
An African *Oresteia*:
Field Notes on Pasolini's *Appunti per un'*
Orestide africana

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ex Africa semper aliquid novi . . .

There's always something new coming out of Africa . . .

—Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 17.42 via Aristotle,
Historia Animalium 8.28

ROME, 1975

A BEACH IN Ostia, just outside of Rome, was the scene of a grisly killing in 1975. The victim was Pier Paolo Pasolini, a one-time schoolteacher, who went on to become one of Italy's most important public intellectuals. Pasolini was many things to many people—poet, translator, staunch advocate for his native Friulian dialect, semiotic theorist, journalist, social critic, political activist, novelist, and, ultimately, a filmmaker. Pasolini's corpse had been badly mutilated and was hardly recognizable. His skull had been crushed with a wooden plank and, according to the coroner's report, he had been kicked repeatedly in the scrotum with such vehemence that his groin area was black and grotesquely distended. Pasolini's attackers then drove over his body multiple times with his own Alpha Romeo GT. A seventeen-year-old hustler and convicted felon named Giuseppe Pelosi (nicknamed "Pino la Rana," or "Joey the Frog") was charged with the murder and initially confessed to the crime. Pelosi served nine years. He was released from prison in 1984, but he retracted his confession in 2005, claiming that he did not kill Pasolini, but had taken the fall because certain men with Sicilian accents had threatened to hurt his family.

From the outset of the investigation, police reports indicated that Pelosi's story—that Pasolini had picked him up for sex at the Stazione Termini and that their transaction had turned vi-

olent—was contradicted by the forensic evidence. Footprints in the sand pointed to several assailants. The physical evidence against Pelosi was also flimsy, and it was deemed unlikely that one scrawny teenager could have inflicted so much damage on Pasolini, who, though in his fifties, was a wiry man of strong, athletic build. On the basis of Pelosi's retraction, Roman authorities reopened the investigation briefly, but the case was again closed for lack of new evidence.¹

Pasolini's friends and supporters have long argued that his murder was a political assassination. In the retraction of his confession Pelosi noted that the men who bludgeoned and killed Pasolini had taunted him as a "dirty Communist." Pasolini was in fact a committed, if unorthodox, member of the Italian Communist Party. He had also just completed the film *Salò, or 120 Days of Sodom*, which premiered in Paris three weeks after his death. Reels of the film had been stolen beforehand, however, in an apparent attempt at extortion, and so it is possible that the film's subject matter was known to the assailants.

Pasolini's *Salò* transposes the work of the Marquis de Sade's notorious novella to Mussolini's Fascist Republic of Salò, on Lake Garda, which had been created with the help of Nazi Germany after the Allied forces had successfully invaded Italy in 1943. *Salò* is a fierce indictment of Fascism. And it is almost impossible to watch, replete with acts of unimaginable cruelty. But Pasolini's enemies did not need a scatological, anti-Fascist film to instigate their blood-lust. Although a gentle, abstemious man by temperament, Pasolini was a lightning rod for scandal, inclined to speak his mind forcefully and with conviction. Such outspokenness over a lifetime made him a target. Although never convicted, Pasolini was indicted or prosecuted some thirty-three times on charges ranging from defamation to sexual predation to petty theft. He was an open (yet conflicted) homosexual with a predilection for liaisons with rough teenage boys. (Hence, it is thought, the use of Joey the Frog as a decoy in his murder.) He favored the abolition of marriage and, at the same time,

paradoxically, the end of abortion. If not a believer *per se*, spiritually and aesthetically he was Roman Catholic, yet politically a Communist, who was nonetheless infatuated with the bourgeois psychology of Freud. Pasolini thought the single worst aspect of capitalism and consumerism was the invention of television, yet was himself a filmmaker. He was, in short, a man of contradictions and controversy. As one critic aptly describes him, “If Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, Camille Paglia, Madonna, Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee, Michael Moore, and Noam Chomsky were rolled up into a single person, one might begin to get some idea of the impact Pasolini had on Italian society.”²

KAMPALA / DAR ES SALAAM, 1969

FIVE YEARS before his death, Pasolini spent several weeks shooting notes for a film version of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* to be set in modern Africa. The result is the brilliant, but little known and poorly understood work *Appunti per un’ Orestide africana* (“Notes for an African *Oresteia*”), which was initially conceived for Italian television and released as a film in 1970 (first screened in public in 1973). In his visual notes on the trilogy Pasolini explores the many analogies he sees between the Athens of Aeschylus’ time and the situation of post-colonial Africa in the late nineteen-sixties. His camera documents the life and landscape of the eastern regions of sub-Saharan Africa (Tanzania and Uganda mostly) as he auditions the continent for a non-professional cast and location for his would-be production.

In these *Appunti*, as in all his work, Pasolini shows himself to be the Caravaggio of film: He is fascinated with the faces and physiques of the poor and downtrodden, and his elevation of marginalized persons to mythic, iconic status serves to ennoble their plight. An actual film was never made, and clearly that was never his intention. The notes are the thing. “Here I am with the camera, reflected in the plate glass window of a shop in an African city,” Pasolini says in the film’s

opening shot, where we see a self-reflection of the director in his signature sunglasses as the camera pulls back to capture cars, shops, people in the street, the images of which are still refracted through the window. It is as if Pasolini is suggesting that we are looking through a glass darkly. "I've obviously come here to film, but to film what? Not a documentary, and not a feature picture. I've come to shoot some notes for a film, the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, to be shot in the Africa of today, the modern Africa."³

The ensuing footage is accompanied by Pasolini's own running commentary, voiced-over passages from the text of Aeschylus, and, midway through the film, interviews with African students at the University of Rome about the conceptual viability of his project. Agamemnon is tentatively cast as a proud but aging Maasai warrior; Clytemnestra as an imposing medicine woman from Uganda; Orestes as a European-clad university student in Dar es Salaam; the Erinyes—in non-human guise—now as giant, forbidding trees, now as a wounded lioness from the bush. Chorus members are drawn from the ranks of the many farmers, tailors, beggars, barbers, old men, women and children that populate the open-air markets of any typical African town. Modern Kampala represents Athens. The university campus and courthouse in Dar es Salaam—still emblazoned with the colonial slogan "For God and Country"—serves as the hypothetical setting for Orestes' trial. None of this, however, is sentimental; nor does it romanticize African "primitivism." In fact, Pasolini—a product and proponent of the Neorealist movement in Italian cinema—pulls out all the stops: To convey the fall of Troy, for example, he splices in graphic newsreel footage of Nigeria's brutal, "Western-style" Biafran War. A particularly haunting scene depicting the *Oresteia*'s apocalyptic vision of Cassandra, in which the Trojan captive foresees Agamemnon's murder, utilizes footage of the summary execution by firing squad of a profusely sweating, quivering, blindfolded soldier. It is an excruciatingly long scene, with the camera panning out now and again to show an officer

reading the terms of the sentence and the nervous, reluctant riflemen awaiting their orders. “For this,” Pasolini says, “I have no words.” Instead, we hear jazz master Gato Barbieri, who composed the film’s ethereal score, wailing and panting on his saxophone over frenetic arpeggios on the double bass, played by Marcello Melio, and explosive, stratospheric riffs from drummer Donald Moye. Elsewhere we see mothers and wives mourning by the sides of open graves, and video clips of wounded and dead soldiers littering the jungle floor. Aeschylus’ maxim *páthei máthos* (“through suffering comes wisdom”; *Agamemnon* 177) is an abiding theme throughout.

ATHENS, 458 BCE

PASOLINI’S PURPOSE in these visual tropes and analogies is to universalize the significance of the *Oresteia* for the human condition, and to underscore the complexities and challenges of nation building, and of human progress generally, in the language of myth. In this ambitious venture he was inspired by the work of maverick British Classicist, George Derwent Thomson (1903–1987). In 1959, prior to conceiving his *Notes*, Pasolini set himself to translate the *Agamemnon* for a staged production at Vittorio Gassman’s Teatro Popolare in Sicily. Pasolini’s enthusiasm for the task was keen, but his knowledge of ancient Greek was limited, so he relied heavily on what was then (and is arguably now still) the best edition of the *Oresteia* available—a two-volume Greek text with commentary, introduction, and English translation by Thomson, based on the work of the brilliant, but untimely deceased Walter Headlam, and published by Cambridge in 1938.

Thomson, himself a product of Cambridge (though never a student of Headlam’s), spent most of his career as Professor of Greek at the University of Birmingham until his death in 1987. Like Pasolini, he was a Marxist—long before Marxism became fashionable in the humanities—and was the first classicist to apply the methods of dialectical materialism systematically to the study of antiquity, which he

blends with a “Cambridge School” approach to ritual, drama, and myth. Thomson’s landmark book *Aeschylus and Athens* was published with some urgency in 1941 as a manifesto against the Fascist appropriation of classical antiquity and scholarship on the Continent. *Aeschylus and Athens* literally rose from the ashes of World War II, as the manuscript of the book was heroically saved by the publisher, Lawrence and Wishart, from the German air raids on London,⁴ and was later used, much to the author’s satisfaction, as a training manual for Left-leaning dramatic troupes in post-War Greece, Great Britain, and Italy.⁵ Indeed, the book was translated into Italian in 1949 and was a direct influence on Gassman and co-director Luciano Lucignani, as can be seen from an epistolary exchange that was printed in the program notes to their 1960 production of Pasolini’s translation.⁶

Thomson was drawn to Marxism, as to poetry, based on his experiences with pre-industrialized, pre-capitalist Irish peasants in the Blasket Islands, where, as a young man in his twenties, he became fluent in Irish Gaelic and was a life-long translator of Irish texts—notably, his friend and Blasket Island resident Maurice O’Sullivan’s classic memoir *Twenty Years-a-Growing*.⁷ At the University of Galway, his first academic position, Thomson—an Englishman born and bred in London—lectured on the Classics in impeccable Blaskets Irish and translated Greek and Latin works, including large swaths of Plato and Greek tragedy, even portions of Augustine’s *Confessions*, into Gaelic. A complete Irish translation of the *Odyssey*, for which illustrations by Gwen Raverat (Charles Darwin’s granddaughter) were planned, was somehow lost in the shuffle when Thomson moved back to Cambridge.⁸ Later in his career Thomson became a champion, too, of Greek peasants and modern Greek language, in which he was also fluent, going even so far in his devotion to the *Volkssprache* as to devise a method of teaching ancient Greek that integrated the modern vernacular.⁹ Thomson’s commitment to Marxist ideas was not just academic. He taught evening classes in Marxist dialectics to workers at the Austin auto-works plant

in Longbridge, and held workshops for members of the Indian Workers Association at his own home. He visited the Soviet Union with his new bride Katherine Stewart in 1935, China in the 1970s, and served on the Executive Council of the Communist Party of Great Britain for many years.

For all of Thomson's political activities, however, poetry was his first love. His own first book is a sensitive and compelling analysis of the meters of Greek Lyric (Cambridge, 1929). In *Marxism and Poetry* (1945) he speaks of his "electrifying" first-hand experience of the formularity and poetic qualities of everyday speech in Ireland. Thomson's comparison of this oral milieu to the world of Homeric poetry, as one prominent scholar notes, enlarges considerably on the observations of Milman Parry, and anticipates the effective use of discourse analysis and performance studies in recent Homeric scholarship.¹⁰ To some of his contemporaries Thomson's Marxism and his sharp poetic sensibilities seemed at odds. W. F. Jackson Knight observed this in a review of Thomson's prequel to *Aeschylus and Athens*, *Studies in Ancient Greek Society: The Prehistoric Aegean* (1949): "He can hardly help being forced sometimes into a sanely religious, or at any rate not materialistic, statement. His own precious, first-hand experience of a simple, but truly poetic, people in Ireland must have led him that way. Anyway, he has far too attractive a temperament, and too keen a sense of humour, for a materialist."¹¹

The influence of Thomson's work on Pasolini, at once poetic and political, has been noted in passing by others,¹² but the extent and nature of that influence, and the magnitude of Thomson's own achievement for that matter, have not been fully appreciated. The Marxist connections are clear enough: Pasolini needed to look no further than the first five pages of the introduction to Thomson's edition of the *Oresteia*—under the sub-heading "Aeschylus and Athens" (foreshadowing the development of this theme in his 1941 book of that name)—to find a kindred political spirit. A few examples will suffice to suggest the connection to Pasolini's thought:

When the Athenians returned to the smoking wilderness which was all the Persians had left behind them, they rebuilt the city and reconstructed the social order. To that task the plays of Aeschylus were a direct contribution. He wrote plays for the same purpose he had fought at Marathon and Salamis. His aim as an artist was to evoke and organise the collective energy requisite for the task of reconstruction.¹³

Similarly, in speaking of the historical transition in Greece from monarchy to landed aristocracy, Thomson writes:

Successive appropriations of the remainder of the land promoted a concentration of wealth at one pole of society. The community split into two classes, landowners and peasants, sharply divided in wealth, in power, and in culture.

Pointing to his polished weapons, the landed noble sang: "With these I plough, with these I reap, with these I tread my sweet wine from the grape, with these I make serfs call me lord" [citing Hybrias, *apud* Athen. 695]. Meanwhile the toiling serf was constrained to believe that "measure is best in all things." The proverbial doctrine of measure or restraint (μέτρον, κείρα), which does not appear in Homer, was developed under the landed aristocracy, to whose rule it lent an apparently external authority. The same idea underlies the early philosophy of Ionia. Anaximander taught that the encroachment of one element on another was an injustice to which a penalty was attached. The tendency of aristocratic thought was to divide. (3)

Or, finally, consider Thomson's dialectical account of the origin of the *páthei máthos* theme and Aeschylus' reworking of it, which clearly caught Pasolini's attention:

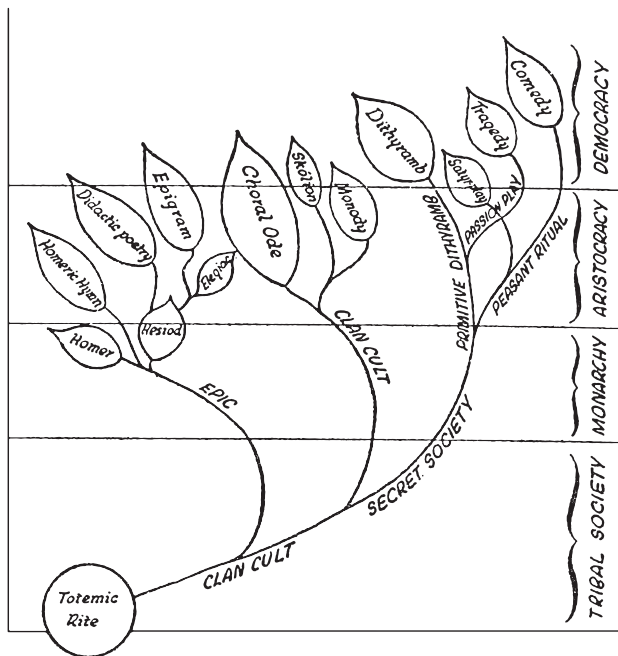
The tendency of democratic thought was to unite. When opposites combine, they cease to be opposites: the injustice lies in their separation . . . The old saying that "suffering teaches man his folly" had been merely a corollary to the doctrine of measure—a warning to the man who sought too much. Aeschylus reinterpreted it as the vital principle of human progress. One wrong provokes another until rival claims meet and merge in a new understanding. Wisdom is the outcome of conflict, and the attainment of wisdom is therefore an evolutionary process. (5)

In the *Oresteia* that evolutionary process culminates in the acquittal of Orestes. While at first glance the Areopagite verdict seems an irrational sanction of Athenian patriarchy (i.e., How can it be less worse for a son to kill his mother than for a wife to kill her husband?), which on one level it is, a deeper significance lies in the fact that it is more so, at least given the context of its time, a triumph of *nómos* over *phûsis*; of the claims of culture over nature; of the priority of an institution sanctioned by the State (marriage) over the biological ties of blood—in short, of collective self-determination over sheer necessity. Moreover, the verdict itself is the work of a human tribunal, “the first trial for bloodshed” (*Eumenides* 685), and although the reconciliation of the Furies is, in typical tragic form, the unilateral act of a *dea ex machina*—Athena, goddess of reason—it is an act not of *fiat*, but of persuasion. As Thomson translates it: “Let me persuade you,” Pallas says to the aggrieved Furies, “from this passionate grief . . . be not angry . . . Rather accept my honorable word . . . Be moved by my persuasion . . . If Persuasion’s holy majesty / The sweet enchantment of these lips divine, / Is aught to thee, why then, reside with me” (*Choephoroe* 798 ff.). What catches Pasolini’s particular attention in the *Oresteia*’s denouement is how the imagistic and thematic polarities that subsist in tension throughout Aeschylus’ trilogy (e.g., male-female, light-darkness, old order-new dispensation, justice-revenge, Olympian-chthonic, etc.) resolve themselves in a specifically *civic* reconciliation, namely the transformation of the Erinyes into Eumenides—of vengeful Furies, who enforce tribal/family loyalties and vendetta, into Kindly Ones who preside over prosperity and public beneficence. Pasolini’s visual emphasis on the material privation and “folk quality” of his African Chorus¹⁴ points to the hope for resolution to what can only be described as class conflict by the establishment of a new social order. That the footage and commentary devoted to the Chorus takes up the bulk of his film and is accompanied

throughout by Soviet work songs playing in the background underscores his particular angle.

In *Aeschylus and Athens* Thomson had included the following “stemma” that correlates the generic evolution of tragedy as an art form to the socio-political development of Athenian democracy—“democracy,” of course, in Thomson’s scheme of things being, *mutatis mutandis*, a cipher for a post-capitalist society.¹⁵

EVOLUTION OF GREEK POETRY



Pasolini transposed this model from Attica to Africa, seeing the transition of African nations from tribalism through colonialism to newly independent, autonomous democracies in precisely similar terms. “First of all,” he says in prefatory remarks before a small assembly of African students at the University of Rome,

I would like to tell you why I decided to make the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus in the Africa of today.

The profound, essential reason is this: I feel I can recognize some analogies between the situation of the *Oresteia* and the situation of Africa today, especially concerning the transformation of the Furies into Eumenides. In other words, I mean the tribal civilization seems to resemble archaic Greek civilization and Orestes' discovery of democracy, carrying it then into his country, which could be Argos in the tragedy and Africa in my film, is in a sense the discovery of democracy that Africa has also made in these last few years.¹⁶

Greek tragedy, and the *Oresteia* in particular, presented itself to Pasolini, under the spell of Thomson's evolutionary scheme, as the corresponding poetic vehicle to express this discovery. The defamiliarization involved in transposing the West's charter myth for the rule of law and the social contract to post-colonial Africa not only draws attention to the universality of those ideas,¹⁷ it also represents, as we shall see, an inverted masterstroke of the Myth-Ritual School's technique of tracing residue of archaic, even "primitive" forms of culture in Western "civilization," something Pasolini also encountered in Thomson: Africa, he implies, against all appearances to the contrary, could become the new standard bearer of human progress and civilization. A similar *Verfremdungseffekt* is seen in Pasolini's treatment of indigenous cultures in his feature film versions of Sophocles' *Oedipus* (1967) and Euripides' *Medea* (1969). In each instance Pasolini portrays the non-professional Chorus—"extras," really—as indigenous folk, capturing them on film carrying on with their everyday activities against a backdrop of costumed European actors playing the lead roles in plots about their own destruction. (The *Medea* stars Maria Callas, who, unforgivably on Pasolini's part, does not sing.) For Pasolini, Africa presented the ideal social conditions and political prospects to realize Aeschylus' synthesis of the past, present, and future, of the mythic and historical. In his poem "Frammento alla morte" (1961) Pasolini catalogues the disgust, self-loathing, ennui, and hopelessness he had experienced as a consumer in the

neo-capitalist West: "I had everything I wanted . . . I had sated myself," he writes, seeing in Africa the only option remaining—"Africa! Unica mia / alternativa."¹⁸ Indeed, Tanzania was chosen as a location for the film because, under Julius Nyerere, the new country's first president, it provided just the alternative, socialist experiment that Pasolini was seeking. In his choice of film, as opposed to the stage or print, as the artistic medium to explore the hopes and challenges of Africa's post-colonial reconstruction, Pasolini seems to have intuited Herbert Golder's apt remark that "If Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were alive today, they would be filmmakers." "Like film in its beginnings," Golder writes, "Greek drama was a whole new medium which arose rapidly, at a period of enormous cultural upheaval . . . to become the synesthetic myth-making medium of its day."¹⁹

CAMBRIDGE, ENGLAND, 1890-1935

"Im Anfang war die Tat." This line, from Goethe's *Faust* (Part I, 1237), stands alone on the dedication page, at the very head of Thomson's *Aeschylus and Athens*. "In the beginning was the Deed," of course, is Faust's diabolical parody of the Gospel of John's "In the beginning was the Word." Its significance for Thomson was two-fold: In addition to its overt associations with dialectical materialism—namely the debunking of idealism and metaphysics (Marx and Engels use the allusion several times in their works)—the phrase encapsulated for him the central premise of the Myth-Ritual or "Cambridge School" approach to the study of ancient Greek religion and poetry.

The Cambridge School is a curious development in the history of ideas. Spawned by revolutionary discoveries in biological and cultural evolution, by Darwin and E. B. Tylor respectively, a spate of paradigm-shifting works on ancient poetry and religion appeared in the course of some fifteen years from scholars associated with Cambridge University. James G. Frazer (a Classicist at King's College) published his

monumental *The Golden Bough* in installments from 1890–1915. Jane Harrison’s *Prolegomena to Greek Religion* (1903) and *Themis* (1912), in which was published Gilbert Murray’s “Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy,” were also seminal contributions, as was F. M. Cornford’s *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (1914). All were based, directly or indirectly, on ethnographic reports from missionaries in the field about the social and religious practices of primitive, pre-industrialized, pre-monetarized peoples in the colonized world. The impetus and precursor for all these works was Lewis Henry Morgan’s groundbreaking *Ancient Society* (1877), a detailed account—based on first-hand fieldwork—of kinship relations and property transfer among the Iroquois tribes in North America. The imaginative and learned scheme of cultural evolution presented by Bachofen in *Das Mutterrecht* (1861) was also enormously influential. Bachofen and Morgan in turn directly influenced Engels’ *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), and it is no accident that many purveyors of Myth-Ritual ideas were also sympathetic to the ideas of Marx.

Both Morgan and Bachofen were lawyers by profession. (Morgan later became a New York State Senator.) Bachofen, whom Morgan cites approvingly in several places, was particularly drawn to the trial scene in the *Eumenides*, which for him, when Athena declares her motherless parthenogenesis from the head of Zeus (*Eumenides* 737–747), marked a seismic shift from an archaic, matriarchal phase of human culture (“Das Mutterrecht”) toward classical patriarchy. In the course of tracing this transition Bachofen coined the terms “Dionysian” to describe an intervening phase, and “Apollonian” to characterize the ultimate progression, terms later employed (without acknowledgment) by Nietzsche in the *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) to describe contradictory, yet complementary impulses in Greek art and culture.

The central premise of the Cambridge School is that religious practices and behaviors precede the myths or stories that attempt to explain them, and that, over time, primitive

ritual practices become “secularized” or domesticated in other cultural forms like poetry, dance, and art. Yet the mythic accounts themselves, especially in their inconsistencies and variants, contain residue of more ancient beliefs that one can reconstruct with recourse to ethnographic, comparative data from contemporary peoples still living in the pre-modern world. As one scholar has put it, in its relation to ritual “myth . . . is like the sound in a film, or the narration of a pantomime.”²⁰

Thomson became ensconced in this intellectual movement by virtue of the Cambridge School’s rootedness in classical studies, and in that he himself had been a student and later Fellow at King’s. It was also, as it were, in the family: Thomson’s mother-in-law, Jessie Stewart, who contributed the line drawings to *Aeschylus and Athens*, knew Jane Harrison well. She was Harrison’s student and protégé and later edited a volume of her mentor’s letters for which Thomson wrote the introduction. While Thomson himself never met Harrison, on the shelves at her home in Kent, England, Thomson’s daughter, Margaret Alexiou, emerita Professor of Classics from Harvard, showed me a gilt-bound, inscribed copy of Harrison’s *Prolegomena*, dated 1922, which George received as a prize for Latin Prose Composition while a pupil at Dulwich College in London. There is also in the Birmingham City Library Archives an extensive and fiery exchange of unpublished letters between Thomson and Cornford, himself a self-described “democratic socialist,”²¹ but of the Fabian sort, in which the two friends debate the premises of the Cambridge School and the proper relationship of politics to scholarship. “FMC” comments on Thomson’s epigraph to the recently released *Aeschylus and Athens*:

I have just been reading Russell’s Essay on the origins of fascism in *Let the People Think* (which is full of wit). His view that a philosophy, like Fichte’s absurd stuff, only appears fully in practical life as Nazism *about a hundred years later* raises a point that has always puzzled me about the time relations of abstract speculation

and practice. I think you rather tend to assume that philosophy always reflects *contemporary* happenings. But is this so? Sometimes, as in the cases Russell mentions, it seems prophetic, formulating something in the soul of a people which may emerge into action only much later, when circumstances offer it an outlet. But I have also wondered whether it is not sometimes a reflection on the plane of conscious thought of what had taken place in action long before unconsciously.

‘In the beginning was the Word’; ‘In the beginning was the Deed’—are both these true—sometimes one, sometimes the other? And if so, *when* is *which* true? I don’t see how to get further with this. Is thought prophetic at the rise of a culture or phase of civilization, and retrospective in the decline?²²

Elsewhere Cornford lodges a more specific complaint against *Aeschylus and Athens* from the political side:

I see that your book [*Aeschylus and Athens*] is offered at half-price to members of a Marxian society, as ‘the Marxian interpretation of Aeschylus’. This makes me uncomfortable. These people know and care nothing about Aeschylus. They will accept as gospel all that you say and use your book as a source of political propaganda, on your authority as a scholar . . . I have no objection to a Marxian interpretation of Aeschylus or Plato or of anyone else, if that means a calm, dispassionate, objective attempt to relate the literature of an age to the social conditions, instead of treating it (as is generally done) as an inexplicable phenomenon which might as well have existed at any other time or place. The value of your work lies in this attempt and there is a lot of illumination to come from that quarter. But when I come across violent denunciations and demonstrable distortions of the phenomena you profess to explain, I begin to think that you are using the ancients as a stick to beat your political opponents with . . .²³

In his unflinching commitment to Marxism, Thomson was, in fact, what Isaiah Berlin would have characterized along Archilochean lines as an intellectual hedgehog, not a fox. Hedgehogs are thinkers with a penchant for “a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance.”²⁴ Pasolini, on the other hand, is a textbook example of a fox, his thought,

though influenced by the likes of hedgehogs like Thomson, “scattered and diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves.”²⁵ Symptomatic of their respective tendencies, Thomson was (predictably) fond of schematic drawings; Pasolini, as we have seen, of more impressionistic statements. Here, then, preliminary to an analysis of two scenes in Pasolini’s African Oresteia that bear the hallmarks of Myth-Ritualism gleaned from Thomson, is a crisp visual distillation of the Cambridge School’s central tenets, in which Thomson maps Aristotle’s account of the parts of tragedy onto early Greek and other initiatory practices collected from comparative evidence.²⁶

RITUAL PATTERN OF GREEK TRAGEDY

PRIMITIVE INITIATION	GREEK INITIATION	TRAGEDY
Departure as child	<i>pompé</i>	<i>párodos</i>
Death and resurrection	<i>agón</i> <i>sparagmós</i>	<i>peripéteia</i> <i>kommós</i>
Revelation of sacred objects	<i>anakálypsis</i>	<i>anagnórisis</i>
Catechism	<i>ainígmata</i> <i>dokimasia</i>	<i>stichomythia</i>
Return as adult	<i>kômos</i>	<i>éxodos</i>

Several instances in his *Notes* suggest that Pasolini was aware of and in sympathy with this notion that artistic form is rooted in ritualistic behavior, but the idea comes clean to the surface toward the end of the film, where Pasolini reflects on how “the new Africa, the Africa of the future” on which he has pinned his hopes must remain, in order to flourish, a “synthesis of the modern, free Africa with the ancient, ancestral Africa.”²⁷ Eager to represent the transformation of the Erinyes into Eumenides in a way that captures

this synthesis, Pasolini relates a chance encounter he had on the road with the Wagogo tribe in Tanzania, where he films a ritual dance performed by young men dressed unceremoniously in shorts and tank tops. The dance is vigorous, accompanied by a lively call-and-response style of singing and intoxicating polyrhythms on what sound like steel drums. As the frenetic music and dance ensue, broad smiles on the performers' faces, clapping in the background, Pasolini comments:

Wandering with my camera along the roads of Tanzania and Uganda . . . I made this encounter, in this deserted place in the savanna. We're with the Wagogo tribe, one of the main tribes that make up the nation of Tanzania, and here I film this dance. The dance, in ancient times—ancient after a manner of speaking, that is, up until a few years ago—was virtually a rite, with its meanings precise and religious, perhaps cosmogonic. Now, instead, as you can see, the Wagogo people are in the same place where once they did these things seriously, now repeat them, but repeat them gaily, to amuse themselves, draining their gestures of their ancient, sacred meaning, and doing it as if out of sheer merriment. Here is a metaphor of the kind that could also be the transformation of the Furies into the Eumenides.

As the music and dancing continue on screen in the foreground, Pasolini reads from the text of Aeschylus Athena's moving appeal to assuage the Furies' outrage over Orestes' acquittal—what they perceive as a violation of their ancient, ancestral privilege. "I understand your wrath." Athena begins. "You are older than I.

But, if your experience is greater,
God has given to my experience the gift of reason.
Go, go, again, into another land:
You will regret this. I know. The days
Of the future will give greatness to my people.
And if you are here, in the glorious center
Of this city, you will see processions
Of men and women bringing you offerings

Such as no other people of the world before.²⁸

Aeschylus' Furies, of course, accept Athena's offer, and, as Pasolini puts it, which is revealing of his understanding of the political implications of the Ritualist approach he encountered in Thomson, they "agree to coexist with her, the goddess of reason—they the goddesses of irrationality—in the new world, in the new, free, independent, democratic world."²⁹

In a second vignette that immediately follows the Wagogo dance, Pasolini takes his cue from Athena's mention of processions and offerings, and doubtless, too, with an eye to evoking the torch-lit polis procession with which the *Oresteia* concludes, and films a wedding celebration in the city of Dodomo. "These headdresses, this way of walking, these dancing motions, these gestures, these face tattoos," Pasolini muses, "are all signs of an ancient, magic world." "But this magical world is presented here, as you see, in the form of tradition, an ancient, indigenous spirit that will not allow itself to be lost."³⁰ The scene then cuts to the inner courtyard of the house where an even more secularized party is going on, "a party very similar to any European party of ours" where couples dance to contemporary Afro-pop played on Fender Stratocasters and electric bass guitars. "But even here, in this modern attitude and this modern music," Pasolini remarks, "you can feel the residue of that ancient spirit I've been talking about, transformed, as you can see, into moments of happiness, of festivity and grace, and lightheartedness—these are traits very typical of the African spirit."³¹

HARLEM, 1969

GIVEN THE richness of the African tradition, it is somewhat surprising that in searching for the musical idiom for his *Oresteia*, Pasolini found it not in Africa itself, but in Harlem, in African American jazz. About halfway through his *Notes*, Pasolini announces "a sudden idea," one intended to "rip apart the style without style which is the style of documentaries and of notes"³² and to have his imaginary *Oresteia*

sung rather than acted. But why African-American jazz? “It would be well to clarify,” Pasolini explains, invoking indirectly the Black Power movement (which he actually calls “the African Renaissance”—*la rinascita africana*—anticipating by twenty-five years former South African president Thabo Mbeki’s slogan for the continent’s revival in the twenty-first century), “that twenty million black members of the American sub-proletariat are the leaders of any revolutionary movement in the Third World.”³³ The camera, meanwhile, surveys an intimate, empty stage. Barbieri’s sax is in its stand, the upright bass on its side, the drum kit at rest. The location for the pending performance is identified cryptically as “a semi-underground studio in an old Western city” (probably Rome) and, without fanfare, three musicians take their places—Barbieri on sax, Melio on bass and Moye on drums. The instrumentalists are joined by two singers and together the ensemble launches into a twenty-minute setting of Cassandra’s verbal exchange with the Chorus from *Agamemnon*.

The vocalists in this dialogue are Archie Savage and Yvonne Murray. Savage was one of many black expatriate artists living and working abroad who made a name for himself in the 1950s and 60s, appearing in Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*, for example, and in minor roles in other Italian and American films, and on Broadway as a dancer. Murray, also African American, is more enigmatic, as a subsequent career as an actress or performer never materialized. The one thing that can be said about her with confidence is that she cannot sing. When she sings Aeschylus’s beautiful lines comparing Cassandra to a nightingale, one can only wince and cringe. In fact, Savage and Murray’s performance is almost as hard to watch as *Salò*, and this vocal interlude in Barbieri’s otherwise inspired score is not a good indicator of his talents, which earned him a Grammy two years later for his soundtrack to Bertolucci’s *Last Tango in Paris*. But Pasolini’s choice of Harlem and American jazz as a soundtrack to his film, as his preface to the performance suggests, was not primarily aesthetic, but political and ideological. The American

Civil Rights Movement provides the subtext here and, while the degree to which Pasolini was actively aware of it is uncertain, Aeschylus played a significant, if surprising, role in that drama as well.

On April 4, 1968, the day the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot dead in Memphis, Tennessee, Robert F. Kennedy, Senator from New York and presidential hopeful, was campaigning in Indianapolis. RFK was scheduled to address a mostly black audience that evening that had not heard of MLK's assassination earlier in the day. Kennedy announced the shocking news, and, with a view to consoling the crowd, invoked the author of the *Oresteia*: "My favorite poem," Kennedy intoned, his voice clarion, but also somewhat halting, choked with grief, "my—my favorite poet was Aeschylus. And he once wrote: Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget / Falls drop by drop upon the heart, / Until, in our own despair, / Against our will, / Comes wisdom / Through the awful grace of God."

RFK had his passage of Aeschylus by heart. He got it, not from the text directly, but from a collection of essays on ancient Greek thought and literature that was popular at the time, Edith Hamilton's *The Greek Way*, originally published in 1930 and still in print today. Kennedy kept his tattered, heavily annotated copy of the book with him at all times. It was a gift from his sister-in-law Jackie. Hamilton's vision of the ancient Greeks' capacity to create beauty from ashes and to find wisdom and strength in suffering was a source of solace to him in the years after his brother John's assassination. That RFK misquotes Hamilton's translation (substituting the word "despair" for what should read "despite")—one can see it all on YouTube—only adds to the authenticity and emotional poignancy of the moment, and underscores the aptness of *Agamemnon's* choral ode as an expression of collective despair during a civic crisis. Kennedy left his audience that evening in Indianapolis with this exhortation: "Let's dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life

of this world. Let us dedicate ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our country and for our people.” Just four short months later, RFK was himself gunned down.

Pasolini does not mention RFK or MLK by name in his film, but they are palpably there, mute characters in the background. The fact that Pasolini quotes from the very same choral ode of *Agamemnon* to express the prayerful longings of his African folk chorus that Kennedy uses to eulogize MLK in Indiana suggests we are meant to hear an echo of some kind.³⁴ Furthermore, not long before Pasolini’s trip to Africa, on June 6, 1966, RFK delivered a remarkable speech at the University of Cape Town where he speaks in grand terms about US aspirations for Africa. Here are a few excerpts:

At the heart of . . . western freedom and democracy is the belief that the individual man, the child of God, is the touchstone of value, and all society, all groups, and states, exist for that person’s benefit. Therefore the enlargement of liberty for individual human beings must be the supreme goal and the abiding practice of any western society.

RFK points to hallmarks of democracy: freedom of speech and full citizen participation in government, “not just to those of a particular race; but to all of the people . . . These are the sacred rights of western society,” he insists. “These were the essential differences between us and Nazi Germany as they were between Athens and Persia . . . They are the essences of our differences with communism today. I am unalterably opposed to communism,” he continues,

because it exalts the state over the individual and over the family, and because its system contains a lack of freedom of speech, of protest, of religion, and of the press, which is characteristic of a totalitarian regime. The way of opposition to communism, however, is not to imitate its dictatorship, but to enlarge individual human freedom. There are those in every land who would label as “communist” every threat to their privilege. But may I say to you, as I have seen on my travels in all sections of the world, reform is not

communism.

“And the denial of freedom,” Kennedy adds, with a barely veiled reference to Apartheid, “in whatever name, only strengthens the very communism it claims to oppose.” RFK goes on to cite as a comparandum “Negro Americans” and their struggles for equity in Harlem, Watts, and South-side Chicago; he invokes MLK by name and touts the civil rights leader’s Nobel Peace Prize as evidence of the international community’s sanction of racial equality. He also reminds his largely white South African audience of the vast politico-economic potential of the rest of (black) sub-Saharan Africa:

Just to the North of here are lands of challenge and of opportunity—rich in natural resources, land and minerals and people. Yet they are also lands confronted by the greatest odds—overwhelming ignorance, internal tensions and strife, and great obstacles of climate and geography. Many of these nations, as colonies, were oppressed and were exploited. Yet they have not estranged themselves from the broad traditions of the West; they are hoping and they are gambling their progress and their stability on the chance that we will meet our responsibilities to them, to help them overcome their poverty.

Kennedy rounds off his Cape Town speech as it began, with an allusion to a great battle fought by Athens, this one not against a barbarian invader, but against her fellow Greeks: “‘If Athens shall appear great to you,’ said Pericles, ‘consider then that her glories were purchased by valiant men, and by men who learned their duty.’ That is the source of all greatness in all societies, and it is the key to progress in our own time.” That Thucydides’ Funeral Oration of Pericles, from which RFK’s passage here is taken (composed during the first year of the Peloponnesian War), was also contained within the covers of *The Greek Way* will come as no surprise. But Africa in the 60s and 70s was indeed a battleground of sorts, and not only for curtailing the spread of Communism and enlarging freedom and prosperity on the “dark continent.” It was also a battleground for the hearts and minds of African-Americans at home, to whom

Kennedy's remarks are also pitched. These were, after all, the decades of Malcolm X's African sojourns and, later, Muhammed Ali's "Rumble in the Jungle" with George Foreman, in Kinshasa, in 1974.

Pasolini was certainly aware of what was at stake in Africa, though he naturally took a different view from Kennedy's on the solution to her challenges. Indeed, at the very beginning of his film he calls attention to the same competing political interests that RFK describes—in Tanzania: "For the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus," he remarks, "I have chosen an African nation that seems typical to me, a socialist country, with pro-Chinese tendencies." His camera moves from the bookshop window of the new University of Dar es Salaam, adorned, as we see later in the film, with a plaque dedicating the structure that reads "This Building Was Built with a Grant from the People and Government of the People's Republic of China," to focus in on smiling street vendors sitting in front of the window selling pamphlets and trinkets from Communist China stamped with images of Mao. "But the choice is not yet final," Pasolini continues, "because along with the Chinese attraction, there is another no less fascinating attraction"—the camera zooms in now on a sign indicating the headquarters of The African American Institute—"that of America, or rather neo-capitalism." (Camera shots now pan out onto new refrigerators and appliances for sale in an adjacent store window.) Tanzania's experiment with socialism, we know now, was unsuccessful. Experiments with democracy in various forms, on the other hand, continue across the continent. As Kennedy put it, the most promising African nations—most as poor and unstable as ever—have "not yet estranged themselves from the broad traditions of the west."

ZOMBA, 2011

IN AUGUST 2010 and in the first months of 2011, I followed in Pasolini's footsteps to do some "fieldwork" in the region where he shot his film. I went to Malawi, a sliver of a country

just south of Tanzania, because, uniquely to the region, it has a Classics Department. I taught a seminar on the *Oresteia* for the Department of Classics at Chancellor College, the flagship of the University of Malawi, in Zomba, the old colonial capital. My purpose was to see whether Pasolini's Aeschylean vision for Africa still rang true one generation on.

Malawi is a poor country populated by some of the most handsome, dignified human beings you will ever meet—persons with English names like Praise, Blessings, Prosper, Memory, Happy, Precious (a man's name—my cook), Innocent (my taxi driver), Lancelot, and Prince Charles. When I asked this last young man—an IT specialist from Lilongwe—whether I should call him simply “Charles,” he responded, politely puzzled and momentarily nonplussed, that “Prince Charles” was in fact his name and that's what everyone called him.

The introduction of Classics to Malawi and the subsequent history of the Department are topics that have been covered admirably by others. Caroline Alexander, for example, a Columbia PhD in Classics, but better known perhaps as the author of the best-selling book *The Endurance* (about Ernest Shackleton's expedition to the South Pole) and, recently, *The War That Killed Achilles*, published a fascinating piece about her experiences as a Lecturer at Chancellor College in *The New Yorker* in 1991.³⁵ It was Alexander who founded the Department at Chancellor in 1985. But the story does not begin there. In 1979, the *pater patriae* of the independent nation of Malawi, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda (Malawi was freed from British rule under Banda's leadership in 1964), invited Professor R. M. Ogilvie, a formidable Latinist noted for his work on Livy and Roman religion, to visit the country and make recommendations as to the establishment of Classics as a field of study at Chancellor. The choice of a distinguished Latin scholar from St. Andrews in Scotland was logical enough, given Malawi's (and formerly Nyasaland colony's) strong ties with Scottish Presbyterian missionaries, beginning with Livingstone. The fact that Scotland was also where Banda had earned his medical degree

(Edinburgh) played a large role as well. (Banda had previously been enrolled as a non-traditional undergraduate in the US, first at Indiana, Bloomington, where he was a student of/resource for folklorist Stith Thompson, and later at The University of Chicago, where he advised on the Chewa language for linguist Edward Sapir and where he eventually earned his BPhil in History in 1931.)

By 1979 Banda had devolved from being a freedom fighter and nationalist hero to running the country as a dictator, and so, since he was also a Classics enthusiast, Ogilvie's recommendations were implemented and Classics has been taught continuously in Malawi since that time.³⁶ Banda also founded an elite boarding high school in the territory of his home village called, after him, Kamuzu Academy, which I also visited. Dubbed the "Eton of the Bush," students at KA these days, most of them black Africans from wealthy families, still wear a uniform of twill shorts, sweaters, and boater hats and take five years of Latin, four of Greek.³⁷

I screened Pasolini's film twice in Zomba, first to a large general audience of College faculty and students, and then again to my *Oresteia* seminar, which consisted of hand-picked students from the Department. All twelve undergraduate participants wrote impressive essays on Pasolini's *Notes vis-à-vis Aeschylus'* original (which we read in Meineck's translation using books donated by the publisher), but two students made observations I thought were particularly insightful. Here are excerpts—field notes, as it were, from my research.

The first selection is by Bernard Mkonkha, a tall, lanky, serene young man with a square jaw and enormous hands who looked to me as if he was in his late twenties. He lived with a few other students in a thatched hut in Chikanda village and walked about five miles each way to and from campus for classes. Bernard hoped to be ordained someday as an Anglican priest and had some Greek under his belt already from earlier training in theological studies. (In addition to some New Testament, he had previously read the *Bacchae* in Greek.)

The theme of stifling justice that predominates in the *Oresteia*, especially in *Agamemnon* and highlighted by Pasolini in his African *Oresteia*, is of paramount importance because by the time the film was shot many African countries had just attained their independence and the peoples' expectation was that they would be led justly. That, however, was not to be because the African leaders who took over from the colonial masters did not rule justly. They used to muffle any voice of protest or dissenting views instead of listening. In Malawi, Dr. Banda was such a one. An example in the *Oresteia* of someone afraid to express himself is found when the watchman in Argos was musing to himself on the rooftop. In his words he indicated that there were other things that he would like to speak out [viz., his knowledge of Clytemnestra's plot to kill Agamemnon], but for fear of reprisals he decided to remain quiet, since a great ox was said to stand upon his tongue, meaning that something was preventing him from saying everything that he knew.

It is worth pointing out that Mkonkha's eloquent disquisition here on Aeschylus' night watchman takes on added nuance when one realizes that, for Malawians, the night watchman is no mere character in a mythological drama, but a familiar, ubiquitous fixture in contemporary African society.

This second selection features the work of a splendid young woman named Mildred Chirwa, a fastidious dresser with a bashful outward demeanor that concealed what turned out to be deep thoughtfulness and sophistication within. She observes the following:

A central theme of the *Oresteia* is that justice should be preferred, at all costs, to revenge. Victims of civil war in African societies long for a day when all the injustices inflicted upon them will come to a total halt. Justice overrules revenge, since, as a solution, revenge worsens matters by giving back evil for evil. This in the long run causes immense human suffering. Ethnicity, tribalism, nepotism, corruption, among other things, only benefit a few individuals, just like the woman-avenging Trojan War benefitted Menelaus at the expense of thousands of old and young lives alike. Both the Pasolini film and the *Oresteia* emphasize the need for separating private interests from public interests on the part of African leaders.

From my time in Malawi, I, too, like these students, have come to agree with Pasolini that the *Oresteia* focuses on issues still of great urgency for African nations today—the subservience of private interests to the public good; the “transubstantiation” and thus preservation of traditional practices in the midst of inevitable cultural change; the transparent administration of justice in society; the importance of persuasion in public discourse; and especially the point, drawn ultimately from Thomson, that Aeschylus’ work articulates a positive historical and conceptual transition from the summary justice of blood-feud to the rule of law in a democratic city-state. Viewed in light of the recent human catastrophes in Rwanda, Sudan, Kenya, Nigeria, Mali and elsewhere, and failed states like Zimbabwe, Somalia, and Congo, Pasolini’s Aeschylean programme seems as relevant today as it was visionary in 1970, when many African nations were freshly independent from colonial rule. No one who has read even one chapter in *The Fate of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence*, Martin Meredith’s disheartening account from 2006 of the continent’s post-colonial descent into mayhem, can fail to see the importance of these lessons.

CAIRO, 2012

ON JANUARY 25, 2011 thousands of Egyptian protestors poured into Tahrir Square. The rest is now history—history that Egyptians themselves are still living with, and a situation, especially given the most recent developments, that is far from settled. I was in Malawi when the events of the Arab Spring and the Revolution of January 25 (as the Egyptians call it) were unfolding. I watched it all transpire on Press TV, an Iranian cable network that was one of only two channels I could get via satellite in the College guesthouse, the other being a Pentecostal station from South Africa where a heavily perspiring pastor performed ecstatic “healings,” pulling chicken gizzards from supposed cancer patients and waving them in the air.

Egyptians consider themselves more Arab than African, but a core group of Malawian students and faculty activists at Chancellor took the developments of Tahrir Square to heart and made the movement their own. I was inadvertently caught up in the fray and saw first-hand the transformation of a social order.

On the evening of February 15, 2011, I walked down to my campus office at seven p.m. (about ten minutes away from where I was staying) to check email and do some work as usual. In the Great Hall—dedicated, as it happens, by Banda with an inscription from Horace’s *Odes* (*exegi monumentum aere perennius*; 3.30)—there was a rowdy meeting going on. I peered inside and saw that the place was teeming with about five hundred or so students, some making speeches into a microphone and others blowing vuvuzelas. Others were running up and down the aisles waving branches. At first I thought it was an evangelical rally (there are a lot of those held in the Great Hall), but it looked and sounded to me rather like a student union meeting or something. Thinking nothing of it, I walked down to my office and got to work. After about twenty minutes I heard a loud ruckus in the exterior, colonnaded corridor outside my office: All those students in the Hall were now marching through the halls of the College chanting slogans and banging very hard—some kicking—on my door! I was the only one around, and they could tell I was in my office because they could see the light on through my transom window. (The students, I decided upon reflection later, were not singling me out—I just happened to be the only professor in my office at that time.) Because there were so many students, this fracas went on for quite a while, back and forth down the corridor. Some banged on the door so hard I could see it buckle and shake from the inside. Fortunately, I had locked myself in, as I always did at night.

As soon as they had passed by for good, I made a clandestine escape (with my laptop tucked tightly under my arm), only to be caught up in the middle of the protesters’ road

blockade on my walk home. The sun sets in sub-Saharan Africa at sixish, so by seven it is completely dark, especially so in the corridors of Chancellor College where none of the exterior lights work. Once the riot moved to the road, students wouldn't let cars pass by. They threw rocks. They set bonfires in the street, smashed the Principal's windscreen (he was not in the vehicle at the time), and overturned a four-door sedan right in the middle of campus (ironically, a student's car). Thankfully, no one accosted me as I made my way home through the throng, but I was unsure enough about my safety not to risk taking pictures at the time, which would have been easily noticeable because of the flash. Only about fifty or so ringleaders were being really aggressive and destructive. Others were just milling about and walking along. But, even so, you could sense a mob mentality. I tried hard to give them the benefit of the doubt at first—that it was just general student rowdiness and some sort of healthy protest—but I could see it was spiraling out of control.

The official cause for the protest, as I heard the next day from some of the students involved (also reported in the press), was that the National Bank of Malawi had delayed by two weeks payment of loans and of a small government allowance to students because of some bureaucratic red tape. This kind of thing is typical of African (in)efficiencies, but it was a state of affairs that was completely out of the College's hands in this instance. At first, this didn't seem to me to justify such a violent strike on this scale directed against the College, since the College itself wasn't at fault. Why not hit the Bank of Malawi? But it came to light soon afterwards that a Chancellor College professor/political analyst, Blessings Chinsinga, who writes a column in the local *Nation* newspaper, had the day before been taken to police headquarters for questioning about the content of his courses, the charge being that he had incited students to follow Egypt's lead and rise up against the gross mismanagement of Malawian affairs by then President Bingu wa Mutharika. Chinsinga was released without charge, but

was subsequently fired from ChanCo, an event that prompted, in addition to the disorganized student riot that I got caught up in, a more formal (but equally rowdy) sit-in and protest march by Lecturers a few days later in support of academic freedom.

The morning after the student uprising, the police—in riot gear and toting machine guns and tear gas—came down to campus to put a damper on things. Nonetheless, various protest marches processed through Zomba-town under police escort, and over the following days, weeks, and months riots erupted all over the country. The government crackdown was harsh: A student protest leader, Robert Chasowa, was thrown from a window to his death on the campus of the Polytechnic Institute in Blantyre. Offices of opposition groups in Lilongwe were firebombed after Mutharika threatened in the media to “smoke out” his opponents. Needless to say, classes at Chancellor were cancelled indefinitely and the campus shut down. However, because my time in the country was limited, I was keen to exercise some academic freedom of my own and held classes anyhow—at my guesthouse—and I was very gratified that all my students came to meet as usual in spite of the protests and sit-ins (though I do admit to bribing them with cookies, tea, and Fanta). As we discussed Clytemnestra’s specious arguments to get Agamemnon to



tread upon the tapestries and the Chorus' impending dread for the outcome, it dawned on me just how unique an experience I was having—to be reading the *Oresteia* under such circumstances. This was no mere academic exercise.

While the vehemence of the protests is highly atypical of peaceful, friendly, law-abiding Malawians, this particular series of events was clearly an instance of what happens when the proverbial ox stands upon one's tongue: Things had built up to a breaking point. Various position papers issued by opposition groups after the ChanCo riot faulted Malawi's "neo-patrimonialistic paradigm" under which the country had been suffering since independence. Although Banda abdicated willingly and relinquished power peacefully in the free democratic elections of 1993 (he died in 1997), "a litany of woes, ranging from muzzling the media, passing oppressive laws that violate the very spirit of the Constitution, shrinkage of political space for alternate views, inappropriate economic policies leading to acute foreign currency and fuel shortages, exacerbating economic woes through wanton profligacy and reckless expenditure" had taken its toll and came to a head in the ChanCo protests.

In a stroke of impossible luck, or, some might argue, Providence, Mutharika, the inheritor and exacerbator of the foregoing "litany of woes," died in office in April 2012 of a heart attack. Vice President Joyce Banda (no relation to Kamuzu), succeeded him, becoming thereby Malawi's first female head of state, and only the second woman, after Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia in 2006, to become the President of an African nation. Things have since deescalated from crisis level and the University is again open for classes, but many challenges remain.

In March 2012, I journeyed to the source—to Egypt—to give a talk in Cairo on Pasolini's *Oresteia* and my then recent experiences in Malawi. The conference, entitled "Drama and Democracy from Ancient Times till the Present Day," was convened by noted Egyptian playwright and classicist Ahmed Etman and organized by Professors Ali Abdel Tawab and Adel

El-Nahas, assisted by a gaggle of Classics graduate students from Cairo University. I screened clips from Pasolini's film and spoke about the influence of the Egyptian Revolution on Malawian affairs. On a free afternoon, at my request, my handler on the ground—let's call him Mohammed, but that also happened to be his real name—whisked me through Tahrir Square on foot. He was extremely nervous about this outing, me being a Westerner, and literally pushed me along, though I managed to take it all in. There were a few makeshift tents strewn about and what seemed like a lot of apolitical hangers on milling about, smoking cigarettes. Children, too, scampered about, pawing candy and cheap flip-flops. Trash was piled up everywhere. The effigies of various political leaders hanging by the neck were a bit disconcerting, and the calls to prayer echoing all around—it was a Friday afternoon—added to the eerie effect. However, the graffiti on walls and storefronts honoring the heroes and heroines of Tahrir was spellbinding. Much of it was in a satirical, neo-Pharaonic style. Other pieces reminded me of the work of Howard Finster. All told, it had the feel, one year after the violent clashes of 2011, of an Occupy Wall Street encampment. Now, given the events of July 2013, the situation has become a *déjà vu* all over again.





I could not get Pasolini out of my head. When I screened the film the next day, what resonated most deeply with my Egyptian audience was this passage from the end of his *Notes*, which seems to speak directly to the current situation, not only of Egypt, but of so many nations around the world in the midst of volatile political transition. “Here are the final notes for a conclusion,” Pasolini intones, as Soviet work songs rise up over images of African laborers hoeing the ground of a vast expanse of savanna.

The new world is established. The power to decide one’s own future is formally at least in the hands of the people. The ancient, primeval divinities coexist with the new world of reason and liberty. But how to conclude? Well, the ultimate conclusion doesn’t exist. It’s suspended. A new nation is born. Its problems are infinite. But problems are not resolved, they . . . they must be lived, and life is slow. The proceeding toward the future is without any temporal break. The labor of the people knows no rhetoric and no pause. Its future lies in its eagerness for a future. And its eagerness is also a great patience.³⁸

BURLINGTON, VERMONT, 2013

PASOLINI’S DEATH was tragic in the Aristotelian sense. It was, like the deaths of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra—indeed,

like most of our deaths—a reversal or change in fortune that emerged according to probability and necessity, but an outcome that was not entirely deserved. In the best tragic plots, as Aristotle puts it in the *Poetics* (52a), “things come out contrary to expectation, but because of one another.” In an interview in Philo Bregstein’s 1981 documentary about Pasolini’s murder, “Whoever Says the Truth Shall Die,” Pasolini discusses the subjective, inconclusive nature of documentary film and his concept of the *auteur* as ultimately little more than an editor. With prophetically ironic reference to the various, contradictory accounts of the assassination of JFK, Pasolini inadvertently gives us a byword for the essence of tragic art: “One does not really know a person until he has died.”

Pasolini was fully aware that, in a sense, his African interpretation of Aeschylus would be immediately and inevitably dated.³⁹ And yet his *Notes* are also still fresh and powerful and worth close consideration, especially as an alternative to the last decades’ *Black Athena* “culture war” debates over Afrocentrism.⁴⁰ “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” So Tertullian famously asked in the second century AD. The question was purely rhetorical, for in his view orthodox Christian belief had nothing whatever to do with the Hellenic, pagan strand of the Western tradition. Tertullian himself was a citizen of neither Athens nor earthly Jerusalem, but hailed from Africa, where he served as the bishop of Carthage, in modern Tunisia. His repudiation of the transfer of ideas from one sign system to another is turned on its head by Pasolini’s imaginative transposition of Aeschylus from fifth-century Athens to post-colonial Africa: What, Pasolini invites us to consider, has Athens to do with Africa?

At the core of Pasolini’s artistic vision is, on the one hand, Nietzsche’s insight into the socio-cultural purchase of myth. As he puts it in the *Birth of Tragedy* (section 23):

Without myth culture loses its healthy and natural creative power: only a horizon surrounded by myths can unify a cultural movement. Myth alone rescues the powers of imagination from

their aimless wanderings. The images of myths must be the daemonic guardians, omnipresent and unnoticed, which protect the growth of the young mind, and guide man's interpretation of his life and struggles. The state itself has no unwritten laws more powerful than its mythical foundations. (Trans. Shaun Whiteside)

But like his *obiter dictum* "God is dead," Nietzsche's statement here, made near the end of his treatise, is no positive assertion of the modern West's self-understanding. It is a lament, since most of us, Nietzsche argues, are "so undermined by the critical-historical spirit of our culture that it is only by scholarly means and mediating abstractions that . . . myth can be made credible." In a probing introduction to the Modern Library's Everyman re-issue of Thomson's *Oresteia* translation, Richard Seaford calls attention to the seductive influence that Nietzsche has exercised on the modern understanding of Greek tragedy. Especially insidious is our passive acceptance that the tragic worldview is somehow necessarily an embodiment of metaphysical pessimism. Nietzsche's neglect of the *Oresteia* in the *Birth of Tragedy*, Seaford notes,

Despite [the work's] immense significance for Wagner, and despite the appearance in it of Apollo himself set against the Dionysiac Furies—results from the cosmological and *civic* optimism with which the trilogy concludes. Civic optimism, for Nietzsche, was of the shallow kind associated with the rational, Socratic spirit. His theory privileges rather the culmination in heroic downfall that is characteristic of Sophocles.⁴¹

The unique and innovative work of George Thomson helped Pasolini see, as Aeschylus himself saw without a mediating apparatus, what Nietzsche laments we have lost: The power of myth to foster hope for human progress in the midst of crippling challenges and change; the viability, however dated and provisional, of social transformation. While the problems of modern Africa, as Pasolini concedes in his own conclusion, may never be resolved, inspired myth-making—indeed, even mere notes—can still suggest ways those problems might be lived.

NOTES

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1. On all these details, see Siciliano 1982, 3–21; on the aftermath of the Pelosi case, see, e.g., news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4529877.stm (May 5, 2005).

2. Ben Lawton, trans., *Heretical Empiricism* (Indiana University Press, 1988), vii–viii.

3. “Mi sto specchiando con la macchina da presa nella vetrina del negozio di una città africana. Sono venuto evidentemente a girare, ma a girare che cosa? Non un documentario, non un film, sono venuto a girare degli appunti per un film: questo film sarebbe l'*Orestide* di Eschilo, da girarsi nell' Africa di oggi, nell' Africa moderna.”

Italian transcript in *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Per il cinema*, Vol. 1, ed. by Walter Siti and Franco Zabagli (Arnoldo Mondadori, 2001), 1177 (hereafter Siti/Zabagli).

4. See W. F. J. Knight's review of the book in *Greece and Rome* 11:31 (1941), 46.

5. See Thomson's Preface to the Third Edition.

6. Massimo Fusillo, “Pasolini's *Agamemnon*: Translation, Screen Version and Performance” in *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC–AD 2004*, edited by Fiona Macintosh, Pantelis Michelakis, Edith Hall and Oliver Taplin (Oxford University Press, 2005), 224.

7. The memoir was written at Thomson's urging. O'Sullivan was Thomson's guide, friend and conversation partner when he visited the island.

8. Seán Ó Lúing, *Celtic Studies in Europe and Other Essays* (Dublin, 2000), 161–73.

9. *The Greek Language* (Cambridge 1960).

10. Richard P. Martin, “Homer among the Irish: Yeats, Synge, Thomson,” in *Homer in the Twentieth Century: Between World Literature and the Western Canon*, ed. by Barbara Graziosi and Emily Greenwood (Oxford University Press, 2007), 88–91.

11. *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 72 (1952), 139.

12. See Fusillo 2005, cited above; Enrico Medda, "Rappresentare l'arcaico: Pasolini ed Eschilo negli *Appunti per un' Orestide africana*" in *Il mito Greco nell' opera di Pasolini*, ed. by Elena Fabbro (Udine, 2004) 114; Anton Bierl, "Die *Orestie* auf der zeitgenössischen postdramatischen Bühne," *Freiburger Universitätsblätter* 189 (2010), 57–59.

13. From the Introduction to Thomson's edition of the *Oresteia* (Cambridge 1938), 1.

14. "Ripeto, il carattere del mio film, deve essere profondamente popolare. I protagonisti devono essere questi, ecco qui [camera shots of various persons]: questa donna che raccoglie l'acqua dal pozzo, questo bambino, questo giovanotto elegante" (Siti/Zabagli 2001, 1179). Cf. 1180: "Questa gente colta nel suo daffare quotidiano e nella sua umile vita di ogni giorno, dovrebbe essere la protagonista del mio film *l'Orestide africana*; and 1185: "Naturalmente, come ho più volte ripetuto, il grande protagonista di questo mio film, di cui questi non sono che appunti, dovrebbe essere il popolo."

15. *Aeschylus and Athens*, 184.

16. "Prima di tutto vorrei dirvi perché ho deciso di fare *l'Orestide* di Eschilo nell'Africa di oggi. La ragione essenziale, profonda, è questa: che mi sembra di riconoscere delle analogie fra la situazione dell'*Orestide* e quella dell'Africa di oggi, soprattutto dal punto di vista della trasformazione delle Erinni in Eumenidi. Cioè, mi sembra che la civiltà tribal africana assomigli alla civiltà arcaica greca. E la scoperta che fa Oreste della democrazia, portandola poi nel suo paese, che sarebbe Argo nella tragedia e l'Africa nel mio film, è, in un certo senso—diciamo così—, la scoperta della democrazia che ha fatto l'Africa in questi ultimi anni" (Siti/Zabagli, 1181).

17. On the defamiliarizing aesthetic, compare Pasolini's revealing comment on the footage of carnage from the Biafran War that he splices into his film: "Nothing could be farther from the image that we normally have of classical Greece. And yet suffering, death, mourning, tragedy are eternal and absolute, which can link these searingly up-to-date scenes with the fantastic images of ancient Greek tragedy." ("Niente è più lontano die queste immagini dall'idea che comunemente ci facciamo della classicità greca. Tuttavia il dolore, la morte, il lutto, la tragedia, sono elementi eterni e assoluti che possono benissimo legare queste immagini brucianti di attualità con le immagini fantastiche dell'antica tragedia greca" [Siti/Zabagli 1185]).

18. Ho avuto tutto quello che volevo / sono anzi andato anche più in là . . . fino in fondo . . . / E ora... ah . . . lo stupendo e immondo / sole dell'Africa che illumina il mondo. // Africa! Unica mia / alternativa.

19. Herbert Golder, "Geek Tragedy, Or Why I'd Rather Go to the Movies," *Arion*, Third Series, 4.1 (1996), 199; 187–88.

20. Robert A. Segal, *The Myth and Ritual Theory* (Oxford 1998), 7.

21. From a letter dated 7.4.41, typescript p. 70, in the archives of The Birmingham City Library.

22. From a letter dated 7.22.41, pp. 82–83 in typescript.

23. From a letter dated 7.4.41, pp. 70–71 in typescript.

24. Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (London 1953), 2.

25. Berlin (note 24).

26. *Aeschylus and Athens*, 180.

27. "una sintesi dell'Africa moderna indipendente, libera, e dell'Africa antica" (Siti/Zabagli, 1194).

28. "Capisco la vostra ira: siete più vecchie di me. / Ma se la vostra esperienza è più grande, / a me Dio ha dato il dono della ragione. / Andate, andate pure in un altro paese! / Rimpiangerete questo. Io so che i giorni / futuri daranno grandezza alla mia gente: / e se sarete qui, nel centro glorioso / di questa città, vedrete processioni / d'uomini e donne portarvi doni / come presso nessun altro popolo al mondo!" (Siti/Zabagli, 1195).

29. "Le Furie si lasciano convincere dalle parole di Atena e accettano di coesistere con lei, l'dea della ragione, esse le dee dell'irrazionalità, nel nuovo mondo, nel nuovo mondo indipendente democratico e libero" (Siti/Zabagli, 1195).

30. "Queste acconciature, questo modo di camminare, questi cenni di danza, questi gesti, questi tatuaggi nei visi sono tutti segni di un antico mondo magico . . . Ma questo mondo magico si presenta qui, come vedete, come tradizione, come un antico spirito autoctono che non vuole andare perduto" (Siti/Zabagli, 1195).

31. "Qui invece siamo nel cortile interno della casa dove come vedete si celebra una festa più moderna, una festa simile a quelle europee . . . ma anche qui in questi atteggiamenti moderni, in questa musica moderna si sente il permanere di quell'antico spirit di cui parlavo, trasformato, come vedete, in voglia di felicità, di festa; in grazia, in leggerezza, in spensieratezza che sono tratti molto tipici dello spirit africano" (Siti/Zabagli, 1196).

32. "Ma un'improvvisa idea mi costringe a interrompere questa specie di racconto, lacerando quello stile senza stile che è lo stile dei documentary e degli appunti" (Siti/Zabagli, 1185).

33. "È ben chiaro infatti a tutti, che venti milione di sottoproletari negri dell'America sono i *leaders* di qualsiasi movimento rivoluzionario del Terzo Mondo" (Siti/Zabagli, 1185).

34. Pasolini reads—Soviet patriotic songs playing under it—the second strophe of the first stasimon, "Zeus, if I should call you by that name . . ." (Siti/Zabagli, 1180); RFK recites the third strophe (from Hamilton, 186).

35. Alexander's memoir on the same topic appeared in *Granta* ("Plato Speaks"; issue 51) in 1995. A short history of the Department by Edward Jenner, a former expat lecturer at Chancellor, appears in *Scholia*, New Series, Vol. 10 (2001), 161–69.

36. The recommendations themselves, still preserved on yellowed, dog-eared, mimeographed sheets kept in Department Head Steve Nyamilandu's office, are actually quite compelling, the sorts of arguments Classicists in small departments in the United States continually make to university administrators and other detractors to this day.

37. Samson Kambalu's memoir about coming-of-age in Malawi, *The Jive Talker* (New York 2008), captures well the student experience at Kamuzu Academy.

38. "Ecco gli ultima appunti per una conclusione. Il nuovo mondo è instaurato. Il potere di decidere il proprio destino, almeno formalmente, è nelle mani del popolo. Le antiche divinità primordiali coesistono con il nuovo mondo della ragione e della libertà. Ma come concludere? Ebbene, la conclusione ultima non c'è, è sospesa. Una nuova nazione è nata, i suoi problem sono infiniti, ma i problemi non si risolvono, si vivono. E la vita è lenta. Il procedere verso il futuro non ha soluzioni di continuità. Il lavoro di un popolo non conosce né retorica né indugio. Il suo futuro è nella sua ansia di futuro; e la sua ansia è una grande pazienza" (Siti/Zabagli, 1196).

39. "Il mio film sarà molto datato" (Siti/Zabagli, 1194).

40. Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. Vol. I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece* (Rutgers University Press, 1987) and *Vol. II: The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence* (1991). Among the many responses the most sustained is Mary Lefkowitz, *Not out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (New York 1997).

41. Richard Seaford, *The Oresteia of Aeschylus*, George Thomson, trans. (New York 2004), xiv.