

Germany and Greece



Theories of tragedy

Friedrich Nietzsche's book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, appeared in 1872. It is a book that can be related closely to the age in which it was written, and especially the personal circumstances of its author, then a young classical scholar. It can be related, again, to the mature philosophy of its author's later years. It must, obviously, be considered in relation to the actual matters it is concerned with, of which Greek tragedy is the most specifiable. And in respect of this main concern, it is also to be related to a particular tradition within German thought, which provides us with our starting point: a tradition of theoretical enquiry into the nature of tragedy – Greek tragedy, above all. This tradition goes back at least to Herder and Lessing in the eighteenth century;¹ and it continues beyond Nietzsche to Johannes Volkelt and Bertolt Brecht in our own time. Common to all the contributors, up to and including Nietzsche, is their profound interest in the literature of ancient Greece. They all take issue, in a variety of different ways, with the classic theory of tragedy propounded in Aristotle's *Poetics*; they all, in the wake of Herder, make some attempt to relate the achievements of the Greek tragedians to the religious or social facts of Greek life; and they all consider the dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides to form one of the summits of world literature. About the other summit there is less agreement: it is not always Shakespeare. But while the reasons for 'the tyranny of Greece over Germany' are many, the belief in the paramount value of these Greek plays as in some sense forming one of humanity's fundamental documents is always present.

Why the interest in *theory*? It is true that preoccupation with theoretical accounts of phenomena of all kinds is characteristic of German culture at

In these notes N. = Nietzsche, and E.F.-N. = Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche.

1 For its earlier history, see D. E. R. George, *Deutsche Tragödien-theorien vom Mittelalter bis zu Lessing: Texte und Kommentare*, Munich, 1972.

least since the day of Leibnitz at the beginning of the eighteenth century, but in this instance there is a more specific reason. The need for a German theatre, as part of a wider literary and philosophical programme for Germany, arises at the point where Herder sets out to emphasize the Englishness of Shakespeare and the French character of the court of Louis XIV and its drama, and where he begins to point to the absence of a comparable phenomenon in the 'Germany' – that is, the conglomeration of German principalities and duchies – of his own day. To the articulation of this need are added proposals for a specific programme and conscious, often self-conscious, attempts to create the repertoire of a national theatre. The theory of Greek drama is intended to provide the guide-lines for such a theatre, for there is an idea prevalent in Germany that a special affinity links German thought of the period with classical Greek thought. Above all, there is a feeling that the metaphysical and religious thinking revealed in the Greek dramas is specially relevant to German thought about the relation of man to the cosmos and the forces that rule it.

Lessing – for us the first of these theoreticians – is quite frank about the strictly functional purpose of his concern with Aristotle. It is to gain authority from the *Poetics* for his 'bourgeois tragedy' (*bürgerliches Trauerspiel*) by arguing that with the reduction in the social standing of the characters of his plays must come a corresponding reduction in the intensity of the emotions displayed by them and the reversals of fortune that they experience. His aim might unkindly be described as the creating of rococo tragedy with Aristotle's support. For Schiller, Greek tragedy poses a problem which he approaches from the point of view of Kantian ethics. If, in the age of the Enlightenment, a transcendent religious authority no longer provides an objective sanction for men's deeds and a punishment of their misdeeds, and if a common belief in such an authority is no longer there to provide the theatre with a cultural-religious function and to give unity to its public, then that authority must be replaced by the voice of individual conscience. The 'political' dramas of the Greeks are seen as, and become the authority for, dramas of psychological conflict; and this innovation, which is not always fully conscious, is hardly modified in Schiller's attempts in his last plays to re-establish supra-individual objectivity by the use of the ancient chorus.

Next comes Schelling, the most uncompromisingly metaphysical of our theoreticians, and the one least concerned with the theatrical side of the programme. He offers an interpretation of Greek drama, in some ways anticipating Hegel's, which brings to the fore the question of tragic guilt. The aim is to acknowledge the guilty nature of the hero according to one

set of criteria, those of ordinary morality, but to stress at the same time that his guilty act is a source of pride and value of an altogether different, non-moral, antinomian kind. As far as the Greek stage is concerned, Schelling's emphasis on the hero is bound to entail a diminution of interest in the chorus, that problematic but inescapable feature of ancient drama. While in Schiller the attempt to re-establish (and perhaps re-interpret) the function of the chorus never gets very far, in Schelling this concern is abandoned altogether in favour of a wholly individualistic view of the hero, whose very solitude is the source of his strength and tragic predicament alike.

Hegel's life-long love of Sophocles and his profound historical preoccupations issue in a novel view of the relationship between chorus and hero. It may be described as the dialectical relationship between the broad objectivity of the socio-political circumstances of an age, embodied in the chorus, and the assertive subjectivity of the individual. Here, as in Schelling, something like the notion of pride in suffering is validated on the side of the hero, but, as against that, the validity of the point of view of the socio-political complex is asserted with equal force and disastrous – necessarily tragic – consequences. Finally, for Schopenhauer Greek tragedy has a significance that must be comprehended in terms of his particular brand of pessimism: it provides a powerful demonstration of the vanity of all desires of the 'will', its foolish stubbornness, and the unworthiness of all its goals. In so doing, tragedy teaches us to contemplate with equanimity, indeed with serene detachment, that which we cannot change and should therefore speedily abandon. It must be said, though, that in Schopenhauerian eyes the Greeks are in fact less compelling instructors than Shakespeare; and that tragedy as a whole is not much more than one of several 'quietives of the will' which it is the function of art in general to provide.

Were we to adhere strictly to the interpretation of our tradition as 'theoretical', there would, for our purposes, be no need to go beyond Schopenhauer. But with Nietzsche in mind, we can hardly conclude this section without mention of Richard Wagner: a figure of central importance to Nietzsche, albeit one of only peripheral relevance to the tradition in itself. With Wagner the theatrical part of the programme reappears in a pure form. The product is a new German drama – *music-drama* – which, with its re-integration of long separated arts, its mythic basis and its aspiration towards a socially organic function, evokes, at least in intention, several of Greek tragedy's most distinctive characteristics. But notwithstanding a strong attachment to Schopenhauerian doctrine, Wagner does

not evince any serious theoretical interest in tragedy as such; and therefore he cannot, one might add, effectively reassert the special claims of tragedy, especially Greek tragedy, which Schopenhauer himself had tended to discount. For the decisive reassertion of these claims, we must wait for Nietzsche, Wagner's young friend and admirer who, like Wagner himself, had the deepest respect for Schopenhauer's ideas, but, unlike the composer, also possessed the capacity to reappraise those ideas and challenge them.

German Hellenism

The German preoccupation with the theory of tragedy is bound up with a more general German admiration for Greece, to which we have alluded already. The question that needs some consideration now is: why *Greece*? What did the German writers of the century preceding Nietzsche's book hope to find in Greek antiquity? The short answer is: a superior alternative to the contemporary world and the situation of Germany in it. They might, as we have suggested, feel confident of some affinity between their own world of ideas and the Greeks', and so think themselves particularly well equipped to explore this alternative. This apart, their characteristic posture was not one of confidence about the world they lived in. They were apt to see contemporary man in a radically alienated situation: estranged from his divine origins, from nature, from his fellow-men. In the culture of ancient Greece, as they saw it, man was the 'whole man', with precisely that integrity of experience and that experience of psychic integrity which they missed in the world around them. Such enthusiasm, for all its passing likeness to the Renaissance esteem of the 'universal man', is something new in Europe, something axiomatically Romantic, the *exile's* enthusiasm. It is (in Nietzsche's words) 'thoroughgoing romanticism and yearning for home [*Heimweh*]. . . : it is the desire for the best that ever was. One is no longer at home anywhere, so in the end one longs to be back where one can somehow *be* at home because it is the only place where one would *wish* to be at home: and that is the world of Greece!' The value and dignity of German Hellenism, therefore, lay in 'reclaiming the soil of antiquity' and strengthening Germany's 'bond with the Greeks', the 'highest type of the species "man" so far achieved'.²

2 A characterization by N. (with our italics) of, in fact, German *philosophy*. The words come from the N. of the 1880s (*Will to Power*, 419).

To Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68), son of a Saxon cobbler, who rose to be a friend of cardinals and custodian of their books and antiquities, belongs the honour of having been the first and, in some ways, the most influential of these ‘thoroughgoing Romantics’.³ To appreciate his achievement, we must bear in mind that in his time Europe in general and Germany in particular had remarkably little awareness of Greece or Greek culture as *distinctive* entities, and insufficient enthusiasm for things Greek (as opposed to things Greco-Roman) to feel such unawareness as a deficiency. The Renaissance had provided western Europe with a handsome collection of hitherto lost Greek texts, literary, philosophical and historical, to be studied by scholars, admired by the cultivated (generally in translation), and imitated, in part, by contemporary writers; but insofar as the Renaissance was actually a ‘rebirth’ of anything past, it was predominantly a rebirth of Rome and the spirit of Rome, not of Greece; and the remains of Greek antiquity were treated, and well into the eighteenth century continued to be treated, largely as if they belonged to some kind of extension of the now assimilated world of Rome. Germany, moreover, had been comparatively little touched by the Renaissance and so by even the limited Renaissance cognizance of Greece. Yet in the person of Winckelmann it was Germany that now initiated a quite new passion for the Greek world and an equally new sense of its distinctiveness.

In ancient Greece, Winckelmann saw the embodiment of an ideal: an ideal of visual beauty and, more particularly, of a whole mode of life dominated by visual beauty. His ideas derived partly from his youthful reading of Greek literature, but largely from his studies of Greek statuary – or, in most cases, later copies of Greek statuary – in Germany and Rome. From the contemplation of these copies he distilled ‘the spirit of Greek art’, which became, for him and his successors, not only the characteristic of *all* Greek art (poetic as well as visual), but also the criterion of aesthetic value-judgements in general. The perfection this ‘spirit’ reveals is a perfection of static harmony. It is displayed (Winckelmann affirms) in the Laocoon group, that famous sculpture of the Trojan priest and his sons in the grip of the sea god’s serpents: and this example, certainly surprising,⁴ is used over and over again by subsequent theorists. His description of the group

3 The work that made him famous was *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*, 1755.

4 The group is Greek, but hardly ‘classical’ in any strict sense. It was carved in the late first century B.C. and then, or soon afterwards, brought to Rome where it was rediscovered in 1506 in the ruins of the Baths of Titus. Winckelmann saw a copy of it in Dresden; see C. Justi, *Winckelmann und sein Jahrhundert*, Leipzig, 1943, I, 490f.

culminates in the famous formulation of the ‘perfect law of art’ of which it is said to be the embodiment:

The universal, dominant characteristic of Greek masterpieces, finally, is noble simplicity and serene greatness [*edle Einfalt und stille Größe*] in the pose as well as in the expression. The depths of the sea are always calm, however wild and stormy the surface; and in the same way the expression in Greek figures reveals greatness and composure of soul in the throes of whatever passions. This spirit is depicted in Laocoon’s face, and not in the face alone, in spite of the most violent sufferings. The pain which is manifest in all the muscles and sinews of the body... does not express itself with any violence either in the face or in the position as a whole. This Laocoon, unlike the hero in Virgil’s poem, is raising no dreadful cry... The pain of the body and the greatness of the soul are equally balanced throughout the composition of the figure and seem to cancel each other out. Laocoon suffers; but he suffers like Sophocles’ Philoctetes; his misery pierces us to the soul; but we should like to be able to bear anguish in the manner of this great man.⁵

Are there any manifestations of Greek art which are not informed with this spirit? Once Laocoon, an effigy of the utmost suffering, physical and mental, has been accommodated within the scheme, almost anything, seemingly, can be. There is, Winckelmann concedes, ‘Aeschylus’ tragic muse’ with its dark hyperboles and lurid dramatic effects; Greek drama, he admits, does contain ‘the high-flown and the astonishing’, ‘the hasty and the evanescent’. But whenever something does not fit his ‘spirit of Greek art’, he has a notion – and for eighteenth-century aesthetics it is a disturbingly new notion – of *development* to fall back on. And so he ascribes all the dark aspects of Presocratic drama to the imperfection of a young and immature culture. Yet the heartland is safe: ‘Greek literature of the best period, the writings of the Socratic school’, are once again validated by that solemn phrase, ‘noble simplicity and serene greatness’. The fact that this particular ‘best period’ had seemed to some of its leading figures a fallen world is not allowed to affect the conclusion.

Winckelmann’s influence was enormous. When Goethe, in a scene of *Faust* I written in Rome, evokes the travail of modern man and shows it being assuaged by the contemplation of the ‘silver figures of the ancient

5 Miss E. M. Butler’s translation, from *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany*, Cambridge, 1935, p. 46; German text in J. J. Winckelmann: *Ewiges Griechentum, Auswahl aus seinen Schriften*, ed. F. Forscheptpe, Stuttgart, 1943, 21f.

world' (*der Vorwelt silberne Gestalten*),⁶ these shapes are the ideal models of Greek man which Winckelmann had set up in his historico-aesthetic studies; and when, in his 'classical' drama *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Goethe's fervent heroine is eventually victorious and the play resolves itself into a serene and harmonious close, it is the spirit of Winckelmann that triumphs. In the sphere of aesthetics, Lessing, Herder, and, a generation later, Friedrich Schlegel not only base their diverse theories on material or formulations put into currency by Winckelmann, but might be said to owe to him, as Schlegel put it, 'the very idea of a history of art',⁷ conceived as the development of a series of individual works towards a perfect beauty. And even Nietzsche – whose vision of Greece was formulated, as we shall see, in conscious opposition to Winckelmann's – generously acknowledged his great feat of imaginative scholarship as the foundation of a true German national culture. Generously, but also nostalgically: the national culture thus founded reaches an immediate peak in the Weimar classicism of Goethe and Schiller at the end of the eighteenth century, but the innocence and cultural purpose of that epoch are strengths no longer to the fore among the Germans of Nietzsche's own day – the modern barbarians and 'cultural philistines' (*Kulturphilister*) of the Wilhelminian *Reich*.

The Greek ideal as founded by Winckelmann implied something more than a purely scholarly pursuit. It implied a quest for perfection: a quest that could inspire an astonishing quantity of new translations of Greek authors, original literature on Greek models, and theoretical writing informed by the Greek achievements; and a quest that could be interpreted by subsequent generations in a variety of ways. If the Greeks had, for instance, thought through the deepest problems of life and if Germans aspired to emulate their profundity, the Greeks had also possessed a rich and much admired language which was likewise not beyond emulation. There was (as indeed there still is) a strange belief that the German language showed a particular affinity with Greek and was, among other things, uniquely placed to achieve effects associated with the ancient system of quantitative metre. This theory, already prefigured by Klopstock, was worked out at inordinate length by the poet, scholar and translator Johann Heinrich Voss (1751–1826) and, erroneous though it was, it served to fuel the growing fire of Hellenism by stimulating the imitation of Greek metres in German poetry. There were those, again, in

6 *Faust*, I, 3238.

7 Friedrich Schlegel, *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie*, 1795, ed. P. Hankamer, Godtberg, 1947, 222f.

Germany as elsewhere, for whom the terms ‘Hellas’ and ‘liberty’ were axiomatically linked: a link symptomatized and strengthened by the warm interest taken by many German writers in the Greek struggle for independence, whose fruition followed in the wake of the French Revolution. One of these writers, the poet Hölderlin, claims our particular attention here for the new attitude towards Germany that his commitment to the Greek ideal entails – and also for his intuitive awareness of a greater complexity underlying ‘the spirit of Greece’ than Winckelmann or his immediate successors had been able to recognize.

Hölderlin was born in 1770, two years after Winckelmann’s death. Like many German poets of his age, he came from a clerical family and was intended for the church. The passion of his life, however, was Greece. For Hölderlin, the assimilation of classical Greece is conceived of as a blueprint for the German nation. Criticisms of Germany had hitherto been largely implicit in the philhellenic perspective. It is Hölderlin who first articulates them fully in his letters, in his epistolary novel *Hyperion* and, above all, in his poetry; and his central target is the imbalance of German culture – as compared with the supposed perfection of Greece. It is, in particular, the unnerving intellectuality of the life around him that Hölderlin attacks, the overvaluation of philosophizing and the promise of action that never comes, the substitution of books and words for deeds, the excessive introspection and lack of worldly competence (the criticism has a special poignancy in that these are character traits he is intimately familiar with, which at times become part of his self-criticism).⁸ When he speaks of Greece, it is not always clear whether he has in mind the fifth century or the timeless present in which *Hyperion* lives, but it is always Greece that provides the contrast. For Greece is the golden mean between this northern introversion and the passionate spirit of exotic lands:

The north drives. . . its pupils back into themselves too soon; and while the spirit of the fiery Egyptian hurries out into the world, too intent on the journey, in the north the spirit prepares to retire into itself before it is ready to travel. In the north you must be wise even before you have a mature emotion. . . ; you must develop your self-assurance before you have become a man, you must be intelligent before you are a child; personal harmony and beauty are not allowed to thrive and mature. . .⁹

8 ‘Denn, ihr Deutschen, auch ihr seid / Tatenarm und gedankenvoll. . .’

9 *Hyperion*: Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. F. Beissner, Stuttgart, 1946–, III, 82.

Hölderlin's vision of Greece is, like Winckelmann's, idyllic, but not in precisely the same way. Like Winckelmann he still speaks of 'harmony' and 'beauty', but the ultimate source for his interpretation of these ideal values is not Greek sculpture, but Greek literature of the classical period, especially Plato and Pindar. The Greece that these writers evoke for him is a whole culture, a mode of life in which there is no division between material and spiritual, gods and men:

And the people [of Hellas] came out of their doors and felt the spiritual stir in the air lightly move the soft hair across the forehead and cool the ray of [divine] light, and gladly they loosened their robes to take it to their breast: they breathed more sweetly, touched more fondly the light, clear, caressing sea in which they lived and moved.¹⁰

'Felt the spiritual stir': the breath of the Spirit itself is tangible, is *felt*. The opposites are reconciled in an overriding harmony. Hölderlin, then, has significantly modified Winckelmann's notion of a homogeneous 'Greek spirit': the harmony is the product of opposing forces. It can also be said that, unlike Winckelmann, Hölderlin has some intuitive appreciation of the Greek spirit's darker depths to which Nietzsche will later attach the name 'Dionysiac' – although Hölderlin gives them no such definition, and only in the last draft of his unfinished dramatic poem, *The Death of Empedocles*, do these depths receive a comparably urgent emphasis. His own urgent concern is the material–spiritual harmony which he sees as something lost and never again recovered: here, certainly, he agrees with Winckelmann. In his own interpretation, it is the advent of Christianity and its repudiation of the material that destroyed the harmony – at which point Hölderlin's Christian allegiance engenders, in his greatest poetry, an antithesis, if not an actual conflict between his Greek ideal and the purely spiritual aspiration appropriate to his own Protestant background. This dilemma may well have been one of the factors that precipitated his eventual madness, which began in 1802: that possibility adequately suggests the existential seriousness of the Greek ideal for the German writers under its spell.

After the first decade of the nineteenth century the German concern with Greece can be seen to undergo a change in character. Schiller died in 1805. By 1810 Hölderlin's active life was over. And Goethe – although he retained his admiration for the Greeks, and not least for the three

¹⁰ *Ibid.* III, 50.

tragedians, right up to his death in 1832 – mostly looked in other directions for his inspiration after the unfinished drama *Pandora* of 1810. Sixty odd years separate this work from *The Birth of Tragedy* and compared with the similar span of years since Winckelmann's revolutionary study of Greek art, the later period, viewed as a period of German Hellenism, is anti-climactic. This is not through any lack of distinction on the part of the writers of the time or those of their works that show the Greek influence; nor is there any lack of such works. On the contrary, the poetry of von Platen, Mörike and Heine attests the continuing influence of ancient Greece at a high level of poetic achievement. And in other spheres too, such as philosophy, a figure like Schopenhauer (to choose a single example particularly relevant to our general concern) can be taken to represent the respect for Greek literature general among the intellectual élite of the time: in his case, Plato, above all, was not merely an interest but an important influence – if not quite to the extent he claimed himself – on his own work. But these are *individual* writers or thinkers responding to, and making use of, ancient Greece for their own *individual* purposes; whereas in the earlier period there was the constant hope, at least, of something more, something evoked by such of our phrases as 'quest for perfection', 'superior alternative to the present', 'blueprint for the German nation'. The Greek achievement represented an ideal: special, superior, but still largely remote and mysterious; Germany's own new culture was to evolve by coming to terms with it; and a *collective* effort was to be the means of realizing that aim. In the age of Winckelmann and Weimar, therefore, the sense of purpose depends on there being a common cause to guide the nation's culture; and it is this that wanes.

Classical scholarship

One aspect of the change of character within German Hellenism – and, to an extent, one of the complex causal factors in the change – needs special consideration: the development of German classical scholarship. The quest for Greece initiated by Winckelmann was not (we have said) a purely scholarly pursuit. Nevertheless, it did have important consequences within the scholarly study of antiquity itself. If his notion of Greek serenity and harmony induced writers to look to Greece for their standard of perfection, it also coloured the interpretation of Greece current among professional students of the Greek world. If his studies in ancient sculpture succeeded in making the notion of 'art history' a public possession, they also gave a particular impetus to the study of ancient artefacts in their own