

Two Studies on Greek poetry

Aeschylean metaphors in *The Persians* and in his *Seven against Thebes*

Abstract

The article explores how Aeschylus developed his literary imagery. Its argument is twofold. By ‘development’ we mean first how Aeschylus started. For that reason Aeschylus’ two oldest surviving and datable tragedies, *The Persians* and his *Seven against Thebes*, are chosen. They are not as fraught as his *Oresteia*, but are already indicative of a pensive spirit and of a meditative, if gloomy, outlook. By ‘development’ we mean also, second, the fact that our article proposes a new criticism, focussing on the actual narrative development of images as they unfold their meaning, as they are repeated, as they sustain, and interfere with, each other, as they are again and again alluded to and brought back to the mind of those who saw the tragedies performed. We live much later, however, and in a cultural environment defined by many other literary achievements. All such epithets as Dantesque, Quixotic, Chekhovian or Orwellian, let alone Hitchcockian, show how much we owe to the post-classical European literary and artistic tradition. Therefore, our ‘enterprise’ must be affected by our modern perception. In other words, it bears its traces and cannot be sterile. Decidedly, the article does not exclude a comparative and un-classical perception of Aeschylus’ two earliest plays. There is no harm intended. Great artists survive their critics.

Aeschylus’ two earliest extant plays were performed in 472 and 467, respectively. Both highlight the decline of a force of once heroic dimensions. The first tragedy focusses on the process of how the Persian ruling elite reacts to being defeated by the Greeks – a monstrous curiosity to happen. The second oldest surviving Aeschylean play relates the final episode of the story of Oedipus’ sons Eteocles and Polyneices, culminating in their mutual killing – a not less curious monstrosity. The plays, however, have more in common. Both, for example, tell the story in an indirect way, i.e. by means of excessively long and somehow cumbersome messenger speeches, a fact that allows us to observe and to concentrate on the protagonists’ reactions. Thus, we are enabled to analyse the real reason for the catastrophic outcome, a force that drives the protagonists’ character. Or, to put it in a Thucydidean way, we notice that the real reason is a single one and somehow ‘behind’, and that it has nothing to do with what is brought forward and often repeated by the many.

Moreover, on closer inspection, the protagonists resemble each other and their reasoning, as well as their ethos, has something in common: In the *Persians*, there is an air of dishonesty, class loyalty, and absence of principle. In the *Seven*, a heady blown-up star, a wilfully careless pervert, a maniac bent on destruction. Eventually, and regarding their form not their contents, both plays are rather straightforwardly told, and nearly of the same, short length. They are not at all as fraught as Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, a play characterised by Aeschylus’ heavily theologising, a process that adds a lot of meaning which clearly transcends the plays’ story.

The two early plays still largely do without this somehow oppressive, all pervading, ‘religious’ subtext. They are professionally conceived, and both provide fine reading. Nevertheless, just as the *Oresteia*, both deal not only with events that substantially change Greek culture but also with the theme of something that is forever lost – the heroic glamour of the house of Laius and the great dreams of the Achaemenids, respectively. By this, however, we don’t mean that Aeschylus’ plays would bear a kind of Brideshead stamp *avant la lettre*.

On a larger scale this ‘Aeschylean change’ can be best seen in the *Oresteia*. Notoriously, the *Oresteia* is to illustrate a paradigm shift: surprisingly, a vendetta narrative ends at court. The theme is acted out in three successive plays. We observe an outrageously dysfunctional family, the heir to which is portrayed on the brink of madness, like some heroes in a novel by Joseph Conrad are, depicted in their conquest of power, revenge, or as they call it, justice. Such a setting must mean, at least, whatever terms we may choose to describe this paradoxical turn, that a social practice, considered to be old-fashioned, became part of the problem, and was no longer regarded as part of the solution.

The two earlier plays, however, with which we are concerned, united by the fact that they are more ‘historical’ plays, as opposed to the more ‘mythical’ *Suppliants* and *Prometheus Bound*, – whether that last one be by Aeschylus or not, – prepare the way to the *Oresteia*. To cite Edgar Allan Poe, ‘an air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all’, an atmosphere which characterises Aeschylus’ poetic development more and more – and long before the House of Usher other dynasties fell to pieces, too.

At first sight, this may sound exaggerated and teleological, as if Aeschylus had nothing else on his mind than writing the *Oresteia*, and then to die shortly after in a Sicilian resort. And indeed, given the fact that so many plays are lost, that less than ten percent only of his production can be read by us, and that perhaps the rest cannot even be rightly guessed at, one should better refrain from such a naive statement.

Nevertheless, the two selected early plays portray the artist at work, as one of these angry young men who time and again want to change the ‘poles’ of drama, not yet concerned with explaining to the audience how the world is going on, or how it should be, as Aeschylus would do later in his *Oresteia*, performed in 458. The *Oresteia* might have been already on his mind though. In any case, Aeschylus reserved some thoughts for the trilogy that became his monument. And Aeschylus wanted to become one, this goes without saying. The early plays show his ambition that goes without saying.

In the following, our close reading tries to highlight the development of his literary imagery, the one Aeschylus developed in his first two plays, how he shaped and accommodated it, according to the plot. It may sound a bit churchy, but to seize a language and compel it to become a malleable material of thought, as he and his younger contemporary Thucydides managed to do, clearly is the sign of a great mind. It’s well worth a closer look.

1. *The Persians*

Aeschylus uses his first metaphor in order to describe the eyes of Xerxes. With the “dark glance of a deadly serpent”¹ Xerxes leads his army, we read. The chorus of Persian elders of the King’s council say this. They have just finished the catalogue of Persian fighters, at the end of which the

1 *Persians* 81sq., from the translation by Alan Sommerstein, first published in 2008. The opening image of the *Seven* is similar; it concerns the ‘fierciful’, i.e. ferocious or savage, eyes of the seven fighters; see below, the beginning of ch. 2. The Greek word used (kuaneon) means something ‘dark’, in particular ‘dark-blue’, in Homer; cf. Irwin 1974, 84-96, Dürbeck 1977, 139-150.

King turns up on stage, a climactic ‘closure’. Something resembling a serpent’s glance might have been visible to those close around Xerxes indeed, why should it not have been so. A simple reading of his image is always possible. Anyone provided with a sense for dramatization, however, any hack who writes a screenplay, for example, would invent it. Perhaps Aeschylus did so, too. Why should he not take refuge with such a natural, or common, image.

Since Aeschylus, however, is not the first to use this metaphor as part of a simile, a second layer is added to his play. Later on, he is even to return to this metaphor, calling the Greek ships that defeated the Persian navy ‘dark-eyed’ – transferring the image to the enemy, the victorious Greeks. Such a conveyance, the handing from one to another, makes a complex reading. For now, though, we cannot know that the metaphor is to be taken up again.²

What we do know now, however, or what some of us already guessed at, is the fact that the expression belongs to nothing else than the heroic discourse, as established and richly illustrated by Homer’s seminal grand narrative. In general, Homer presented history as a sequence of events that have been constructed into a story in accordance with a particular ideology,³ as later Aeschylus was to do in his *Oresteia*. In particular, and what is of relevance to us, Homer used the image in question in the *Iliad*’s heart, the story of Achilles and Hector. Thus, by alluding to it, Aeschylus evokes a complex subtext, itself related to such defining issues as the opposition between ‘guilt’ and ‘shame’, harking back to the in Greek thought ever-present so-called ‘double determination’.⁴

The ‘Achilleis’ forms the tragic nucleus of the *Iliad*, succinctly told in five books, yet thought-provokingly spread over the *Iliad*’s entire length. It is the story of a fundamentally decent and essentially cheerful man, companionable if misunderstood. Shamelessly betrayed by his peer group, he isolated himself, on the outside looking in. Having tried to escape in vain the universe he has helped to create so successfully, eventually, Achilles returns from the last-picked, relentlessly inflicting punishment by way of personal requital, savagely slaying Hector, his beloved friend’s killer.

This happens when Hector takes the fatal decision to stay outside Troy, unprotected, in front of the Skaian gates. He appears doubly determined, by “cruel fate”⁵ and by the shameful thought that he

2 On *Persians* 559 see below. Our argument follows the *Persians* passage by passage. This kind of reading shows better how the imagery unfolds; it follows the reader’s perception, as the images develop.

3 The sentence paraphrases what the Oxford English Dictionary has to say s.v. grand narrative, a term that translates the French grand récit, an expression made popular by Jean-François Lyotard (in a monograph, published 1979).

4 The modern view on Homeric psychology was much determined by two influential 20th-century scholars, Bruno Snell and Eric Robertson Dodds. For various reasons, their kind of ‘approach’, however, is no longer tenable. First, there is no consistent Homeric psychology at all, since *Iliad* and *Odyssey* differ fairly much. Second, Homer wrote poetry and not an account that can be cannibalised for any Kantian analysis, since there are no universally valid categories determinable according to which the Homeric heroes act or think. And third, the relationship between language and thought is not so simple as it was supposed to be. A thorough analysis of the decision-making process, for example, as the one carried out by Joseph Russo (2012), makes this obvious. The point in question is even more difficult to evaluate precisely because complex, abstract terms can operate in similar spheres. In Aeschylus, a degree of overlap between ‘aidos’ and ‘sebas’, for example, is studied in detail by Cairns (1993, 206-14).

5 *Iliad* 22. 5, from the translation by Martin Hammond, first published in 1987.

has destroyed his people through his own folly, as he puts it, addressing “in dismay his own great heart.”⁶ At that point, Homer uses an elaborate simile in order to describe Hector: “as a mountain snake in his hole waits the approach of a man, when he has eaten poisonous herbs and savage anger has sunk deep into him, and he glares out malevolently, coiling round in his hole.”⁷

Certainly, Homer’s elaborate simile, depicting a man doomed to die soon, shortly to be killed by Achilles, standing motionless for a second, as posing for a flash-bulb photograph, sheds additional light on Xerxes.⁸ Both Hector and Xerxes are Easterners, sons of and heirs to great father-figures, King Priam of Troy and King Darius of Persia. Both are luckless: blameless Hector is literally hunted to death, mentally unstable Xerxes metaphorically haunted forever by his defeat. They are not equal to each other, of course not, courageous Hector being the careful father and family man, forced to defend and protect his silly younger brother who seduced a Greek beauty queen, feckless Xerxes being the childish invader, keen on taking revenge for his father’s bad luck. The Homeric “view of snakes as vicious and courageous creatures”⁹ does match ghastly Xerxes very well, though. What Hector and Xerxes may have in common, and what makes them comparable to each other, is something that might be called “perhaps ‘ominous and merciless’.”¹⁰

Turning a grand narrative into a subtext without which the plot cannot be satisfactorily appreciated, Aeschylus achieves a heightened tone. Evoking an epic reminiscence, referring to a large-scale poem, harking back to Homer – something that pervaded archaic Greek art as American pop culture did overwhelm the Western hemisphere during last century’s second half – he refers to the fantasy world created by *the* poet. Thus, Aeschylus invites his readers to compare him to a great artistic model, insisting on his and Homer’s artfulness.

Already in antiquity Aeschylus was said to have acknowledged this attempt of his, metaphorically declaring his plays to be “slices from the great banquet of Homer,” i.e. one on which he ‘feasted’, of which he took large ‘portions’, by which he ‘filled’ his plate.¹¹

This time, however, on second thoughts, the effect achieved may slightly irritate, simply because Xerxes and Hector are by no means driven by the same forces. The comparison works. Both are cruel and ghastly, or can appear as that. Thus, the ‘vehicle’ is well chosen; the ‘tenor’, however, is

6 *Iliad* 22. 99.

7 *Iliad* 22. 93-95: a strong image that depicts “Hektors wilde Wut” (Fraenkel 1921, 69, as if Hector were a Wagnerian figure), providing a stark contrast to Achilles’ way of fighting. Homer compares Achilles to a lion, again developing a complex image (*Iliad* 20. 164-175, fighting against Aeneas); see below, the beginning of ch. 2.

8 Cf. Broadhead 1960, 52, and Garvie 2009, 76.

9 Richardson 1993, 116.

10 Collard 2008, 133.

11 As related by Athenaeus 8. 347e (TrGF T 112a), who introduces Aeschylus as noble and distinguished: “though it is important to stress at the outset that anecdotes attaching to such people may be devoid of historical truth and that in Greece as in England jokes tend to attach themselves to ‘characters’ whom they seem to fit, and are often ascribed to more than one” (Gow 1965, 7). Nevertheless, the secondary literature on that statement abounds. It does not seem to have escaped anyone. For a good start cf. Lefkowitz 2012, 70-77.

different, and on the whole unconvincing – at least, for the time being.¹² This is to change, though; Xerxes’ eyes will return, just as ‘James Bond will return’.¹³

Aeschylus put his Homeric reminiscence at a prominent place, right at the opening of the second strophe. In the following, and rather unexpectedly, the regular sequence of strophe and antistrophe is interrupted. An epode is inserted after the third strophe. Surprisingly, we hear of Hector again:¹⁴ “Who is so light of foot that he has power to leap easily away?” cannot but refer to the simile that Aeschylus begun by evoking Homeric Hector, because it was him who tried to run away from Achilles, in vain. Aeschylus elaborates on it, giving to it more fleshy detail. Again, it is the opening line that contains the leitmotif:¹⁵ “But what mortal man can escape the guileful deception of a god?”, a general statement on which follows, as a mythical specimen, this particular reference to Hector’s being chased to death by Achilles.¹⁶

Xerxes’ eyes, his glance by which Aeschylus started is prepared for enigmatically, but carefully.¹⁷ From the play’s start speaking uninterruptedly for 150 lines, the chorus suddenly notice the Persian Queen approaching: “a light as brilliant as that which shines in the eyes of the gods,” the chorus claim.¹⁸ Taking this up, the Queen draws our attention to a specific “light”¹⁹ that does not shine for men without wealth. She may well mean a “light of salvation or success,”²⁰ while at the same time fearing for the “eye”²¹ of her own house. The riddle is solved in the next line, where Atossa, mother of and wife to Xerxes, considers her husband and son “to be the eye of his house.”²²

12 Silk (1974, 8-15) demonstrates how such terms as ‘tenor’ and ‘vehicle’ may apply to Greek poetry.

13 By this we mean that any author creates a series of images, images which are constantly referred to, as it suits every protagonist of any successful work of art, be it by Aeschylus or by Ian Fleming. This recurrent sequence becomes an author’s trademark. Of course, Ian Fleming draws more on Raymond Chandler’s poetics, i.e. that any bottle of whiskey that turns up at the beginning of a novel should be emptied at its end, as any good hack knows. This is, however, what Aeschylus does. Admittedly, he does neither speak of whiskey nor of any blue-eyed blondes, though.

14 *Persians* 95sq.

15 *Persians* 93sq.

16 A fairly common poetic device, often used also by Aeschylus’ contemporary Pindar: a general maxim, an aphorism, a gnome, is illustrated by a particular example, a case-study, be it a positive or a negative one. Broadhead 1960, 53, favours the suggestion that this passage (i.e., the epode 93-100) should immediately follow line 92, with which the second antistrophe ends. Thus, the Homeric reminiscence would be more easily understandable, being closer to the opening of the second strophe. Our observation may support the proposed transposition, adding new weight to what Broadhead suspected.

17 M. Silk treated related phenomena in his chapter dedicated to ‘interaction outside the grammar’ (1974, 150-72).

18 *Persians* 150sq.

19 *Persians* 167.

20 Garvie 2009, 110.

21 *Persians* 168.

22 *Persians* 169.

Later in the play, the Queen, interrogating the messenger, is told about the Persian defeat; Xerxes is alive, a great relief, “like bright day shining out after a pitch-dark night,”²³ standing out in the sombre catalogue of fighters – killed. Their long list is about to begin immediately.²⁴

Surprisingly to us, who are inclined to think that eyes merely reflect the light, eyes are considered to be the source of light. At least bold Pindar does so, speaking of the light of his eyes he would not hide, if he were a relative to prominent men,²⁵ or alluding to his own bright gaze.²⁶ Moreover, prosperity in Pindar can be called “a most splendid eye,” for which we would translate ‘light’. Inherited privilege is said to be “an eye” too, where we would translate ‘glory’.²⁷

This ‘boldness’ is interesting to note because Pindar’s poetic Sicilian output is contemporary to Aeschylus’. Pindar ‘worked’ often in Sicily,²⁸ where Aeschylus staged a performance of a modernist tragedy (for a tyrant who also ‘employed’ Pindar) and where he finally chose to live.²⁹

Moreover, both aiming high, they share a stylistic abruptness.³⁰ This is to be observed here in Aeschylus, too, who introduces one thing, “and at once shifts to the somewhat different idea”³¹ in

23 *Persians* 301.

24 *Persians* 302-330. To a linguist it may be worth pointing out how the three catalogues of the dead Persian heroes differ. In the first version (*Persians* 21-51) we hear of 17 fighters, in the second (302-330), of 19, in the third and last (958-999), of twenty-nine. Their whole number is 49. It is remarkable that the play does not mention a single Greek fighter by name. Perhaps this is indicative of a more religious, or even pious, than ‘jingoistic’ perspective aimed at by Aeschylus, as Schmitt suggests (1978, 18). In any case, a political overtone must have been intended, and probably was heard by many in the audience. The beautifully strange names, ruthlessly Hellenised to make them metrically suitable, and brought forward at three decisive moments in the play cannot but have made a strong impression on the audience. It does still much impress the modern reader. However, no one else than the gods (theoi) saved Athens, the messenger concludes (347), only divine power (daimon) was able to destroy the best of the Persians, he says (345). At least to a modern reader this finale is puzzling: is it just a noble public gesture, an act of military gallantry, as if someone really said ‘tirez les premiers, messieurs’, put into the mouth of this simple messenger, or shall we note a signal of Aeschylus’ religious private conviction, so obviously hidden in a work of art?

25 *Nemean Ode* 10. 39-41.

26 *Nemean Ode* 7. 66.

27 The argument follows Gow 1928, 136sq., the translations come from Race 1997.

28 The majority of his fifteen victory odes for Sicilian victors date from between 476 to 466. They include some of Pindar’s most impressive poems, such as the first two Olympian and the first three Pythian odes. Among the addressees figure the great tyrants of Sicily, Hieron of Syracuse and Theron of Akragas. For a good survey cf. Morrison 2007. Bacchylides, too, worked for Hieron, and both Pindar and Bacchylides speak of ‘sending’ their poems to Sicily for performance (Bacch. c. 5.10-14 & Pind. *Pyth.* 3. 68-79); Pindar even mentions a deputy whom he sent to produce *Olymp.* 6 on his behalf (Herington 1985, 189-91, § 21 & 24 & 27).

29 In 1952, a hypothesis of this play turned up and was published as an Oxyrhynchus Papyrus. Its text suggests that the play had several, perhaps five, “real ‘acts’ between which the stage must have been empty while the performers were conceived of as being transported from place to place”, as the editor then remarked (*The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* xx, London 1952, 68, on P. Oxy. 2257). This play was produced during one of Aeschylus’ visits to Sicily, perhaps at the new city of Aetna, founded by Hieron in 476/5 BC. Most abnormally, indeed, the play *Women of Aetna* (or *Nymphs of Mount Etna*) had many changes of scene, moving from Aetna to Syracuse and back, all of them places within Hieron’s dominions (TrGF F 6-11).

the following line. In any case, the three references to eyes and light are almost a riddle, solved by Atossa, finally mentioning Xerxes, “who is uppermost in her thoughts”³² – and of whose eyes the first metaphor in *The Persians* spoke.

The metaphor has still another layer – the Persian King had many ‘Eyes’ indeed. In fact, the title ‘King’s Eye’, mentioned later in the play,³³ “was given to those who were charged by the Great King with the task of inspecting the satrapies,” and probably also to those “who were the King’s private and secret agents.”³⁴ The Greeks did believe so, though “there is no evidence in Persian sources of the existence of such an official.”³⁵ The absence of ‘sources’ about secret police forces is not surprising in itself. The ambiguity, however, i.e. the belief in suspected forces that cannot be proven, fits well into Aeschylus’ half-fantastic, half-real *chiaroscuro* painting of the Persian Empire. Sinister they were, these Easterners, and above all ruled by an ominously looking King.³⁶

The leader of the Westerners at Troy, however, comes very close. At the *Iliad*’s outset, he becomes incandescent with vehemence: “fury filled his dark heart full, and his eyes were like blazing fire, ... with a glare of malice he spoke,” etc.³⁷ Agamemnon’s eyes “shine like fire,”³⁸ like that of Hector later.³⁹ It was Hector’s glance, however, that provided the simile that served as subtext to Xerxes’, i.e. the eyes of a man from the ‘East’.

Since lights can be most clearly seen in darkness,⁴⁰ it fits wonderfully that we hear from the Persian Queen how “dreams of the night have been frequent companions” to her, ever since Xerxes led out

30 An ancient rhetorician, Dionysius Halicarnasseus, grouped them together as typical examples of what he named the austere style (*On literary composition* 22): “This style of composition had many keen exponents ..., in lyric poetry Pindar, in tragedy Aeschylus,” etc. The austere style, in Dionysius’ words, “does not mind admitting harsh and dissonant collocations, like blocks of natural stone,” etc. Dionysius’ characterisations are constantly referred to, for example, in Denniston’s monograph (Denniston 1952), where they are often paraphrased. Pindar’s inconsistency was a topic of many an academic treatment, and the question of his odes’ unity is still unsolved.

31 Gow 1928, 137.

32 Garvie 2009, 111.

33 The chorus to Xerxes 979sq.: “your ever-faithful Eye, who counted the numberless tens of thousands.”

34 Broadhead 1960, 233, n. 1.

35 Sommerstein 2008, 121, n. 140.

36 In the Greek text, the “Easterners” appear in the report of the messenger (391, barbarois, and in 423, their “Eastern armada”, barbarou strateumatōs); the Queen, too, speaks of “the Eastern race” (434, barbaron genei), and “the Eastern lives that Marathon had already destroyed” (475, prosthe Marathon barbaron apololesen). The chorus hope to speak “clearly in Eastern speech” (635, barbara saphene).

37 *Iliad* 1. 104; the threatening darkness becomes generic, and it is said of Hector in Agamemnon’s brother *aristeia* (*Iliad* 17. 83, 499), as well as of Menelaus (17. 573).

38 Kirk 1985, 64.; a formulaic expression (Schmidt 1885, 164sq.).

39 *Iliad* 12. 466.

40 Aeschylus’ *Persians*, as has been often stated and analysed, is a play full of visual imagery. Aside from “the motifs dealing with visible sumptuousness ... the prevalence of purely visual terminology should be noted, particularly as

his army.⁴¹ Among the many, the one she ‘saw’ (eidomen) last night, however, was the most ‘clearly visible’ (enarges), manifest to her mind, distinct, palpable even.⁴² The Queen dreamt of two women “coming into sight,”⁴³ one dressed in Persian, the other in Doric robes. A kind of strife developed between them, which Xerxes tried to restrain, yoking them under his chariot. While one remained submissive, the other began to struggle, smashing the yoke in half. “That is what I saw in the night,” Atossa concludes.⁴⁴

Thus Aeschylus not only continues his initial ‘eye’-metaphor, but makes it also more pertinent to the narrative. One need not be an oneiromancer or mantic prophet to see what is meant – or rather, one need not be an oneiromancer to know that something bad is about to happen. Only later in the play the Queen herself identifies the dream’s meaning: “... our army annihilated! O you clear (emphanes) dream-vision (enhupnion) of the night, how very plainly you revealed these disasters to me.”⁴⁵ In the same breath she is to accuse the chorus of having interpreted the dream “far too lightly” then when she told them.⁴⁶ Thus, her narrative consists of two parts: first, the dream is described, second, the dream is “recognized as symbolically true.”⁴⁷

Aeschylus returns to this image. He does so at the same point in the tragedy when he does return to the gloomily threatening eyes of Xerxes. Making the chorus call the Greek ships ‘dark-eyed’, he evokes again Xerxes, though this time the threat comes from the Greek side.⁴⁸ Again it is the chorus who take up the earlier passage, speaking of the now no longer binding yoke, which was then threatened by the Greek woman so frightfully present in Atossa’s dream.

A few years after this, in another play Aeschylus is to return to his poetic device, a dream that tells the truth, much more refined though. In the second play of his theologising thematic trilogy that deals with Orestes we hear about the intense impact of such a dream, and later get it explained.⁴⁹

it relates to the contrast of light and dark” (Sansone 1975, 42 n. 7). In Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes* another kind of imagery, one of sounds, is domineering. A group of horse images, for example, “is based upon the noise which the horses make” (Cameron 1971, 77), a series of images, however, that “also involve several other strains of imagery” (Cameron 1971, 79). On the importance of such “image complexes” much has been written; cf., e.g., the impressive list of secondary literature already given by Kelley, some forty years ago (1979, 213 n. 1). Modern studies were initiated by William Bedell Stanford in two short monographs (1936, 144-149 & 1942, 86-111).

41 *Persians* 176sq.

42 *Persians* 179.

43 *Persians* 183.

44 *Persians* 200.

45 *Persians* 517-519.

46 *Persians* 520.

47 Sansone 1975, 42.

48 On *Persians* 594 see below.

49 Devereux treats both dreams (1976, 1-23 & 181-218). His approach helps much to understand Aeschylus’ poetic realism. The ‘French touch’, however, may lead to extravagancies. Jacques Lacan’s commentary, for example, on

Early in the play, the chorus report of such “a clear prophetic dream which made the house’s hair stand on end, raised a loud cry of terror.”⁵⁰ The person who was at the dream’s centre, Orestes, his mother’s killer, when told by the chorus of it, understands immediately that only he could be meant: “I pray ... that this dream may be fulfilled in me.”⁵¹ Ironically, Clytaemnestra is the last to confess her understanding: “The dream that terrified me was truly prophetic indeed!”⁵² Just as the Persian Queen who does understand much later.

This either simple (*Persians*) or prolonged prolepsis (*Libation-Bearers*), an intentional amphiboly, structures both plays. Both *The Persians* and *The Libation-Bearers* are relatively short (of nearly identical length, 1077 and 1076 lines, respectively); both are told in a straightforward way – it is clear from the beginning what we are to expect, a fact that suits well the middle play of the overwhelming *Oresteia*. There is no turning-point, and no crisis developed in the play either, neither an Oedipus who recognises what he really did, half-way through the play, nor an Ajax who commits suicide, half-way through the play, and has to be buried. We do not have a sub-plot either, and there is no chorus who elaborate on leitmotifs. In the older play, it is simply the fact that news of the Persian defeat have to arrive at court, in the younger play, it is just the killing of Clytemnestra which needs to be carried out. Both is done by humans under divine protection,⁵³ again something both plays have in common.⁵⁴

Speaking about structure, we may note something that Aeschylus’ two earliest extant plays have in common. They share an impressive and most convenient device. In both plays’ first part, a long scene, lasting nearly 300 lines, presents the state of affairs. Each time three groups are on stage – (i) the leading commander, Queen Atossa and Eteocles, ruler of Thebes, respectively, (ii) a messenger (*The Persians*) or a scout (*Seven against Thebes*), and (iii) the chorus. The long scene introduces background information necessary for the development of each play’s action.⁵⁵

Before discussing the *Seven*, let us stay with the *Persians*. In the following, in Aeschylus’ *Persians*, the Greeks kill the Persians’ “flower”. It is the messenger who says so,⁵⁶ taking up the same word

Plato’s *Symposium* (1991, 27-195, a ‘seminar’ from the early sixties), inspiring as it may be (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 76-80), is not free of them (Roudinesco 1993, 139sq., 303, 334, 420, 443, 451).

50 *Libation-Bearers* 33-35.

51 *Libation-Bearers* 540sq.

52 *Libation-Bearers* 929.

53 All the characters, from the messenger to Darius, throughout the play mention the divine power who brought about the great disaster; cf. Broadhead 1960, 116. In the words of the messenger, the Persians did not understand “the deceit of the Greek (i.e., who told the Persians that the Greeks would not stay where they were but flee, escaping unnoticed) or the jealousy of the gods” (361sq.). Xerxes was particularly ignorant what the gods had in store (744), or in the words of the messenger, “he was reading the future badly” (454).

54 It may be added that in both plays the interpreters of the dream are not only mentioned but also called by the same word: *krites* (*Persians* 226) and *kritai* (*Libation-Bearers* 38), as Garvie points out (1986, 58).

55 *Persians* 246-514 and *Seven against Thebes* 369-652, respectively.

56 *Persians* 252.

that was used by the chorus in the catalogue of Persian fighters, at the play's opening.⁵⁷ Again we see the Homeric palimpsest: moving from the singular and abstract to the plural and concrete, Aeschylus 'extends', or 'enlarges on', *the* poet. Homer used the same word (anthos), describing "the youthful vigour of an individual warrior."⁵⁸

More than forty years after *The Persians* has been performed (in 472), some Athenians listened to a speaker who draw another such metaphor from nature, again referring to the dead of a war. When in the winter 431/430 the first dead of the Peloponnesian War were ceremonially buried in Athens, Pericles spoke on the occasion. In this Funeral Oration, as we read in Aristotle,⁵⁹ he said that the removal of the youth from the city was 'like the year being robbed of its spring', 'as if the year has lost its springtime.'⁶⁰

From this later use of a similar image, derived from a similar sphere, one may deduce that already the 'flower'-image in *The Persians* has some political overtones. It is not only a natural metaphor, referring to the eternal cycle of birth, blossom (to which both 'flower' and 'spring' belong), and death. Moreover, it evokes also a political theme. This is not a far-fetched suggestion, given the fact that Aeschylus took part in the battle against the Persians at Marathon, i.e. the campaign carried out by Xerxes' father, Darius.

The messenger, in this, his longest single passage in a fairly long-stretched speech,⁶¹ details the disastrous destruction of the Persian navy. At its climactic closure this modest and god-fearing man compares the dead heroes to "tunny or some other catch of fish."⁶² The apocalypse has a sound, too: "a mixture of shrieking and wailing filled the expanse of the sea."⁶³ Effortlessly Aeschylus makes the messenger pass from what was seen to what simultaneously could be heard. This happens when the messenger describes the end of the Greek attack. Already at its opening Aeschylus combined an optical and an acoustical phenomenon, each subservient to the whole impression, just like an opera-composer intent on a 'gesamtkunstwerk'⁶⁴ would do. To the horror of the Persians, "the whole fleet

57 *Persians* 59.

58 Garvie 2009, 70, refers to *Iliad* 13. 484: Aeneas "is at the flower of youth, which is the greatest power in a man." The image has been treated by Dumortier 1975, 125-134 ('floraison') and Petrounias 1976, 25sq. ('gemähete Blüte'), listed under different headings. Earp (1948, 102-112) provides a list of sources from which Aeschylus derives these and other of his metaphors.

59 *Rhetoric* 1. 7. 34 & 3. 10. 7.

60 Curiously, the citation is missing in Thucydides' version of the speech (2. 35-46).

61 *Persians* 353-432.

62 *Persians* 424.

63 *Persians* 426sq.

64 The term belongs to the aesthetic theory of Richard Wagner, the opera composer (1813-1883). The same goes for 'leitmotiv'. Many a reader of Aeschylus' surviving tragedies was much tempted to look for such a "theme associated throughout the work with a particular person, situation, or sentiment," as the Oxford English Dictionary defines it. Eduard Fraenkel did so in brief remarks, stating, for example, that "the idea that Clytemnestra catches her husband ... in the garment which in her hand becomes a net permeates the *Oresteia*" (1950, III 512). Anne Lebeck did explain the interaction between idea and imagery in her monograph on the *Oresteia* (1971, e.g., 74-79, or 131-

coming on behind, and from all of them together one could hear a great cry: ‘Come on, sons of the Greeks, ... all is at stake!’⁶⁵ They hardly heard the words, let alone understood them, but the shock must have been immense. A god did this to the Persians, and *theos* is the last word the messenger has to say.⁶⁶

The chorus discuss the news at great length. An impressive series of repetitions introduces Xerxes as the one who brought his men to the fight, who lost them, and who handled everything unwisely.⁶⁷ To this first trikolon responds a second one, using the same verbs in the first two lines, concluding with an anaphoric crescendo.⁶⁸ In the antistrophe we hear that ships brought their men to the fight, and that ships destroyed them, i.e. ships driven by Ionian hands.⁶⁹ One of the epithets of these ships refers to their dark hull. Aeschylus borrows a Homeric word (*kuanopis*), once said of the eyes of a goddess,⁷⁰ and transfers it to the prow of a ship.⁷¹ Thus, he may refer only to the dark blue colouring of the prow, as does his contemporary Bacchylides.⁷² Perhaps, he does also allude to the

133); for a good start cf. Collard 2002, liv-lviii. The only surviving thematic trilogy in the history of Greek tragedy, Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, comes close to a ‘gesamtkunstwerk’ indeed. Interestingly, Wagner knew Aeschylus’ text: “above all he admired the *Oresteia*, so much so that he later wrote in his autobiography that he had never subsequently been able to reconcile himself with modern literature. This reading, he added, had a decisive effect on his ideas about drama and about the theatre” (Lloyd-Jones 1982, 128). During his stay in Paris (1839-1842) Wagner tried to learn Greek, but in the end his teacher “told him that as things were, with his music in him, he would do better to learn what he needed without the aid of grammars and lexicons; to learn Greek thoroughly was difficult, and could not be done in one’s spare time. This advice Wagner seems to have taken, and perhaps he acted wisely” (loc. cit.).

65 *Persians* 400-405.

66 *Persians* 514.

67 *Persians* 550-552.

68 A term used by Fraenkel (1950, III 841).

69 *Persians* 560-564. The chorus who speak these lines echo them later. At the end of their ode, just before Darius returns from the underworld, the chorus put the catastrophe in one line. Having stated that all the triple-oared ships this land possessed have vanished away, the chorus declare them to be “*naes anaes anaes*”, i.e. “ships that are ships no more” (*Persians* 680), as the *Greek-English Lexicon* by H.G. Liddell and R. Scott translates this rare word, probably attested only here and perhaps coined by Aeschylus (Oxford 1940, ninth edition, 124).

70 *Odyssey* 12.60, of Poseidon’s wife Amphitrite. In another era of Classics, this wonderful expression was declared to refer to the dark blue colour of the calm sea: “*der dunkeläugigen, in bezug auf die tiefblaue Farbe des ruhigen Meeres,*” as it was put by Karl Friedrich Ameis (cited from the eleventh edition of his commentary intended for usage at school, Berlin and Leipzig 1908, 181). Leumann suggested two starting-points for the word, formed like the epithet of Athena (*glaukopis*) with a view on the blueness of the sea (*glauke thalassa*). This process of word-formation in turn made some think of *glaukopis* as ‘light blue-eyed’ in contrast to *kuanopis* as ‘dark blue-eyed’ (1950, 152).

71 In Aeschylus, there are more *composita* with *-proiros* as second part, denoting ‘a ship’s forepart’, ‘the prow’, on which v. Van Nes 1963, 98-100.

72 Bacchylides *c.* 13. 160sq.: “only Bacchylides and Aeschylus refer to ships as ‘dark-eyed’; otherwise, the adjective is exclusively a marker of feminine beauty,” etc. (Cairns 2010, 317).

eyes that were painted on both sides of the bows of ships, though.⁷³ If so the adjective would recall the “dark-blue glare of the terrible serpent’s eyes in the comparison with Xerxes at 81-6.”⁷⁴

At the end of his ode, the chorus again hark back to an earlier remarkable event in the play. The Queen dreamt of two women under the yoke of Xerxes, of whom one tried to break away: “the other began to struggle, tore the harness from the chariot with her hands, dragged it violently along without bridle or bit, and smashed the yoke in half.”⁷⁵ Of course, it is not the woman from the Orient,⁷⁶ but the Greek one who struggles herself free. After the messenger brought the devastating news, at the end of the chorus’ intervention, “now the yoke of military force binds them no longer,” i.e. the Greeks are no longer subject to Persian rule.⁷⁷ The Queen’s fear became true.

To resume it briefly: Half-way through the play Aeschylus takes up two intense images used earlier. The threatening eyes of Xerxes are now to be seen on the Greek ships. And the yoke against which the Greek woman in Atossa’s dream struggled is now broken. What are we to expect from the rest of the play, one may well ask. The Queen is at a loss, too, “everything is full of fear”, now that is no longer sure “that the breeze of good fortune will always continue to blow from astern.”⁷⁸ She does, however, not only use nautical metaphors, but she also changes her vision, since “before my eyes there appear hostile visions from the gods, and in my ears there resounds a din that is not a song of cheer,” as if she were watching an opera performed.⁷⁹ A coup de théâtre is waiting in the wings indeed. Her dead first husband, Xerxes’ father, Darius, is to return from his grave, which is not given to many.

To carry out a libation was recommended to the Queen by the chorus.⁸⁰ Twice she affirmed her plans to pray,⁸¹ but then there was no word of evoking the spirit of Darius. Now she says “I’m on my way again.” This seems paradoxical, because she never properly was ‘on her way’ before.⁸² Assuming that she has changed her outlook on the events, one is tempted to suggest a translation as “backwards I’m on my way,”⁸³ i.e. returning from something awful, having experienced something

73 An interpretation favoured by Garvie (2009, 241), though regarded as less probable by Broadhead (1960, 150). Sommerstein writes “possibly with allusion of the eyes so often painted on ships’ bows” (2008, I 75 n. 86).

74 Garvie (2009, 241).

75 *Persians* 194-196.

76 *Persians* 187 (barbaron).

77 *Persians* 594.

78 *Persians* 602sq.

79 *Persians* 604sq.

80 *Persians* 219sq.

81 *Persians* 229 & 523sq.

82 *Persians* 608 (palin): “it is strange that there should have been no earlier hint on the evocation from Chorus or Queen” (Broadhead 1960, 160).

83 *Persians* 607-609: “the usual sense in early Epic,” i.e. in the Epic dialect, as the *Greek-English Lexicon* by H.G. Liddell and R. Scott states (Oxford 1940, ninth edition, 1292). Aeschylus often alludes to Homer’s creative Greek,

bad, being bereft of former glory. This would be in accordance to what she says, i.e., “I have retraced my path, coming back from my house without my carriage and without my former luxury, bringing ... drink-offerings ..., such as serve to soothe the dead.”⁸⁴

Darius needs not much time to get the message. It must have been “a powerful divinity that came upon” his son, “to put him out of his right mind,”⁸⁵ i.e. creating such a crazy pathway to yoke the Hellespont, closing up mighty Bosphorus. The Queen was more cautious, though, stating motherly that “some divinity must have touched his wits.”⁸⁶ Thus, “a fountain of sorrow” has been discovered for all Persians, as Darius puts it.⁸⁷ Surely, “a mental disease” held “ill-counselled” Xerxes in his grip, his father continues.⁸⁸ Others are guilty, of course, Xerxes’ mother continues, still trying to protect her child (and husband) against his father (and her former husband).⁸⁹ The father, however, elaborates on the theme, speaking of one his predecessors whose “intelligence was in control of his fighting spirit.”⁹⁰

As one might have expected it, the Greek phrasing rendered into English belongs to the nautical sphere. Literally, Aeschylus says that intelligence ‘steered’ or ‘directed’ the handle of rudder, i.e. ‘turned the helm of’ Darius’ predecessor, the great Cyrus.⁹¹ Since Cyrus was the first *Persian* leader to be ruler over Medo-Persia, his two predecessors being Medes, “his head steered his heart” indeed.⁹²

Aeschylus continues his maritime discourse, remaining in the adequate metaphorical sphere, establishing his trademark. Surely, it comes as a surprise to read this newly coined expression, but, as many another surprise, the new coinage is not necessarily convincing. To some it may look mannered, perhaps even stilted. Why taking refuge to such a bold expression, one may ask, since

paraphrasing a formula here, or taking up an unusual word there. In the following, for example, the chorus use a rare Homeric word (*Persians* 669) meaning ‘mist over the eyes’ (as of one dying) in the sense of ‘a cloud of Stygian gloom’. Slightly transferring the meaning, Aeschylus refers to the Homeric phrase said of a dying hero: “his spirit left him, and mist spread over his eyes” (Achilles, *Iliad* 5. 696). Already Homer ‘played’ with this formula, saying a bit earlier of a dying hero: “and black night covered his eyes” (Nestor, *Iliad* 5. 659); v. Sideras 1971, 20sq.

84 *Persians* 607-610. At the end of Darius’ speech, a moment before he returns to the dead, this image is taken up again – Darius evokes his son in rags (*Persians* 834-836); see below.

85 *Persians* 725.

86 *Persians* 724.

87 *Persians* 743 (kakon pege). The image is to return in 814sq., the Greek wording is slightly different though (kakon krenis).

88 *Persians* 749sq.

89 *Persians* 753-758.

90 *Persians* 767.

91 Aeschylus probably coined the word oiakostrepho (from oiak ‘helm’ & strepho ‘to turn’); Aeschylus uses the rare noun oiakostrophos, meaning ‘captain’, at the opening of the *Seven* (see below, ch. 2, at its beginning). Time and again, he slightly varies his expressions, on which v. Van Nes 1963, 108sq.

92 Broadhead 1960, 193.

any overdoing may spoil the effect, rather than enhance the poetic force. In any case, it remains questionable whether it was just as normal in Ancient Greek as it is normal in English to say ‘his mind steered his heart.’ It looks artificially contrived,⁹³ although it goes without saying that a “naval metaphor is particularly appropriate to this play”,⁹⁴ a play that deals with the Persian navy’s defeat at Salamis.

Before we find time to solve this aesthetic dilemma whether Aeschylus carried his fondness for new words this time too far, we get a short lesson in interpreting history. On the one hand, Xerxes, being “still a young man, thinking young man’s thoughts,” has not kept his father’s instructions in mind.⁹⁵ On the other hand, the destiny awaits the Persians “in requital for their outrageous actions and their godless arrogance.”⁹⁶ They have done evil and they are suffering evil to match it, since “the fountain of suffering” – of which Darius already spoke – has not stopped flowing yet, “more of it is still gushing forth.”⁹⁷

Reaching the climax of his speech, Darius develops a longer simile: “outrage has blossomed,” he states, and “has produced a crop of ruin” and “a harvest of universal sorrow.” Only an oxymoronic paradox can express this perversion, as “the heaps of corpses will voicelessly proclaim to the eyes of men ... that one who is mortal should not think arrogant thoughts.”⁹⁸ Finally, Darius evokes the image of his son: “all the threads of his richly decorated garments are torn and in rags around his body.”⁹⁹ Thus, a moment before Darius leaves again to join the dead, we return to the Queen as she was, just before Darius turned up. On her way to pray to him, she retraced her path, “coming back from my house ... without my former luxury.”¹⁰⁰ Mother and son are alone, united in misery. Again Aeschylus returns to an image evoked earlier, again a foreboding is reflected later: the mother without luxury, the son in rags.

From a motherly point of view, the Queen comments on the “dishonourable state of the garments that clothe my son’s body,” calling it “the misfortune that stings me most.”¹⁰¹ Perhaps she was unable to grasp the metaphorical speech of her former husband, getting only the literal meaning, i.e. that her husband now looks miserable, strictly sartorially speaking. She cannot understand that her husband’s second body, his public personality, is torn to rags – he is no longer the undisputed great king, since the Greeks defeated him, these people from the tiny country at the fringe of an empire.

93 The adjective ‘one who turns the steering-oar’ is (rarely) found in tragedy and contemporary choral lyric, “but the verb only here” (Garvie 2009, 303).

94 Garvie 2009, 303.

95 *Persians* 782sq.

96 *Persians* 808.

97 *Persians* 814sq. This takes up 743.

98 *Persians* 818-822.

99 *Persians* 834-836.

100 *Persians* 607-609.

101 *Persians* 845-848.

“Where in the world do they say that Athens is situated,” she asked the chorus at the play’s opening.¹⁰² This seems an eternity from now, after the messenger spoke, after Darius condemned his son’s idiocy. The Queen, however, remains naive, speaking to a former partner’s zombie replica, she plays the ingénue.¹⁰³

Eventually, her son comes, engaging in a duet with the chorus that lasts until the play’s end: what a finale! During the last one hundred and fifty lines he cannot speak properly, as if mentally deranged, or high on drugs. An extrovert narcissist, completely self-absorbed: “What am I to do, wretched me,” he begins.¹⁰⁴

The play’s ‘leitmotifs’ are all to return now, as they do at the end of some of Richard Wagner’s later operas. Again, and for the last time, we are to hear from the chorus about “the flower of the land”¹⁰⁵ now “the god has scythed away.”¹⁰⁶ The image returns in a catalogue-like list of the dead heroes,¹⁰⁷ the third and last one, this time combined with the ‘title’ “your ever-faithful Eye,”¹⁰⁸ by which the chorus appeals to Xerxes. And we return to the king’s ragged clothes, “the remnants of my attire,”¹⁰⁹ as he says – just as in an opera, when all the leading themes return, combined to form the finale. And the narrative gathers speed, and momentum, as it suits such a closure.

“I ripped my robe at the terrible event,” witnessing a disaster he never expected, Xerxes explains.¹¹⁰ Everybody is crying, the king as well as the chorus, “a sad answer of sad sound to sad sound.”¹¹¹ The noise becomes ever bigger: “groan for my sake,”¹¹² “cry out in response to my cries,”¹¹³ “now

102 *Persians* 231.

103 A similar misunderstanding can be observed in the *Agamemnon*. Cassandra and the chorus discuss the smell of death which Cassandra notices, and of which the chorus can detect no trace – or so they pretend. Twice Cassandra refers to it: ‘the house breathes murder’, and ‘the scent is very plain – just like the whiff of a grave’ (1309 & 1311). Twice the chorus respond that she can mean only ‘the smell of sacrifices at the hearth’ and that she is probably speaking about ‘the Syrian fragrance which is adding splendour to the palace’ (1310 & 1312). Earlier in the long-lasting scene, Cassandra also ‘sees’ a net of death (1114sq.). The chorus only reply by stating that they cannot claim ‘to be a first-class interpreter of prophecies’ (1130sq.). Cassandra’s Greek, however, is perfectly intelligible – she knows not only that Agamemnon’s killer is ‘female’ (1231), but she also used a dozen or so words of feminine inflection to refer to her.

104 *Persians* 912.

105 *Persians* 925.

106 *Persians* 921.

107 *Persians* 978.

108 *Persians* 979.

109 *Persians* 1018.

110 *Persians* 1030.

111 *Persians* 1041.

112 *Persians* 1046.

113 *Persians* 1048, repeated 1066.

raise a high-pitched wail,”¹¹⁴ “accompany the action with a Mysian cry,”¹¹⁵ “and raise a piercing shriek,”¹¹⁶ “let ‘io’ indeed be heard throughout the city,”¹¹⁷ “as you lament, while you walk delicately,”¹¹⁸ Xerxes maniacally admonishes the chorus.

The maritime discourse lasts until the end, too. Eventually, the ‘ships which are no longer ships’ return. We hear one half of the phrase sung by Xerxes, hardly audible, nearly unintelligible, and the second half completed, made understandable, by the chorus. These two lines precede the last, again spoken by the chorus: “yes, I will escort you, with loud wails of grief.”¹¹⁹

How all this did appeal to the audience we cannot know, for we do not know enough about the music of tragedy. One may state, however, that Aeschylus’ project, seeking to explore the mind of the Persian elite, was unheard of. It must have been spectacularly new. In order to gauge the final scene’s mood, it may help to seek an analogy in the history of opera, a genre much similar to Greek tragedy. Two scenes come to mind, scenes which cannot be more opposed to each other. Aside from the finale of Wagner’s *Ring des Nibelungen*, where the music resumes the whole work again, reminding the listener of what he heard, another opera’s finale comes to mind, the end of Modest Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov*, performed for the first time 1874 in Saint Petersburg. This scene is quiet and lyrical. All leave the stage except the ‘holy idiot’, the Yuródiviy (юродивый), who performs a plaintive song about the arrival of the enemy and the imminent woe threatening Russia: “Flow, flow, bitter tears!” «Лейтесь, лейтесь, слёзы горькие!» In fact, after the death of Boris Godunov, Russia descended into the ‘Time of Troubles.’ Having watched *The Persians* performed, one might fear the same for the Persians.

Surely, Aeschylus’ play differs, the chorus is on stage, and a self-pitying Persian king cannot be compared to an ascetic ‘holy fool’ of Eastern Orthodox descent. Moreover, it is hard to believe that Aeschylus was in any kind intent on making us feel pity for the Persians, let alone listen to these killers, these bastards from the East. Surely, the Greeks must have been happy that the Persians were defeated, themselves never ever planning to invade the Persian Empire. Aeschylus may well have been, however, interested in the Persian state of mind, their megalomaniac folly turned into crazy despair. Mad they were, indeed, defying the gods, and his play is a study in psychology – as is *Boris Godunov*. An ambitious subject anyway, somehow provocative, at least promising a *succès d’estime*.

A real portrait was out of Aeschylus’ reach, though. Having met Persian fighters only on the battlefield, he would never have gained access to the ruling elite. To Herodotus this wasn’t granted either, who not even bothered to learn Persian. We only know that Aeschylus fought against them at

114 *Persians* 1050.

115 *Persians* 1054.

116 *Persians* 1058.

117 *Persians* 1070.

118 *Persians* 1072.

119 *Persians* 1076.

Marathon, against the troops commanded by Darius. Darius was no fool at all. It was his son who gave all away – and that is an operatic plot, if there is one.

Aeschylus did not compose operas, however, and the fact that Richard Wagner liked the *Oresteia* does not turn Aeschylus' poetry in operatic works. Like Wagner for the *Ring*, however, Aeschylus chose for his plays human beings who are bigger than life, or rather too big to live long, subdued by annihilating forces they cannot control. Something religious or sacred is around, as is in Aeschylus. One may detest this, calling it a poetic manoeuvre. Aeschylus, however, portrayed the Persian world as such, not free from something divine, and as a poet he knew how to do it. His metaphors lend a suitable atmosphere. The dangerous eyes, the unpredictable sea, the luxury of a bygone era – all help to create the imaginary realm of the East. It cannot be but a painting of decline – and so it became one, as is Wagner's *Ring*, and as is Mussorgsky's *Godunov*.

2. *Seven against Thebes*

Aeschylus uses his first metaphor in order to describe the fierce spirit of the seven fighters. He does so while developing a rather elaborate image; at its end, we read of the “light of war in their eyes.”¹²⁰ Entering the stage from the direction of the battlefield, the scout says this to Eteocles, ruler of Thebes. The scout witnessed how seven men, “bold leaders of companies, slaughtered a bull, let its blood run into a black-rimmed shield, and touching the bull's blood with their hands swore an oath by Ares, Enyo, and blood-loving Terror.”¹²¹ They would either destroy Thebes “or perish and mix their blood into the soil of this land”; somehow surprised, he watched them “shedding tears”; whatever it was that moved them, “no word of pity passed their lips.”¹²² Now the image starts: “they breathed within them a steel-hearted spirit, blazing with courage,” and as if this were not sufficient to characterise their mental disposition the scout continues by a comparison. The fighters' spirit he thought to observe seemed to him “like that of lions with the light of war in their eyes.”¹²³

This is not only Homeric, but also Achillean. Again, as at the opening of *The Persians*, Aeschylus refers to a Homeric subtext, and one that comes from the story of Achilles and Hector. In an elaborate simile, Homer compares Achilles' way of fighting to that of a lion.¹²⁴ Fighting against Aeneas, he “sprang out to face him like a ravening lion.”¹²⁵ At the simile's end the “fiercely glowing” lion kills mercilessly the enemy.¹²⁶

120 *Seven* 52sq., translated by Alan Sommerstein, first published in 2008. The opening image in the *Persians* is similar, it concerned the fierce eyes of Xerxes; see above, the beginning of ch. 1.

121 *Seven* 42-45.

122 *Seven* 48-51.

123 *Seven* 52sq.

124 Fraenkel 1921, 62sq.

125 *Iliad* 20. 164sq.

126 *Iliad* 20. 172. Homer uses a verb derived from the adjective *glaukos*, which means ‘light-blue’ (when said of the eyes); cf. Dürbeck 1977, 171-177.

The only other person in the *Iliad* worthy of this comparison is the Greek commander-in-chief, Agamemnon. He, too, attacks like a lion, and the *Iliad's* author uses the same expression again, in a formulaic, i.e. an identical, half-line.¹²⁷ This time, however, Agamemnon is not described as fiercely looking. That he can do that needs not to be mentioned. He did so while humiliating Achilles at the *Iliad's* outset.¹²⁸

All this does not bode well – not only literally, because there is something menacing at this moment in the play's narrative, but also meta-literally, for there is something deadly to come later, as we may expect from the Homeric subtext alluded to. In the case of the *Persians*, it was Homeric Hector so fiercely looking as Xerxes did. Both were heavily defeated. Then in the *Iliad*, Hector was savagely killed, in the heroic age, considered by the Greeks to be more of a historical event than of a mythical narrative. In Aeschylus' play, Xerxes can be happy to be alive, only his clothes being torn to rags. Now we watch a historical figure becoming at least half-mythical. How ironical it must have been to some in the audience: the arch-enemy at the very end of his forces, elevated to the Homeric realm of the heroic archetypes.

In the case of the *Seven*, there are the fighters outside, determined to die, theirs not to reason why, fighters who have 'war in their eyes' as surely Achilles did, too – and Achilles killed Hector, at the end of Homer's tragic story. A reversal is alluded to: the dangerous eyes were on the side of the loser in the *Persians*, now they are to be observed again. A reader familiar with such a recycling of images may have anticipated the outcome. In fact, Eteocles is dead at the end of Aeschylus' tragic story, perishing in a duel together with his brother.

Another image, familiar from the *Persians*, is to follow suit. Only a few lines later, the scout, or spy as he is also called, appeals to Eteocles: "be like a good ship's captain,"¹²⁹ as if the city of Thebes were surrounded by an unpredictable sea, which she was not.¹³⁰ This, at first, surprising nautical image is developed further, perhaps in order to make it more suitable to the context, more apt and intelligible. The enemy's army is compared to a "wave roaring on dry land"; henceforth, the city must be made safe, before the blasts of war shatter it, or to make it sound more nautical, "before the

127 *Iliad* 11. 129, remarkable, indeed, for exceptionally ending in a *monosyllabon*, "though lion-similes are common" (Edwards 1991, 309).

128 *Iliad* 1. 107sq.; the passage is discussed above, ch. 1. Again we notice that Aeschylus not only 'recycles' a Homeric comparison, but also one that has been said of fighters Trojan as well as Greek. In *The Persians* it were the evil-looking eyes of Hector that were alluded to, although also Agamemnon is characterised as having such; v. above, ch. 1. On the one hand, this fact may indicate that Homer's texts were understood as generic poetry, and that they were somehow indiscriminately read, referred to, and reused. On the other hand, such a reading would imply that Homeric composition was regarded as something specific, from which one had to differ, in order to make one's own poetic project visible.

129 *Seven* 62.

130 Since we hear nautical metaphors extensively used in and known from the *Persians*, it may be worth reminding the fact that Thebes, the leader of the Boeotian confederacy, was a major rival of ancient Athens. Moreover, Thebes sided with the Persians during the invasion led by Xerxes. Thus, there is a literary and a historical relation between the two cities and the two Aeschylean plays.

squalls of war assail her.”¹³¹ The word for ‘captain’ comes from the same rare word family already enlarged on by Aeschylus in his *Persians*.¹³²

To an attentive ancient reader, this nautical image may have seemed like a developed version that belongs to, and takes up, something he heard earlier in the play, without necessarily having paid much attention to it then. Did we miss something? Yes indeed, right at the play’s beginning, Eteocles defines himself as the man “who guards the city’ fortunes, controlling the helm at its stern.”¹³³ This passed unobserved, since as often in poetry, the city is imagined as a ship.¹³⁴

What makes it interesting, or why it may return to an attentive reader’s mind in antiquity, is the fact that Eteocles himself prominently harks back to this image. The Greek word used by him at the play’s beginning was the ordinary Greek word for ‘stern’ (prumne), which he now takes up, praying to the gods that his city may not be captured by its foes and that she may not be “from the stern on totally” destroyed.¹³⁵ The Greek words now used are the proper words to be expected (prumnothen and panolethron), preceded by the Greek word for city (polin). The alliteration, plus the trikolon crescendo, consisting of a series in which the following word is always a syllable longer than the word preceding it, highlights the adverb ‘from the stern’. It becomes an intensifier, – in the sense of ‘totally’, ‘utterly’, etc., – rather than just being neutrally indicative of a direction: and properly speaking, a city has no stern at all. Thus, we may speak of an anticipation: first we get a glimpse, just one word, and later we get the picture developed. It must be said, though, that this kind of link between two speeches by Eteocles may not have been noted by everybody; nevertheless, it does exist, it is no accident but design.¹³⁶

In any case, to us modern readers, the expression has a Shakespearian ring to it, reminding us of the ‘sea of troubles’ against which Hamlet eventually does take arms, and of which he speaks in his soliloquy that begins by ‘to be or not to be’.¹³⁷

The setting is dramatic, indeed. Commenting on what he was told a moment ago, the chorus seem even more confused than the scout was by what they hear and see. “The dust I see in the air shows

131 *Seven* 63-65.

132 *Persians* 767, see above, ch. 1; missing in Sideras 1971.

133 *Seven* 2sq.

134 A politically intended allegory of the ship of state, or of a certain faction within, is a most influential image in the poetry of Alcaeus, an archaic Greek poet. It is found in a number of fragments, most prominently in fr. 208; cf. Burnett 1983, 153-155. It became known to the Western tradition, and is widely referred to, by Horace’s allusive rendering that personifies the ship from the first word ‘O navis’ in his ode 1. 14; cf. West 1995, 65-71.

135 *Seven* 71.

136 The ingenious argument referred to is developed by Silk 1974, 183. He suggests that “‘you are made to think of their possible connections’ and, specifically, invited to re-etymologize prumnothen in the light of polin. ... The link, in short, conjures up a second image of complete propriety.” Such a link works, or is “of comparable efficiency”, to a modern reader. Perhaps, it was to some among the ancient *conoscenti* in the audience, too.

137 *The tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, written between 1599 and 1602, act 3, scene 1.

me” that a huge army is on its way, they say.¹³⁸ The noise is overwhelmingly “sent to my ear”, the cry of warriors¹³⁹ “comes over the wall.”¹⁴⁰ Terrorised and frightened the chorus ask whether they do or do not hear the clatter of (this time) shields, which of course they do.¹⁴¹ Eventually, the crescendo ends in a synaesthetic vision: “I see the noise,”¹⁴² the chorus declare, which is nothing else than the clatter of (this time) spears.¹⁴³ Later in the play, such synaesthetic imagery is to return in the description of the enemies’ shields, “which carry not only pictures but also mottoes that are said to shout.”¹⁴⁴

In the *Oresteia*’s first play, the *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus repeats but slightly varies his synaesthetic metaphors,¹⁴⁵ making the chorus say that ‘silences are seen’.¹⁴⁶ This is said as part of a description of Agamemnon’s brother Menelaus, not believing that Helen left him, a silence “filled by his imagination of Helen’s ghost.”¹⁴⁷ The passage is garbled, though, and perhaps “there is no question of Menelaus *not believing* that Helen has left him.”¹⁴⁸

In the following, in the *Seven*, responding to Eteocles, the chorus again refer to the unholy noise that can be heard: “the bits in the horses’ cheeks give forth a piercing whine that tells of slaughter,” they say.¹⁴⁹ Actually, what kind of sound is heard, or to which sphere it belongs, remains disputed, since the wording of the verb is not clear. Perhaps Aeschylus used *kinurontai* (given by the manuscripts), a rare verb, derived from a noun that is somehow connected to the sound, or attitude, of a mother cow, having given birth for the first time. Whatever that may have been,¹⁵⁰ this is what

138 *Seven* 81.

139 The text is not complete, and various supplements are proposed. In any case, however, what is meant is that “as the sound becomes louder or clearer, the enemy is seen distinctly” (Hutchinson 1985, 61).

140 *Seven* 84 & 89.

141 *Seven* 100.

142 *Seven* 103.

143 On the fact that “from start to finish, the *Seven* is pervaded by discordant and terrible noise” cf. Thalmann 1978, 57-59 & 89.

144 Thalmann 1978, 123, in his long discussion (105-135) of the so-called Shield Scene (*Seven* 369-652). This scene is notoriously often treated, even in monographic form, as by Froma I. Zeitlin (1982).

145 Perhaps the most impressive in the *Persians* is ‘the trumpet that set the whole place ablaze with its call’ (*salpinx* ... *epephlegen*, 395). Broadhead refers to Murray’s translation of this: “out burst their trumpets, flaming through the air” (1960, 123), and to Sophocles’ ‘shining paean’ in his *Oedipus Tyrannos* (*paian* ... *lampei*, 186). In the *Seven*, Eteocles fears that the scout ‘with a flurry of hasty, noisy words ... sets all ablaze’, an expression that comes close (*logous* ... *phlegein*, 286), and on which v. Garvie (2009, 193).

146 *Agamemnon* 412sq., referred to by Hutchinson (1985, 63).

147 Collard 2002, 129.

148 Denniston & Page 1957, 106 (italics in the original).

149 *Seven* 122sq.

150 Leumann 1950, 241-243, elaborates on the two words.

can be made of a Homeric simile.¹⁵¹ Perhaps, however, Aeschylus used the rhyming *minurontai* (a 19th-century emendation), which is much more common (and which is, given Aeschylus' taste for singularities, however, for exactly that reason rather to be doubted), which means 'sing' (of human and avian melodies).¹⁵² Later in the play, the same sound is characterised as 'howling', or 'roaring'.¹⁵³

At first, one is inclined to favour the first alternative, not only because the word is much more rarely attested, posing a small riddle, and thus more difficult to make up by a copyist failing to do his job properly, but also because it evokes something sombre, particularly apt to a tragedy: the evil is born, and now alive, developing, coming closer. In fact, similar expressions "suggest the Homeric meaning was 'threatening'" indeed.¹⁵⁴ Having said that, however, on second thoughts, it cannot be excluded that Aeschylus re-interpreted a common word, lending an evil note to it. Both options would suit our view of an innovative, Homerizing poet. Perhaps, it is this ambivalence what might have caused the copyist to waver, changing earlier *minurontai* into the rarer *kinurontai*.¹⁵⁵

Eventually, clutching at a straw, one may add that Aeschylus explains himself, or rather that he can be better understood by reading more of his output. In the *Agamemnon*, for example, the chorus are much distressed by Cassandra 'wailing terribly',¹⁵⁶ while in the *Seven*, the chorus himself is 'crying fearfully':¹⁵⁷ obvious variations of the same theme, the meaning remains clear.

Now, in the *Seven*, the enemy comes closer. Again the chorus refer to their noise. Specifying it, they hear "the rattle of chariots around the city," how "the sockets of their heavy-laden axles are squealing"; they seem to feel that "the air is going mad with the brandishing of spears."¹⁵⁸ Two processes can be observed, the first traditional and conservative, the second innovative and avantgardistic.

First, our attention is guided to ever more detail, as it is in Homer. The visitors of Achilles, for example, sent by Agamemnon, find him singing "of the heroic deeds he is no longer allowing himself to perform,"¹⁵⁹ 'giving pleasure to his heart with a clear-voiced lyre, a beautiful finely-worked thing' – and now we hear the detail one remembers – 'with a cross-piece of silver'.¹⁶⁰ And

151 *Iliad* 17. 5.

152 Cf. Hutchinson 1985, 66sq.

153 *Seven* 206 *apuon*, a Doric form used by the chorus instead of Attic *epuon*, a common verb in poetry since *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; see below.

154 Edwards 1991, 63.

155 On such copyists cf. Dain 1975, 40-55.

156 *Agamemnon* 1165, *minura threomenas*.

157 *Seven* 78, *threomai phobera*.

158 *Seven* 151-155.

159 Hainsworth 1993, 88.

160 *Iliad* 9. 187.

second, going to great lengths, Aeschylus created a new word, in order to convey the sound properly.¹⁶¹ Thus, the acoustics reveal indirectly, “obliquely”,¹⁶² the progress of the attack. Suddenly, the city is bombarded, the shields clash at the gates.¹⁶³ The chorus interrupt his single-line report of the ever more dramatic sounds only by single-line invocations of various gods and goddesses: Hera, Artemis, Apollo, and Ares. Its last triad is entirely devoted to the “beloved gods” who are begged to “be mindful of the city’s loving sacrificial rites.”¹⁶⁴

Aeschylus continues establishing a narrative that alludes to the acoustical senses. Eteocles, for example, sharply criticising the chorus for spreading panic and cowardice among the citizens, demands them to stop that, wondering: “Did you hear me or not? Or am I talking to the deaf?”¹⁶⁵ There must have been a moment of silence, one may infer that.¹⁶⁶ Such silences render texts more august, creating sublime moments fraught with suspense: “just as Ajax’s silence in the Vision of the Dead is grand and indeed more sublime than any words could have been,” as the author of the small literary pamphlet *On the Sublime* described it.¹⁶⁷ The moment in the *Seven* is even more impressive; given the enemies’ eerie sound, Eteocles’ appeal sounds surreal, and perhaps he really could not be heard at all.

A curious dialogue begins – everybody turns a deaf ear to the arguments of the other side. The chorus brief Eteocles, pointing out the various sounds that can be heard,¹⁶⁸ to which he, however, shows a particularly tin ear approach. Instead of replying, or taking the chorus’ statement seriously, he focusses on the nautical metaphor already known: “A sailor can’t, can he, when his ship is in distress in heavy seas, find an escape from danger by fleeing from the stern of the bow?”¹⁶⁹

Several times, the chorus declare to hear frightening sounds,¹⁷⁰ and every so often Eteocles asks them to ignore it: “If you do hear them, do not hear them too clearly.”¹⁷¹ As if that were of any use,

161 *Seven* 155 dori-, or dory-, tinaktos, is seemingly attested only here, as the *Greek-English Lexicon* by H.G. Liddell and R. Scott states (Oxford 1940, ninth edition, 445).

162 Hutchinson 1985, 155.

163 *Seven* 159 & 161.

164 *Seven* 166-181.

165 *Seven* 202.

166 Aeschylus was so fond of silences – something that he knew from Homer – that he was derided for it in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*; cf., in particular, Rau 1967, 123, and, in general, Taplin 1972.

167 Ch. 9. 2. The anonymous author alludes to the ‘Nekyia’ in Homer’s *Odyssey* 11. 563; translated by D.A. Russell (Russell & Winterbottom 1972, 468).

168 *Seven* 203-207.

169 *Seven* 208-210.

170 *Seven* 239 may mean something like “unprecedented din”; on the corrupt yet impressive wording cf. Lupaş & Petre 1981, 88sq., and West 1990, 111sq. Noise is mentioned by the chorus again in 245, 247, 249.

171 *Seven* 246, from Collard (2008, 246).

Eteocles twice repeats his claim,¹⁷² accusing the chorus of a defeatist attitude.¹⁷³ He strongly admonishes them to “utter the sacred, auspicious ululation of triumph, ... to give confidence to our friends,”¹⁷⁴ an autosuggestive delusion. The chorus’ morale is low, indeed, comparing themselves to a trembling dove that “fears the snakes that make evil companions for the chicks sleeping in their nest.”¹⁷⁵

There are more snakes to come. As soon as the Shield Scene begins, and it starts at the end of this choral ode, the scout observes Tydeus at the first gate, “lusting madly for battle, screaming like a snake hissing at midday.”¹⁷⁶

A snake’s furious anger is an Iliadic image, and again Aeschylus refers to the Homeric subtext. Homer, for example, compares both Hector’s and Menelaus’ fierce fighting spirit to that of snakes.¹⁷⁷ Surely, “a grandiose and epic flavour”¹⁷⁸ can be felt, but in Aeschylus this is said of a man doomed to die soon. Another Iliadic passage speaks metaphorically about a snake. It deserves our attention because it might have come to the minds of again at least some in the audience.

In *Iliad* xii, when Hector is about to launch an attack, a bird-omen appears. The Trojans watch an eagle flying across the front of the army from right to left, “from East to West.”¹⁷⁹ The bird holds a monstrous blood-red snake. The snake is alive and struggles, having “not yet lost its will to fight.”¹⁸⁰ Eventually, the eagle lets it fall to the ground. Discussing the omen, cautious Poulydamas advises not to attack. Hector, however, depreciates not only those who consider such bird-omens worthy of a thought but also, hyperbolically, all the birds, flapping their wings: “I have no thought for them, I care nothing for them, whether they fly to the right towards the east and the sunrise, or to the left towards the western darkness.”¹⁸¹

At his speech’s opening Hector scowls,¹⁸² looking with lowering brows and a malignant, threatening expression; at its end, his men follow with a tremendous clamour.¹⁸³ Thus, the scene does contain

172 *Seven* 250, 252.

173 *Seven* 254.

174 *Seven* 267-270.

175 *Seven* 291-293.

176 *Seven* 380sq., v. Thalmann 1978, 112sq.

177 *Iliad* 22. 93-95 (on which see above, ch. 1, at its beginning) and 3. 33-35, respectively. Fraenkel (1921, 60) also refers to Proteus’ characterization in the *Odyssey* (4. 456sq.): “first he became a great bearded lion, then a snake, a panther, and a huge boar” (from Hammond’s translation, published 2000).

178 Hutchinson 1985, 93.

179 Hainsworth 1993, 340.

180 *Iliad* 12. 203.

181 *Iliad* 12. 237-240.

182 *Iliad* 12. 230.

183 *Iliad* 12. 251sq.

all Aeschylus needed, a fact that would not have escaped an attentive reader of Homer, as he certainly was. What is more, the whole setting implies an etymological play, since the Greek word for ‘snake’ (drak-on) and for ‘looking grimly, from under the brows’ (hupo-dra, an adverb) are formed from the same root.¹⁸⁴ Since Homer, Greek poets fancied such etymologising;¹⁸⁵ Aeschylus was no exception.

The chorus still drag on tediously.¹⁸⁶ The women are much concerned with their fate in case the city is captured; symbolically they become horses: “the women are taken captive and led away ... dragged by their hair like horses, their clothes being torn off,” they fear.¹⁸⁷ Enslaved, they serve as the bedfellows of their captors: “the Argives as drivers and tamers of horses will impose the yoke of slavery; the Argives as lustful stallions will cover the frightened mares.”¹⁸⁸ Ending their catalogue of horrors, i.e. “just reared” and “plucked unripe” in order to traverse “a hateful path away from their homes,”¹⁸⁹ the chorus repeat their greatest fear: slave-girls will soon have to endure a captive coupling, “a nocturnal consummation with the dominating enemy, the climax of their utterly wretched afflictions.”¹⁹⁰ The incomplete hints are easily completed subjectively by the audience; they even seem to complete themselves, creating an unholy and deeply disturbing whole.

The ensuing long Shield Scene supports much this process of completion. To some, the scene might have appeared impressively monumental indeed; it inspired Euripides to allude to it, perhaps even to mock it. In his *Phoenissae*, in a similar setting, having announced that he is about to station captains at all seven towers of Thebes, setting an equal number of defenders to face the enemy, Eteocles suddenly stops himself: “To tell the name of each would consume too much time with the enemy encamped at our very gates.”¹⁹¹ Some consider this couplet “as a polite, even

184 Risch 1974, § 128a.

185 Having often been at odds and issue with men and women, Odysseus’ father gives this name Odysseus to his son ‘to let his name reflect that’ (*Odyssey* 19. 406sq.). Such a verb (odussomai) would mean ‘to become angry at’ or ‘to take a dislike to’; its fundamental meaning, however, is unclear, ‘anger’ or ‘hatred’ or ‘pain’ being not the same. Perhaps, Odysseus was more suffering from and disliked by others than he was angry at them, a question already discussed by the Ancients (Stanford 1952). In this view, the verb would differ (odyromai), and Odysseus would mean ‘Child of Woe’, or ‘man of suffering’. In tragedy, Aeschylus’ younger contemporary Sophocles, in a presumably early play of his, makes Ajax famously say (430sq.): “*Aiai*. Who could ever have thought that my name would thus correspond to my sorrows?” (from Finglass’ translation, 2011, 265). The ‘ai’, or often doubled ‘aiai’, is a common Greek interjection of astonishment or grief. Aeschylus seems to be the first who used the denominative verb ‘aiazo’, curiously in a line the words of which suggest the wailing sound of which they speak (*Persians* 922, AIAzei tan eggAIAn); perhaps, the same kind of ‘mimetic imitation’ can be found a bit earlier, too, where the chorus “send forth clearly in Eastern speech my variegated, grief-laden, cries that tell of woe” (*Persians* 635-637, panAIol’ AIane).

186 *Seven* 287-368.

187 *Seven* 326-329.

188 Cameron 1971, 82.

189 *Seven* 333-335.

190 *Seven* 363-368.

191 Euripides *Phoenissae* 751sq.; v. Walton 2009, 18sq., also on other Euripidean ‘imitations’ of Aeschylus. Both poets are inextricably linked since Aristophanes’ *Frogs*. In this comedy, performed just after Euripides’ death, Aeschylus

complimentary, acknowledgement of Aeschylus,” some see here “a sarcastic rejection of Aeschylus’ technique as unrealistic”; in any case, “the intertextual allusion is characteristically Euripidean.”¹⁹²

This is the more interesting to remark since the *Phoenissae* belong “to the last decade of Euripides’ life.”¹⁹³ The play was performed more than half a century later than Aeschylus’ *Seven*, “most likely in one of the years 411-409, although a later production is not impossible.”¹⁹⁴ Athenian literary culture was highly developed, or so it seems, to allow for such a degree of intertextuality. Not many who saw the older play performed were alive, though, to watch the younger.

In Aeschylus’ *Seven*, the scout gives his impressions at much greater length. He describes the seven fighters: Tydeus (375-396), Capaneus (422-436), Eteoclus (458-471), Hippomedon (486-500), Parthenopaeus (526-549), Amphiaraus (568-596), finally Polyneices, Eteocles’ brother (631-652). He tells us what he saw and, more important, what he heard. Each time, first Eteocles, and then the chorus, respond. The monumental narrative is intended to be a show-piece, and one may well doubt the realism of the scene. Somehow one asks oneself how a simple scout, who in addition is so overwhelmed by his own emotions, can deliver such complex information so precisely. It’s simply too good to be true. In any case, we encounter many familiar images, optical as well as acoustical. The images become audible, the sounds, visible.

Tydeus, the first fighter, for example, “is screaming like a snake hissing at midday,” we hear.¹⁹⁵ The noise of his cries is made the more impressive: “he shakes three crests casting long shadows, the mane of his helmet, and on the underside of his shield bells of beaten bronze make a terrifying clang.”¹⁹⁶ To the scout, Tydeus seems out of his mind: “raving thus, ... he screams by the banks of the river, longing for battle, like a horse panting against the force of bit and bridle and impatiently awaiting the sound of the trumpet.”¹⁹⁷ At the calm centre of this hurricane of noise, we see Tydeus’ shield; conspicuous in its centre is a brilliant full moon, a thrilling paradox, “the eye of night.”¹⁹⁸

To this Eteocles responds how we expect a strong ruler to do. Undeterred by any kind of noise, he derides the shield. Only a silly person would be impressed by that: “for if the night of death should fall on his eyes, then this boastful device would prove to be rightly and properly true to its name for

rightly mocks Euripides’ verse as predictable and formulaic. Euripides counters by demonstrating the alleged monotony of Aeschylus’ choral songs, convincingly parodying excerpts from his works. The whole work is an exercise in intertextuality, a much entertaining piece of literary criticism; v. Rau 1967, 125-136.

192 Mastronarde 1994, 360sq.

193 Mastronarde 1994, 11.

194 Mastronarde 1994, 14.

195 *Seven* 380sq.

196 *Seven* 384-386.

197 *Seven* 391-394.

198 *Seven* 390.

its bearer,” who made this “arrogant prophecy against himself.”¹⁹⁹ Again, one wonders about the care deployed by a king responding to a military private. In fact, Eteocles answers as if he were interviewed, as if his pompous stance were recorded for posterity – which it actually is by Aeschylus. In fact, it is invented by Aeschylus, just as Thucydides invented Pericles’ funeral speech.

Nevertheless, this does not diminish the poetic splendour nor the historical appropriateness of both Aeschylus and Thucydides. Eteocles’ public voice (and that of Pericles) might well have been exactly like the one ‘recorded’ by Aeschylus (and Thucydides, respectively). Eteocles responds to what he is told, while the chorus point to the future. They fear the death of both fighters, the one sent by Eteocles and the one from outside. Perhaps the chorus anticipate the outcome, as some must have done in the audience, too. It would be in line with the chorus’ double ‘function’, i.e. either to digest the horrible past or to premeditate the woes to come.

The second fighter does “show a pride beyond human limits,”²⁰⁰ we hear from the scout. On his shield a naked man carries a fire, and inscribed on it we read “‘I will burn the city.’”²⁰¹ Again Eteocles is dismissive. He makes fun of such a figure that “is voicing threats against men who are ready to act,”²⁰² a formula reminiscent of the sophistic antithesis between ‘words’ and ‘deeds’.²⁰³ Eteocles again promises to send a good man against the enemy, and the chorus has nothing more to add than hailing such a brave defender.

The third fighter we hear of is Eteoclus. He is circling with his horses, whose noise is amply described.²⁰⁴ Their muzzles, we hear, “are whistling a barbarian music”.²⁰⁵ Earlier in the play, we

199 *Seven* 400-406.

200 *Seven* 425.

201 *Seven* 434.

202 *Seven* 440.

203 The sophists were fond of such divisive and provocative oppositions as, for example, ‘nature’ versus ‘culture’, and made much mileage out of them. The antithesis between ‘word’ and ‘deed’, for example, famously opens the funeral speech supposed to be delivered by Pericles, in the winter 431/430. The speech was written and conceived, however, by Thucydides (in his monograph 2. 35-46). He tried to sketch a history of the internecine, or fratricidal, war between the Greeks that ended in 404 with a partial destruction of Athens. Thucydides probably witnessed the outcome, and under its impression made Pericles say something which tells us more about imaginary Athens, which was lost, than about the dead Pericles was expected to honour. The details are not known, and therefore much disputed; cf. Gomme 1956, 104. In any case, such an antithesis formed part of a well-established narrative, referred to by Plato, for example, a discourse to which also Aeschylus alludes; cf. Kakridis 1961, 4-9. One need not assume Aeschylus to be a sophist, however, when he uses arguments every educated contemporary was familiar with. Euripides, more often than not Un-Aeschylean, was much closer to the sophistic movement (Kerferd 1981, 169-171), as was already discussed by the Ancients (a collection of testimonies can be found in TrGF T under the heading F, H, and Ud). – To add a final thought: the story of the *Seven* is that of an internecine war, too. Either side, each led by two brothers, the sons of Oedipus, tries to kill each other. Eteocles is to return to his antithesis on the occasion of the fifth fighter (see below).

204 *Seven* 461-464.

205 *Seven* 463. Aeschylus may suggest that the enemies’ behaviour resembled that of barbarians, highlighting the “near-monstrous character of the Seven,” as Hall writes (1989, 178). Not all ‘barbarians’, however, are monstrous.

already heard the bells attached to Tydeus' shield made "a terrifying clang."²⁰⁶ And the image on the shield repeats something we already saw.

Thus, a repetitive, retarding moment is established. Like the man on Capaneus' shield, we see a figure on Eteocles' shield, "and he too is crying out in written syllables,"²⁰⁷ saying that not even Ares can stop him from climbing the wall. Eteocles has already sent a man "not to be terrified ... by the noise of horses' wild neighing."²⁰⁸ Then, Eteocles speaks as if the scout were making the boasts he only reports the attackers are making, admonishing him to "brag about another one; don't be grudging about informing me,"²⁰⁹ Eteocles concludes. The chorus, however, is disturbed by the noise, hoping that fortune is not with the enemies "as they bluster loudly against the city."²¹⁰

Hippomedon, the fourth fighter, is uttering loud cries, too. The scout shuddered because of his gigantic shield, on which a monster with a hundred fiery serpent-heads is to be seen. And as if this were not terrifying enough, "the round circle of the hollow-bellied shield is floored with coiling snakes."²¹¹ Shouting Hippomedon, of course, is "possessed by Ares, ... rages for fight like a maenad, with a fearsome look in his eye."²¹² The monster on Hippomedon's shield, Typhon, was killed by Zeus, and quite appropriately, Eteocles chose a fighter on whose shield Zeus resides with his flaming bolt in his hand, by which he killed once Typhon: "it is to be expected that the human opponents will fare likewise."²¹³ The chorus are confident, too.

The fifth fighter "stands ... with a savage pride, ... and a fierce eye," surprisingly though, because he is "little more than a boy: the down is just growing thick," we are told.²¹⁴ His shield shows the Sphinx – the monster once upon a time killed by Eteocles' and Polyneices' father, a bad omen, a terrifying reminder of the past which predicts worse to come. Only lately we are told the fighter's name, Parthenopaeus, a speaking name referring to his innocent youthfulness. Eteocles, again, assures the chorus that the fighter he chose "will not allow a tongue with no deeds to its credit"²¹⁵ to

Perhaps, Aeschylus drew on earlier literary tradition from the 'East', as Burkert proposed (Brillante 1981, 29-51). This cannot be proven, however, and even if it may seem plausible it would hardly matter for a literary interpretation of Aeschylus' *Seven*. The origin is not the essence, just as a word is defined by its usage, not by its etymology.

206 *Seven* 386.

207 *Seven* 469.

208 *Seven* 475sq.

209 *Seven* 480.

210 *Seven* 483.

211 *Seven* 495sq.

212 *Seven* 497sq.

213 *Seven* 519.

214 *Seven* 537 & 533-555.

215 *Seven* 556.

enter the city, thus returning to his sophistic antithesis, already referred to on the occasion of the second fighter. Terrified by the “loud boasts of these loud-mouthed, impious men,”²¹⁶ the chorus hope very much that Eteocles did the right thing.

This fighter slowed the narrative’s speedy suspense, which gains momentum now with the scout’s presentation of the sixth, “a man of the highest virtue and an excellent fighter, powerful Amphiarus.”²¹⁷ He is singled out, for not only his reviling words can be heard, of which the scout cites some verbally, but also because a short speech of his is remembered word by word.²¹⁸ Moreover, another point makes him unique: on his shield there is no image, “for he desires not the appearance of excellence but the reality,” the scout surmises.²¹⁹ He is unique, indeed, for he would not take part in the expedition of the Seven against Thebes, foreknowing its result. His name (‘very sacred’) singles him out, too.

The next two lines are filled by a poetic image, apparently invented by the scout who declares that Amphiarus “harvests a deep furrow in his mind from which good counsels grow” (593sq.).²²⁰ again it surprises how a poetically gifted soldier praises the enemy’s virtues. Even more so because Eteocles takes this up, speaking of evil company as “a crop best not reaped.”²²¹ Eventually, Eteocles goes at great length, honouring the enemy’s qualities, engaging in a silent dialogue, a *conversation souterraine*,²²² with the scout; as if there were a Chekhovian mute understanding between the ruler and the slave, the king and his servant.

Eteocles develops the remarkable image of a good man surrounded by evil sailors, with whom he cannot but perish: “either a virtuous man boards a ship together with sailors engaged in some headstrong villainy” and perishes along with them, or else “an honest man in the company of ... men ... who are unmindful of the gods, is caught unjustly in the same net as they” and perishes as well.²²³ For a moment, we see Eteocles meditating a nearly philosophical problem. He cuts a Benito Cereno-like figure:²²⁴ “a virtuous, upright, courageous and pious man, ... joined together against his

216 *Seven* 565sq., whose words imitate sound (MEGALa MEGALenoron ... ANosion ANdron, partly anaphoric, plus *homoiteleuton*).

217 *Seven* 568sq.

218 *Seven* 580-589.

219 *Seven* 592.

220 *Seven* 593sq.

221 *Seven* 599sq.

222 Éric Vuillard, *L'ordre du jour*, Arles 2017, 93.

223 *Seven* 602-608, on which Van Nes 1963, 128sq.

224 For one reason or another, the point attracted some German attention. From a classicist’s viewpoint, Eduard Fraenkel, for example, is vigorously elaborate on it (1957, 51 = 1964, 319). There is another point of view, however. Considering Cereno as a “Situations-Symbol” and actually living in a similar situation, Carl Schmitt, for example, felt “von dem ganz ungewollten, hintergründigen Symbolismus der Situation als solcher ganz überwältigt,” as he put it (in two letters to Ernst Jünger, dated February 25 & September 17, 1941, published in Jünger/Schmitt 1999, 115 & 129). First published 1855, a German translation of Melville’s novel appeared only 1938. Its narrative is relatively simply, though told in a rather complex way. By chance, an American captain

will with impious men of arrogant speech.”²²⁵ Nevertheless he posts a man against him, whose “eye is swift.”²²⁶ The chorus become thrilled, invoking Zeus who may slay the enemy “with his thunderbolt,”²²⁷ which we already saw depicted, or were told so.

Everything is repetitive, becomes circular, nearly claustrophobic, as the situation really must have been to those forced to live through it. This is another Aeschylean achievement – he redefines realism: the whole situation, the elaborate ekphraseis, for example, and the educated scout confronting the philosophical king ‘on a par’, is contrived, beggars belief and un-real, yet the atmosphere evoked, appropriate and real. There must be an exit, and here it comes.

Everything points towards a climax. The scout reports that Eteocles’ own brother is at the seventh gate. He, too, is noisy and confident, “sounding out a jubilant paean for its capture: to join battle with you, kill you,” etc.²²⁸ His shield is decorated by an intellectually demanding device: we see two persons, a warrior led by a woman, apparently an allegory: “And as the writing proclaims, she says that she is Justice, ‘and I will bring this man back from exile, and he will possess his father’s city and the right to dwell in his home.’”²²⁹

Eteocles remains determined. “We shall soon know,” he declares, whether “those letters in gold” are of any use, this highbrow stuff, “blathering insanely on his shield.”²³⁰ Claiming that Justice never ever was his brother’s companion, he asks for his weapons. The chorus fear the worst, for “pollution can never grow old.”²³¹ In retrospect, excitement was mounting until the countdown to war began. Now, at the decisive moment, no longer any metaphor is needed. It would have spoiled the effect. As in an opera, several motifs were developed and repeated, only to be silenced at the end.

The chorus discuss the events, suggesting to Eteocles that the curse on Oedipus’ sons might be appeased. They propose a sacrifice in order to make the Fury leave his house.²³² Part of this rhetoric of desperation is a harking back to the amply described shields. The chorus use a rare word, which

encounters a seemingly helpless ship on sea. Apparently, its captain, Benito Cereno, is still in command. Instead, however, he is completely controlled by the slaves who rebelled, he is their hostage. It takes some time for the American to find that out.

225 *Seven* 610-612.

226 *Seven* 623.

227 *Seven* 630.

228 *Seven* 636sq.

229 *Seven* 646-648.

230 *Seven* 660sq.; again one may note the sound of the words (phluonta sun phoitoi phrenon). Collard tries a rendering by “the wittering of wandering wits”, said of the letters wrought in gold (2008, 52). Silk speaks of aural interaction, an exploitation of alliterative linking (1974, 179): “Once again Aeschylus shows the way”, he states, adding an impressive list of examples.

231 *Seven* 682.

232 *Seven* 699-701.

turns up here for the first time, to describe the Fury as carrying, or being equipped with, a black shield (melanaigis). The word-formation is simple, the meaning could be easily understood. It must be the shield of death, what else can it be, since “the only favour the gods will accept from the family is its obliteration.”²³³

Addressing Eteocles, the chorus are still hoping, however, that some deity may change “the wind of your spirit and blow with a gentler spirit.”²³⁴ The image is taken up by Euripides, made more literal and low-life, though. In his *Phoenician Women*, he makes Iocaste say the same to Eteocles who encounters his brother: “stop your fierce glaring and your angry panting,”²³⁵ she admonishes her son, since he is not looking at the severed head of the Gorgon but at his own brother. The ‘storm of anger’ is a widely used image.²³⁶ Earlier in the *Seven*, the scout, characterising all seven enemies, said that “there breathed within them a steel-hearted spirit, ... like that of lions with the light of war in their eyes.”²³⁷

Eteocles, however, cannot be moved. He is ready to fight, he is whetted, as he put it, and he cannot be dulled or blunted by the chorus’ words.²³⁸ By no means this image is to be found in Aeschylus only. The expression is fairly common, but cannot be easily judged. His younger contemporary Thucydides, for example, is much “fond of this metaphor.”²³⁹ It must be said, however, that Thucydides’ way of writing Greek cannot be called sober, or restrained, quite the opposite. Perhaps he borrowed the word from Aeschylus or some such source, intent on heightening the tone, attaching a tragic ring to it, ennobling his prose. Perhaps, it was an everyday expression, though, adding ‘street credibility’ to one’s discourse.

The chorus, bewailing the anticipated killing of the two brothers, returns to the image of “waves of trouble” which break “loudly around the very poop of the city.”²⁴⁰ There is an elaborate Homeric model for this, to be found in *Iliad* xiii, the book which is called ‘the battle around the ships’. The “full-blown simile”²⁴¹ is said of the enemy, as in the *Seven*: “the Trojans came on like the cruel

233 Thalmann 1978, 54.

234 *Seven* 705-708.

235 *Phoenician Women* 454.

236 Taillardat 1965, 180-186, gives many examples.

237 *Seven* 52sq. In his *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus makes the chorus describe him, when in Aulis, as ‘blowing together with fortune’s wind’ (187). On breath and emotion in Greek poetry v. Onians 1951, 49-56. The concept might have been around early, since the Greek word for ‘courage’ (thumos) and the Latin for ‘fumes’ or ‘steam’ (fumus) are formed from the same root. A common ‘denominator’ from which the differing meaning developed is not easily suggested, though; similar word-pairs, covering a somehow related area, occur in non-Indo-European languages as well. Perhaps they suggest an ‘elementary’ parallel, common to various cultures, developed independently and at various stages.

238 *Seven* 715.

239 Gomme 1956, 224.

240 *Seven* 758-761.

241 Janko 1992, 143.

winds' blast, which swoops to earth driven by the thunder of father Zeus, and with a tremendous roar cuts into the salt sea water, and the waves boil countless over the sounding sea, curling and cresting white, rank after rank."²⁴²

In Aeschylus, and quite appropriately, naval imagery is to follow. The chorus compare "prosperity grown too fat" to a "cargo being thrown overboard from the stern."²⁴³ The city, however, survived, she "has let no water into her hull," as the messenger reports.²⁴⁴

The two sons of Oedipus, however, are dead. When they are brought on stage, the chorus speak to themselves: go along "with the wind of lamentation in your sails, ... propelling ... the black-sailed ship, ... to the invisible shores that welcome all."²⁴⁵ For more than 200 lines, filled with lamentation and planning for a controversial funeral, we hear of no image at all. No metaphor is used, as if the author's imagination had run out of force, until at the very end the chorus (or a half of it) praise Eteocles for the very last time. In the play's very last moment we hear that he, most of all, as the chorus declare, saved the city "from overturn and swamping by a wave of foreign men."²⁴⁶

Innovative Aeschylus developed his own brand of metaphors, a blend that refers to the great and defining themes of Greekness. The disquieting sea of troubles, the vicious enemies, from the East or, worse even, from within, the heightened, quasi-religious tone, and the boldly formed, yet easily understandable, new words created, this all established and helped to sustain his, Aeschylean atmosphere. As it was in Homer, who invented a fictitious world, using a vocabulary that matched its speakers' remoteness and artificiality, Aeschylus tried to convey the atmosphere that reigned at the Persian court and among the bygone heroes of the Greek great age. Monumentalising in a dignified way, he was, working on a large scale, as Homer did. A new voice in poetry made herself clearly heard, while a familiar sound was always around, sustaining his poetic project, making it credible. As did Homer, and that is the reason why we know his name.

The operatic, however, almost always comes close to the unctuous, pompous, and pretentious. From the sublime to the ridiculous there is but one and rather small step. Given this unsatisfactory situation, this inescapable dilemma, Euripides excelled. His success is not due to his poetic talent but to a wish to safeguard tragedy, to preserve the genre, to make it again, and anew, appear full of meaning, in other words, to transform it. Euripides simply became the right man, or appeared as such, when all around him changed and moved, which helped him much. He came too early, though. Unlucky with the audience in Athens in the classical age of the fifth century, only after the demise of Athens, of her society, of her public, he became the only voice the audience wanted to listen to in the following century. Suddenly, he was in the right position, the light fell in the right angle on him and his low-lifers. Euripidean misfits became part of Athenian social memory.

242 *Iliad* 13. 795-799, on which v. Van Nes 1963, 37sq. The simile belongs to a pair "with essentially the same vehicle, but with different referents," as Moulton remarks (1977, 23).

243 *Seven* 769-771.

244 *Seven* 795sq.

245 *Seven* 857-860.

246 *Seven* 1075-1077, translated by Collard (2008, 64).

This meant the poetic death of Aeschylus. He became a classic instead, which was and is not necessarily a compliment. In the new light, Aeschylus shone as the last man of a past that was no longer. Nostalgia, however, was no longer what it used to be either. Aeschylus who recycled Homer to make his new voice audible was copied by Euripides who recycled him, in order to make his new voice audible. The ‘poles’ of poetry changed again, whether for the better or the worse it is for others to decide.

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