

Voegelin's Account of Tragedy in the New World Disorder

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Voegelin, Tragedy, and Athenian Democracy

Voegelin did not publish an extended volume on Greek tragedy. In his writings, there is a brief account of tragedy in *The New Science of Politics*, and a more extensive chapter on the subject in *The World of the Polis*.¹ [1] In each case, the bulk of Voegelin's analysis is concerned with Aeschylus, but in neither case is his analysis comprehensive. His comments in *New Science* amount to a few pages. He expands upon these comments in *The World of the Polis*, but much is still missing. In *The World of the Polis*, he speaks generally about the purpose of tragedy in the Athens of Marathon, and he provides an interpretation of Aeschylus's plays *The Suppliants* and *Prometheus Bound*. However, he spares only one sentence for Sophocles (OH II, 252). In that sentence, Voegelin claims one can already see the demise of tragedy in Sophocles's works. Voegelin has more to say about Euripides, but here too his analysis is scant. Echoing Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Voegelin claims that Euripides's plays are a degradation of tragic art and reveal the extent to which Athens deteriorated during the Peloponnesian war (OH II, 252, 264-6). However fair an assessment this may be of Euripidean tragedy, Voegelin does not consider in detail the significance of Euripides's better works, and what these reveal about the nature of Athenian tragedy.

While Voegelin does not set aside much room for tragedy in his writings, much of what he does say is compelling. We learn more about tragedy by reading Voegelin's brief remarks than we often do

1 [1] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 70-5, and *The World of the Polis*, Volume II of *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 243-66. All subsequent references to *New Science of Politics* are documented in parentheses by the abbreviation NSP and page number. References to *The World of the Polis* are documented in parentheses by the abbreviation OH II and page number.

by reading an extended meditation on the subject, such as Aristotle's *Poetics*.² [2] Recent volumes on the subject of tragedy, including Christian Meier's *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, J. Peter Euben's *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, and Mera Flaumenhaft's *The Civic Spectacle*, do not cite Voegelin as a source, but they nevertheless support much of what Voegelin has said.³ [3] Meier, Euben, and Flaumenhaft are aware, like Voegelin, that tragedy was essential for Athenian democratic culture. To put it simply: tragedy was the medium through which the average Athenian citizen did political philosophy.

When reading *New Science of Politics*, one is struck by the regard with which Voegelin holds tragedy, particularly Aeschylean tragedy. The emergence of the annual tragic festival in Athens the City Dionysia is, for Voegelin, a high point of civilization. It is the moment when a democratic body of citizens fostered an aesthetic forum in which to consider the nature of the soul. Voegelin writes:

Here, for a golden hour in history, the miracle had happened of a political society articulated down to the individual citizen as a representable unit, the miracle of a generation which individually experienced the responsibility of representing the truth of the soul and expressed this experience through the tragedy as a public cult. (NSP, 71)

For Voegelin, the truth of the soul that the Athenians experienced was the soul's ability to deliberate and take appropriate action for the soul to, in Voegelin's words, descend into its depth and respond adequately to the demands of justice [*Dike*]. Tragic action, in the fullest sense, is a movement in the soul that culminates in the decision (*proairesis*) of a mature, responsible man (OH II, 247). Voegelin describes this movement in the soul as the Dionysiac descent into man, to the depth where *Dike* is to be found (OH II, 251). Aeschylean tragedy, for Voegelin, presents this Dionysian wrestling with justice, in which a hero is forced to choose between hard options one of which more closely approximates *Dike*. Voegelin writes:

2 [2] For Voegelin, Aristotle's analysis in the *Poetics* reveals very little about the substance and historical function of tragedy. See OH II, 246-7.

3 [3] See J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Christian Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, trans. Andrew Webber (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993); Mera Flaumenhaft, *The Civic Spectacle: Essays on Drama and Community* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1994).

Tragedy as a form is the study of the human soul in the process of making decisions, while the single tragedies construct conditions and experimental situations, in which a fully developed, self-conscious soul is forced into action. (OH II, 247)

Voegelin, however, provides only a single example of a tragedy in which a fully developed, self-conscious soul makes a choice in accord with Dike ♦ a soul who then persuades the people to consent to this choice through persuasion (*Peitho*). The tragedy is *The Suppliants* by Aeschylus, and the heroic soul is the character Pelasgus, the King of Argos (NSP, 71-3; OH II, 247-53). No other extant tragedy fit this model quite so well, not even the remaining works of Aeschylus.⁴ [4] Nevertheless, in a general sense, Voegelin's depiction of tragedy as ♦ a liturgy which re-enacts the great decision for Dike ♦ is illuminating (NSP, 73). In tragedy, humans ♦ both individually or collectively ♦ are faced with difficult choices and must live with the consequences of these choices. The way in which humans arrive at the best choice ♦ the choice most in accord with Dike ♦ is through individual and public deliberation. Aeschylean tragedy presents the horrors that result when humans proceed without discretion. It also reveals the fragile justice, or the lesser evil, which emerges when reasonable reflection and public persuasion precede action.

The struggle for justice that Voegelin associates with tragedy reflects the concerns of Athenian citizens in the fifth century BCE. After the victories over the Persians at Marathon and Salamis, Athens possessed unprecedented control over the Greek world. This power resulted in part from the militancy, courage, and ingenuity of Athenian citizens, who led the Greek resistance against Persian expansion. Athens, against all expectations, was able to hold the Persian Empire at bay and gain authority over the city regimes in Hellas, Thrace, Asia Minor, and the Aegean Sea. The involvement of middle-class citizens in Athens ♦ sudden triumph accelerated the birth of democracy in the city. The citizen body was no longer content to have political decisions made by a select few. For the first time in history, so far as we can judge, a city disposed its aristocratic leadership and replaced it with the rule of the people. The ♦ people ♦ ♦ and by this I mean the male, land owning citizens of Athens ♦ were now directly involved in determining the affairs of the polis. Athens was a direct democracy, not a representational one; roughly six thousand citizens were required to participate in the people's ♦ Assembly, which had final authority. Political decisions in the Assembly were determined by a vote. The way in which citizens

4 [4] Voegelin writes, ♦ *The Suppliants* is the finest study of the essence of tragic action, but of no more than this very essence ♦ (OH II, 253).

voted depended on which speaker could best persuade. Citizens were also required to serve as judges in legal cases.⁵ [5]

Athenian democracy was a bold and unique experiment. The average citizen suddenly found himself with unprecedented political and judicial power — power that required him to make life and death decisions. However, the Athenian — people — had no formal education or experience in political and legal matters. There was a high probability that mob rule and unruly passions could overtake the city. Thus, the Athenians recognized the need for a public forum that could refine judgement — an institution that was political but that also gave citizens a certain degree of reflective distance from politics. Thus, they created an aesthetic space in which to consider — experimental situations — and nurture the art of deliberation. This was the primary political purpose of the City Dionysia. The yearly festival of watching tragedies, and comedies, was not simply — entertainment — that Athenians could take or leave. Attendance at the Dionysia was mandatory. For all of the revelry and drinking that took place at the festival, its intent was to inspire thoughtful debate. The Dionysia forced citizens to consider the horrific aspects of life, along with the choices that human beings make under duress. Hopefully, such representations of suffering and decision making would assist citizens when they returned to the Assembly and found themselves faced with difficult choices.⁶ [6]

The fact that Athens founded this tragic festival reveals that the city was, for a short time, constituted by a remarkable citizenry — a citizenry who, in Voegelin's words, were — disposed to regard tragic action as paradigmatic. — Voegelin claims that, for tragedy to flourish, — the heroic soul-searching and suffering of consequences must be experienced as having valid appeal. — The Athenian spectators were — not an assembly of heroes — to be sure, but they were a relatively thoughtful and politically engaged group who turned to tragedy in their moment of need (NSP, 73). As J. Peter Euben writes, — Probing the shaping force of institutions and traditions, tragedy was itself a political institution and part of a tradition. Educating the judgement of the community ... tragedy sought to nurture an audience capable of appreciating what [it] was and did. —⁷ [7]

⁵ [5] For an account of Athens' — rise to power, and the emergence of democracy, see Meier, *Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, 8-43.

⁶ [6] See *ibid.*, 1-7

⁷ [7] Euben, *Tragedy of Political Theory*, 58.

It is interesting that the Dionysia, for all its celebration of the city, did not possess the usual triumphalism that we often associate with civic holidays. Voegelin writes, "The meaning of tragedy as a state cult consists in representative suffering" (NSP, 73). Citizens were required by civic ordinance to watch depictions of evil "to gaze on those things that disrupt civilized life, cause suffering, and contaminate good with evil."⁸ [8] As Voegelin writes, the audience must watch "the fate of the hero and the suffering of consequences" "a fate that arouses a shudder" in "the soul of the spectator" (NSP, 73). The tragedies also reveal the difficulty of establishing order in a world that contains evil. Even a hero who makes a decision that approximates Dike, such as King Pelasgus in the *Suppliants*, is fated to suffer the dire consequences of that decision. The best decision does not guarantee happiness or success, but it can perhaps mitigate surplus suffering. The best chance that humans have, even in the worst case scenarios, is careful deliberation. Tragedy declines, according to Voegelin, when it depicts heroes who are simply crushed by fate. This decline, for Voegelin, is manifested in the works of Sophocles and, especially, Euripides, where the "demonic capriciousness of the gods becomes stronger than the faith in the ultimately harmonizing order of Dike" (OH II, 252).

But even in Aeschylean tragedy, evil is ineradicable. It is possible to, in Voegelin's words, create "a shining bulwark of order in a very disorderly world" (OH II, 253). That said, this bulwark is unstable. In the Aeschylean vision, there is no transcendent or immanent utopia; there are limits to what any endeavour can accomplish; good is always accompanied by something bad; heroic suffering does not indicate eternal salvation; death is final. Voegelin claims that the "great problem" for the Greek tragedian is "the morass of demonic evil surrounding the island of order" (OH II, 243). The Athenians presented this stark vision of reality just as Athens was at the height of its glory. It appears they felt the need to check their own hubris by reminding themselves of the sober realities embodied in the older Homeric and Hesiodian myths. Tragedy recasts these myths "which portray a world of gods, heroes, and royal families" "to address the new democratic situation."⁹ [9] Perhaps there were fears amongst the citizens that Athens' military success, political daring, and technical ingenuity had crossed certain limits, and that disorder would soon overtake their newly established "island of order." This

⁸ [8] Mera Flaumenhaft writes, "the tragedies reveal rape, parricide, incest, cannibalism, and defiled corpses....In the theatre, spectators must face what is mixed and mingled, mangled and impure" (*Civic Spectacle*, 74).

⁹ [9] See Meier, *Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, 41-3.

fear proved to be well founded, as Athens would eventually deteriorate under the stress of the Peloponnesian War.

Case Study: Voegelin's Interpretation of *Prometheus Bound*

Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* can be interpreted as an expression of anxiety concerning Athens's recent accomplishments. In this tragedy, the god Prometheus, according to Voegelin, symbolizes the demonic drive of human existence in its self-assertion and expansiveness (OH II, 261). That is to say, Prometheus represents some of the very drives through which the Athenians rose to power. The play presents the struggle between Prometheus, the older Titan deity, and Zeus, the younger Olympian god who is now King. Zeus punishes Prometheus for the excessive pity he has shown human beings. Prometheus, however, is not the tragic hero of the play, according to Voegelin (OH II, 261). Rather, both Prometheus and Zeus equally stand for forces that are experienced in the soul of man (OH II, 257). What we see presented in *Prometheus*, according to Voegelin, is the tragedy of the soul in tension with itself: the struggle between unruly technical reason (as represented by Prometheus) and the intelligence guided by justice (as represented by Zeus). Zeus, according to Voegelin, rules in relative accord with Dike. Zeus's defeat of the older Titan deities resulted in the order of Dike, which is a rule of law replacing the ancient horrors (OH II, 256). Prometheus had initially supported Zeus in the struggle against the Titans. However, tension between the two deities resulted when Zeus decided to abolish the human race because it belonged to the old, chaotic order. Prometheus intervened on behalf of humanity. Zeus agreed to spare humans, but Prometheus proceeded to show excessive pity on the human race by giving them a multitude of technical abilities. In addition to these, Prometheus gave human beings fire an act which, for Zeus, goes too far. But, as Voegelin points out, this is not the specific reason why Prometheus is punished. Prometheus, we are told, is guilty because he has talked so high and haughty and is not yet humble before the new King of the gods.¹⁰ [10] Prometheus's hubris is disrupting the new order established by Zeus; he takes too much pride in the civilizational inventiveness he has given humanity (OH II, 259).

Aeschylus, according to Voegelin, is concerned that the civilizational impulses represented by Prometheus will, ironically, undermine civilization itself if taken to excess. Voegelin writes, "When the

10 [10] Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, lines 321-2. The translation is by David Grene in *The Complete Greek Tragedies, Volume 1: Aeschylus*, eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959). I refer to this translation throughout.

civilizational drive has disrupted the order of Dike and caused a social catastrophe, then man is helpless (OH II, 261). Prometheus claims that he gave humans beings their wits and that all arts that mortals have come from Prometheus.¹¹ [11] Because of Prometheus' philanthropy, human beings now possess the arts of writing, housing, astronomy, mathematics, sailing, medicine, metallurgy, domesticating animals, and reading omens.¹² [12] However, Prometheus has not given humans the art of politics, or, more precisely, prudential statesmanship. Ruling in accord with Dike is a practical pursuit distinct from the applied arts symbolized by Prometheus. Technological intelligence cannot pursue its possibilities at the expense of prudential governance, just as Prometheus cannot continue to defy Zeus. If technological possibilities are pursued without practical wisdom, and if a fetish for contrivance overwhelms human consciousness of justice, then, Aeschylus fears, we will descend into chaos. This applies to Athens, who should not take too much pride in its contrivances. As Voegelin writes, there is the danger of the sophistic intellect ... overreaching itself and destroying the order of Dike through the unmeasured, demonic pursuit of its possibilities (OH II, 260).

There are moments in Voegelin's analysis when he seems to present the tragic vision of the world as similar to the Gnostic. Tragedy, in Voegelin's words, presents a battle against a demonically ordered world (NSP, 73). His frequent use of the term demonic to describe the tragic representation of evil is potentially misleading. Voegelin, as we have seen, claims that Prometheus symbolizes the demonic drive of human existence in its self-assertion and expansiveness, whereas Zeus symbolizes the just order that confronts the demonic. Explained in these terms, it seems as if tragedy presents a dualistic struggle between a Jovian Dike that is thoroughly good and an immanent demonic reality that is thoroughly evil. But Voegelin is aware that it is not quite this simple. He writes: On the one hand, Prometheus is more than a villain who breaks the law; and on the other hand, Zeus is less than a pure force of goodness and right (OH II, 261). Or, as Albert Camus observes, Prometheus is both just and unjust, and Zeus who pitilessly oppresses him also has right on his side.¹³ [13] Prometheus has taken his love of humanity too far,

11 [11] Ibid., lines 441, 506.

12 [12] See *ibid.*, lines 437-71, 477-504.

13 [13] Albert Camus, *On the Future of Tragedy*, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 301.

but his impulse to help humanity is justified and can be acted upon in accord with Dike. As Voegelin writes, "Man and his Promethean drive are part of the order of things" (OH II, 261). Human beings would not be polis dwelling creatures without the technical abilities given to them by Prometheus. These abilities allow humans to meet their basic needs in a hostile world and provide the foundation for political life. That is to say, the Promethean drive is not inherently "demonic," but it becomes evil when taken to excess. Zeus, on the other hand, is not a force of pure goodness. He establishes a relatively just order in the cosmos, but his notorious philandering and tyrannical tactics reveal, in Voegelin's words, "the demonic component in Zeus that strikes the innocent with misery" (OH II, 262). So Zeus, the symbol of Dike in the world, also has a "demonic" side.

With this, Voegelin identifies a central feature of tragedy: no single force in a tragedy, not even the most just, is absolutely just. Tragedy does not present a melodramatic conflict between angelic good and demonic evil. This characteristic of tragedy checks the totalitarian impulse to declare one side absolutely just and encourage excessive actions in the name of "justice." Camus, like Voegelin, also notes this characteristic of tragedy, and contrasts it with the dualistic account of justice contained in melodrama:

tragedy is ambiguous and [melo]drama simple-minded. In the former, each force is at the same time both good and bad. In the latter, one is good and the other evil (which is why, in our age, propaganda plays are nothing but the resurrection of melodrama)...This is why the chorus in classical tragedies generally advises prudence. For the chorus knows that up to a certain limit everyone is right and that the person who, from blindness or passion, oversteps this limit is heading for a catastrophe if he persists in his desire to assert a right he thinks he alone possesses. The constant theme of classical tragedy, therefore, is the limit that must not be transgressed....To make a mistake about this limit, to try to destroy the balance, is to perish.¹⁴ [14]

14 [14] Ibid.

It is a mistake, however, to proclaim, like Camus, that the forces confronting each other in tragedy are *equally* legitimate, *equally* justified.¹⁵ [15] Certain forces may be more justified than others in a tragedy. In the case of *Prometheus Bound*, Zeus is more justified than Prometheus. However, Zeus is not absolutely justified, nor is Prometheus completely unjustified.

Camus speaks of an uneasy balance between antagonists. We do not possess the other two plays in Aeschylus' *Prometheus* trilogy, but we can be fairly certain that in the concluding play, *Prometheus Unbound*, Zeus and Prometheus come to an agreement.¹⁶ [16] A fragile order emerges from this conflict between deities, much like the tenuous order established at the end of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy.¹⁷ [17] For Voegelin, as for Camus, this insecure realization of order is a hallmark of Aeschylean tragedy:

It was the greatness of Aeschylus that he understood the order of Dike in society as a precarious incarnation of divine order, as a passing realization wrung from the forces of disorder through tragic action by sacrifices and risks, and even if momentarily successful under the shadow that ultimately will envelop it. (OH II, 255)

Voegelin's comments reveal yet another crucial feature of tragedy. Not only is there no force in tragedy that is absolutely just, but there is no anticipation in tragedy of a final, permanent reign of justice. Tragedy, in this sense, is radically non-eschatological. By eschatology I am not referring to the orientation of the soul towards the good beyond being, but rather to the belief that history will

15 [15] Ibid., my italics.

16 [16] See Voegelin's comments in OH II, 262.

17 [17] In the court scene in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, Apollo and Orestes are pitted against the Furies. Orestes has murdered his mother Clytaemestra in revenge for her killing his father Agamemnon. The Furies torment Orestes for his crime and demand that he be punished. The goddess Athena and twelve Athenian citizens adjudicate the case. Apollo and Orestes are right: Orestes could justifiably kill his mother in revenge. The Furies are not wrong: Orestes killed his mother, which is an unspeakable outrage that must be punished. Both defendants and plaintiffs have a certain amount of right on their respective sides. The difficulty of this case is reflected in the way in which the Athenian jurors vote. After listening to arguments on both sides, the jurors split the vote right down the middle, with equal ballots for Orestes and the Furies. A tie means that Orestes escapes the charge of murder, but Athena must appease the Furies by establishing a permanent cult for them in the city. Thus, no side in this struggle is proclaimed absolutely right, but, through public deliberation, persuasion, and compromise, order emerges out of the private cycle of revenge, violence, and chaos. A perilous and uneasy balance is struck.

one day culminate in a once and for all victory of the absolute good ♦ a victory that will see either the destruction or transformation of the present world. In tragedy, there is no immanent or transcendent defeat of evil. Even Zeus ♦ relatively just order in the cosmos will not last. Voegelin writes: ♦As far as Zeus is concerned, his order is not a divine, eternal order in the Christian sense. It has come into existence and will pass away, being no more than a phase in the life of the cosmos. And Zeus himself is not the God beyond the world, but a god within it ♦ (OH II, 261). The idea of the God beyond the cosmos revealing himself definitively, in either a person or a text, with a message indicating a once and for all defeat of evil, is absent in tragedy. The ♦soteriological truth ♦ of eschatological faith is unacceptable to the tragic Greek mind. Any kingdom to come, or for that matter, any democracy to come, will be temporary. Equally unacceptable is the melodramatic selection myth common to all forms of eschatological faith, a myth that divides humanity between the righteous and the unrighteous, the saved and the damned. Tragedy does not undertake such divisions.

This non-eschatological, non-providential aspect of tragedy is what is most at odds with Christian and post-Christian civilization. It is here that we see the major fault line within the Western world, between the eschatological orientation on the one side and the tragic vision on the other. This rupture, I contend, is greater and more decisive than the conflict between Christianity and Gnosis, as well as the break between medieval Christendom and modernity. Whatever major differences exist between Christianity, Gnosticism, and modern political ideologies (such as Nazism, Communism, and certain forms of liberalism), all are united in their expectation of a future culmination ♦ of a once and for all victory of the good. This victory may be said to occur through a transcendental irruption into history (Christianity), or through a pneumatic flight out of history (ancient Gnosticism), or through an immanent developmental process within history (modern ideology). Notwithstanding these substantial differences between various eschatological sects, all are united in the belief that history will end and evil will be defeated. Tragedy rejects all such eschatological visions.¹⁸ [18]

The Relevance of Tragedy in the Midst of Globalization and Terror

¹⁸ [18] For an analysis of how the eschatological vision of reality developed in history, and how it is distinct from non-eschatological mythology, see Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World To Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

This brings me to the relevance of tragedy for today. It is frequently taken for granted that Athens laid the foundation of Western civilization. Tragic art, however, has been a marginal aspect of Western culture. Camus observes that tragedy is one of the rarest of flowers that only blossoms during moments of high stress and transition.¹⁹ [19] After Athens, the tragic vision was replaced, first by the ecumenic triumphalism of the Macedonian and Roman Empires, and second by the eschatological ethos of the Christian and post-Christian West.²⁰ [20] Camus claims that tragic art flourished in the West on only one other occasion: during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England, Spain, and France the moment at which Europe was experiencing the stress of transition from medieval Christendom to the modern world. After that, tragedy is eclipsed once again, this time by the ages of Reason, Enlightenment, and Revolution. Other than ancient Athens and early modern Europe, the tragic voice is muted or silent.²¹ [21]

The rarity of tragic art may be something to be lamented. As we have seen, Voegelin claims that Aeschylean tragedy is a high-water mark, a golden hour in history, in which the truth of the soul in its struggle for justice was represented in a public forum (NSP, 71). This would suggest that the insights of the soul expressed in Greek tragedy, and further developed by Plato, can be applied to our current historical moment and given new form, much like Shakespeare did for his contemporaries. But there are other moments in Voegelin's analysis where he suggests that Aeschylean tragedy was superseded by revelatory religion. In *The World of the Polis*, Voegelin claims that the Hellenic experience of history, as well as its symbols is less differentiated than Israelite and Christian experiences and symbols. In terms of degree of differentiation, Voegelin places tragedy one step above the compact Chinese experience of cosmological empire, but one step below the Israelite experience of

19 [19] Camus, *On the Future of Tragedy*, 298.

20 [20] Roman tragedy, for Camus, is a vulgar imitation of the Greek original. In medieval Christendom, tragedy is completely eclipsed. The Western Church was always wary of theatre, often restricting its subject matter to biblical themes, and frequently putting a stop to staged performances altogether. For nearly a thousand years, from the decline of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance, theatre was almost non-existent. See *ibid.*, 302-04. Also see Camus's comments about Rome in *The New Mediterranean Culture*, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 193-4.

21 [21] See Camus, *On the Future of Tragedy*, 296-98. Camus identified an effort by some of his contemporaries to revive tragic art in the twentieth century, but he was not prepared to declare it a full flowering of tragedy.

◆ Chosen People in the present under God,◆ and two steps below the Christian experience of universal humanity under God. The ◆ experience of tragic history,◆ according to Voegelin, carries a ◆ mortgage,◆ in part because it is bound by political conceptions of the polis (OH II, 263). But, more importantly, there is a ◆ mortgage◆ in tragedy because its symbols do not indicate a divine ◆ irruption◆ from the God beyond being, such as is found in Judaism and Christianity. Voegelin writes:

the polis of Aeschylus, unlike the people of Moses, does not exist freely under God through the leap in being, but approaches such existence through the tragic efforts of its people to descend from the divine depth of Dike. The Dionysiac component in tragic existence precludes the irruption of a divine revelation from above.

The qualifications should not detract from the greatness of Aeschylus. The revelation of God to man in history comes where God wills. If Aeschylus was no Moses for his people, he nevertheless discovered for it the psyche as the source of meaningful order for the polis in history. (OH II, 263-4)

Voegelin here reformulates a commonplace Christian distinction between worldly reason and supernatural revelation, and uses it to suggest that Aeschylus, for all his greatness, is deficient precisely because he lacks revelation. Aeschylus◆ soul descended to the depths to find justice, but he did not ascend to the heights with God◆s grace. For this reason, Aeschylus was ◆ no Moses.◆ This implies that he was certainly no Jesus or Paul, since, for Voegelin, Christian revelatory symbols are even more differentiated than their Old Testament predecessors. Christian revelation, in Voegelin◆s words, reveals the experience of ◆ the universal history of mankind under God through Christ◆ and thus is not limited by the more compact experiences of cosmos, psyche, polis, and chosen people (OH II, 263). Voegelin does not get into the details of Christianity here, but substantively, the content of Christian revelation is found in its symbols of the incarnation, the trinity, divine providence, bodily resurrection, final judgement, and so on. Humans cannot discover these articles of faith through unassisted natural reason or ◆ descent into the depth.◆ Such knowledge requires a definitive act from God.

I am aware that Voegelin◆s discussion of these matters is not exhausted by these few comments in his chapter on tragedy.²² [22] However, I refer to them to suggest that Voegelin is

22 [22] The suggestion that revelatory ◆ irruption◆ is an *experience* superior to anything experienced by Aeschylus is in tension with Voegelin◆s later argument that human experiences

ambivalent about tragedy. On the one hand, tragedy is a **miracle** that reveals the truth of the soul in its struggle with Dike; on the other hand, this truth has been surpassed somewhat by Judeo-Christian revelation. If the basic insights of Aeschylus have been superseded by subsequent revelatory events, then it would seem that the tragic vision has little to say to us today. Tragedy may be important and helpful, but more decisive truths have been unveiled. Thus, tragedy art, once again, recedes to the margins of an eschatologically oriented civilization.

However, I want to suggest that the general vision contained in Athenian tragedy, and developed by Plato, has not been superseded by eschatological faith. Tragedy addresses our current situation more directly, and with less potential for psychological and political derailment, than eschatology. It is certainly possible, as Voegelin has shown, to order the soul by a revelatory eschatology that does not descend into an immanent revolutionary enterprise. The thought of St. Augustine stands as the pre-eminent Christian example of this type of eschatology, since it is aware that humans cannot realize the heavenly eschaton and that there are limits to politics.²³ [23] However, Augustinian symbolism, or some form of Augustinian-derived eschatology, may not be the best remedy for our current malaise. The **new world disorder**²⁴ [24] that we presently inhabit is characterized, in large part, by millennial battles sparked by various forms of secular and religious eschatology **what we often call fundamentalism.** To counter the eschatological excesses of our age, it may be best to cultivate a new tragic ethos. For tragedy is less inclined than any form of eschatology to become intoxicated by a transcendental order, and thus to **forget that the world is what it is** (OH II, 255).²⁵ [25] A tragic acceptance of the limit-conditions of this world without the intoxicating promise of a future transfiguration means that the soul is less inclined towards excesses and delusions. It is less likely

are **equivalent** throughout history. See Voegelin's essay **Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History**, in *Published Essays: 1966-1985*, Volume 12 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 115-33.

23 [23] See Voegelin's commentary in NSP, 107-10.

24 [24] I borrow this phrase from Ken Jowitt. The meaning I give the phrase, however, departs somewhat from Jowitt. See Ken Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

25 [25] Voegelin makes this comment during a critique of the theodicy problem.

to try to flee this world for a fantastic transcendence, or to believe that a transcendental order will irrupt into the world at some unknown point in the future, or to mistake the experience of transcendental order as a world-immanent order. The good remains the measure in tragedy, but it can only be approximated in a world containing ineradicable evil.

In modernity, the Promethean drive of human-self assertion manifested itself in the major eschatological political movements of the twentieth century, all of which promised a definitive transformation of the world through human initiative, state planning, political expansion, and technology.²⁶ [26] Western liberalism is the movement that triumphed at the end of the twentieth century over the more genocidal eschatological movements of Nazism and Communism. But the West's victory unleashed some of its more radical eschatological tendencies. Capitalist democracies presented themselves as the eschaton — as the —end of history,— to borrow Fukuyama's phrase — whose mission was to transform the world in accord with Western values, markets, and technology. This victorious Promethean drive is now the ecumenic movement we broadly call —globalization— — a movement characterized, on the one hand, by the demand to uphold universal human rights, and, on the other, to spread technology and free markets around the globe.

The —new world order— that was trumpeted at the end of the cold war has, in fact, descended into disorder and uncertainty. Not everyone is happy with the hegemony of the West. Resistance to Western domination has taken new forms. One symptom of the new world disorder is the current struggle between globalization and radical Islam. The September 11th attacks stand as the ultimate symbol of this conflict. But it would be a mistake to understand the new world disorder as a struggle between Western ecumenism and Islamic apocalypticism. There is, instead, a more general resistance to Western domination. This resistance is found both within the West and outside. Everywhere, new expressions of individual, nationalistic, and religious violence are disrupting the operational perfection and free-market deregulation dreamed of by Western visionaries. Terrorism has now become the most effective mode of resistance. Jean Baudrillard writes:

When the world has been so thoroughly monopolized, when power has been so
formidably consolidated by the technocratic machine and the dogma of globalization,

²⁶ [26] Voegelin writes, —Modern Prometheanism— is in fact a form of Gnosis (OH II, 254, n. 7).

what means of turning the tables remains besides terrorism?...All those singularities (species, individuals, cultures) that have been sacrificed to the interests of a global system of commerce avenge themselves by turning the table with terrorism....Terrorists, like viruses, are everywhere. There is no longer a boundary that can hem terrorism in; it is at the heart of the very culture it's fighting with, and the visible fracture (and the hatred) that pits the exploited and underdeveloped nations of the world against the West masks the dominant system's internal fractures. It is as if every means of domination secreted its own antidote....It is a mistake, then, to characterize this as a clash of civilizations or of religions. It goes well beyond Islam and America, on which one might be tempted to concentrate in order to create the illusion of a confrontation resolvable by force....This is the clash of triumphant globalization at war with itself....[I]f Islam were dominating the world, terrorism would rise up against Islam. The globe itself is resistant to globalization.²⁷ [27]

Baudrillard's reflections on globalization and terror serve as the backdrop against which a contemporary tragic vision can be formulated. Baudrillard is articulating a tragic truth about the limits of human endeavour. The closer a power approximates absolute totality, the more violence it commits to sustain its domination. The greater the monopoly on power that a single force has, the more likely that resistance will take the form of covert terrorism rather than open warfare. The type of totality that dominates the world does not matter; any global movement will encounter intensifying degrees of terroristic resistance as it moves closer to totality. In response, the global movement will increase its military and surveillance capabilities to unprecedented levels. This means that the West will probably not be undermined by a single terroristic faction (such as al-Qaeda). With the passage of time, however, the cumulative effect of multiple resistant forces — internal and external, religious and secular, individual and group based — could potentially undermine the spirit of Western ecumenism.

Furthermore, the endeavour by a single movement to spread its values around the world does not just lead to an escalation of violence, but also to a dilution of the very values that it seeks to globalize. Baudrillard speaks of a neutralization of values due to their proliferation and indefinite

²⁷ [27] Jean Baudrillard, *L'Esprit Du Terrorisme*, trans. Donovan Hohn, *Harper's*, February 2002, 14-5.

extension. This is how it is with human rights, democracy, etc.: their expansion corresponds to their weakest definition, their maximum entropy. Degree Xerox of value. 28 [28] Bad photocopies of Western ideals are now proliferating. Indeed, it is not so much Western values (democracy, jurisprudence, freedom, human rights) that have become global in recent years as Western markets and technology. In the meantime, Western values have decayed at home. Commodity fetishism has eclipsed our sense of democratic responsibility; the consumer has replaced the citizen as the paradigm of liberty;

From Baudrillard's comments, we can draw a parallel between the present crisis in globalization and the world of tragic Athens. Like Athens and its Greek allies after the battles with the Persians, so America and its Western allies have emerged triumphant from the ideological struggles of the twentieth century. Just as democratic Athens stood out as a beacon of light against authoritarian Persia and Sparta, so Western democracy for all its failings is preferable to Fascist and Communist alternatives offered in the past century. Now the West sits victorious; there is not a single power that can match the West economically, technologically, or militarily. But also like the ancient Athenian Empire, which began to encounter fierce resistance at the very moment of its triumph, so too Western based globalization must deal with a multitude of reactions to its ascendancy. Like Athens, the West's triumph may ironically be the start of its undoing. The West must now deal with a multitude of terroristic reactions that will become increasingly hard to contain. The battle lines are not as clear as they were in the ancient world. Nevertheless, for the time being, America and the West sit in triumph. But unlike Athens, which at the height of its power created an aesthetic institution dedicated to showing the limits of power, contemporary Western democracies have not developed a corresponding cultural space. The post-cold war ethos in capitalist democracies has been expressed predominantly through an exported free market triumphalism and a home-grown culture of indifference. And yet, everywhere there are signs that should mitigate our blind optimism and political apathy. September 11th has made this all-too-obvious.

We must wonder, then, if it is possible, or even desirable, for a tragic aesthetic theatrical or otherwise to emerge today, and whether it can have impact beyond a select group of citizens. 29 [29]

28 [28] Jean Baudrillard, *Paroxysm*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1998), 12.

29 [29] There have been efforts to demonstrate how tragic culture can address our contemporary problems and have political relevance. See Robert C. Pirro, *Hannah Arendt and the Politics of*

If tragedy re-enacts the great decision for Dike, then we are in need of such re-enactments in theatre, but also in literature, music, philosophy, and art especially at this time when the decision for justice has never been more difficult. We are caught between the need to mitigate the excesses of our own civilization and the need to defend ourselves against terrorism. We can no longer cling to quasi-eschatological accounts of liberalism's global triumph, nor can we continue to spawn cultural forms that encourage moral and political indifference (such as we find in the current entertainment industry). A culture of indifference is a breeding ground for both apathy and extremism. The aims of our civilization, and how we can best protect it, need to be addressed through a broad-based cultural discussion. As the West defends itself from attack, citizens must work to encourage new cultural expressions that in some way echo the public cult of tragedy expressions that are politically engaging and uncompromisingly honest about the evils in this world. This will require a citizen body that is, once again, inclined to regard tragic action as paradigmatic.

Such a tragic renaissance would, hopefully, be accompanied by a renewal of democratic life. Instead of trying to spread our ideals around the world through state and corporate apparatus, it might be better to concentrate on enhancing our own democracies at home. What has eroded in present day democracies is the existence of small-scale associations within civil society that cultivate social virtues. Jean Bethke Elshtain has argued this point.³⁰ [30] She defines civil society as the many forms of community and association that dot the landscape of a democratic culture. This network, according to Elshtain, lies outside the formal structure of state power.³¹ [31] It is only within such small-scale *civitates* that, she argues, it is possible for individuals, as citizens, to cultivate democratic virtues and possibilities, to play an active role in the drama of democracy.³² [32] In Athens, it was precisely such politically engaged individuals who felt the need for tragic art and who saw tragic deliberation and suffering as paradigmatic. As Christian Meier writes, [Athenian] citizens did not belong to a large-scale political unit such as a present-day nation; it was not a society of specialists

Tragedy (De Kalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001). Also see J. Peter Euben's commentary on Thomas Pynchon in *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 59-63, 281-308.

30 [30] See Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (Concord, ON: Anansi, 1993), 3-34.

31 [31] *Ibid.*, 6.

32 [32] *Ibid.*, 10.

and did not have to contend with our manifold processes of change, fuelled from all sides, beyond comprehension, and so difficult to influence....[A]s soon as they had the city in their hands, they must surely have felt the challenge of applying great mental effort to understanding the world.◆33 [33]

It must be said immediately that the emergence of a vibrant civil society is no guarantee against extremism. Furthermore, even if a more tragically oriented culture were to emerge, it would not guarantee perpetual prudence in the citizen body. The endeavour by the Athenians to ◆understand the world◆ through tragedy did not ◆save◆ them. Within a generation, the glorious ◆Athens of Marathon◆ had disintegrated into the horrors of the Peloponnesian War ◆ a war in which the Athenians made an increasing number of bad decisions. Voegelin notes that as the Peloponnesian War dragged on, ◆the citizens of Athens were no longer representable by the suffering heroes◆ (NSP, 74). Plato and the philosophic schools subsequently expanded upon the truths of tragedy. The tragic ethos moved from the polis to the university.

My primary concern, however, is not whether the tragic understanding can thrive amongst a select group of individuals. I am more interested in whether this ethos can have a broad-based, cultural impact, with better consequences for us than for the Athenians. Perhaps this is not possible in the current climate, characterized as it is by the parade of screen images, brand names, technological diversions, and quasi-eschatological remedies. The present situation may have to play itself out before we can speak seriously of a tragic renaissance. Nevertheless, the stress of our times may eventually spawn a new tragic orientation ◆ an orientation that is acutely aware that there are no eschatological solutions to our current dilemmas, just tough choices. This turn towards tragedy that I am suggesting should not be understood as defeatist or despairing. Rather, it should be seen as an effort to gain lucid awareness of our current situation ◆ to understand the frontiers of politics, the dangers of technology, the indelible nature of violence, our inescapable mortality, and the need for prudence. From this lucidity it might be possible for the West to build the character necessary for preserving, enhancing, and defending the best of its democratic culture against the pathological and fundamentalist forms of terror that threaten not just globalization but the basis of any reasonable politics.

33 [33] Meier, *Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, 38.

It is frequently said that the current war on terror is a struggle for civilization. I contend that civilization is not equivalent to the eschatological drive we call globalization. That said, the tragic resources that serve as the bases for order in the soul and in society are found in the civilization that is currently promoting globalization in the West. It is these resources that need to be enhanced and defended. A revived tragic ethos will mean relinquishing all Western eschatological illusions of radical liberation, universal consensus, uninhibited markets, and global democracy. But tragic recognition might bring with it a more realistic assessment of our political responsibilities

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