

SPEECH AND SILENCE IN THE *ORESTEIA* 2

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IN THE EARLIER ESSAY of which this one is the sequel, lines 1025–1029 of the *Agamemnon* were considered in themselves and in the immediate context of the third stasimon of that play (*Phoenix* 39 [1985] 99–118). It is now possible to widen the scope of the discussion to an examination of some fundamental concerns of the entire *Oresteia* and then to an evaluation of perhaps the most prominent aspect of Aeschylus' style—his massive use of figurative language. In the end we shall be led to confront questions of poetic and dramatic meaning in the trilogy. We shall not, however, leave *Agamemnon* 1025–1029 behind. The discussion will be grounded in those lines and will serve two complementary and inseparable aims: to pursue the implications of those lines as they were interpreted in the first essay, and to provide further support for that reading by putting the lines in the context of the *Oresteia* as a whole. There are two justifications for this extension of the earlier argument, one general and the other arising out of this particular case. First, as every reader of Aeschylus must be aware, a single passage, or even a phrase, will often have complex connections with other passages throughout the trilogy and cannot be considered in isolation. This is a mark of the wonderful unity of idea and theme in the *Oresteia*. Secondly, the lines in question, interpreted as I have done, provide the most general formulation in the entire trilogy of the nature of *dike*; and as we shall see, the issue of the use of language, which is also raised by these lines, is intimately related to that concept.

I

We shall begin with the scene in the *Agamemnon* that follows the third stasimon, because it is necessary to consider a question raised by Scott: why do the chorus there have trouble understanding Cassandra's prophecies if they have sensed a prophetic song within themselves, and in particular why do they try to silence Cassandra when she says flatly, "I tell you that you will look upon the death of Agamemnon" (*Ag.* 1246)?¹

An answer is implicit in the earlier essay's discussion of the third stasimon. For us the contradiction between the stasimon and the Cassandra scene, which is created by most other explanations of lines 1025–1029, does not exist, because we were not forced to assume that the chorus consciously anticipate what is about to happen. Having failed to formulate what has

¹W. C. Scott, "The Confused Chorus (*Agamemnon* 975–1034)," *Phoenix* 23 (1969) 342–345.

caused their internal disturbance because that has not been made the object of the *phren*'s understanding, the chorus cannot comprehend Cassandra's riddling prophecies of the future, although they catch her allusions to past horrors in the house (Ag. 1242–1245). Even after her explicit statement of Agamemnon's doom, they show how far they still are from complete understanding when they speak of a man as Agamemnon's killer, whereas Cassandra has referred to a female agent (Ag. 1251–1254). The difference in kinds of insight is crucial here: Cassandra can prophesy with the *phren*, but the prophetic song in the chorus's *kardia* only communicates agitation to the *phren*, and its content remains vague at this conscious level. And so to them her prophecies, like the Pythian oracles, remain "hard to grasp" (Ag. 1255).

It is also humanly understandable that the chorus should resist any attempt to bring what they themselves have dimly foreboded to the level of conscious awareness:

Κα. Ἀγαμέμνωνός σέ φημ' ἐπόψεσθαι μόρον.

Χο. εὐφημον, ὦ τάλανα, κοίμησον στόμα.

Κα. ἀλλ' οὔτι παιῶν τῷδ' ἐπιστατεῖ λόγῳ.

Χο. οὐκ, εἴπερ ἔσται γ'· ἀλλὰ μὴ γένοιτό πως. Ag. 1246–1249

When Cassandra finally turns from mantic allusiveness to direct statement, the chorus's first response is not an expression of disbelief but a plea for silence, as if some part of them recognizes the accuracy of her prediction. To speak this awful truth would somehow make it certain of fulfilment,² and by transforming it from matter for dim apprehension to an object of knowledge, would compel the chorus to face it. The very fact that they have failed to achieve this transformation for themselves and still do not fully understand the situation enables them to block the knowledge from consciousness. Thus Agamemnon's murder remains a possibility; it may happen, as Cassandra has predicted, but it might not, and ill-omened utterance can therefore be replaced by prayer to avert it (Ag. 1249). The chorus's adjective *εὐφημον* (1247), in fact, literally designates auspicious speech, and then by extension implies silence in regard to all else. Silence on the one hand and prayer on the other, the chorus hope, may be effective. But Cassandra knows how futile this effort is by comparison with the murderers' *actions* (1250). Although, as we shall see, speech and silence in this trilogy can be a kind of action for those who use them in the right way and at the right time, the chorus lack this control over them. Line 1246 thus represents the one point in the play where real knowledge might be communicated before the event between characters other than the conspirators themselves, but no sooner is the possibility raised than it is forestalled because of the disjunction between the chorus's and Cassandra's modes of understanding.

²Cf. lines 1130–1135 and E. Neustadt, "Wort und Geschehen in Aischylos' Agamemnon," *Hermes* 64 (1929) 243–265, at 251.

The short anapaestic passage (Ag. 1331–1342) that separates Cassandra's exit from Agamemnon's death-cries shows in what mental state the chorus have emerged from the Cassandra scene. Their understanding and attitude have undergone something of a development. Lines 1331–1332 recall lines 1001–1002:

τὸ μὲν εὖ πράσσειν ἀκόρεστον ἔφν
πᾶσι βροτοῖσιν.

There is an important difference, however, between the two passages. Now the chorus apply the general maxim that prosperity is insatiable explicitly to Agamemnon (1335–1337), as they could not do earlier. In the next lines (1338–1340), moreover, though the language is obscure, it is clear enough that the chorus refer to Agamemnon's death. This passage, then, is more direct and explicit than the third stasimon; what has intervened is Cassandra's prophecy. Furthermore, in contrast to their reception of the prophecy, they now talk about the murder. But they evidently still do not regard it as inevitable. The form of their expression in lines 1338–1342 is conditional: *if* the splendidly victorious Agamemnon must now die, what mortal can boast that he was born under a harmless *daimon*? The chorus have finally been brought to the point where they will utter the dreaded words, but in a way that leaves open the possibility that they will not be fulfilled. Indeed, the implications of Agamemnon's murder for the common run of mortals are so frightening, the view of human life that it would force upon onlookers so despairing, that the chorus do not want to believe that it will happen. Perhaps they cannot believe (it is difficult to gauge their tone here). In any case, although these old men have attained a degree of insight, it still falls short, even here, of full certainty.³ If they do not recognize that the logic of the situation, created by past events which their own earlier songs have in large part recounted, and to which these lines obscurely allude (1338–1340), *demand*s Agamemnon's death, then they do not fully understand the situation itself.

Our interpretation of lines 1025–1029 is not merely consistent with the rest of the *Agamemnon*, however. More than any of the other proposed readings, it fixes these lines securely within the fundamental thematic concerns of the whole trilogy. For what is the plot of the *Oresteia* if not the story of conflicting and mutually infringing *moirai*—those of both divine powers and the human agents? Paris' pursuit of excess (cf. Ag. 367–403), the eagle-omen as Zeus *xenios* sends (Ag. 59, 111) the Atreidae against Troy and the consequent offense against Artemis' prerogatives which necessitates the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, the great victory over Troy based on so much bloodshed which is followed by the conqueror's murder: all these events are

³Only here, I would argue, are the chorus caught between two consciously entertained possibilities.

instances of *moirai* grown to excess and needing to be checked. Clytemnestra's fortunes follow the same cycle. When she tries to defend herself to her son by saying, "*moira*, child, is partly responsible for these things [her killing of Agamemnon]," Orestes replies, "and *moira* has given you this fate [μῶρον]" (*Cho.* 910–911). The process by which these rival *moirai* should ultimately balance one another is *dike*.⁴

In the *Eumenides*, however, the working of this process becomes complicated. As the principle of distribution, *Moira* is the power of allotment (of each thing's portion). In the trial scene, because the judges' ballot-pebbles are referred to as πάλαι (*Eum.* 742, 753; cf. 715), the voting is assimilated to the casting of lots.⁵ Thus it visually represents the checking of one *moira* by another. And yet Athena must intervene, and Orestes' acquittal leaves a condition of imbalance: it violates the *moira* not only of Clytemnestra but also of the Erinyes—the very goddesses whose lot (λάχος, *Eum.* 334, 349, 385), woven by their mother *Moira*, is to control the λάχη among men (310–311) and carry out the requirements of *dike*. The process that dramatically represents *dike* upsets the cosmic order. In the end, the Erinyes' legitimate claims are accommodated when they are incorporated into Athens and their awesome powers are turned to the city's good. But the way in which Athena effects this resolution sets aside the automatic infringement of *moirai* on each other.

The idea expressed in lines 1025–1027 of the *Agamemnon*, then, is transformed into concrete spectacle in the *Eumenides* in an ironical manner that reveals it as the basic problem underlying all the action. That the nature of *dike* is stated abstractly for the only time in the trilogy in connection with the heart and the tongue is not a reduction to triviality. If the chorus, in their inability to foresee clearly and to speak, are feeling the effect of a law that demands Agamemnon's death, that is because the law is already in operation. For although I doubt that the lines in the immediate context can explicitly refer to the inevitability of that event or can be intended as an explanation of why the chorus did not warn the king before he entered the house, the effect of the chorus's failure to formulate their inner forebodings is precisely that no human agent can interfere to save Agamemnon. And that is as it must be at this stage of the action. The laws of cosmic and moral order require that he die. The chorus's predicament beautifully illustrates the necessities that govern events throughout most of the *Oresteia*.

⁴For a more detailed discussion of the plot of the *Oresteia* as such a balance, see M. Gagarin, *Aeschylean Drama* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1976) 59–65, 69–79, and Peter M. Smith, *On the Hymn to Zeus in Aeschylus' Agamemnon* (Chico, Calif. 1980, American Philological Association American Classical Studies 5) 43.

⁵On this, and on language of allotment in the *Eumenides*, see Anne Lebeck, *The Oresteia: A Study in Language and Structure* (Washington, D.C. 1971) 150–159.

II

The third stasimon, then, and particularly its conclusion, shows how speech and silence—their effective use or a failure to master them—can represent the workings of *dike* and are finally one with the moral issue. That is why a concern with speech and silence pervades the whole trilogy.

A remarkable essay by Ernst Neustadt (above, note 2) suggests how the issue of language can be so important. In the demonic world of the *Oresteia*, he observes, the word has a magical power; it both reveals the nature of a thing (this is especially the power of names) and, when uttered, can conjure a thing up, make it present. Speech is therefore a form of action, as with curses or blessings. We can build on Neustadt's analysis (and extend it to include silence as well) by examining how language and silence are used as weapons in the struggles between various *moirai*. Speech can be truthful, false, or—between these extremes—ambiguous and manipulative, especially, though not only, when its power is harnessed for *peitho* or persuasion.⁶ On the other hand, it can be no less effective for beneficent purposes. Silence also, as the withholding of information in order to deceive, can be a potent means to accomplish an end. Conversely, silence resulting from the fear or the inability to speak at a critical moment, or language used only to tell why something cannot or should not be said, marks the powerlessness of bystanders in the drama to intervene in the progress of events.

Proof that the fundamental conflicts of the *Oresteia* resolve themselves into verbal struggles is afforded by the remarkable emphasis on speech in *Cho.* 309–314. This passage, which introduces the great *kommos*, is part of a prayer addressed, significantly, to the Moirai; and Gagarin has argued (above, note 4, 66) that it is a key statement of the nature of *dike* as a system of reciprocity:

ἀντὶ μὲν ἐχθρᾶς γλώσσης ἐχθρὰ
γλῶσσα τελεῖσθω· τοῦφειλόμενον
πράσσοῦσα Δίκη μέγ' αὐτεῖ·
ἀντὶ δέ πληγῆς φονίας φονίαν
πληγὴν τινέτω. δράσαντα παθεῖν,
τριγέρων μῦθος τάδε φωνεῖ.

The parallelism between lines 309–310 and 312–313 equates the “hostile tongue” with the “murderous blow” and makes it seem just as destructive. By a similar parallelism, Dike's shout as she exacts what is owed becomes

⁶On *peitho* in the *Oresteia*, see R. G. A. Buxton, *Persuasion in Greek Tragedy: A Study of Peitho* (Cambridge 1982) 105–114. Buxton stresses particularly the erotic associations of *peitho* and the opposition between persuasion and force (*bia*); here I am interested in *peitho* as an effect of speech (though it is not limited to speech: see Buxton 49–50) as opposed to silence. And I think that ultimately the *Oresteia* displays less confidence in the power of the beneficent *peitho*, and of all language, to effect resolutions than he maintains.

the "thrice-aged word" crying out that "the doer suffers"—a succinct expression of the process of *dike*. Enunciating this rule makes it active and thus furthers the purpose of the *kommos*—to summon Agamemnon's aid and make it effective *by words* for the sake of redressing the imbalance that his murder has caused.

That murder has been contrived by verbal deceit. In the *Agamemnon*, it is Clytemnestra who is most in command of language and uses it as an instrument to accomplish her purposes. Her manipulation of words to exploit their imprecision is splendid and terrifying. The conclusion of her address to the Herald shows a self-conscious, almost a mocking, use of verbal ambiguity:

οὐδ' οἶδα τέρψιν οὐδ' ἐπίψογον φάτιν
 ἄλλου πρὸς ἄνδρὸς μᾶλλον ἢ χαλκοῦ βαφάς.
 τοιῷσδ' ὁ κόμπος, τῆς ἀληθείας γέμων,
 οὐκ αἰσχρὸς ὡς γυναικὶ γενναίᾳ λακεῖν.

611–614

All is here in these lines: her adultery, her usurpation of the male role, and her plot against Agamemnon, the latter two compressed into the double meaning of the "the dippings of bronze" as both the tempering of metal and the staining of the weapon with the victim's blood (cf. *Cho.* 1011).⁷ Her words are indeed "crammed with truth." There is an excess of meaning in them that makes them devious. Clytemnestra is seldom, if ever, outrightly untruthful, although she means to deceive.⁸ In the present passage, if one assumes, as the Herald and Agamemnon naturally will, that she has been content with woman's typical role, the full literal force of the negative in οὐδ' οἶδα will be granted and there can be no suspicion of danger to the king. All one needs is to know how Clytemnestra has actually been behaving to unravel the ironies and recognize that she is telling the truth by indirection. The chorus, who posses this knowledge (at least insofar as they know of Clytemnestra's infidelity) but cannot speak forthrightly to the Herald, seem to be making just this comment on the Queen's language in the lines which immediately follow (615–616, the precise meaning unfortunately obscured by textual corruption).

Parallel to her use of language is her tendency to deal in symbols. Others may doubt that the symbols on which she relies mean anything (for example, the chorus's skepticism about the beacons), or they cannot be aware of the full range of their significance. Only she can gauge their accuracy and

⁷Cf. Fraenkel *ad loc.* (304–305). He is unnecessarily cautious about the latter significance of the phrase, which he admits only tentatively and as a "secondary meaning."

⁸This point is rightly emphasized by Neustadt (above, n. 2) 254–261, although he also makes the (in my view) questionable suggestion that Clytemnestra involuntarily lets her true wishes appear beneath the surface meaning of her words.

their import; for she controls these symbols as she controls language. And therefore she controls the situation and is uniquely privileged with complete understanding of it. She does not need to learn of things from others. She requires only the fact that the beacon-signal has arrived to have a vision of the carnage that must be taking place in Troy even as she speaks (320–350). Even the manner of her entrance and exit in the Herald scene reflects her superior knowledge, as Taplin has shown.⁹

In her climactic scene with Agamemnon, language for Clytemnestra at last becomes a mode of positive action as well as a means for concealment. Just as she uses the act of walking on the fabrics to express in advance the significance of the murder she intends, her struggle with her husband is fought out before the audience in words (Agamemnon himself, though without full awareness, describes it with a military metaphor in lines 940 and 942; cf. 1235–1237).¹⁰ When she induces Agamemnon to tread the fabrics, especially in the stichomythia of lines 931–943, Clytemnestra's language takes the form of persuasion, *peitho*, and against this weapon Agamemnon has no defense. The action here fits the pattern described earlier by the chorus in 385–386.¹¹ When she alludes to this scene later on, Cassandra gives full credit to the role Clytemnestra's language plays in her husband's doom. He does not know, she says, "the nature of the detestable bitch's tongue that . . . will hit the mark of secret destruction by ill chance" (1228–1230).

After the murder, when concealment is no longer necessary, Clytemnestra herself describes the kind of language which she has earlier been forced to use:

πολλῶν παροῦθεν καίρως εἰρημένων
τᾶνναντί' εἰπεῖν οὐκ ἐπαισχυνθήσομαι. 1372–1373

Καίρως here means "to suit the moment" both in the sense "diplomatically," "ambiguously," and with the implication "effectively," "so as to produce the desired result." It should be contrasted with the chorus's οὐδὲν . . . καίριον in lines 1031–1032. The two words mark the opposition between Clytemnestra's resourcefulness with language and the inability of the chorus's heart to speak what it senses, and so between her domination and their ineffectualness. Clytemnestra's mode of speech does not change its fundamental character at this point. She still exploits the figurative, imagistic

⁹O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford 1977) 299–302.

¹⁰Cf. Taplin (*op. cit.*) 312–313.

¹¹On persuasion in this scene (and the relevance to it of the lines just cited), see Robert F. Goheen, "Aspects of Dramatic Symbolism: Three Studies in the *Oresteia*," *AJP* 76 (1955) 126–132, and Buxton (above, n. 6) 105–108.

potential in language, as in the rest of her speech (1374–1398). But now she uses the multivalence of language in order to reveal the truth rather than simultaneously to express and conceal it, to triumph and no longer to ensnare. It is left for the chorus only to wonder at her “tongue,” the boldness of her speech (1399–1400).

At the opposite extreme to Clytemnestra are the passive characters—ordinary people, most of them—who cannot speak or are reluctant to do so because that would turn horrifying possibilities into inescapable truths. Some are silent out of fear of those more powerful, such as the chorus during Agamemnon’s absence from Argos (548) or the watchman in the prologue (36–39). The watchman manages to suggest much by his silence, so that “those who know” will catch his meaning (the chorus’s corrupt lines 615–616 might have had a similar sense). His silence is, as we should say, eloquent, but it is the absolute opposite of Clytemnestra’s method: her *words* are over-charged with meaning. Iphigeneia is another figure coerced into silence (228–247). The Argive chiefs ignore her cries to her father (ineffective speech), and the attendants gag her to prevent her from uttering a curse (contrast Thyestes’ effective curse, 1601–1602). Deprived of speech, she becomes like a painted figure, but with a picture’s wordless power of expression: “she struck each of her sacrificers with a pitiable bolt from the eye.” For her as for the watchman, this power comes only in default of speech (προσεννέπειν θέλουσα, 242–243). In contrast with the scene of her sacrifice is the recollection of the “holy voice” with which she “honored the paean” at the third libation during feasts in her father’s house (243–247). And finally there is the Herald’s unwillingness “to defile with a tongue of ill tidings a day meant for auspicious utterance” (εὐφημον ἡμαρ, 636–637; cf. the chorus’s εὐφημον . . . στόμα, 1247). The chorus of the third stasimon belong with this group. There not fear but lack of certainty prevents their speech because not past or present but future events are at issue. But their silence marks them, like the others, as helpless against the relentless flow of events.

Only one character in the play can resist Clytemnestra, and that is Cassandra. Lines 1035–1071 represent a failed persuasion-scene which contrasts with the successful one with Agamemnon. Cassandra meets Clytemnestra’s attempts to persuade her to enter the house (forms of *πεῖθειν* occur five times in lines 1049–1054) and characteristic verbal ironies (e.g., 1055–1058) with *silence*. Whatever Cassandra’s motives—contempt, indifference, preoccupation with her suffering—this silence is a brilliantly effective response. To try to resist Clytemnestra on her own terms would be dangerous and probably futile; but silence, the apparent absence of any response at all, is the one attitude that renders Clytemnestra’s skill with language impotent. Cassandra’s silence is a sign of her knowledge. In sharp contrast to the chorus, whose failed attempt at expression in the third stasimon immediately before has left them helpless, Cassandra uses silence voluntarily and in order to

prevail, to claim the only freedom left open to her: to enter the palace to her death at the time and in the way she chooses—unlike Agamemnon.

When she does speak, Cassandra represents the inverse of Clytemnestra. She too uses obscure and riddling forms of expression, but in an attempt to reveal the truth. To those who understand (the audience) her language seems compelling far beyond the power of the direct statement to which she finally resorts in line 1246. Yet it is one of the terrible ironies of this play that she is cursed with the inability to *persuade* (1212: ἐπειθον οὐδέν' οὐδέν . . .), whereas Clytemnestra's talent for persuasion is formidable.

Even more clearly than in the *Agamemnon*, words are the basis for the action in the *Choephoroi*. Here the chorus have more command over language than did the chorus of the first play. It is they who teach Electra what prayer to make as she pours her libation (*Cho.* 102–123), in order to aid their friends and curse their enemies (*Cho.* 145–146). And in fact the chorus will materially aid Orestes' plot—by means of words. He gives them this command:

ὑμῖν δ' ἐπαινῶ γλώσσαν εὐφημον φέρειν
σιγᾶν θ' ὅπου δεῖ καὶ λέγειν τὰ καίρια.

581–582

In contrast with its use several times in the *Agamemnon*, εὐφημος now does not indicate a fruitless attempt to suppress terrible knowledge but the exercise of speech and silence at appropriate times. And the chorus here—like Clytemnestra but unlike the chorus in the *Agamemnon* (1032, 1372)—are to speak τὰ καίρια. Now for someone besides Clytemnestra speech and silence will be not opposed but complementary. The Queen's loss of exclusive power over language shows how her fate is closing in on her.

In the series of rapidly shifting scenes that lead up to the play's climax,¹² we see the chorus carrying out Orestes' order. "When shall we demonstrate the might of our speech [στομάτων . . . ἰσχύν]," they ask with a violent but telling metaphor (719–721), and in the same passage they invoke "deceitful Peitho" to enter the contest on their side (726–727). In the next episode they persuade the Nurse to suppress a critical part of the message she is conveying from Clytemnestra to Aegisthus (770–773), hint at the imminence of good fortune (775), but refuse to tell her more. In line 780, as they turn aside her last question, they speak with a Clytemnestra's open-endedness (μέλει θεοῖσιν ὥνπερ ἄν μέλη πέρι—cf. *Ag.* 974). The chorus then (783–837) deliver a prayer to Zeus, Apollo, and Hermes for Orestes' success—a use of words intended to have no less practical an effect than their persuasion of the Nurse. Next, with Aegisthus, the chorus are non-committal, concealing what they know and feel, skilfully directing him inside the palace to get the information that he wants (838–854). Finally, in lines 855–868, which corres-

¹²Their effect is well described by Taplin (above, n. 9) 351.

pond symmetrically with the earlier anapaestic passage in lines 719–729 within the structure of these scenes,¹³ they again deliver what is in effect a prayer for victory which begins, τί λέγω and ends with εἴη δ' ἐπὶ νικῇ (cf. *Cho.* 478).

Orestes himself uses words to deceive Clytemnestra, although his method is a plausible and well-constructed lie rather than verbal ambiguity. As for Clytemnestra, even by the end of the *Agamemnon* she has shed elaborate language and has been reduced to straightforward wishes and prayers for an end to the succession of evils in the house (*Ag.* 1567–1576, 1654–1655), although she is still defiant towards the chorus. This directness is a sign of her incipient loss of dominance, her transformation from victor into victim. She is, of course, still capable of ambiguity (*Cho.* 668–671)—it is too firmly rooted in her character to disappear. But it does not work now because her past actions and her character are known to her listeners. And she no longer has sole control over tricks of language; she must share it with Orestes. Although the servant's riddling report of Aegisthus' murder and her own danger is transparent to her, it tells her only that she is being destroyed by her own weapons of deceit (886–888).

The scene in which Orestes faces his mother and forces her back through the palace door (892–930) is a verbal duel and the counterpart, in this play, of Clytemnestra's scene with the king in the *Agamemnon*. But here there is no need for ambiguity—deceit and persuasion have already played their role. Instead, Orestes and Clytemnestra argue the issue of justice directly and without concealment. Ἀντὶ μὲν ἐχθρᾶς γλώσσης ἐχθρὰ / γλώσσα τελείσθω—especially in the stichomythia of lines 908–930, the process of *dike* is enacted, *in words*. And *dike* now demands Clytemnestra's death and Orestes' blood-guilt.

"Schoolled in evils, I understand . . . where it is right to speak and where it is right to be silent likewise [καὶ λέγειν ὅπου δίκη / σιγᾶν θ' ὁμοίως]," says Orestes in the final play (*Eum.* 276–278).¹⁴ That timely speech and silence are now put to ritual use instead of serving as instruments to entrap and destroy (contrast *Cho.* 581–582, quoted above) is a sign that as the conflicts of the trilogy approach a conclusion language is being reoriented to serve not

¹³The scenes are grouped symmetrically around the stasimon at lines 783–837: A. 653–718: *Oiketes*; Orestes (disguised); Pylades (silent); Clytemnestra. B. 719–729: choral anapaests. C. 730–782: Nurse (on errand to Aegisthus); chorus. D. 783–837: stasimon. C. 838–854: Aegisthus; chorus. B. 855–868: choral anapaests. A. 869–934: *Oiketes*; Orestes (identity revealed); Pylades (breaks silence); Clytemnestra.

¹⁴Or "alike to speak where it is right and to be silent [where it is right]"—perhaps better because more in line with *Cho.* 581–582 (to which these lines are parallel on either translation). As for the words omitted here, πολλοὺς καθαρμούς, Blass suggested πολλῶν τε καιρῶν, Herwerden πολλοῖσι καιροῖς, both from the Medicean scholiast (. . . ἐκατέρου καιρὸν γινώσκων). Even if these emendations are rejected, the notion of the "right time" is clearly implicit (whence perhaps the scholiast's language).

sinister but beneficent ends. In sending him to Athens, Apollo tells Orestes (81–82) that they will obtain judges there and, with “enchanting words [θελεκτηρίους μύθους],” they will find the means to free him from his plight forever (cf. Ag. 1). The trial scene in the *Eumenides*, like the major action of the *Choephoroi*, is a verbal struggle. But the verdict decides nothing except Orestes’ fate. It leaves the larger questions unresolved, so that the outraged chorus must now be dealt with. The true “enchanting words” are those Athena speaks to the Furies in the *Eumenides*’ own persuasion scene—lines 778–915, which follow the saved Orestes’ exit, whereas the corresponding scene in the *Agamemnon* is preceded by the entrance of the doomed king. As in the first play (Ag. 931–943), the conversion takes place in a short passage of stichomythia (892–902). “I think you will enchant me [θέλξειν μ’ εοικας], and I give over my hatred,” say the chorus (900). The instrument of enchantment is persuasion, now redirected from destructive to good purposes.¹⁵ But this is just a particular case of the final choice between possible uses of all language. The value of words is ambiguous right up to the end: the Furies could blight the land of Attica with their words (829–831)¹⁶ but finally invoke the blessings of fertility upon it instead. The question of the creative and the destructive uses of language is part of the issue of right and wrong, justice and injustice, that torments the world of the *Oresteia*.

Music provides a close analogy to speech, and they both are combined in song. The prominent concern with language explains why there are more references in the *Oresteia* than in the rest of Aeschylus’ extant dramas to music and song of various kinds. Song has the same magical power for good or ill as speech. In the first two plays, songs of joy and triumph repeatedly turn into laments, and names for auspicious kinds of song are applied to songs of ill-omen; like language, music is reoriented at the end of the trilogy in the Furies’ incantatory benediction on Athens.¹⁷ This blessing reverses their earlier “binding-song” (307–396), which is, as we have seen, the full realization of the song of which the chorus were incapable in the third stasimon of the *Agamemnon*.

Since words and music were part of the dramatic medium, their thematic use was natural—but significant nonetheless. By drawing attention to this

¹⁵See 794, 829, 885–887, and 970–972, and Buxton (above, n. 6) 109–113.

¹⁶The sense is clear despite uncertainty about the last two words in 830, for even if φέροντα in 831 is left without a noun (which Burges’s ἔπη χθονί would admirably provide), “words”—the only thing that proceeds from the tongue (γλώσσης, 830)—can easily be supplied. For words bearing fruit, cf. *Eum.* 714, *Sept.* 618. In the present passage, the terrible incongruity in καρπὸν places what the Furies threaten to do within the context of the perversion of natural cycles which has been used as an image to characterize horrible events throughout the trilogy. These lines show clearly how the issue of the benign *versus* the malignant use of language encapsulates the central conflicts.

¹⁷See J. A. Haldane, “Musical Themes and Imagery in Aeschylus,” *JHS* 85 (1965) 33–41 (37–40 are on the *Oresteia*).

medium, Aeschylus could make his audience fully aware of the meaning of what they were hearing at every point in the trilogy. Because it takes concrete form in the drama, the use of words, which is closely identified with the competition among various *moirai*, becomes the means of representing in the theater the abstract issues of *dike*. Whenever the audience witnessed a character employing speech or silence as a weapon or half-speaking, half-concealing his or her knowledge, when they saw others unable or afraid to speak effectively, and when they heard song perverted into disharmony, they were observing at first hand the operation of the problematical process of *dike*. In the same way, the conversion of language and song to beneficent uses at the end of the trilogy stands for the resolution of the conflicts. The trilogy as a whole, because it is in large part a creation of words and music, is a semblance of the very issues it probes.

In the *Eumenides*, the forces that govern the world take personal form in Apollo (who claims to represent Zeus), the Erinyes, and the mediator Athena. This transformation from impersonality to personification, and from imagistic, allusive language to concrete spectacle, is necessary in order that an adjustment may be achieved, a realignment of powers and a new unity among them that do not disrupt but rather strengthen the already existing order in the world. But what lasting value does this resolution hold? We may try to form a just appreciation of the ending by considering what limits there might be on the trilogy's powers of representation—a question that the third stasimon of the *Agamemnon*, and especially its concluding lines, by pointing to the weaknesses in all human attempts at expression, invites us to raise.

III

The rules of language impose limits that inevitably prevent full statement of deeply felt meaning. The necessity of framing thoughts in articulate speech impedes a direct outpouring of what is in the heart. Language is too specific to convey adequately the inchoate ideas and feelings within. This disparity between the inner impulse and its outward expression is the general human experience which, I take it, lines 1025–1029 of the *Agamemnon* describe.

No less than other men, the poet is subject to this limitation. W. B. Stanford, in fact, has related these lines to Aeschylus' style. They explain, he suggests, this poet's obscurity and what may at times seem his incoherence—characteristics which are "an inescapable result of his passionate and fiery emotions."¹⁸ The connection Stanford makes is suggestive; but we

¹⁸W. B. Stanford, *Aeschylus in His Style: A Study in Language and Personality* (Dublin 1942) 11–12, 129–131 (the quotation is from the former pages). Although I find his remarks unnecessarily limited by preoccupation with Aeschylus' personal character, I am indebted to them as the starting-point of my own thoughts.

cannot fully explore its implications if we assume that the text is merely transparent, a window upon Aeschylus' personality. We would do better to examine the text for its own sake in the first instance, and only then, if we wish, draw conclusions about the poet. The lines under discussion suggest, I think, what all human speech, and the *Oresteia* as one of its products, can and cannot accomplish.

An ideal speech would doubtless be perfectly expressive, without any ambiguity or other imprecision. But that speech would be the privilege of divinity. Human language, confined by rules which group words as they follow one another through time into meaningful patterns, can only try to approach, without ever attaining, this ideal. Its imperfections epitomize the limits that condition mortal life. But there are ways in which we can seek to extend those limits, and perhaps the most important is figurative language. Through it, complex and multiple meanings can be suggested with no attempt made at directly stating them (an attempt that would never completely succeed). Figurative language is thus a strategy for turning human weakness to advantage by exploiting imprecision, whereas the ideal speech would not need it but would be perfectly abstract. Much can be gained in this way: what we feel as beautiful and moving in poetry arises from this attempt to circumvent the literal inadequacy of words. And yet there are limits to this success, and poetry ought properly to make us aware of these as well. Figurative speech is a mode of representation, and between it and what it stands for there can only be analogy, not true identity. As Goethe wrote at the end of *Faust*:

Alles Vergängliche
Ist nur ein Gleichnis.

Gleichnis—"image," "semblance"—also means "simile," and a basic theme of *Faust* is the parallel imperfection in our world and in our language. Between the word and what it signifies the correspondence will always be incomplete.

Aeschylus, supreme poet, master at exploiting the possibilities offered by figurative language, shows particularly well both its strengths and its limitations. Let us consider first what he accomplishes with it. Some lines from the third stasimon of the *Agamemnon* will provide the illustration we need:

καὶ τὸ μὲν πρὸ χρημάτων
κτησίῳ ὄκνος βαλὼν
σφενδόνας ἀπ' εὐμέτρου,
οὐκ ἔδυ πρόπας δόμος
πλησμονῆς γέμων ἄγαν,
οὐδ' ἐπόντισε σκάφος.

1008-1014

This is how the lines appear in Page's edition; the only departure from the manuscripts—Schütz's *πλησμονῆς*—does not concern us. If the text is

sound, the passage exemplifies a phenomenon not uncommon in Aeschylus: the shift within the development of an image from the figurative (the ship, 1008–1010) to the literal (house, 1011) and—in this case—back to the figurative (1014).¹⁹ This is a good example because the first shift involves a change of subject and grammatical construction which at first seems awkward and the second creates uncertainty about the subject of the verb in the last line. But as to the latter, it makes no difference whether we are to supply “[the sailor’s] caution” or “house” (which would then figuratively have a hull, *σκάφος*). The uncertainty itself, along with the earlier shift of subject, tends toward a much closer identification between the house and a ship than could be suggested by a more usual form of imagery. House and ship, in the circumstances envisioned in the passage, have enough in common so that the poet can move between them in a way that is surprising, to be sure, but finally justifiable and meaningful.

This passage, then, reveals the assumption that underlies the use of imagery, metaphor, and all figures of speech that involve the substitution of one thing for another: that the world is so unified and coherent that analogies can be drawn between distinct spheres of action and experience. Thus if excessive prosperity threatens both a ship at sea and the fortunes of a house on dry land (and, for that matter, good health—1001–1004), this danger and the action necessary to avoid it come to seem general rules, moral prescripts which imply the existence of an essential order. In the same way, warfare is like hunting, the capture of a city like the hunter’s netting of his prey or like forcing a yoke on a domesticated animal.

In one way these analogies are reassuring. Although they serve to portray terrible actions with more immediacy and vividness, at the same time they help to contain the horror by relating each event to the known and familiar and by making it seem intelligible as part of a comprehensive order in the world. The plan of the trilogy as a whole also performs this clarifying function. As deeds recoil upon their agents, patterns of repeated action are formed which are stressed by complexes of recurrent imagery. The unity that results has a value that is not purely aesthetic. By virtue of its coherence, the trilogy comes to stand as a model of a *kosmos*, a universal design. At least until the end of the trilogy, this order may seem frightening, but the idea of its existence offers comfort as well. It assures us that events are not random, that they can be explained, that from great suffering understanding can emerge. Yet the trilogy is a semblance, which by definition cannot *be* the thing itself. How can we know that the regularity it intimates really exists and is not merely a human construct, an artifice created by a language that can never be wholly authentic? We should not be surprised if the text, which

¹⁹Cf. Fraenkel, 456 (on 1011).

strives to evoke a sense of coherence in things, betrays at the same time an awareness that the world may not be like this at all.²⁰

I am suggesting, then, that Aeschylus is essentially in the same position as his chorus in the third stasimon of the *Agamemnon*, even though his perspective is much broader than theirs: sensible of a reality which lies beyond normal awareness yet prevented from expressing it authentically by the flawed nature of language, and from knowing it, even from being sure that it exists, by the human limits of which language is a sign. Even when he transforms the song of the Erinyes from the old men's vague intimations into a dramatic reality in the *Eumenides*, Aeschylus actually is only showing what that song might be like. We observed, moreover, that certain forms of expression used by the chorus (e.g., Ag. 1019–1021) encourage us to interpret their words as hinting at the true situation but are primarily general moral formulas that may not finally work as explanations. Here too there is a parallel to be drawn. Indeterminacy of statement is Aeschylus' practice throughout the trilogy; and even though he, unlike his characters, surely knew what he was suggesting to the audience, it too rises from the impossibility of certainty.

In his discussion of the parodos of the *Agamemnon*, K. J. Dover makes the very interesting observation that the chorus's narrative of the events at Aulis is indirect.²¹ We are, of course, told some facts—the eagle-omen, the adverse winds, the sacrifice of Iphigeneia—but the relation between them, and their causes—all, that is, that can make the story coherent and intelligible—has to be inferred from Calchas' prophecy. As Dover says, "in their [the chorus's] narrative, as in real life, the figure of the seer stands all the time

²⁰In another way, some of the figurative language in the first two plays of the trilogy can be frightening insofar as it reflects complexity and contradiction in the world, as has recently been suggested by George B. Walsh, *The Varieties of Enchantment: Early Greek Views of the Nature and Function of Poetry* (Chapel Hill, N.C. and London 1984) Chapter 4 (62–79). But this analysis will not cover passages such as Ag. 1008–1014, which seek to construct a unity underlying the contradictions. Perhaps even in the *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi* we are confronted with two versions of reality, and two corresponding kinds of figurative language; but that in itself suggests doubts—central to the effect of the drama—about how far "language magically reflects and influences the world" (Walsh, 64). In the *Eumenides*, Walsh points out, figurative language decreases in frequency and is replaced by other modes of representation as (he argues) language and the world are purged of complexity. Here too, Walsh suggests, the power of language to reflect reality was accepted by Aeschylus and his audience, and this idea is problematical only for the modern reader. I wish to argue instead that the text itself reveals limits on that power in a movement simultaneous with but contrary to the impulse towards representation, and that the tension thus created is part of the substance of the trilogy. My view thus tends in the same direction as that taken recently by Simon Goldhill in "Two notes on τέλος and related words," *JHS* 104 (1984) 169–176.

²¹K. J. Dover, "Some Neglected Aspects of Agamemnon's Dilemma," *JHS* 93 (1973) 58–69, at 61–62.

between laymen and the mysterious intentions of the gods, and they cannot know whether his interpretation of events was correct or not." We may add that Calchas' interpretation is itself presented obliquely. As the chorus report his words, he raises the possibility of Artemis' resentment against the army and her demand for "another sacrifice" as things he fears, not as definitely impending events (131–134, 147–154; both sentences are of the same type: μή with the subjunctive). Then, when the adverse winds came, we learn only that he "shouted out to the commanders another remedy for the storm, alleging Artemis as the reason" (199–202). Nor are we ever told why Zeus sent the omen of the eagles and the hare (or even, explicitly, that *he* sent them).

Clearly we are meant to put these things together into a sequence of cause and effect. As the play proceeds, we may even infer that present events are the consequence of earlier guilt in the family of Atreus, and specifically of Thyestes' curse (1600–1602).²² But it is we who must do this work of interpretation; and although the explanation that emerges is plausible and internally consistent, satisfying our desire for form and order in the flow of events, we must bear in mind that it is not authoritative. And why, even if immediate causes can accurately be supplied, was the whole succession of disasters necessary in the first place? It is no wonder that the chorus break off their narrative with an invocation to Zeus, as if he might provide reasons. But their famous characterization of his justice (176–183) does not take them very far toward an explanation.

Nor is it an adequate solution to the questions raised by the rest of the trilogy. In the *Eumenides*, of course, Zeus does seem to emerge as the reconciler of conflicting claims, though through his intermediaries Apollo and Athena (indirection once again). I am one of those, however, who find the end of the trilogy unsatisfactory—at least, if we are to expect from it a definitive solution to the abstract problem of *dike*. The arguments for Orestes' acquittal given by Apollo, and later by Athena, are unconvincing, not to say trivial and demeaning, and the final outcome is heavily weighted in favor of the Olympian gods. But are we justified in demanding tidy answers? The ending seems eminently satisfactory, and certainly more honest, on the assumption that the lack of resolution is precisely the point: the moral questions are insoluble. We see before us gods familiar from the Homeric

²²I am not entirely convinced by Timothy Gantz's argument ("Inherited Guilt in Aeschylus," *CJ* 78 [1982] 1–23) that Aeschylus made no use of the concept of inherited guilt, but I think that his observations show how Aeschylus leaves the questions of causation ultimately indeterminate. The idea of a curse is suggested strongly enough (cf. συγγόνων Ἐρινύων, *Ag.* 1190) for the audience to use it to construct a coherent explanation of events, but is nowhere explicitly stated as a cause. Aeschylus leaves room for significant uncertainty. For a sensible treatment of inherited guilt in his dramas, see T. G. Rosenmeyer, *The Art of Aeschylus* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1982) 295–299.

world—jealous of their prerogatives, their moral concern qualified by a large capacity for spite and self-interest. Here, as in Homer, the world is fragmented among the powers of various divinities. That is the problematic of a cosmos defined by competing *moirai*, and Aeschylus probed it more deeply than Homer apparently was concerned to do. The balance finally reached is precarious and lacks a rational foundation. And yet our moral sense, if not our reason, is fully gratified by the outcome. That is why the ending of the trilogy can be exhilarating at the same time as it is logically suspect. Or, to shift terms somewhat, with the drawing together, at the end, of so much of the main imagery, verbally and through visual means, the *Oresteia* gains a wonderful feeling of closure even while the possibility is left open that the sense of order thus conveyed is at least partly an illusion.

What I have said, if it is right, makes the *Oresteia* not less but more interesting than otherwise as the creation of human thought expressed in mortal language. The text shows an attempt to construct intelligible order, and reflects at the same time the working of a mind aware of precisely what it was about—the honest and rigorous type of mind which alone could understand the possibilities that the conditions of mortality offered and the restraints that they imposed. Only a very great poet could have expressed these perceptions so profoundly: by taking advantage of the limits on human language and, in the end, by conceding their mastery.

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