Sons of the Gods, Children of Earth

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Sons of the Gods, Children of Earth: Ideology and Literary Form in Ancient Greece.

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We are taught to read classical texts teleologically—to understand the rationale for whatever comes before in the text as an anticipation of or preparation for whatever comes at the end. So too there is a strong disposition among interpreters of ancient Greek civilization to read what comes before Plato as caught in a Hegelian dialectical spiral ascending inevitably toward its culmination in Plato. Thus what is negated along the way is felt to be somehow superseded—not annihilated but preserved on a more sublime plane.

The Marxist model I have applied in the preceding chapters treats both the reading process and the study of historical continuities and disjunctures rather differently. The winners in particular struggles are not endowed with any a priori claim to virtue, but there are reasons worth looking for in assessing why the winners won and the losers lost. Particularly in examining the ideological level of struggle, Benjamin’s dictum that “even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he win” (1969: 255) is a salutary corrective to the more blandly optimistic Hegelian model. The winners determine what if anything is remembered of the losers, and they are in a position to distort whatever is remembered beyond all recognition. Plato’s representation of the Sophists, Greek tragedy, lyric, or epic expresses his own ideological agenda. That agenda deserves to be appreciated in its own right as an extraordinarily creative response to a set of conditions not of Plato’s making. That Homer’s Achilles is convicted of undignified excess in grief, greed, immoderate brutality, and contempt of men and of gods (Rep. 3.388a5–391b6), that Odysseus must be stripped of his will to achieve and
dominate the polis and instead become an *apragmôn*, a political quietist (*Rep.* 10.620c3–7), that the drama and public discourse of democratic Athens become figured as meaningless and seductive idols of the cave—all this is quite intelligible in terms of that Platonic ideological agenda. Even Pindar, whose vision of an ideal community dominated by the scions of the great families seems to have contributed so much to Plato's own utopian project, appears in the *Republic* only as one who fosters the illusion that wealth is equivalent to justice (1.331a1-b1) and along with the tragedians perpetuates morally reprehensible myths (3.408b7-c1). The dazzling, hypnotic power over sound effects, images, and narratives by which Pindar claims to lift us into a divine realm is precisely what must be mercilessly expunged from the new education. Plato's version won in the sense that the new monarchs and their essential support systems of professional mercenaries and bureaucrats had the power both to crush the amateur citizen-soldiers of the democracy and to set the educational agenda for the foreseeable future. But because ideological struggle seeks to resolve real conflicts with imaginary solutions, because the form of those imaginary solutions must confront and respond to the forms of alternative visions, ideological victories are rarely complete or permanent. Were there no oppressed underclass challenging the claims of the oppressors to define reality, there would be no specifically ideological struggle. The voices of the challengers must be somehow incorporated in however a distorted form in the discourse that seeks to answer their challenge. Moreover, because this impulse to define reality in terms favorable to the oppressors is doomed to promise more than it can deliver, there is an inherent utopian negation of the status quo in the very defense of that status quo. Such in summary form is the rationale for the hermeneutic means by which we have sought to let speak the multiple voices of these canonical texts. We have listened for the voices of contending classes and utopian negation in the allegedly homogenized aristocratic discourse of the traditional epics. In Pindar's towering vision of the constitutive power of poetic language, we have heard the emergence of a rhetoric that will sweep aside the old rules of political discourse. In the very sensuous richness of his idealization of aristocratic society we have heard the voice of its negation, the declaration of its inadequacy. In Aeschylus' triumphant vision of the dialectical emergence of democratic justice, we have heard the smouldering threat of aristocratic stasis and an implicit demand for sexual justice that indicts the society it celebrates. Sophokles' seemingly nostalgic cooptation of an anthropological ground for aristocratic *phusis* lets us hear the democratic case for the social construction of identity by education. The drama's celebration of aristocratic male-bonding enlists us in a cry of common
humanity over inhuman pain, a sympathy that defies the impositions of any state. Finally, in Plato's apparently seamless totalization of state control over both birth and education, we can hear the negation of private property and that systematic subordination of women that were the founding conditions of the aristocratic valorization of inherited excellence. We also hear, beside the denigrating assault on the Sophists' mode of discourse and democratic arena of activity, a despairing acknowledgment that they were right about the priority of education over birth.

The formal trajectory from epic formulas to choral lyric, trilogy, single play, philosophical dialogue is similarly not intelligible on the basis of a purely internal Hegelian logic of forms. Concrete political, economic, and technological developments called forth the mammoth poems that signaled the death of epic. The development of literacy and the specific institutional forms of aristocratic struggle for legitimacy are specific preconditions of the epinician form. No less the specific forms of class struggle in Athens during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. are necessary contributory factors in the emergence of tragedy and trilogy. So too the impact of literacy and the political role of both drama and rhetoric are essential to our grasp of the conditions of possibility of Plato's massive prose dialogue.

At the same time these various forms do have their own material weight and their own internal dynamic that cannot be reduced to a simple reflex of their conditions of possibility. Homeric formulas, typescenes, and traditional story patterns preclude certain kinds of discourse even as they enable others. The fact of cultural continuity within the period we have considered means that Homeric forms continue to exert a distinct pressure on all subsequently dominant forms of discourse, since these later forms are not free not to respond to Homer. If changed conditions call into being new forms, these must compete with the existing forms. Homer is more than a quarry of stories and phrases to be mined and reworked at will. Those stories and phrases manifest their own specific gravity, however self-conscious the will to transform them may be. Pindar's efforts to forge more memorable images of heroic grandeur and break the relative predictability of the hexameter line reminds us of the model phrases even as we catch the echo of the hexameter's opening cadence in the creative play of the dactylo-epitrite. The images and narratives by which Aeschylus launches his massive assault on the aristocratic heroic ethos bring to life again that Homeric world as the price of its negation. Sophokles' nostalgic celebration of Achilles-like radical negation of the status quo carries into democratic and Sophist-taught Athens a Homeric aura that bespeaks its own age. Finally, Plato, who feels the compulsion to launch
a last attack on Homer's Odysseus on virtually the last page of his vast opus, testifies throughout to the pressure exerted by Homer's mixed mode of narrative and drama as well as by Homer's ethical weight.

The play between ideological struggle and formal struggle is only discernible by analytic abstraction. But such an analysis helps clarify why neither aspect can be grasped within a purely internal history. Real history, the history of living human beings confronting conditions not of their own making and struggling to make a livable life, generates the terms of ideological struggle and educates the five senses through the struggle of forms.