

Gary S. Meltzer, *Euripides and the Poetics of Nostalgia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, XII, 266 pp., ISBN 978-0-521-85873-1.

When tracing the defining traits of modern Euripidean scholarship, a mention of the sophistic issue seems inescapable. Was Euripides a sophist? And in the case we assume he was, yet another question: was he a Protagorean or a Gorgianic type of sophist? Or, to put it differently: was he a relativist and unbeliever (unless a believer in relativism), was he a perspectivist, was he a rhetorician *par excellence*, or, a solution distancing him from the movement, was he, deep at heart, a conservative who used the elaborate methods of sophistic rhetoric to unmask the possible nihilism of relativist position? These and similar questions have been tormenting the Euripideans for over a century, influencing and spawning legions of interpretations, firing new controversies and quite often leading to radically different readings of a single text¹. Additionally, they are inextricably linked to other issues: the alleged misogyny, the theodicy, indeed, the religiosity problem, just to mention these most prominent. It is to this lively debate that Meltzer's [= M.] recent book contributes.

The basic stand taken by the author of *Euripides and the Poetics of Nostalgia* is as follows: by concentrating on the issue of "the lost voice of truth", M. aims at characterizing Euripides as a conservative comparable with Aristophanes, a man particularly sensitive to the rapidly widening gap between the signifier and signified, the emergence of which was linked to the conventional-ity idea promoted by the sophists. His argument is built on an analysis of four plays: *Hippolytus*, *Hecuba*, *Ion* and *Helen*. Yet, one should add to this list the *Phoenissae* and the *Medea*, from which some important insights are drawn in the opening chapter. It is noteworthy that the analyzed plays are varied, representing different stages of Euripides' career, and, at least for some, vastly differing in the ideological stratum. This latter would certainly facilitate the diachronic analysis of 'nostalgia' as an evolving feature of Euripidean tragic cosmos. Yet, quite strikingly, M. makes his start (pp. 2–32) with the famous *agon* of the *Phoenissae* 469–637, the highly charged (both emotionally and ideologically) moment where words prove unable to solve the conflict doomed to culminate in bloodshed, a scene that basically prefigures the reality to come. What makes this *agon* of particular importance for his interpretation is Eteocles' implicit claim that words are words only (*Phoen.* 501 f.), and one would be a fool not to use them for his own gain. This, M. stresses, marks the rejection of the traditional word/thing correspondence, and, implicitly, the distancing of the signifier from the signified to the point where the 'usual' signified is lost or forgotten². As another instantiation of this tendency to abandon the original meaning of words M. invokes the *Medea*, where Jason feels quite safe in renegeing on the sworn promises, while the heroine insists on the validity

¹ The most influential work is certainly K. Reinhardt's *Die Sinneskrise bei Euripides*, in: idem, *Tradition und Geist: Gesammelte Essays zur Dichtung*, ed. by C. Becker, Göttingen 1960. Among the more recent studies dealing with Euripides' relationship with the sophistic movement one should number D.J. Conacher, *Euripides and the Sophists*, London 1998; W. Allan, *Euripides and the Sophists: Society and the Theatre of War*, in: M. Cropp, K. Lee, D. Sansone (eds.), *Euripides and the Tragic Theatre in the Late Fifth Century*, Champaign, Il. 2000 [= ICS XXIV–XXV 1999–2000], pp. 145–156, and M. Wright, *Euripides' Escape Tragedies*, Oxford 2005 (particularly pp. 226–337).

² While M.'s debt is to J. Derrida himself, one may wonder whether G. Manetti's *Le teorie del segno nell'antichità classica*, Milano 1987 (English translation by Ch. Richardson: *Theories of the Sign in Classical Antiquity*, Bloomington 1993) would not add to his argument.

of spoken oath. The reversal of traditional male and female roles, the transferral of the capability for duplicitous language to the male (Jason), all rightly stressed by M. (pp. 61–67), appear as the consequences of the oath-breaking: the remark seems particularly valuable given the other signs of gender confusion present in the play³.

As mentioned above, the central chapters of M.'s work deal respectively with *Hippolytus*, *Hecuba*, *Ion* and, finally, *Helen*. When discussing the *Hippolytus* (pp. 71–103), M. seems to focus on the great *agon* (*Hip.* 902–1101): his choice is well justified given that the scene reflects all the complexities related to the perception vs. reality or representation vs. reality problems so prominent in the play. Indeed, for the large part of this play the silent sign constituted by Phaedra's body and the frozen voice of the letter seem to provide a truth stronger than any speech coming from a living being (only at the end will they be invalidated by the divine). The impressive rhetorical skill of the young hero (in spite of his protestations to the contrary, Theseus' son speaks with the ability of one well-versed in the Athenian court of law⁴) achieves nothing. The truth, even assisted by skill, proves insufficient against the silent witness, even as Theseus voices his wish for "the voice of truth" that would give lie to any attempt at prevarication. Interpreted along the Derridean terms of *signifié* and *signifiant* the scene is profoundly disturbing, for it seems to abuse any link that exists between the two, or, at another level, to belie any use debate and dialogue may have. Yet, simultaneously, it asserts the effective power of human voice: after all, the *agon* comes only after the death-sentence has been pronounced, Theseus' wish voiced and Hippolytus' end decided. Even at the moment when the essential link between the word and the denoted object collapses, human speech, as represented by Theseus, retains the frightening performative power, as the silence of Phaedra works upon reality through the speech act of her husband.

In the analysis of the *Hecuba* (pp. 104–145) the author focuses on the famous plea the beleaguered queen addresses to Agamemnon (*Hec.* 786–845), a plea he rightly perceives as a culminating phase of rhetorical intended aimed to alleviate the suffering of the Trojan women. M. seems quite justified in maintaining that the plea only makes sense when considered together with the earlier, failed address to Odysseus (*Hec.* 251–295), and when set against the background of the more general collapse of values traditionally linked to the heroic age. The weakness of human voice, particularly when this voice stands for justice and protests against the violence which threatens the sacred norms ensuring the survival of society, becomes for M. particularly manifest at the point when Hecuba deplors the fact her limbs are not endowed with an ability to speak... (*Hec.* 836 f.). While he does certainly have a point, one may wonder whether the very impossibility of Hecuba's wish coming true does not highlight her own powerlessness in a particularly distressing manner – she is a speaking creature, and by the very right of her ability to think/speak, a member of human society. Yet, her words repeatedly fall on deaf ears, thereby complicating her position: she speaks, but her words remain unheard. In wishing for another voice (or, rather, for a chorus of voices) she may not only be wishing for the voice of truth and power, but, perhaps even more importantly, she may be lamenting the loss of the constitutive ability of a human. This, quite strikingly, would anticipate the later promise of her animal transformation, a metamorphosis which will, effectively, render her voiceless *and* mark her banishment from the humankind. The interesting point of M.'s approach is that he seems to stress both Hecuba's powerlessness to defend the justice of her claims and, at the same moment, her ability as a speaker, an ability one may clearly mark as sophistic. What seems by contrast obscured is the fact that Hecuba's commendable skill becomes effective

³ While M. focuses on the reversal of the traditional gender paradigm, one could also refer Medea's insistence on the validity of the oath and on the maintenance of the 'old ways' to those traits of her persona which denote her clear preference for the 'older' gods (cf. e.g. K.J. Newman, *Euripides' Medea: Structures of Estrangement*, ICS XXVI 2001, pp. 53–76).

⁴ On the subject cf. M. Lloyd, *The Agon in Euripides*, Oxford 1992, pp. 43–51 (surprisingly, the title never appears in M.'s work).

only after the total destruction of her family, and that her transition from wailing wretch to shifty sophist invoking the bed of daughter as an argument in her plea for Agamemnon's good will seems markedly prolonged⁵. In short, one may wonder about Euripides' intentions in portraying human speech as unable to defend justice yet proving its deadly efficacy when aimed at twisting the reality to fit one's own ends. In such a context, it would be also interesting to consider whether Polyxene's acceptance of her own death, indeed, her very resolve to die, manifested in her final gesture at the altar, should not be viewed as a rejection of this growing gap between the object and its name, between what we are and how we are perceived.

In interpreting the *Ion* (pp. 146–187), M. stresses the basic ambiguity of all the figures appearing in the play, most particularly that of the ever absent, yet omnipresent Apollo. The oracular voice, the voice of truth proves capable of prevarication, but also of enlightenment, a circumstance quite in line with Phoebus' behaviour throughout the expository phase of the play. Forcing himself on Creusa, he fathers a son, who is afterwards reared in total ignorance of his provenance, while his desolate mother mourns her abandoned and apparently dead child. Apollo's benevolence remains hidden and, for the long time, unknown to the beneficiaries. Indeed, one may think that some of his benefits come rather expensive: in giving Xuthus his long-awaited successor, Apollo stresses the limits of oracular ambiguity to their very utmost, thereby casting doubt on his own temple. Still, M. is quite right in emphasizing the importance of the act of naming (pp. 169 ff.) and the importance of the name itself, for it is in the very act that Xuthus claims the hero as his own son and confirms his place in the Athenian society. Similarly, the name is anticipated in the oracle itself (*I.* 535), thus hinting at Apollo's paternity – after all, the young man is divine gift to the royal family (*I.* 536), a visible sign of his favour and care, to be protected by the divine in his hour of need, when in danger from his own mother.

Admittedly, little truth (or at least little immediate truth) pervades the world of the *Ion*, as everybody (possibly most strikingly, Apollo himself) seems to hide behind some useful mask or intermediary. Yet, the feelings and emotions aroused by what is not necessarily true are real enough: the sadness of the childless but not childless Athenian queen and, correspondingly, her rage when she deems herself and her bloodline cheated of the throne are very authentic, as is the joy of Xuthus or the murderous fury of Ion⁶. Possibly, this is the most worrying aspect of the *Ion*, an aspect that should prevent us from viewing the work as tragicomedy or whatever generic classification we want to impose on the work: in its word the false tends to raise terrifyingly strong emotions, leading the characters to a behaviour strikingly at odds with their social and generic roles.

In his analysis of the *Helen* (pp. 188–222)⁷, M. returns once more to the already mentioned chasm between the signifier and the signified: Helen's body, the living reason for the cruelties of the Trojan war, is not Helen's at all, instead, the duplicitous double provides the *casus belli*, while Menelaus' chaste wife dwells in Egypt. Yet, Helen's fatal beauty once again (but is it again?) ignites human passions, leading to bloodshed and slaughter, thus proving to be what it seemed (or seemed not) to be. What's more, while not a traitor to her Spartan husband, she is a deceiver and will be perceived as traitorous by Theoclymenus (hardly a laudable character himself). True enough, in no other play the emphasis on appearances and their compatibility (or incompatibility)

⁵ For the contrast between the effectiveness of Hecuba's second address and its moral ambivalence, cf. e.g. G.M. Kirkwood, *Hecuba and the Nomos*, TAPhA LXXVIII 1947, pp. 61–68. For the link between the annihilation of personality and moral collapse, cf. D.J. Conacher, *Euripides' Hecuba*, AJPh LXXXII 1961, pp. 1–26.

⁶ M. is quite right to stress the impact intrinsic in his behaviour toward the suppliant, as the boy usurps the position of divinity in claiming the right to distribute the right of protection (pp. 173 f.).

⁷ The chapter was originally published as "Where is the glory of Troy?" *Kleos in Euripides' Helen*, ClAnt XIII 1994, pp. 234–255.

with the real is so patent, though one may detect some indications of the rift in the *Electra* or the *Orestes*, with their stress on failed promises and expectations belied by the reality⁸.

The weaknesses of the book should be mentioned at this point: almost too often, the author's attention turns to the contemporary world, drawing parallels that may easily be seen as downward simplifying or superficial, though some truth may be seen in the observation that words and indeed speech are being increasingly distanced from facts. More troubling are political analogies and the Americanocentrism manifest in the work: fortunately, I did not see my entire world change radically after September 11 hence the parallels between the damages wrought by the Peloponnesian war and the terrorist attack on New York evade me. Additionally, one may wonder whether the repeated allusions to the modern US politics will not prove too much for a non-American reader. On the other hand, the justified stress on the affinities between the Thucydidean account of the atrocities on Melos, Corcyra etc. and the Euripidean portrayal of war leaves the reader with a convincing image of the poet as deeply troubled by the political extravagancies of his *polis*.

Next, owing to his focus on the language, M. often forgoes a wider reflection, which may occasionally leave his observations disappointingly limited. Thus, one could pay more attention to the fact that Theseus' wish for the voice of truth comes at the point he refuses to listen to any voice but his own, itself being prompted by the incidentally false evidence – the fact is paid its due by Artemis. Second, as mentioned above, Medea's wish for a way to distinguish the true from the false, and then her assumption of heroic standard, which she upholds against Jason's opportunism, leads to a profound disturbance of Corinthian world – the rift between speech and matter seems to spread to different levels of the social network. The body belies the nature, the outward form no longer corresponds to the content, the familiar sign is given to the foreign meaning. Indeed, Medea offers one of the more interesting study matters for a 'nostalgia' reading, as one may observe that the heroine masks as a helpless victim of male violence, as a strictly female creature, when she is harbouring deadly plans vastly at odds with her deceptive words and appearance. Moreover, she is both the deceived and a deceiver herself, hence a double creature *par excellence*. Further, almost no mention is ever made of possibly the greatest 'nostalgia' argument, the *Electra* with the famous interchange concerning the veracity of Apollo's oracle⁹. Should/can the oracle be doubted? The passage has long been employed as an argument for the 'atheism' theory, yet, there might be more to it: if we remove the ring of the truth from the voice of the god as he speaks through the mouth of his Delphic priestess, what is there to be trusted? Many signs are rejected in the play by *Electra*, yet it is *Orestes* that undermines the validity of this particular one. Interpreted in the context of the division between the signifier and the signified, this is a chilling scene.

There is, however, something even more troubling in M.'s book: certain equivocation seems to attach to the very notion of the lost voice of truth. At some point, e.g. when considering the *Hippolytus*, M. seems to concentrate on the veridical aspect of human speech, the very compatibility of *res* and *verba* that constituted the ancient definition of truth. Then, he turns to the occasional loss of performative value: words seem unable to transform reality, to influence it in a manner intended by the speaker (Hecuba provides the best example of the fact), but prove terrifyingly effective when misused, when distanced from their traditional signified. Not only the criterion is at

⁸ In the *Electra*, Orestes' timid stance stands in vivid contrast with the heroic expectations of his sister (a fact stressed e.g. in K.C. King, *The Force of Tradition: The Achilles Ode in Euripides' Electra*, TAPhA CX 1980, pp. 195–212. In the *Orestes* Menelaus appears particularly ill-suited to fulfill the role of saviour in which he had been cast throughout the opening scenes (cf. e.g. P. Kyriakou, *Menelaus and Pelops in Euripides' Orestes*, Mnemosyne LI 1998, pp. 282–301).

⁹ Strikingly, M. mentions the scene in passing only, when discussing the *Ion*, the drama he considers much more to the point in the discussion of the Delphic oracle (p. 146, n. 1). The mention comes in a footnote, together with similarly anti-Delphic passages of the *Orestes* and *Iphigenia among the Taurians*.

stake here... Then, sometimes, M. seems to concern himself not so much with the speech and the signifier, but with the content (or the lack of the latter), i.e. with the signified itself: is it absent? Is it a mere figure of speech? Is it simply a matter of social agreement? Or is there something objectively existent that once upon a time corresponded to the words of our language? The way of presentation tends to increase the resulting confusion. Moreover, the human voice (and the human speech) seems particularly multifaceted in Euripides: the prayers usually go answered (even when their effect differs, often quite radically, from the expected one¹⁰), some wishes are granted (still, one wonders at the argumentation employed) which would seem to reassert the performative power of human voice, though would also point to the limitedness of human expressive ability.

To summarize: though not a masterwork, M.'s book deserves to be read. If not exactly satisfying and abounding with inconsistencies, it is certainly thought-inspiring and occasionally insightful – or at least I found it so. In a way, it emphasizes a quality of Euripides' reflection that too often escapes a reader: the profound anxiety concerning the price one pays for the right to doubt and question both the world and his own perception of this latter, an anxiety concerning the dialogic power of language and the effective power of human voice.

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¹⁰ For the prayer issue cf. J.D. Mikalson, *Unanswered Prayers in Greek Tragedy*, JHS CIX 1989, pp. 81–97, a work which, in spite of its apparent relevance, is never mentioned in M.'s study.

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Oliver Overwien, *Die Sprüche des Kynikers Diogenes in der griechischen und arabischen Überlieferung*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 2005 (Hermes Einzelschriften XCII), 500 S.

Das Buch Overwiens [= Ov.] ist eine überarbeitete und (um das Unterkapitel 7.2) erweiterte Fassung seiner Dissertation, die der klassische Philologe Bernd Effe wissenschaftlich betreut und bei der der Arabist Gerhard Endreß als Korreferent fungiert hat. Die Studie wurde 2002 von der Ruhr-Universität Bochum mit einem der „Preise an Studierende“ ausgezeichnet. Sie besteht aus einer umfangreichen Einführung (S. 13–38), sieben Kapiteln unterschiedlicher Länge (S. 39–446), einem Quellen- und Literaturverzeichnis (S. 447–457) sowie einigen Indizes (S. 458–500).

Ov. hat lediglich diejenigen Sprüche zum Gegenstand seiner Untersuchung gemacht, die sich in griechischen Gnomologien und Florilegien finden¹, und zahlreiche andere, u. a. in den Schriften des Plutarch und Dion Chrysostomos überlieferte Sprüche aus seiner Betrachtung ausgeklammert. Dies betrifft auch die Scheinsprüche, die in Wirklichkeit Textexzerpte sind, also erst sekundär in die Spruchüberlieferung eingegangen und nicht primär als Sprüche entstanden sind. Die in den *Vitae philosophorum* (VI 24–69) des Diogenes Laertios enthaltenen Dicta werden nur als Parallelstellen behandelt. Ov. analysiert „etwas weniger als 140 Dicta“ (S. 20), von denen die meisten der von

¹ Ov. erinnert daran (S. 27), dass als Gnomologien (es ist übrigens ein erst in der Neuzeit geprägter Begriff) Sammlungen bezeichnet werden, „die fast ausschließlich aus Sprüchen bestehen“. Als Florilegien hingegen gelten diejenigen Sammlungen, „die sowohl literarische Kleinformen jeglicher Art (z. B. Sprüche, Fabeln, Verse) als auch Schriftexzerpte umfassen“.