

The Orestes Theme

in Three Plays by Eugene O'Neill, T. S. Eliot and Jean-Paul Sartre

Modern dramatists with the most divergent convictions and artistic aims agree in their interest in the time-honoured mythological themes because they find human types and situations in them that they want to re-create in terms of their own experience or to analyse according to one of the latest psychological theories. In the following pages we propose to compare three plays connected by their dependence upon the story of Orestes, the inheritor of the curse of the Atrides, who, in order to revenge the murder of his father Agamemnon, incurs the guilt of killing his mother as well as her new husband Aegisthus, and is pursued for this crime by the Eumenides until the gods permit his purification. This great theme, perfected in the prototypical European drama, the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, treated again by Sophocles and Euripides, touched upon by the author of *Hamlet*, and nobly revived in Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, is also the background of O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), of T. S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion* (1939), and of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Mouches* (1943). What use have these three contemporaries made of it? What are their reasons for connecting their works with it? In order to answer these questions we are going to outline the plots of the modern plays, investigate their relation to the myth and its Greek dramatizations as well as the motivation of the dramatic events and their meaning.¹

Mourning Becomes Electra is the tragedy of the Mannons, an aristocratic New England family, which is destroyed in 1865/66, at the end of the Civil War, by a series of private catastrophes. Brigadier-General Ezra Mannon is poisoned by his wife Christine in the night after his homecoming. She has hated her husband since the first night of her marriage, and wants to be free for her lover, Captain Adam Brant. Brant is the son of Marie Brantôme, formerly a nurse in the family, and of Ezra's uncle David Mannon, who had got her with child and had therefore been expelled from his home and from the family's firm by Ezra's father Abe, his less enterprising rival for Marie's love. Brant helps Christine in her crime under the influence of her stronger will, and because he hates in Ezra the son of Abe Mannon, who has conscientiously carried on the tradition of leaving Marie Brantôme a prey to starvation. Although the cowardly murder is excellently planned, its execution miscarries in one point. Lavinia, the daughter of the unhappy couple, who is passionately devoted to her father and suspicious of her mother, discovers what is going on, and becomes, by her stony and threatening presence, a source of terror for

¹ The following texts are referred to: *Mourning Becomes Electra* in vol. II of *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*, Random House, n.d.; *The Family Reunion*, a play by T. S. Eliot, Faber and Faber, 1939; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Théâtre*, Gallimard, 1947.

Christine. As soon as Christine's darling son Orin returns from the war Lavinia tries to set him free from his exaggerated attachment to his mother and to win him for her plans of revenge. He has hated his father so much that he would be ready to hush up his murder, but he cannot forgive his mother's *liaison* with Brant. When Lavinia takes him to witness a secret meeting of the murderous couple on the captain's ship at Boston, he kills Brant cold-bloodedly, and then informs his mother of her lover's death in the most brutal manner. For Christine the possibility of living on is gone; she ends by suicide. Lavinia and Orin cannot escape the effects of their deed although they seek oblivion on a trip to the South Seas, all through the play a symbol of innocent natural life. When they return Lavinia has her mother's full forms and beauty; she wants to forget her part in the Mannon tragedy, and is possessed by a wild desire to enjoy life. She disgusts her old suitor Peter by pressing immediate marriage on him, but she discovers in the end that she has lost her chance of a normal life. She gives him up, and decides, a true Mannon again, to punish herself by living alone in the company of her dead. This final change, however, comes over her only after Orin has also left her. He develops the Mannon conscience on their trip; he rebels against her domination, and cruelly torments her, until she wishes him dead, and thus repeats her mother's crime, in intention at least. In a fit of exasperation she tells her brother what she thinks, and starts him on his way to suicide.

O'Neill's debts to Greek drama are numerous. He has given his material the form of a trilogy, and arranged it in Aeschylus' way: The first part (*Homecoming*) shows the murder of Ezra, the second (*The Hunted*) Lavinia's and Orin's revenge: the shooting of Brant and Christine's suicide, the third (*The Haunted*) the fate of the revengers. There is also the concentration of Greek drama: The evil that has slowly grown in time is represented at the moment when it ripens towards catastrophe. The unities of time and place are carefully, but not slavishly, observed: The action of the first two plays passes within a fortnight in spring 1865; the third play covers a little more than a month in the summer of 1866. With the exception of a single one (the murder of Brant) all the scenes occur in front or inside of the sinister Mannon house. Moreover, O'Neill makes his own use of the convention of the chorus. It is rather a modest one, as Set Beckwith and the various representatives of the townspeople who comment with him upon the strange aloof ways and the terrible fate of the aristocratic Mannons are treated in a strictly realistic style, a characteristic trait of which is the introduction of dialect. There is hardly any profundity or wider vision in these comments: they are the superficial gossip of average people. The Greek example can also be discovered in the fact that the dramatist found it hard to keep masks out of his play. Again and again he stresses the mask-like expression on his protagonists' faces. Each one of these mask-like faces is stamped by one of the overpowering passions impelling the Mannons to destroy one another and themselves. Most appropriately the Mannon house itself wears its

white Grecian temple portico — a symbol of harmony and poise — like a delusive mask.

But the most striking of O'Neill's borrowings is the story itself, of course. He has not appropriated more than the mere story, however, and perhaps part of its effect. He motivates the events in his own way, using the theories of modern psychology and biology. Christine Mannon's hatred of her husband has its origin in the psychological make-up of the two partners and not in any particular deed of Ezra's. Only her anger at Ezra's forcing Orin into a military career might be considered an echo of Clytemnestra's fury after the loss of Iphigenia. In Ezra and the others who share with him the Mannon blood O'Neill offers a study of the psychological plight of those late-born Puritans who have inherited from their ancestors a moral code without the religious faith originally bound up with it. Thus he connects his trilogy with such treatments of a great American theme as Hawthorne's novels and tales and George Santayana's *Last Puritan*. Cut off from its religious roots, the Puritan moral code retains its power over the Mannons because it is the basis of their self-respect and aristocratic family pride. Having lost all relation to their vital and expansive impulses, it becomes a power for death. In the Mannons the *frein vital* and the *élan vital* are not only antagonistic; they tend to destroy each other. Christine is as different from the Mannon type as possible: a person made to give herself wholeheartedly to life and passion. Therefore she has attracted Ezra, just as Marie Brantôme had fascinated both David and Abe Mannon. But he cannot respond to her love in her way. One part of his being rejects his passion for her as low and sinful, and the beginning of their sexual relationship breeds disgust and contempt in both of them. The children of the unhappy couple inherit a double nature. They are still under the Mannon code, but they know also the desire for their mother's strong impulsive life. All their actions are ambiguous. At first Orin resists the Mannon inheritance, and becomes a prey to the Oedipus-complex. He loves his mother with an exaggerated passion, and is nerved by it to kill her lover. Lavinia's devotion to her father is similarly exaggerated, and yet, when she urges her brother to revenge him she does not act from pure motives either. Adam Brant, by his Brantôme blood, has stirred up her passionate nature, too, and deep down in her heart there is jealousy of her mother. After the destruction of Brant and Christine Orin is hopelessly at war with himself. He allows his Mannon nature with its sense of guilt and sin and its desire for punishment to dominate him in order to torture himself and his sister, who tries in vain to suppress the same element in herself.

We need not enumerate the many further psychological subtleties of the play. Those we have discussed suffice to show what O'Neill set out to do. In his version of the Orestes myth he attempted to replace the curse of the Atreus family by a complicated psychological mechanism and to create the impression that this mechanism controls human existence more inexorably than any *fatum* or curse known to the ancients. He used all

the resources of his remarkable artistry to hide the fact that the dice in his hands were loaded, that his characters and his situations corresponded to theories rather than to life itself. The whole work is, like many another of O'Neill's, a magnificent *tour de force*. This is inevitable as he wanted to compose it in accordance with strictly deterministic principles and to give it the appearance of life. *Mourning Becomes Electra* is the drama of determinism: Human existence in it is a closed circle, in which there is no escape, no freedom possible from the working of natural and psychological laws of a mechanistic type. Orin struggles in vain in the web of a malevolent spider. The possibility of expiation and purification, known to the Greeks and to Goethe, is gone. Thus O'Neill evokes in his spectators a terror that is colder and more hopeless than that excited by any classical tragedy. His drama has grown in a philosophical mood characteristic of many of the best American minds of the early twentieth century: the mood of the rebels against the Puritan tradition, whose minds were formed by the experience of the tremendous physical growth of the United States in the nineteenth century and by the scientific discoveries and the pseudo-scientific hypotheses of the same age.

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T. S. Eliot, who was born in the same year as O'Neill (1888), had felt the impact of the same experiences and theories in his American youth. For him they had been accompanied by a devastating sense of futility and unreality, against which he set out to struggle. Our motto in studying *The Family Reunion* shall be a remark of Eliot's on Shakespeare's ability to appeal to different types of spectators, which is found on p. 153 in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933): 'For the simplest auditors there is the plot, for the more thoughtful the character and conflict of character, for the more literary the words and phrasing, for the more musically sensitive the rhythm, and for auditors of greater sensitiveness and understanding a meaning which reveals itself gradually.' The poet adds that he has tried himself in 'a couple of scenes, of a verse play' to construct a drama with several layers of meaning. Doubtless, he is thinking of the two *Sweeney Agonistes* scenes of the years 1926 and 1927. When Eliot composed *The Family Reunion* he succeeded in doing what he had merely attempted in those scenes.

If the play has failed to impress the general public, the reason must be looked for in its uppermost layer of meaning. The dramatist has been somewhat stingy in giving 'the simplest auditors' their food. He introduces them to an aristocratic family of northern England, who assemble at Wishwood, the family seat, to celebrate the birthday of Amy, Dowager Lady Monchensey, their senior and head, in the traditional way. Her sisters and brothers-in-law have arrived for the party, but she is still expecting her three sons. Only Harry, the eldest, comes; the two others are kept away by motorcar accidents they have suffered or caused. Harry is in a strange state of perturbation. He has been abroad since his marriage

eight years ago, and has recently lost his wife under unusual circumstances. On their way home from New York she has fallen overboard. Now he shocks his relations by accusing himself of having pushed her into the sea. With satisfaction the simple auditor smells a crime interest in the story, but he is badly disappointed by what follows. Harry has long talks with his cousin Mary, with the family doctor Warburton, and with his aunt Agatha, and he sees ghosts in the windows. The question whether he is really a murderer, or not, is not answered. He leaves the party prematurely to face an unknown future, and his mother dies from shock shortly after his departure. Agatha and Mary perform a strange funeral ceremony, walking round the birthday cake and muttering verses of a runic type.

For the 'more thoughtful' auditors, however, there is almost as much interesting psychology in the play as in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Amy, her sister Agatha, and Harry are the most striking characters. As a young wife Amy was tied to a husband who did not love her and for whom her sister Agatha became the great passion of his life. In spite of their estrangement she stayed with him, and bore him the children whom she educated in a spirit of jealous and possessive love. Especially after her husband had left her and had died she gave rein to this tendency. Harry, her eldest and ablest son, as well as his cousin Mary, who was brought up with him, reacted to that type of love by a strong desire for independence. As early as possible Harry married a woman whom his mother disliked. Amy resisted the fact of his marriage with her whole tenacious will, and tried to preserve Wishwood in precisely the same state in which Harry had left it. (When he actually comes home and finds everything unchanged, this makes him only the more acutely conscious of the fact that he is an entirely changed person.) She received the news of his wife's death with undisguised satisfaction, and hoped that her son's marriage would prove merely an unhappy episode in his life. When Harry's brief visit destroys this illusion her weak heart gives way, and she collapses. Agatha has suffered no less than her sister. The passion of her brother-in-law for her was so overwhelming that he conceived the plan of murdering his wife at the very time when Harry's birth was approaching. Agatha prevented this crime because she cared for the child that was going to be born rather than from love of her sister. She learned to love Harry with a mother's love. That is why she is now able to help him in the great crisis of his life. But the most fascinating case for the psychologist is Harry himself. We have pointed out that he married early to get away from his mother. His marriage proved no less unhappy than that of his parents, partly because it was an escape marriage, partly because Harry transferred his antipathy from his mother to his wife. He suppressed his growing hatred of her, but after her death he was haunted by a sense of guilt, and thought, at times, that he was her murderer. Immediately after his arrival at home he even sees the threatening shapes of the Eumenides. His guilt-complex is healed in a way while he discovers the facts about the unhappy married life of his parents, and realizes that his father had wished before

him to murder his wife. This is a satisfactory explanation of the chief events of the play for the thoughtful auditor who cannot grasp its real meaning.

That meaning is in no way hidden by the author. On the contrary, he does his best to express it as clearly as he possibly can. Nevertheless, it can only be understood by those who have ears to hear it. For those acquainted with Eliot's poetry there are numerous signs telling them where to look for his intention. The play does not take place in 'depraved May' or in April, 'the cruellest month', but only a very little earlier: late in March. It is the season of birth and growth in nature, when the lack of both in the spiritual sphere can become torture. The spectator is invited to witness a birthday party, but the birthday cake becomes the centre of a funeral ceremony. It is one of Eliot's recurrent motives that life may be death and death life, that being born may be a kind of dying and dying a way of being born.² The distance between O'Neill and Eliot may be measured if we remember the sneering way in which Ezra Mannon refers to this very idea as to an outworn Puritan obsession: 'That's always been the Mannons' way of thinking. They went to the white meeting-house on Sabbaths and meditated on death. Life was a dying. Being born was starting to die. Death was being born.' (p. 54.) What is the essence of a dead convention for the one dramatist is the most exciting and important new discovery for the other. There are other pointers in Eliot's play, e.g. the numerous short or long remarks by which the figures gifted with a more than average awareness of spiritual things interrupt the futile conversation of the normal people in a shocking way. Besides, Mary, Agatha, and Harry are allowed moments of abstraction when they can speak their most secret intuitions. There are the key passages, none of which is simpler and more straightforward than Agatha's two lines:

What we have written is not a story of detection,
Of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation. (p. 104.)

As we have seen it is Harry who is haunted by an intense sense of sin. It sets him apart from all the other figures of the play, and makes him cry out at the sight of the Eumenides:

No, no, not there. Look there!
Can't you see them? You don't see them, but I see them,
And they see me. (p. 25.)

These lines contain a quotation from Aeschylus' *Choephoroe*, which was also used by Eliot as one of the mottos of *Sweeney Agonistes*.³ Harry's sense of sin is connected with the murder of his wife, which he has perhaps

² Cf. the last line of *Animula*: 'Pray for us now and at the hour of our birth.' (*Collected Poems 1909-1935*, London, 1936, p. 112.)

³ *Choephoroe*, 1509: ὑμεῖς μὲν οὐχ ὀφθαλμοῖς ταοῦδ', ἐγὼ δ' ὀφθαλμοῖς. (*The Oresteia of Aeschylus*, edited by George Thomson, Cambridge, 1938, vol. I, p. 280.)

not committed, and it is modified when his aunt tells him of a similar deed contemplated by his father.

What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.⁴

Besides, the sphere of Christian responsibility does not include deeds alone, but wishes, dreams, and thoughts as well. Nor is his sense of sin restricted to his real or intentional murder. It springs from the whole of the psychological situation in which the murderous plan could grow. Here we reach an important link between O'Neill's and Eliot's plays. Harry's situation is that of the late-comer, who lives, or rather, vegetates, imprisoned in O'Neill's closed circle, on the relics of a lost spiritual tradition, without a religious faith, a knowledge of values, and a sense of reality. It is perhaps one of Eliot's profoundest insights that men, as well as nations, are excited by this situation to deeds of violence, by which they try to win back their lost sense of being real. Harry's consciousness of sin has a further dimension, which we have not mentioned yet: It leads to the discovery of the reality of original sin in the Christian sense. The climax of Eliot's play comes when Harry, helped by Agatha's disclosures, but for no logically explainable reason, is touched by the intuition that his sense of sin is no curse at all, but a terrible privilege, the pulley capable of raising him out of the closed circle, the experience that renders his salvation possible. At this moment of intense happiness he decides to face the Eumenides instead of running away from them and to seek expiation of his guilt. Agatha and Mary have a degree of understanding of what is going on in him, but not Amy and the other more normal members of the family. Agatha even hints at the possibility that Harry's experience may be decisive not only for him alone, but, through the efficacy of vicarious suffering, for all his unhappy family.

What are the connections of this play with the Orestes myth? The most important one is found in the figure of Harry, of course. He is a modern Orestes, pursued by the Eumenides. What attracted Eliot most in the story of the descendant of the Pelops family was the fact that his fate and his guilt were determined by the crimes of his parents and their forbears and that the curse from which his sufferings sprang was brought to an end by the intervention of the gods. He made it the background of his play because he found analogies in it to the modern creed of determinism as well as to the Christian ideas of original sin and expiation. It enabled him to represent the closed circle of the moderns as impressively as O'Neill and, besides, the way of breaking through it that exists according to the Christian faith. We do not think it useful to elaborate occasional parallel traits in the other figures of Eliot's play and those of the Greek myth.⁵

⁴ T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, London, 1944, p. 7.

⁵ An attempt to do this will be found in H. W. Häusermann's essay on T. S. Eliot in *Neue Schweizer Rundschau*, Mai 1945.

The poet has developed his characters freely according to his own complex plan. But he followed the example of Greek tragedy in many points of form. He observed the unities more strictly than O'Neill. There is a chorus in the play. It is formed by Ivy, Violet, Gerald, and Charles, four of the normal unperceptive members of the family. These are allowed an awareness of the plight of the average modern unbeliever when they speak as The Chorus that they do not possess when each of them takes part singly in the drawing-room conversations of the play. Thus, in Eliot's as well as in O'Neill's drama, the deeper insight is with the protagonists, the members of the chorus being average people with average reactions. But these reactions, as rendered by Eliot, have a wider application; they do not belong to our time only, but to all ages. This is partly due to the fact that his chorus speaks in verse. *The Family Reunion* is a verse play. It is not our task to discuss the qualities of Eliot's dramatic verse, whose importance can hardly be exaggerated, as it is based on the rhythms and idioms of modern speech, and reaches high degrees of intensity, although it resists the dangerous fascination exerted by the great Elizabethan plays on many generations of dramatic aspirants.

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In 1943 Jean-Paul Sartre took up the Orestes theme in *Les Mouches*, certainly one of the most discussed plays of the war years. The French dramatist does not remove the story from its Greek setting. His scenes are laid in the city of Argos, where the customs of the people are rather primitive; the city itself, however, is placed in a Greece of a much more advanced civilization. In characterizing his figures Sartre is no more hampered by historical scruples.

Hiding his identity under the name of Philèbe, Oreste returns to the city of his fathers in the company of his pedagogue as a highly civilized young man, who has gathered the most approved knowledge of his time on his extensive travels. He is proudly described by his teacher as 'jeune, riche et beau, avisé comme un vieillard, affranchi de toutes les servitudes et de toutes les croyances, sans famille, sans patrie, sans religion, sans métier, libre pour tous les engagements et sachant qu'il ne faut jamais s'engager, un homme supérieur enfin...' (p. 23 f.) This young man is made acquainted with the secrets of Argos in a series of scenes. No less a personage than Jupiter himself tries to disgust him by a depressing description of the plight of the fly-infested town and its inhabitants. Since the murder of Agamemnon they all labour under a guilt complex. They voluptuously deplore their great sin, overwhelm every casual listener with confessions of their guilt, and undergo imaginary torments every year on the Day of the Dead. This state of things is agreeable to the eyes of Jupiter: 'Ils ont mauvaise conscience, ils ont peur — et la peur, la mauvaise conscience ont un fumet délectable pour les narines des Dieux.' (p. 20.) There is a reason for the bad conscience of the people: They secretly enjoyed the killing of Agamemnon. They sought an act of violence for

a reason that sounds quite familiar to a student of Eliot: 'Les gens d'ici n'ont rien dit, parce qu'ils s'ennuyaient et qu'ils voulaient voir une mort violente.' (p. 16.) Oreste wants to leave the town, but he is kept back by the spectacle of Electre, who comes to insult the statue of Jupiter. She burns with hatred against the protector of her mother and her stepfather, who force her to do menial services in the palace, and she dreams of revenge. Oreste is fascinated by his conversation with her and Clytemnestre, in which the similarity of mother and daughter becomes as evident as their antagonism. His next impression of the people of Argos is got while he is taking part in the death rites, celebrated by the royal couple and the High Priest near the temple in the mountain. The insane spell keeping the people in fear and subjection is almost broken by Electre, who appears in a white robe and dances a sacrilegious dance of joy, but Jupiter intervenes, and restores the rule of superstition by one of his petty miracles. Electre must expect the worst from the enraged king. In the crucial scene of the play Oreste offers to flee with his sister, and when she refuses, saying that she must wait for her brother at Argos, he makes himself known to her. Now she pities him, and tries to send him away, believing that the weight of his task as Agamemnon's son will be too much for him. But he decides to stay and to shoulder his task. Jupiter, foreseeing what is to follow, does his best to change the course of events. He warns Egisthe of his danger, but the king is tired of the role his past crimes force him to play at Argos, and does not take any action. Oreste kills him and Clytemnestre. The rest of the play analyses the different reactions of Electre and Oreste to their crime. Electre behaves exactly like her mother after the murder of Agamemnon. She is overwhelmed by the enormity of a deed that she has passionately desired for many years. She feels repentance, and seeks expiation, and thus becomes a willing, though terrified, victim of the Erinyes, who make an old woman of her in one night. In short, she behaves as Jupiter wants a human being under his rule to behave. Not so Oreste. He is also under the strain of having performed a deed of the utmost gravity. But he has planned and executed it as an act of justice: 'J'ai fait mon acte, Electre, et cet acte était bon. Je le porterai sur mes épaules comme un passeur d'eau porte les voyageurs, je le ferai passer sur l'autre rive et j'en rendrai compte.' (p. 84.) He does not permit Jupiter to rouse any sense of guilt in him: 'Je ne suis pas un coupable, et tu ne saurais me faire expier ce que je ne reconnais pas pour un crime.' (p. 94.) And he asseverates: 'Le plus lâche des assassins, c'est celui qui a des remords.' (p. 98.) This rebellion against Jupiter is given the widest significance. Oreste has discovered the god's carefully hidden secret: Man is created for freedom and therefore destined to turn against the gods themselves. Oreste wants to be the first creature that risks the necessary rebellion, and thus sees a Promethean task before him. He tells Jupiter: 'Mais, tout à coup, la liberté a fondu sur moi et m'a transi, la nature a sauté en arrière, et je n'ai plus eu d'âge, et je me suis senti tout seul, au milieu de ton monde bénin, comme quelqu'un qui a perdu son

nombre; et il n'y a plus rien eu au ciel, ni Bien, ni Mal, ni personne pour donner des ordres.' (p. 101.) And a little later: 'Car je suis un homme, Jupiter, et chaque homme doit inventer son chemin. La nature est un horreur de l'homme, et toi, toi, souverain des Dieux, toi aussi tu as les hommes en horreur.'⁶ As soon as Oreste has made his decision he is impelled by missionary zeal. He wants to give his people the freedom he is enjoying himself. Jupiter warns him:

JUPITER. — Pauvres gens! Tu vas leur faire cadeau de la solitude et de la honte, tu vas leur arracher les étoffes dont je les avais couverts, et tu leur montreras soudain leur existence, leur obscène et fade existence, qui leur est donnée pour rien.

ORESTE. — Pourquoi leur refuserais-je le désespoir qui est en moi, puisque c'est leur lot?

JUPITER. — Qu'en feront-ils?

ORESTE. — Ce qu'ils voudront: ils sont libres, et la vie humaine commence de l'autre côté du désespoir. (p. 102.)

In his farewell speech to his people Oreste promises to carry away with him all the weights of the past and to leave them free to begin a new life: 'Vos fautes et vos remords, vos angoisses nocturnes, le crime d'Egisthe, tout est à moi, je prends tout sur moi. Ne craignez plus vos morts, ce sont mes morts. Et voyez: vos mouches fidèles vous ont quittés pour moi. Mais n'ayez crainte, gens d'Argos: je ne m'assiérai pas, tout sanglant, sur le trône de ma victime: un Dieu me l'a offert et j'ai dit non. Je veux être un roi sans terre et sans sujets. Adieu, mes hommes, tentez de vivre: tout est neuf ici, tout est à commencer. Pour moi aussi la vie commence. Une étrange vie. ...' (p. 108.) That is all we hear of the life on the other side of despair: It will be new, strange, and utterly different from anything that was in the past.

Despite his revolutionary tendencies Sartre is supported in the organization of his play by the example of Greek tragedy. His place economy is only a little less strict than his time economy. There is an impressive *Chœur des Erinyes*. Otherwise, the chorus is disintegrated in the manner of O'Neill to make room for the representation of various types of citizens of Argos. The medium of the play is a prose, grounded on the cultured speech of modern France and capable of imagery and rhythms of great force and beauty.

Like his two predecessors, Sartre introduces a considerable amount of modern psychology into his treatment of the myth. But it is no more

⁶ Cf. the end of the first act of Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris*:

Denn die Unsterblichen lieben der Menschen
Weit verbreitete gute Geschlechter,
Und sie fristen das flüchtige Leben
Gerne dem Sterblichen, wollen ihm gerne
Ihres eigenen, ewigen Himmels
Mitgenießendes fröhliches Anschauen
Eine Weile gönnen und lassen.

the *raison d'être* of his play than of *The Family Reunion*. Like the other dramatists, he was attracted by the story because he found it a striking symbol of the bondage imposed on mankind by fate according to the ancients and by the many determining factors discovered by science according to the moderns. He did not follow O'Neill, who had no use for the fact that the myth is also one of purification and liberation. For him, as for Eliot, the possibility of liberation was its most important feature. Therefore such terms as guilt, remorse, repentance, and expiation are found almost as frequently in his play as in Eliot's. For both authors Orestes' crime, committed under the sway of the family curse, turns out to be a blessing in disguise, as it becomes one of the causes of his liberation. But how different is Sartre's way of liberation! He does not restore their full original meaning to the terms we have mentioned, but allows their value to sink below zero. They belong to the old order, which Orestes is to bring to its end. They are symbolized by the disgusting flies that have given the play its name. They are defended by Jupiter, a capricious tyrant, a low magician, and altogether a shabby caricature of a god. Sartre sells them very cheaply, indeed, in order to make Oreste his own master and sovereign judge of the justice of his acts. It may be admitted that there is a sordid kind of self-accusation and repentance as well as a sordid cult of the past and its dead, and that Sartre is hitting at them when he describes the state of the people of Argos before Oreste's coming. But he does not seem to know anything of the validity of true repentance and expiation and of an existence in a living tradition. A key to what has happened to him may be found, we believe, in the short introduction to the German translation of *Les Mouches*, published by the Oprecht Verlag this year. There he states that the play was written to strengthen the spirit of resistance in the French when their country was occupied. At that time a man of the *résistance* was depressed by the way the Vichy-minded Frenchmen, traditionalists of a peculiar stamp, wanted to play the part of the defeated according to ancient rules. He tried to make his compatriots forget their brooding over the errors of the past and their self-accusations and to encourage them to act in a new way in an unheard-of situation. In *Les Mouches* we find truth for one definite situation represented as general truth. Sartre would probably reject this accusation of jugglery on the plea that there are only truths for definite situations. But he has certainly not resisted the temptation to generalize. Moreover, we cannot suppress the suspicion that he allowed his thought to be contaminated by the sophisms of the criminal victors of the moment. The Hitlerites bragged of the entirely new start they had made; they chose their own acts in utter freedom from any ethical tradition, and defended their justice *à outrance*; they found enough supporters to convince them in their own minds that their acts were not only personally, but also socially just. Must not sentences like the following have sounded pleasant in their ears? 'Quand une fois la liberté a explosé dans une âme d'homme, les Dieux ne peuvent plus rien contre cet homme-là. Car c'est une affaire

d'hommes, et c'est aux autres hommes — à eux seuls — qu'il appartient de le laisser courir ou de l'étrangler.' (p. 79.)

However, we have got to admit that *Les Mouches* is not alone the play of a situation; it has grown in a definite philosophical mood, representing a reaction against the pressure of determinism no less violent than Eliot's, and springing from a diagnosis of the present plight of western civilization no less devastating than his. It leads Sartre to the proclamation of a new type of superman, who enjoys a kind of freedom impossible to man, an attempt that recalls the example of Nietzsche. This superman and his race are to build a new life in the blank sphere on the other side of despair. What will he do there but murder and enslave, unless he can make the discoveries that have enabled Eliot to give new life and meaning to some of the oldest ideas and facts of our civilization, discoveries that would force him to give up his claim to absolute freedom?

Basel.

RUDOLF STAMM.

The Semantics of *Toast*

The *NED* distinguishes four words having the form *toast*: two nouns and two verbs. In this paper only the first verb will be taken up, since the nouns, and the second verb, make no problems which need discussion here. The *NED* defines its first verb as follows:

1. *trans.* To burn as the sun does, to parch; to heat thoroughly. *Obs. exc. as transf.* from 2.
2. *fig.* To redden (by drinking).
3. *intr. for refl.* To warm oneself thoroughly.
4. To brown (bread, cheese, etc.) by exposure to the heat of a fire.
5. *transf.* To warm (one's feet or toes) at a fire.
6. *intr. for pass.* To undergo toasting; to be toasted.
7. To destroy or disintegrate with fire. *Obs.*

These definitions are all supported by illustrative quotations, but the quotations given have not always been rightly interpreted. Thus, the quotation from Caxton (see below) appears as an illustration of definition 2[a] above! Again, the divisions set up in terms of grammar confuse to some extent the semantic picture. Besides, the editors seem to have had before them too small a body of quotations. I have therefore taken the questions printed in the *NED*, added a number of quotations from various sources, and classified the whole in terms of the material toasted. In other