically--amplifying, interpreting, and illustrating its various stages, either as preparation for or supplement to the action; but more important, the episodes illustrate the Choral passages, in which the theme becomes universal. Wilder contrives that through the use of the Chorus we should see the situation as a whole, with the actors standing (to be sure far less vividly than in Agamemnon) against the background created by the Chorus. We are never allowed to lose ourselves in sympathy with any of the characters.

[376]Thornton Wilder, Our Town (New York, 1938), pp. 101-102.

Since Wilder is seeking a universal, "a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life," he can dismiss all topical issues and situations from his demonstration after briefly noting that these events appear in Grover's Corners, as they do everywhere else. The town is a small one that the Stage Manager locates on the map, but it is all places and it is located in the universe. Perhaps nothing sums up the essence of the philosophy of Our Town (with echoes of Joyce's Portrait) better than the address on a letter sent to a Grover's Corners girl by a humorist-minister who profoundly addressed it: "Jane Crofut, the Crofut Farm, Grover's Corners, Sultan County, New Hampshire, the Earth, the Solar System, the Universe, the Mind of God."[377] Wilder's cultivated and sophisticated mind reduces our human complexity to its irreducible simplicity. The events the action sets forth are: coming of age, falling in love, getting married, and dying, events in a universal pattern of human life.

In his archeological studies Wilder had learned to look backward and forward through a long vista of years, and that sort of vision is a quality of his work.[378] Wilder himself says that in attempting to find the value he sought, he "set the village against the largest dimensions of time and place." The recurrent words in the play, Wilder says, and he observes that few have noticed it, are "hundreds," "thousands," and "millions." "Emily's joys and griefs, her

[377] Wilder, Our Town, p. 54.

[378] Malcolm Cowley, "The Man Who Abolished Time," Saturday Review (October 6, 1956), 50.

algebra lessons and her birthday presents--what are they when we consider all the billions of girls who have lived, who are living, and who will live?"[379]

This somewhat Aeschylean sense of broad perspectives of time and space and civilization, inherent in Prometheus Bound, for example, is apparent in a number of instances in Our Town. For example, in the first act Professor Willard, the geologist, mentions that Grover's Corners rests on the old Archaeozoic granite of the Appalachian range, "some of the oldest land in the world," and the inhabitants of the town he traces back to seventeenth-century English "brachycephalic blue-eyed stock."[380] In the second Choral passage the Stage Manager speaks of sealing a copy of Our Town into the cornerstone of the new bank so that people one thousand, two thousand years from now will know more about us than we do of the lives of the people of Babylon or Greece or Rome. All that we know of them is the names of kings, and what knowledge we can get from copies of wheat contracts, records of sales of slaves, and the joking poems and the comedies written for the theater.[381] In the opening Choral passage of Act III he describes the view from the mountain: ". . . range on range of hills--awful blue they are--up there by Lake Sunapee and Lake Winnapassaukee...and way up, if you've got a glass, you can see the White Mountains and Mt. Washington--where North Conway and Conway is. . . ."[382] Like the Stage

[379] Wilder, "A Platform," p. 50.

[380] Wilder, Our Town, pp. 26-27.

[381] Ibid., p. 40.

[382] Ibid., p. 99.

Manager, the Dead seem to find a special significance in the distance of the stars. As A Man From Among the Dead puts it, "A star's mighty good company. . . . It took millions of years for that speck o' light to git to the earth. Don't seem like a body could believe it . . . millions of years."[383]

The scenery for Our Town is expressive rather than realistic, and the play is generally regarded as one of the best examples of stylized dramaturgy developed by an American.[384] The Chorus, the stage hands, or the actors set the stage in view of the audience. Two sets of tables and chairs represent two kitchens; two trellises represent gardens of the homes; a board across the chairs becomes the soda counter at Mr. Morgan's drugstore, or Mrs. Gibbs' ironing board; a group of pews represents a church; ordinary chairs set in rows represent graves. The narrator sets the rest of the scene verbally. Of scenery Wilder says, "Our claim, our hope, our despair are not in things, not in scenery"; the climax of Our Town needs "only five square feet of boarding and a passion to know what life means to us."[385]

Since there is no curtain, lighting is significant to the staging of the play. As the audience arrives, the bare stage is in half-light. Presently the Stage Manager, hat on and pipe in mouth, enters and begins placing a table and

[383] Ibid., p. 127.

[384] A Treasury of the Theatre, p. 927.

[385] Wilder, "A Platform," p. 50.

several chairs downstage left and a table and several chairs downstage right. As the house lights go down he has finished setting the stage, and leaning against the right proscenium pillar watches the late arrivals in the audience. When the auditorium is in complete darkness, he speaks. He sets the time; for example, the first act opens just before dawn. In the course of the first act the stage itself grows gradually lighter, and the Stage Manager works into his conversations the time of day, until at the brightest part of the day the light gradually dims with the approach of evening and bedtime in Grover's Corners. A variation of this procedure takes place in the next two acts.

The first act presents a day in the life of the town as it was on May 7, 1901, and introduces the main characters, the Gibbs and Webb families. In the second act, memory steps ahead to a time three years later (with a short flashback to an event two years previous), and deals mainly with love and marriage, particularly that of George Gibbs and Emily Webb. In the third act memory moves ahead to a rainy afternoon in summer, 1913, and deals mainly with death, in particular Emily's.

The cast of characters in order of their appearance are:

Act I, May 7, 1901.
Stage Manager;
Joe Crowell, Jr., the morning paperboy;
Dr. Gibbs;
Howie Newsome, the milkman;
Mrs. Gibbs;
Mrs. Webb;
Rebecca Gibbs;
George Gibbs;
Emily Webb;

Wally Webb;
Mrs. Forrest.

Act II, 1904.
Professor Willard, geologist at State University;
Mr. Webb;
Woman in the Balcony;
Tall Man at Back of Auditorium;
Lady in a Box;
Simon Stimson, choir director, musician, and town drunk;
Mrs. Soames;
Constable Warren;
Si Crowell, the afternoon paperboy;
Minister;
Baseball Players (one-speech hecklers at the wedding);

Act III, 1913.
Joe Stoddard, funeral director;
Sam Craig, a visiting cousin of Mrs. Gibbs;
The Dead
Included, among other former members of the town, are: Mrs. Gibbs, Mrs. Soames, Simon Stimson (a suicide), Wally Webb (appendix burst). They sit on chairs, "in a quiet without stiffness and in a patience without listlessness."

In the prologue the Stage Manager sets up the condition of simultaneous focus on the immediate present, the past, and the future. He gives to the audience such information as the name of the play, the author, the producer, the director, and the actors, and establishes the time, place, background, and point of view. Standing on Main Street, he looks up at the mountain where the cemetery is, a point of view which will be reversed in the third act. He establishes mood: "The sky is beginning to show some streaks of light over in the East there, behind our mount'in. The morning

star always gets wonderful bright the moment before it has to go."

Like a Greek Chorus, the Stage Manager creates by verbal description, and although he seems to choose his details casually, as he provides local color he is providing details pertinent to events in the play. He locates and describes the railway station and tracks; the outlying poorer farm families; the various churches; the schools; the Town Hall and Post Office combined, with the jail in the basement; the rows of stores, with hitching-posts and horse blocks in front of them--"First automobile's going to come along in about five years, belonged to Banker Cartwright, our richest citizen...lives in the big white house up on the hill." He points out Mr. Morgan's drugstore, Doc Gibbs's house, and editor Webb's. "Nice town, y'know what I mean? Nobody very remarkable ever come out of it, s'far as we know. The earliest tombstones in the cemetery up there on the mountain say 1670-1680--they're Grovers and Cartwrights and Gibbses and Herseys--same names as are around here now." As he reminisces, the day begins as it had a generation ago. The Stage Manager comments to the audience as the characters, some of whom have since died, make their appearance.

The first scene takes place in the kitchen of the Gibbs and the Webb homes. It dramatizes a school-day morning in the lives of diligent, sensible, warm-hearted adults, each with two average children, the parents calling admonitions "upstairs" to the children. The oldest of these children are George Gibbs, fifteen, and Emily Webb, fourteen. As the children enter and take their places at the breakfast table, a factory whistle sounds. The Stage Manager comments, "We've

got a factory in our town too,--hear it? Makes blankets. Cartwrights own it and it brung 'em a fortune."[386] This seemingly offhand comment, we realize later, is relevant in that the Cartwright interests are later going to erect the bank which will seal memorabilia in its cornerstone. With the children off to school, the Stage Manager walks to the center of the stage where the two women have just concluded a chat, thanks them, and suggests the audience needs more information about the town. He introduces two speakers, the geology professor first, and then editor Webb.

The introduction of the geologist serves more than to fill in knowledge about Grover's Corners. In striking contrast to the professor's topic, the vast perspective in time, the Stage Manager asks him to make his talk brief because "unfortunately our time is limited." Throughout the drama, counterpointing the calm presentation of vast perspectives in time runs the other insistent thought, gathering more and more tension and significance. Editor Webb's intimate statistics about the town, and the "audience" participation after his talk bring out a most important point--the culture and love of beauty among the people. About the latter, quite simply the editor stresses the daily pleasure in the beauties of nature: ". . . we like the sun comin' up over the mountain in the morning, and we notice a good deal about the birds. . . . and trees and plants. And we watch the change of the seasons . . ."[387] In scenes that follow, the Stage Manager

[386] Wilder, Our Town, p. 19.

[387] Ibid., p. 31.

also mentions the change of seasons, conveying the idea of diurnal beauty with time slipping away quietly. As for culture, the editor says, ". . . there ain't much--Robinson Crusoe and the Bible; and Handel's "Largo," we all know that; and Whistler's "mother"--those are just about as far as we go." After the last questioner thanks Mr. Webb, the Stage Manager takes over again with an "All right! All right! Thank you, everybody."[388]

He then sets the time as the middle of the afternoon, and comments on the children coming home from school. He introduces the young love interest in the scene that follows, underscoring it when he shocks the audience in his first impersonation. As George Gibbs comes careening down Main Street, throwing a baseball to dizzying heights and waiting to catch it again, he bumps into the Stage Manager and apologizes to him as "Mrs. Forrest," who irritably tells him to go out into the fields and play. This impersonation and the later ones seem to make the Chorus an integral part of the action. Emily comes along, carrying imaginary school books, and after George compliments her for being able to study and get good grades, she goes home and asks her mother if she's pretty enough to get "people" interested in her. The scene ends with a "Thank you. Thank you! That'll do. We'll have to interrupt here. Thank you Mrs. Webb; thank you Emily." As they withdraw, the Stage Manager explores the town some more.

[388]Ibid., p. 32.

He delivers a long Choral passage concerning what people are really like in their everyday life, stressing the theme in a broad sweep taking in the Babylon of about 2000 B.C. to some future civilization existing about two thousand years subsequent to the twentieth century. He begins the passage by looking back on the town from the near future--he doesn't say how far, but Joe Crowell, Jr., a bright scholar, died in France, and Mr. Morgan retired and went to live in San Diego where he died, in 1935, and was buried in "a lot of palm trees." "Kinda lost his religion at the end and took up some New Thought or something. They read some new-fangled poetry over him and cre-mated him. The New Hampshire in him sort of broke down in that climate seems like."[389] The Cartwrights are wealthy "now" and are off eating big dinners in hotels in Virginia Hot Springs and Miami Beach. They've become "'Piscopalians." This leads into the topic of the cornerstone of the new bank, which brings the subject back to the particular day in Grover's Corners, 1901. The time is evening, with the children doing their homework.

For the first time music is introduced with the sound of choir practice in the Congregational Church. The hymn they sing, "Blessed be the tie that binds," is another key idea in the drama. George and Emily mount two ladders representing the second story of the homes, and while they study, call across to each other. George is grateful for help with his algebra problems, while Emily points out to him how terrible the moonlight is. There follows one of several passages between husband and wife in the Gibbs and

[389] Ibid., p. 39.

Webb homes, portraying a mature love in which each is interested in the thoughts and emotions of the other as an individual. The close of the second act emphasizes two strands of the theme of the play as Mr. Webb, having called goodnight to Emily from the garden, enters the house whistling "Blessed by the tie that binds," and Rebecca Gibbs, having overcome her brother's protests, sits beside him, sharing wonderment at the strange address on Jane Crofut's letter. The Stage Manager tells the audience, "That's the end of the First Act, friends. You can go and smoke now, those that smoke."

In the opening Choral passage of Act II, the Stage Manager stresses nature as a force acting on the earth and on the lives of men. Three years have gone by, "summers and winters have cracked the mountains a little bit more and the rains have brought down some dirt." (Rain in the mountains anticipates the final act.) "Nature's been pushing and contriving in other ways too; a number of young people fell in love and got married." The time is just after High School commencement, a time when most of the young people "jump up and get married," and this is the morning of the wedding day of Emily and George. The whole act illustrates people's feelings about love and marriage. Speaking of Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb, the Stage Manager mentions that they've worked every day, one for twenty years and the other for forty, with no summer vacation; they've had two children, cooked, washed, and cleaned, and never thought themselves hard-used. "It's like what one of those Middle West poets said: 'You've got to love life to have life, and you've got

to have life to love life....It's what they call a vicious circle."[390] This expression is forceful enough to linger in the mind of the audience until the climax of the play, when Emily makes her choice to go back to the mountain, and then its full meaning emerges, reinforcing that situation.

The first scenes after the Choral passage show the reaction of the parents to the marriage. The Gibbs reminisce on their own marriage ceremony and the sudden panic at the thought of marrying someone who for a moment seemed like a complete stranger. The Webbs present a different angle. On this morning of the wedding day, an ebullient George goes across to visit Emily, but Mrs. Webb tells him there's a superstition that on the wedding day the groom shouldn't see the bride until the ceremony, and leaves George to chat with Mr. Webb. When George has gone and Mrs. Webb returns, her husband tells her there's an even older superstition, existing "since the cave-men: the groom shouldn't be left alone with his father-in-law on the day of the wedding, or near it. Now don't forget that!"[391] Both scenes are a prelude to the panic both George and Emily will experience.

In the fourth Choral passage the Stage Manager takes the audience back two years to the time when George and Emily first knew, "...as the saying goes...they were meant for one another." He asks the audience to try to remember back "when you were fifteen or sixteen . . . those days when even the little things in life could be almost too

[390] Ibid., p. 67.

[391] Ibid., p. 69.

exciting to bear," and particularly the days "when you were first in love; when you were like a person sleep-walking, and you didn't quite see the street you were in, and didn't quite hear everything that was said to you. You're just a little bit crazy. . . ."[392] The short scene that follows contains a commos between the Stage Manager as Mr. Morgan the druggist, and Emily and George, the whole scene carrying an undercurrent of momentous emotion implied with simple, halting dialogue. It starts out with Emily being rather cool toward George when he offers to carry her books, and her telling him, for his own good, of course, that he's gotten conceited and stuck up and girls are saying so behind his back. It ends with George asking her whether, "if I improve and make a big change...would you be...I mean: could you be..." Emily answers, "I...I am now; I always have been."[393]

The next scene is the reaction of Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs, not quite a year later, when George has asked for their consent to marry in two months, after commencement. The Stage Manager prepares for it in a short Choral passage: ". . . people are never able to say right out what they think of money, or death, or fame, or marriage. You've got to catch it between the lines; you got to over-hear it. Oh, Doctor! Mrs. Gibbs!" The Gibbs appear on their side of the stage and exchange a glance of understanding with him. The drugstore counter becomes Mrs. Gibbs' ironing board. They

[392] Ibid., p. 70.

[393] Ibid., p. 80.

express sympathetic misgivings about George's youth and the problems the young pair will have to face, and for just a moment Mrs. Gibbs hesitates, but Dr. Gibbs says, "Yes, they'll have a lot of troubles, but that's none of our business. Let'm. Everybody has a right to his own troubles." They give their permission. The Stage Manager tells them, "Thank you! Thank you!" and says, "Now we're ready to go on with the wedding." While he talks, actors remove the tables and chairs and set the scene for the church in the back of the stage. The congregation will sit facing the back wall. A small platform is placed against the back wall. On this the Stage Manager as Minister will stand.

In the fifth Choral passage the Stage Manager makes the point that people are made to live "two by two" and this is a good wedding, but there's a great deal of confusion way down deep in people's minds, and the real hero of the scene is nature, "pushing and contriving" in an attempt to bring a perfect human being into the world.[394] The succeeding episode illustrates this confusion, and the force of love. While the organ softly plays Handel's "Largo," Mrs. Webb, on the way to her place, turns back and speaks to the audience. She's exasperated with herself because she's crying, but what's bothering her is "there's something downright cruel about sending our girls out into marriage this way. . . . I went into it blind as a bat myself. The whole world's wrong, that's what's the matter.[395] She hurries to her place in the

[394] Ibid., p. 89.

[395] Ibid., p. 90.

pew as George starts to come down the right aisle of the theater. Suddenly three members of his baseball team appear at the right proscenium pillar and start whistling and catcalling to him. They are dressed for the ball field. The Stage Manager disperses them, smiling. "There used to be an awful lot of that kind of thing at weddings in the old days,--Rome, and later. We're more civilized now,--so they say."[396] The choir starts singing "Love divine, all love excelling--" as George reaches the stage, and stops, saying darkly to himself that he doesn't want to get married; he wishes he were back at school; he just wants "to be a fella." Mrs. Gibbs speaks sternly to him in alarm, and George comes to. Emily in her turn draws back when she sees the congregation. As the choir begins "Blessed be the tie that binds," Mr. Webb tries to calm her fears while she pleads with him to take her away--she'll work for him and keep house. He beckons to George, who tells her he loves her, and they fall into each other's arms. The organ starts the March from "Lohengrin" as Mr. Webb tells them now they know it'll be all right.

After the ceremony, as they kiss, the stage is suddenly arrested into a silent tableau. The Stage Manager-Minister, eyes on the distance, speaks musingly to the audience of the millions of couples who have gotten married: "The cottage, the gocart, the Sunday afternoon drives in the Ford, the first rheumatism, the grandchildren, the second rheumatism, the deathbed, the reading of the will,--Once in a thousand

[396] Ibid., p. 91.

times it's interesting. Well, let's have Mendelssohn's 'Wedding March'!"[397] Looking at the radiant bride and groom as they walk with dignity to the edge of the stage, Mrs. Soames says, "Happiness, that's the great thing! The important thing is to be happy." The couple descend into the auditorium and run up the aisle joyously. The Stage Manager says, "That's all the Second Act. Ten minutes intermission, folks."

The Choral passage that introduces the last act contains the Stage Manager's philosophy, already quoted. Wilder says he took the idea of the group of the Dead speaking among themselves from Dante's Purgatory,[398] but in Wilder's group any note of sorrow or mournfulness is counterbalanced by a note of love and warmth, from Mrs. Gibbs especially; a note of laughter from Simon Stimson's sardonic comments--for example, he says he's always uncomfortable when they're around, them and "their nonsense and their damned glee at being alive," while they trample each other's feelings in ignorance and blindness and waste time as if they had a million years; and a note of general detachment from human turmoil as the Dead express an appreciation of the natural world around them.

From the conversation of the lugubrious funeral director and Mrs. Gibbs' visiting cousin, and from the comments of the Dead among themselves, we learn that Emily has died giving birth to a second child. It is raining as the funeral

[397] Ibid., p. 96.

[398] Wilder, "A Platform," p. 50.

cortege appears carrying an imaginary coffin, and while the group by the grave sing "Blessed be the tie that binds," Emily appears from among the umbrellas, wearing a white dress, her long hair tied by a white ribbon like a little girl. She gazes wonderingly at the Dead, smiles, and greets them dreamily. The Dead welcome her pleasantly and she sits down beside Mrs. Gibbs and watches the funeral. She too sets the tone: "It seems thousands and thousands of years since I....How stupid they all look. They don't have to look like that!"[399]

The high scene of the play is the last-act passage between Chorus and Emily. Having gone back in time to her twelfth birthday, Emily breaks down sobbing: "It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another...I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. . . . Oh earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you." She abruptly asks the Stage Manager, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?--every, every minute?" His reply is, "No...The saints and poets, maybe--they do some."[400]

As George comes and flings himself on Emily's grave, Emily says to Mrs. Gibbs, "They don't understand much, do they?" And Mrs. Gibbs replies, "No, dear, not very much."

The Stage Manager appears at the right, one hand on a dark curtain which he slowly draws across the scene. In the distance a clock is heard striking the hour very faintly.

[399]Ibid., p. 110.

[400]Ibid., pp. 124-125.

Most everybody's asleep in Grover's Corners, he says. It's clearing up. "There are the stars--doing their old, old crisscross journeys in the sky." Scholars seem to think there are no living beings up there, that the stars are just chalk...or fire. "Only this one is straining away, straining away all the time to make something of itself." The strain tells, and people have to get their rest. As he winds his watch, the Stage Manager mentions that it's eleven o'clock in Grover's Corners, and he bids the audience good night.

The Stage-Manager Chorus of Our Town perceives the outcome of the action as a manifestation of divine will on earth, and yet the power of the play is limited, compared with the power of Deirdre or Murder in the Cathedral. The answer seems to lie in the character and motives of the Chorus.

In Notes on Playwriting (The Intent of the Artist, 1941) Wilder writes that the theater is an art addressed to a group mind, and a group mind imposes upon the artist the necessity of treating material understandable by the greater number. This audience is not thought of as a formed community with common tastes and values, but as a statisticians' featureless norm. Wilder aims to make a show that will hold the undefined crowd, the greater number, and at the same time make it represent his own ideas, theories, or deepest intuitions. In other words, he wishes to make a parable, and in Our Town he has triumphantly accomplished this feat. The greater number is held by the play, which contains a moral that Wilder wishes to teach. But by reaching a greater

number he detaches himself from individuals; "he eyes his audience like a kindly and all-knowing uncle, who knows how to entrall them for their own good." The crowd, as such, seems to respond according to plan, but if one understands Wilder's religious-humanistic moral too soon--he may find himself more interested in Wilder's techniques than in the play itself. The play seems to reveal more of ingenuity than of poetry of the deepest and most authentic kind. In constant terror of the "market-god," show business suffers from "a form of anti-egghead snobbery which rules out most questions of artistic value."[401]

The Stage Manager in Our Town seems to eye his audience like a kindly and all knowing uncle who knows how to entrall them for their own good, and if his audience understands his religious-humanistic moral too soon, therein lies the weak - ness of the play.

[401] Francis Fergusson, "The Search for New Standards in the Theatre," Kenyon Review, XVII (Autumn, 1955), 593-596.

A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE[402]

Arthur Miller

The Chorus of A View from the Bridge is a middle-aged Italian lawyer named Alfieri, portly, good-humored and thoughtful, whom the chief characters, and particularly the protagonist, consult in time of emotional crises.

He tells the story in flashback, narrating directly to the audience that part which is not dramatized. The subject is the unacknowledged passion of a middle-aged longshoreman for his niece, and his ostracism and death for betraying two kinsmen. Miller stresses the theme as being Eddie's responsible integrity and his betrayal of Marco and Rodolpho for motives only dimly understood. At any rate, the dramatic conflict is on two planes: 1) Eddie's struggle with his unconscious desire for Catherine and with the primitive force of jealousy Rodolpho arouses, and 2) the threat of a primitive social force lying dormant. When the first combination of forces overwhelms him, he arouses the other force and is crushed.

The Chorus comments on the action, expresses fundamental concepts, at times lyrically, and attempts to provide universality of theme. At times the Chorus attempts poetic prose; the cousins use a conversational prose with a sprinkling of poetic prose; the Carbone family speak a Brooklyn vernacular, sometimes poverty-stricken but at other times terse, vigorous, and colorful.

[402]Arthur Miller, A View from the Bridge (New York, 1960). First published in 1955; revised in Collected Plays (New York, 1957); published in 1960 with a new Introduction by the author.

The play is in two acts. There are five Choral passages, only the one that introduces the story being of any length, and three passages in which the Chorus joins with the main characters, signalling and emphasizing moments of great emotional stress. Three of the short Choral passages are prologues, which for the most part denote the passing of time, do some characterizing, make a few fundamental comments, and set the scene; the fourth one attempts the summing up of the meaning of the play. Except for the three passages already mentioned, the Chorus does not participate in the episodes.

As for story, Eddie Carbone, a rough, respected longshoreman, lives with his wife and seventeen-year-old niece in a neighborhood of people of predominantly Sicilian descent who harbor an ancestral code of justice. He welcomes to his Brooklyn flat two Italian cousins of his wife who have entered the country illegally to find work on the docks. The time is the depression years of the 1930's, and Marco, the older of the two brothers, proves to be a serious young man, interested mainly in making money to send back to his starving family. Rodolpho, surprisingly a platinum blond, is cheerful, enthusiastic, versatile and also a responsible worker. He likes fun, clothes, and people. Inevitably he and Catherine are attracted, and only gradually is the terrible circumstance made apparent to all but Eddie that he is "protecting" his niece because he too is in love with her. Some six months after the arrival of the cousins, Eddie--who fosters the delusion that Rodolpho is a homosexual who wants to marry Catherine only to assure himself of American citizenship--is upset enough to consult the lawyer for a second time to find out if he has a

legal case against Rodolpho. Finding that he does not, he makes an anonymous phone call to the immigration authorities. Retribution is swift when the authorities round up not only Marco and Rodolpho but two newly arrived "submarines." Eddie, angrily protesting his own integrity and his generosity toward the brothers, is ostracized by the neighborhood and fiercely rejected by the once-gentle Catherine; only Beatrice, who is clearly aware of the situation, stands by him. Marco, released on bail, comes to challenge Eddie, who demands of Marco, "I want my name!" Beatrice, in anguish and to prevent bloodshed, tells Eddie that what he really wants--Catherine--he can never have. Eddie is shocked at the thought and immediately turns it aside to take up Marco's challenge. In the swift, savage fight that ensues, the knife which Eddie intends to use against Marco is, with a symbolic touch of ironic justice, turned inward when Marco grips his wrist, and Eddie dies by his own hand.

The cast of the revised version in order of their appearance is as follows:

Louis, longshoreman friend of Eddie Carbone;
Mike, the same;
Alfieri, the Chorus;
Eddie Carbone;
Catherine, his niece;
Beatrice, his wife;
Marco;
Tony, an agent who smuggles in illegal immigrants;
Rodolpho;
First Immigration Officer;
Second Immigration Officer;
Mr. and Mrs. Lipari, neighbors who also harbor two "submarines";
Neighbors.

The setting is a street and tenement building in the slum section of Red Hook, Brooklyn; the front of the building is skeletal (in the original version the doorway was framed by two broken-top Greek pillars). The main acting area is the living-room dining-room of Eddie Carbone's apartment. It is a worker's flat, clean, sparse, homely. At the right forestage is a desk; this represents Mr. Alfieri's law office. The action takes place from June until shortly after Christmas.

In the opening passage the Chorus narrates telescoped information about the neighborhood, both its past and present, and tells something about himself. He foreshadows; sets the mood of suspense and foreboding; introduces characters, and leads into the dramatization of the specific story. As the curtain rises, Louis and Mike are pitching coins against the tenement building. Alfieri enters and the two pitchers nod to him uneasily as he passes. Here stage directions characterize Alfieri: "He crosses the stage to his desk, removes his hat, runs his fingers through his hair, and grinning, speaks to the audience." In this neighborhood, Alfieri explains, to meet a lawyer or a priest on the street is unlucky, both being thought of only in connection with disasters. Miller deliberately juxtaposes the concepts of lawyer and priest; throughout the play no mention is made of payment for professional services and Alfieri's concern seems to be not only for Eddie, but for humanity in general. The word "disaster" is a foreshadowing.

Alfieri characterizes this slum section as "the gullet of New York swallowing the tonnage of the world." The action takes place within view of Brooklyn Bridge. Symbolically, Alfie too is a bridge from which the action is observed. This

characterization is reinforced by the fact that as a naturalized citizen he is also a bridge between Sicily and Red Hook, and as a lawyer he is a bridge between the old world of the immigrant, with its ancient taboos, and the new world of law court and immigration bureau.

Alfieri enlarges the perspective and gives a certain resonance to the play by associating Red Hook with a primitive Sicily of about 1000 B. C. which lived by crude tribal law. Alfieri has known the mores of these Red Hook descendants of Sicilians all his life, and he is no stranger to the concepts of violence and retributive justice of this neighborhood as it was when he first arrived:

> In those days, Al Capone, the greatest Carthaginian of all, was learning his trade on these pavements, and Frankie Yale himself was cut precisely in half by a machine gun at the corner of Union Street, two blocks away. Oh, there were many here who were justly shot by unjust men. Justice is very important here.[403]

Alfieri is appropriately setting up a central idea of the play, primitive justice. As a lawyer who has had his practice in this neighborhood for many years, he is in a position to notice that despite the primitive concepts of justice of the ancestral home, this is Red Hook, not Sicily, and "now we are quite civilized, quite American. Now we settle for half, and I like it better. I no longer keep a pistol in my filing cabinet." The observation about settling for half is underscored by its repetition in the final Choral passage.

Such is Alfieri's affinity with these people that even

[403] Arthur Miller, A View from the Bridge (New York, 1960), p. 4.

when they break the law by smuggling in aliens he gives tacit consent by keeping quiet. He muses that his practice is "entirely unromantic." His wife and friends have told him the people in this neighborhood lack elegance. True, he says, he does deal mostly with the petty troubles of the poor--and yet...

> every few years there is still a case, and as the parties tell me what the trouble is, the flat air in my office suddenly washes in with the green scent of the sea, the dust in this air is blown away and the thought comes that in some Caesar's year, in Calabria perhaps, or on the cliff at Syracuse, another lawyer, quite differently dressed, heard the same complaint and sat there as powerless as I, and watched it run its bloody course.[404]

In identifying himself with another lawyer of ancient times, besides suggesting a larger perspective of time and space, Alfieri provides a legal and perhaps a moral frame of reference for the case being set up and foreshadows the results. The stage is set now for Eddie, who has appeared and has been pitching coins with the men and is highlighted among them. Alfieri says,

> This one's name was Eddie Carbone, a longshoreman working the docks from Brooklyn Bridge to the breakwater where the open sea begins.[405]

Alfieri walks into darkness, and the subsequent scene is dramatized.

In the original version of the play (1955), when Alfieri puts the play in a wider perspective in the prologue, he does

[404] Ibid., p. 5.

[405] Ibid.

so in verse. For example, in the original, after his prose description of his practice and his statement that he deals with "the petty troubles of the poor--and yet...," he continues in verse:

> When the tide is right,
> And the wind blows the sea air against these houses,
> I sit here in my office,
> Thinking it is all so timeless here.
> I think of Sicily, from where these people came,
> The Roman rocks of Calabria,
> Syracusa on the cliff, where Carthaginian and Greek
> Fought such bloody fights. I think of Hannibal,
> Who slew the fathers of these people; Caesar
> Whipping them on in Latin.
> Which is all, of course, ridiculous.
> Al Capone learned his trade on these pavements. . . .[406]

The prose version is an improvement in its more personal details, dramatic tension, and realism, although in his use of verse Miller does at times show evidence of evolving a heightened form of language that makes for enrichment and variation of style, as in the following passage:

> And yet, when the tide is right,
> And the green smell of the sea
> Floats through my window,
> I must look up at the circling pigeons of the poor,
> And I see falcons there,
> The hunting eagles of the olden time,
> Fierce above Italian forests. . . .
>
> And as the parties tell me what the trouble is

[406] Arthur Miller, Collected Plays (New York, 1957), p. 379.

> I see cobwebs tearing, Adriatic ruins rebuilding themselves; Calabria;
> The eyes of the plaintiff suddenly carved,
> His voice booming toward me over many fallen stones.[407]

In the later version Miller sometimes did not change the content of a stanzaic passage but simply set it up as prose.

The first episode takes place in the apartment at dinnertime. It reveals the pride Eddie takes in being looked up to by the other dockworkers and by his family, his reluctance to have Catherine grow up, and his uneasiness about her attracting the attention of men in the neighborhood who are, he thinks, none of them good enough for her. It brings out Catherine's warm heartedness and her childish desire for his approval. It shows Beatrice's love for Eddie and her appreciation of his generosity, and at the same time injects a discordant note in that she is concerned because Eddie has grown inattentive toward her. In the course of this episode the subject of "submarines," illegal aliens, living in the neighborhood comes up and Eddie and Beatrice impress Catherine by their horror for the swift retribution that follows if their presence is betrayed. It ends on a suspenseful note as Eddie springs the surprise that Beatrice's two cousins have been smuggled in and will be there that evening. The lights go down and come up on Alfieri.

The second Choral passage somewhat supplements the action of the preceding episode and prepares for the action that follows it:

[407] Ibid., p. 380.

> He was as good a man as he had to be in a life that was hard and even. He worked on the piers when there was work, he brought home his pay, and he lived. And toward ten o'clock of that night, after they had eaten, the cousins came.[408]

The second episode deals with the arrival of the cousins and with Eddie's rising jealousy and the building up of his suspicions of Rodolpho when the latter enthusiastically sings "Paper Doll" in a high tenor, to the delight of Catherine and Beatrice.

The third Choral passage follows:

> Who can ever know what will be discovered? Eddie Carbone had never expected to have a destiny. A man works, raises his family, goes bowling, eats, gets old, and then he dies. Now, as the weeks passed, there was a future, there was a trouble that would not go away.[409]

A few weeks later the campaign has "solidified" in Eddie, and his misinterpretation of a remark made by Louis and Mike confirms his suspicions that "the guy ain't right." He upsets Catherine by warning her that all Rodolpho wants is a passport to citizenship. His emotion alarms Beatrice, who confronts Eddie and tells him to let Catherine alone. After Eddie stalks out of the house, Beatrice tells Catherine she must let Eddie know he can't give her orders any more. She's a woman now and Rodolpho is a nice boy and this is the time to say goodbye. Catherine "turns with some fear, with discovery" to Beatrice, and on the edge of tears, "as though a familiar world had

[408] Miller, A View from the Bridge (1960), p. 20.

[409] Ibid., p. 29.

shattered," agrees to do it.

The lights rise on Alfieri, seated behind his desk, who addresses the audience as a preliminary to a conversation with Eddie:

> It was at this time that he first came to me. I had represented his father in an accident case some years before, and I was acquainted with the family in a casual way. I remember him now as he walked through my doorway. (Enter Eddie down right ramp.) His eyes were like tunnels; my first thought was that he had committed a crime. (Eddie sits beside the desk, cap in hand, looking out), but soon I saw it was only a passion that had moved into his body, like a stranger. (Alfieri pauses, looks down at his desk, then to Eddie as though he were continuing a conversation with him.) I don't quite understand what I can do for you. Is there a question of law somewhere?[410]

In detailed dialogue, immediate and realistic, mostly by question and answer, Alfieri endeavors to get facts. He questions Eddie's interpretation of them with "Can you prove it? Is there a question of law somewhere?" He assures Eddie of his understanding--he has children of his own, he tells Eddie, but the only legal question involved is the manner in which the brothers entered the country, and he mentions that he doesn't think Eddie wants to do anything about that. Eddie recoils in horror: "Oh, Jesus, no, I wouldn't do nothin' about that, I mean--"

Alfieri then, cautiously and by analogy, explains to Eddie that "sometimes God mixes up the people," that sometimes a man works hard to bring up a child, and through the

[410]Ibid., pp. 41-42.

years there is too much love for the child, and that the time comes when the child has to grow up and the man has to forget. He advises, "Let her go. She's a woman now." The law is not involved and nothing can be done. When Eddie rises, Alfieri asks what he is going to do. Eddie's answer, accompanied by a helpless but ironic gesture, raises Alfieri's alarm:

> What can I do? I'm a patsy . . . I walked hungry plenty days in this city! (It begins to break through.) And now I gotta sit in my own house and look at a son-of-a-bitch punk like that--which he came out of nowhere! I give him my house to sleep! I take the blankets off my bed for him, and he takes and puts his dirty filthy hands on her like a goddam thief![411]

When Alfieri tells Eddie she's a woman now and wants to get married, and he asks, "She can't marry you, can she?", Eddie's furious reply is, "What're you talkin' about, marry me! I don't know what the hell you're talkin' about!" Eddie struggles to compose himself, thanks Alfieri, and with a helpless wave, leaves. Alfieri sits on his desk and addresses the audience:

> There are times when you want to spread an alarm, but nothing has happened. I knew, I knew then and there--I could have finished the whole story that afternoon. It wasn't as though there was a mystery to unravel. I could see every step coming, step after step, like a dark figure walking toward a certain door. I knew where he was heading for, I knew where he was going to end. And I sat here many afternoons asking myself why, being an intelligent man, I was so powerless to stop it. I even went to a certain old lady in the neighborhood, a very wise old woman, and I told her, and she

[411]Ibid., p. 46.

> only nodded, and said, "Pray for him..." And so I--waited here.[412]

The Chorus, in a last effort to forestall tragedy, seems to revert to the ancient tribal custom of consulting the Gerontes. Confirmed in his fears, somewhat like a Greek Chorus, he awaits the inevitable. Miller uses the Chorus in this passage to establish a basic point in the play: Eddie believes he is doing the right thing. The passage interprets and amplifies Eddie's actions so far, affording a deeper understanding of Eddie's incestuous feelings for his niece, and his failure of self-recognition. The atmosphere of foreboding thickens, and Eddie's hostility is a preparation for the episode which follows.

In this episode, which takes place after dinner, Eddie exposes an animosity toward Rodolpho which arouses revolt in Catherine; alerts Rodolpho to suspicion of Eddie's motives after Eddie mildly staggers him with a blow under pretense of teaching him how to box; and prompts the quiet Marco into a demonstration of strength in which he lifts a chair slowly by one leg and raises it like a weapon over Eddie's head, then, face to face with Eddie, "transforms what might appear like a glare of warning into a smile of triumph, and Eddie's grin vanishes as he absorbs his look." In this scene, the contrastive effect of casualness of dialogue with intensity of action contributes much to the rhythmical structure of the play.[413]

[412] Ibid., p. 47.

[413] Dennis Welland, Arthur Miller (New York, 1961), p. 106.

Act II opens as the light rises on Alfieri at his desk. Six months have elapsed since the arrival of the brothers. Alfieri addresses the audience in the fourth Choral passage:

> On the twenty-third of that December a case of Scotch whisky slipped from a net while being unloaded--as a case of Scotch whisky is inclined to do on the twenty-third of December on Pier Forty-one. There was no snow, but it was cold, his wife was out shopping. Marco was still at work. The boy had not been hired that day; Catherine told me later that this was the first time they had been alone together in the house.[414]

This passage adds a new time dimension to the story, the future in the present. While the Chorus is telescoping background information, setting the scene, keeping the time-element straight, and implying that the action about to take place will have repercussions, the light is rising on Catherine and Rodolpho in the apartment. In the action which follows, Rodolpho, wanting Catherine to marry him, comes to sense the anguish of her position. She loves Rodolpho and Eddie too, and doesn't want to hurt either. In the original version Miller sets these lines in verse form also as Rodolpho tells Catherine:

> If I take in my hands a little bird. And she grows and wishes to fly. But I will not let her out of my hands because I love her so much, is that right for me to do? I don't say you must hate him; but anyway you must go, mustn't you? Catherine?[415]

[414] Miller, A View from the Bridge (1960), p. 57.

[415] Ibid., p. 61.

In a scene outstanding for its shock-value, Eddie comes home early, drunk, and interrupts a love scene. Shocked and furious, he orders Rodolpho out, and when Catherine pleads with him to understand that she can't stay there any more either, Eddie reaches out suddenly, draws her to him and forcefully kisses her on the mouth. When Rodolpho attempts to free Catherine, Eddie sneers, and pins his arms, laughing, then suddenly kisses him as a startling signal of his contempt. Catherine tears at Eddie's face in an attempt to free Rodolpho, and threatens to kill Eddie. Before Eddie goes out, he frightens her with vague threats against Rodolpho.

Again the lights rise on Alfieri at his desk; he addresses the audience in a preliminary to the second discussion with Eddie:

> On December twenty-seventh I saw him next. . . . and when I saw him walking through my doorway, I knew why I had waited. And if I seem to tell this like a dream, it was that way. . . . I had lost my strength somewhere. I looked in his eyes more than I listened--in fact, I hardly remember the conversation. But I will never forget how dark the room became when he looked at me; his eyes were like tunnels. I kept wanting to call the police, but nothing had happened. Nothing at all had really happened.[416]

He turns to Eddie and says, "So in other words, he won't leave?" Eddie, apparently continuing the conversation, telescopes the action. His wife is arranging for the "submarines" to rent a room upstairs. "Nobody's talkin' much in the house." Eddie wants confirmation that he has a case against Rodolpho. Alfieri tells him he hasn't proven anything against him; it

[416] Ibid., p. 64.

sounds as if he just wasn't strong enough to break Eddie's grip. Eddie insists, "He ain't right. Somebody that don't want it can break it. Even a mouse, if you catch a teeny mouse and you hold it in your hand, that mouse can give you the right kind of fight." Alfieri asks what he did it for and Eddie replies, "To show her what he is! . . . So what do I gotta do now?" Since Catherine has said she's marrying Rodolpho, Alfieri tells Eddie that morally and legally he has no rights--she is a free agent, and when this angers Eddie, Alfieri warns, ". . . the law is nature. The law is only a word for what has a right to happen. . . . and a river will drown you if you buck it now. Let her go. And bless her." As a phone booth begins to glow on the opposite side of the stage, Eddie stands up, jaws clenched, and Alfieri, reading his intentions, tells him, "You won't have a friend in the world, Eddie! Even those who understand will turn against you, even the ones who feel the same will despise you! Put it out of your mind! Eddie!" He follows Eddie into the darkness, calling desperately.[417]

A short time after Eddie makes an anonymous call to the immigration authorities, two agents enter the house and amid great commotion bring down all four immigrants. Marco spits into Eddie's face and makes his accusation that Eddie has starved his children. Eddie threatens that unless he apologizes, he'll kill him. Ostracized, except for the silent Beatrice, Eddie exits up the street calling his threat.

There is a pause of darkness before the lights rise on the penultimate Choral scene, involving Catherine, Rodolpho,

[417] Ibid., pp. 65-66.

and Marco. Marco would like to be out on bail so that he can work until the hearing comes up and he can attend the wedding, but he thinks a promise not to harm Eddie is dishonorable, that all the law is not in a book. There is no other law, Alfieri tells him, and taking one of Marco's hands, says, "This is not God, Marco. You hear? Only God makes justice." Reluctantly Marco promises, and Alfieri, although not assured, arranges bail. Left alone then, Alfieri, "with a certain professional tread," leaves the stage, and the lights dim.

The last scene is swift and turbulent. In the apartment Eddie angrily insists that Marco apologize or Beatrice doesn't go to the wedding. Catherine turns on him in a fury, calling him a rat. Rodolpho suddenly appears and tries to make peace between Eddie and Marco, who is on his way to take revenge. When Beatrice pleads with Eddie to listen to Rodolpho, Eddie replies:

> I want my name! He didn't take my name; he's only a punk. Marco's got my name--(to Rodolpho) and you can run tell him, kid, that he's gonna give it back to me in front of this neighborhood, or we have it out. (Hoisting up his pants) Come on, where is he? Take me to him.[418]

Beatrice bars his way to the stairs and tells him the truth--too horrifying for Eddie to accept. When Marco appears outside and calls his name, Eddie springs to the challenge. He addresses the neighborhood, recapitulating his generosity and his grievance, while Beatrice and Catherine keen. "Come on, liar," he tells Marco.

[418]Ibid., p. 83.

Arms spread, Eddie lunges, and Marco strikes him beside the neck, crying "Animal! You go on your knees to me!" When Marco raises a foot to stomp him, Eddie springs a knife, and Marco steps back. Eddie rises and lunges. Marco grabs his arm, turning the blade inward.

The knife still in his hand, Eddie falls to his knees before Marco, Catherine and Beatrice supporting him for a moment, calling his name again and again. Catherine tells him, "I never meant to do nothing bad to you." In puzzlement Eddie says, "Then why..." and turns to his wife, "My B!" He dies in her arms and Beatrice covers him with her body. Murmering prayers and keening, the whole group mourns.

Alfieri, who is in the crowd, turns out to the audience. The lights have gone down, leaving him in a glow. Behind him the dull murmur and keening continue as he says:

> Most of the time now we settle for half and I like it better. But the truth is holy, and even as I know how wrong he was, and his death useless, I tremble, for I confess that something perversely pure calls to me from his memory--not purely good, but himself purely, for he allowed himself to be wholly known and for that I think I will love him more than all my sensible clients. And yet it is better to settle for half, it must be! And so I mourn him--I admit it--with a certain ...alarm.

The curtain falls.

The relationship between Alfieri and Eddie Carbone is a unique Chorus-protagonist relationship. Alfieri is not a confidante, since what Eddie seeks is legal confirmation of his own beliefs. Alfieri is perceptive enough to be able to read Eddie's subconscious thoughts and motives but he cannot

communicate with an unreceptive Eddie who sees no interpretation of events other than his own, who is self-blinded and remains so to his death. Miller then cannot utilize an ancient characteristic of the Chorus, that of linking a recognizably heroic action on the part of the protagonist to that of ordinary humanity, symbolized by the Chorus. Nor can there be that great-hearted resolution that comes when the protagonist, having chosen a course of action and suffered for it, perceives what forces he provoked that brought about his downfall.[419]

The action in this play is an example of Miller's feeling for tragedy in the life of the common man. This tragedy of the little man may be quite as exalted dramatically and artistically as that of kings and emperors, but Miller overlooks two points: 1) unless the little man has something of a mind, his tragedy, while it may be moving, is in finality without universal size, and 2) it is the splendor of the prose or poetry in which it is written that renders tragedy impressive, whether it be about the fall of a king or of a common man.[420] Most heroes are unconscious of their destiny, yet need Eddie be quite as unconscious as this? Even allowing for man's infinite capacity for blunders where the devices and desires of his own heart are concerned, this doomed longshoreman is still a whit too moronic to be placed on the pedestal where Miller puts him. Eddie Carbone is a "most exciting theatrical phenomenon, as the center of a melodrama, but not as a satisfactory heir

[419] Kenneth Burke, A Grammar of Motives (New York, 1962), p. 40.

[420] George Jean Nathan, The Magic Mirror (New York, 1960), pp. 249-250.

to Hamlet and Oedipus."[421] Miller doesn't succeed in getting across the idea that Eddie finds himself face to face with an issue he can't evade or shrug off, which he must face even to the death. Despite Alfieri's plea in the last Choral passage that the audience weigh the moral integrity of Eddie while they judge the wrongness of his actions, Eddie does seem more a pathetic misfit than a tragic common man.

Miller seeks a ritualistic communion between dramatist and audience, in which the audience endeavors to supply the missing values whose lack the drama reveals.[422] It is understandable that this play should leave an audience in doubt as to what specific values Miller might have in mind.

Evaluation of Alfieri as a Chorus is generally not favorable. The feeling seems to be that as he stands outside and comments on the action he detracts from the tragedy instead of heightening it, that his speeches are self-consciously literary, and that occasionally, as in "his eyes like tunnels," disconcertingly false poetic. He seems too conspicuously to ram home the relation between the particulars of the plot and the universals of tragic experience, connecting and contrasting the poverty, austerity, and violent uncertainties of the European past with the comfort, bewilderment, and compromise ("we settle for half") of the American present. One critic strongly maintains that no interpreter should be needed to invest drama with the tragic spirit. Miller, he says, by distancing the action

[421] Richard Findlater, "No Time for Tragedy," Twentieth Century, CLXI (January, 1957), 60.

[422] Arthur Miller, "Morality and Modern Drama," p. 190.

and putting it in perspective--by his reverence for the idea of tragedy, "nearly ruins a most exciting, well-made, well-written play." Miller wants to make his people prove things instead of just letting them be; but "in that intensity of being which he (and few other living writers) can summon upon the stage, the characters explain themselves--and enough of life, and destiny, and so forth--without the need of any further gloss."[423]

The foregoing criticism points up one difficulty involved in Miller's use of the Chorus. The single individual as Chorus tends to be too individualized to represent convincingly the community and mankind in general, and when his erudition, perception, imagination, and moral rightness are too sharp a contrast to those of the protagonist, the problem arises of how to keep the Chorus from competing with the main characters. Aeschylus handled his problem by pitting his Furies against characters equally strong.

Alfieri does help to keep the action flowing, but at times he also impedes it by too obviously shaping the story. In his scenes with Eddie Carbone, and later with Marco, his comments are often didactic and somewhat pompous, while his emotion seems calculated and abstract compared with the honest bewilderment of Marco and the violent sincerity of Eddie.

The single individual Chorus, besides being less plausible in projecting a sense of extensive knowledge and prophetic powers, certainly is more limited than a group Chorus in manipulating mood. Alfieri does establish mood in the opening passage, and to a certain extent he maintains and intensifies it, but even

[423] Findlater, pp. 61-62.

the lyric passages appeal more to the intellect than to the emotions. Lacking group presence, he is naturally less successful in projecting to the audience a moving response to a stirring spectacle, which is one reason why Miller uses the praying neighbors and the keening women in the final scene.

Miller's use of the Chorus is not entirely successful; it is used too conspicuously, and certainly it could be better integrated with the action--as one critic puts it, it is not enough to supply "an eternal shell" to a "modern nut," for poetic synthesis is more than putting two and two together; we must be able to say as well that the shell is modern and the nut eternal.[424] Nevertheless, the action of the main story as it stands would be bleak, discontinuous, and only a partial onslaught on reality without Miller's attempt at fullness of revelation which he sought by means of the Chorus.

[424] Eric Bentley, The Playwright as Thinker (New York, 1946), p. 68.

CHAPTER VII

THE VALUE OF MODERN ADAPTATIONS OF THE GREEK TRAGIC CHORUS

Since, as has already been demonstrated, the Tragic Chorus is an unjustified oversimplification, the term a Tragic Chorus is occasionally more appropriate. In Greek tragedy a Chorus was, because of the way the genre developed, regarded as an indispensable element. In modern tragedy it is one possible resource for adding a further dimension of meaning and dramatic force to a play--sub-plot and soliloquy, for example, are other resources--but it does possess a quality that is unique: in its role as a special kind of character it can do more than focus on the dramatic experience--it can grasp the meaning of the experience and express it lyrically, thereby giving special significance to tragic suffering.

An effective Chorus manifests a significant depth of perception and expresses a dual point of view as it gradually perceives the implications of the whole action. It invites the audience to participate, doubling their emotional involvement by imaginative interpretation of what it sees, hears, and feels, thinking with its emotions as well as its head. It sets the details of a particular action against a larger framework, thus heightening both its importance and its intensity. In this perception, this invitation to involvement, and this heightening of the

action, a Chorus offers much to modern tragic drama. When you add to this the representation of a Chorus as the common man, it may be even more useful to us than it was to the Greeks. This effective Chorus is the Tragic Chorus referred to in subsequent pages.

Tragedy, classic or modern, displays an action of the utmost seriousness and significance, conceived as involving a principle upon which the happiness of all of us, or most of us depends; it possesses significance or meaning as it promotes perceptions--perceptions based on feelings--which are conducive to practical wisdom.

Certain circumstances prevailed in the presentation of classic tragedy which warrant mention again for purposes of this summary. The homogeneous classic audience expected the poet to illuminate the ways of God to man, and along with aesthetic enjoyment they anticipated the sustenance of religious and moral teaching. The ancient approach to drama was an attempt to get nearer to "eternal verities" and to the mind and heart of man. In this approach, the classic hero was set in a large mould, but except for the fact that he was no common man, the hero was not too clearly defined. Perhaps the best criterion is that the Greek hero had the capacity to suffer greatly and the capacity also to know why he suffered. The Chorus-character, with its many representations--the Voice of society, the Voice of humanity, the experience of the race, the Voice of the common man--seeking to ascertain those standards by which man should live, suffering with the rebellious hero, perceiving the outcome of the action as the manifestation of

God's will on earth, and extending deep compassion to the fallen hero, as this study indicates, played no small part in the classic attempt to get nearer to eternal truths and to an understanding of the nature and destiny of man.

Ours is an age in which people derive a large part of their view of life from the fields of science and commerce, and it has produced a realistic and naturalistic drama having the force of fact but lacking the imaginative power and richness of traditional poetic drama. This lack is not simply a difference of genius. It is in part the result of a severe limitation of the realistic mode: the dramatic action, rather than being completed, is brutally truncated, since the author has no way of representing the tragedy of the protagonist with all its moral and intellectual depth. Many modern attempts at tragedy leave the audience with little more than a painstaking record of the slow attrition and disintegration of the human person. Intensity of suffering in a character is not enough. Unless the dramatist can give us a significant perception, he had better not show us suffering at all. It can only pain us to no point, or if it does not pain us, perhaps induce an even worse reaction.

The modern audience, unlike the classic audience, is a greatly diversified group which does not necessarily anticipate religious or moral teaching but is no less in need of some understanding of "eternal verities," of some reassurance that life has significance, and that man's natural state is more than one of anarchy where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." At the same time, like its intelligent Greek counterpart, it is wary of any glib philosophy.

The modern Chorus figure, as the embodiment of the common man, transcends his brutish qualities and attains a spiritual awareness in which he sees mankind as a unity, related to some higher order in the universe. To an involved audience he offers reassurance that man is more than a cipher, more than a machine, more than a brute, and that for all his potential for blindness and evil, man still has inherent in him a spiritual power that can be his means to understanding and salvation. The modern Chorus shares in the seeking action which concerns the fate not of a larger-than-life classic hero, but of a hero who is himself a common man, playing out his particular tragedy against a background of eternal issues invoked by the Chorus. Against such a background the modern hero combats the mechanistic view of the moral condition of man-as-victim, controlled by outside impersonal forces which determine the limits and efficacy of human action, and which afford him no power of choice. The Choral perception of why the hero suffers, especially such a hero as Becket who gives his life for mankind, awakens strong feelings of awe, gratitude, compassion, and brotherhood. This common-man Chorus, while recognizing the inability both of the laws of reason and of human justice to resolve the dilemma of the moral incongruities of life, transcends its human ignorance through its vision of a higher justice. The common man as audience, involved with the Chorus, is assured that there is some purpose in carrying his heavy burdens a step further, that his spiritual awareness lifts him above the level of the brute, and that reciprocal compassion for his fellow man--born of spiritual insight--is an earthly means to salvation. He

perceives that it is within the power of the common man to arrest the self-destroying tendencies of the human race and to find peace on earth. It may even be within his capacity to evolve a higher civilization.

In the hands of the modern dramatist, the Tragic Chorus, like the classic Chorus, seems to be a means of exploring and challenging the whole human situation. When all is said and done, murder, suicide, incest, adultery, war, or if one puts it in terms of emotion--anger, revenge, despair, lust, pride, power--remain equally the raw material of modern as of Greek tragedy. The great classic tragedies, challenging the human situation with courage and raising it to a certain sublimity by universality of thought and beauty of language, are vehicles of hope, gratitude, and ennoblement, in which the Chorus plays no small part. Two of the modern dramas analyzed, Deirdre and Murder in the Cathedral, have particularly effective Tragic Choruses, and I think that if a member of the audience watches and listens to these dramas imaginatively, giving full play to his emotions as well as his intellect, he feels that something is being conveyed to him that could not be conveyed through any means other than the involved yet objective Choral figure, a figure endowed with lyricism and a deep perception of the grief and glory of the human situation.

The Greek Tragic Chorus was influential in the shaping of the Greek character. The modern Tragic Chorus may be a means to a paideia for our times.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ethel Teresa (Thompson) Roberts was born in Brooklyn, June 11, 1914. After graduation from high school, she worked for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company Home Office in New York City, leaving her position as secretary to the Assistant Comptroller in 1943 to enter the U. S. Coast Guard Women's Reserve. Stationed at the District Coast Guard Office, Thirteenth Naval District, Seattle, Washington, she was secretary to the Personnel Officer, reporter on the courts martial, and secretarial recorder on the Retiring Board at the U. S. Marine Hospital, Seattle. She made Chief Yeoman in 1945 and attended the U. S. Coast Guard Academy at New London, Connecticut, the same year. She was separated from the service in April, 1946, as an ensign attached to the Thirteenth Naval District, having served as Personnel Officer at the Captain of the Port, Portland, Oregon; Duty Officer at the District Coast Guard Office, Seattle; and, at the time she separated, Assistant to the Personnel Officer of the Thirteenth Naval District. In the same year, she married, and lived on the east coast for one year.

In 1947 she settled on a desert ranch in Laveen, Arizona, for the health of a family member, and in 1950 enrolled at Arizona State University. She received a B.A. in Liberal Arts in 1955, graduating with distinction; an M.A. in Education in 1956; and an M.A. in English in 1962. While working on her degrees and rearing three children, she taught several semesters of freshman English at Arizona State University and one year at Mesa Community College. She completed requirements for a Ph.D in the summer of 1968.