

**Dereifying Tragic Existence:
A Heideggerian Reading of Greek Tragedy and its
Reformulation by Arthur Miller**

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Abstract:

Heidegger turns to Greek tragedy in the course of his investigation of the pre-Socratic concept of being. His reading offers an understanding of being prior to the platonic and Aristotelian metaphysical determinations of being and beings. Most, importantly, it registers a monumental change from the pre-Socratic to the Platonic and Aristotelian concepts. Heidegger regards the whole history of the West as a result of this change in the understanding of being. This article seeks to situate Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* in the history of being in order to witness the change from the pre-Socratic to the later Greek concept of being. It, then, reads Arthur Miller's reformulation of Greek tragedy in the twentieth century, in an attempt to reveal the result of the metaphysical and technical determinations of being. In *All my Sons*, a revelation of the limits of the technical determination may be visible. A new concept starts to unconceal itself.

Keywords: *Heidegger, Dereification, Greek Tragedy, Sophocles, Arthur Miller, All my Sons.*

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Unlike G. W. F. Hegel, Martin Heidegger did not develop a theory of tragedy. Nevertheless, he finds philosophy as a whole, and the philosophy of being in particular, to be tragic in essence.

The experience of beings in their being which here comes to language is neither pessimistic nor nihilistic; nor is it optimistic. It is tragic. That is a presumptuous thing to say. However, we discover a trace of the essence of tragedy, not when we explain it psychologically or aesthetically, but rather only when we consider its essential form, the being of beings (Heidegger, *Early* 44).

Heidegger rejects the formalistic and psychological approaches to tragedy because, in their focus on either formal aspects or the psychological effect induced by tragedy, they miss the revelation of being that comes to unconcealment through it. The formalist approach to tragedy, starting with Aristotle's determination of the attributes (*Symbebekota*) that characterize a good tragedy, already deals with tragedy as a kind of art that is meant to produce a certain effect on its audience. This effect is produced through form. In other words, it deals with art from an aesthetic perspective. Greek tragedy is not a work of art in the modern aesthetic sense or even in the formalist sense initiated by Aristotle. It is part of "ritual, religious, political, poetic events" (Gover 50). To treat it as a work of art characterized by excellent form and artistic value is to approach it from a perspective which did not exist when it was written. What is missed in this formalistic aesthetic delimitation of tragedy is the rich

religious, moral and festive experience of the Greek tragic festival as a total work of art before the separation of art from life. Greek tragedy is granted a significant place in the history of being because it unconceals (*entbergen*) being prior to the onset of metaphysics. Rather, “[t]ragedy is a poetic saying of being at the ‘beginning’ of metaphysics. Heidegger attempts a thoughtful saying of being at the ‘end’ of metaphysics” (Gall 190). The importance of tragedy for Heidegger, then, is not only that it is a more direct unconcealment of being than philosophy but also that it unconceals being at a crucial juncture in the history of Western thought. At this juncture, the movement from one concept of being to another was still taking place before the reification of the metaphysical concept of being assumed control of Western thought as a whole.

Heidegger considers tragedy at “the beginning of metaphysics,” at a crucial juncture where the destiny of Western thought is being determined in the conflict between two different concepts of being. It is illuminating to investigate tragedy in its late developments – hence necessarily from within the metaphysical determination of the meaning of being – in order to take a glimpse of what comes to unconcealment in more recent tragedies. If we come “too late,” question the meaning of being and reach an understanding of who we are, just like Oedipus, only after this meaning and our fate have been sealed, it is crucial that we consider tragedy in its latest form in order to witness what concept of being is revealed through it (*Mindfulness* 354). As witness bearers, we hearken to the revelation which tragedy

makes about the meaning of our being, about who we are and what may become of us.

This study seeks to prove that Arthur Miller's theorization of tragedy goes beyond showing that the common man can be a tragic hero and that it amounts to a major change in the history of tragedy itself. Miller's reformulation of tragedy dereifies the concept which has dominated it since the metaphysical determination of the meaning of being. This is not to say that Miller's tragedies are situated outside the metaphysical concept of being. They are located near its end – or rather latest developments – where a new concept may be glimpsed. This article follows, in the first part, Heidegger's ontological investigations of the Greek concept of being in order to prove that the change which he registers from the pre-Socratic concept to the later developments in Plato and Aristotle may be seen as an instance of reification. Moreover, it seeks to explain how this reified concept of being plays itself out in Greek tragedies and later on in early modern tragedies like Shakespeare's. It becomes part of the concept of tragedy itself. In the second part, it explains how Miller's reformulation not only habilitates the common man as a tragic hero but also, and most importantly, dereifies the concept of tragedy itself. It reads the conflict between the metaphysical concept of being which determines the form of tragedy since *Oedipus Tyrannos* and the new concept which starts to unconceal itself in a tragedy like *All my Sons*.

Situating Greek Tragedy in the History of Being

Most interpreters and commentators on Heidegger's interpretations of tragedy approach his work in an attempt to extract a concept of tragedy, like the Hegelian conflict of two rightful positions, or seek to trace the change in his understanding of tragedy within the overall development of his thought (Bradley 71; Geiman 172; Gelven 556; Gover 38; Fóti 170). Rather than focusing on the development of Heidegger's understanding of tragedy, this article seeks to situate his understanding of tragedy in the context in which it appears; that is the change from the pre-Socratic concept of being to the later Greek one. It traces this development and corroborates it with other analyses of Greek intellectual life in order to prove that it is a movement to a reified concept of being. Tragedy remains trapped in this reified concept until its twentieth century developments start to reveal (*entbergen*) some signs of dereification.

Heidegger comes to his investigation of tragedy in *Introduction to Metaphysics* in the course of his analysis of the Greek concept of being. He writes: “[I]t is precisely in Plato and Aristotle that the decline of the determination of *logos* sets in, the decline that makes logic possible. Since then, which means for two millennia, these relations among *logos*, *alētheia*, *phusis*, *noein*, and *idea* have been hidden away and covered up in unintelligibility” (182). The change in the concept of being that takes place in the shift from the pre-Socratics to the later Greek philosophers has dominated Western thought for two millennia and has therefore determined the meaning of being ever since. Concepts of

being – how people conceive of their existence and of what it means to be – do not determine philosophical thought only but also all aspects of life. Therefore, the meaning of being which was determined by the concealment of the relations among *phusis*, *logos* and *alētheia* by the Socratics has not only shaped philosophical thought but also all aspects of life shaped by the West’s understanding of what it means to be. Heidegger’s investigation of Greek tragedy, like his explorations of art in general, seeks to unconceal the meaning of being underlying it (Heidegger, *Poetry* 35). His investigation of tragedy occurs in the course of his interpretation of the meaning of being in pre-Socratic philosophers like Parmenides and Heraclitus and is situated right before the conclusion that the decline that goes on until today is visible in Plato and Aristotle (Heidegger, *Introduction* 150 –182). Tragedy, therefore, reveals the understanding of being which shaped Greek life and thought prior to the onset of the Socratic concept that has dominated Western consciousness ever since. Nevertheless, late Greek tragedies like *Oedipus Tyrannos* – which was first performed in 429 BC at a time when Socrates (470 – 399 BC) had long been offering his criticism of the pre-Socratics and the sophists – shows signs of the late Greek Socratic understanding of being. It is a manifestation of being at “the ‘beginning’ of metaphysics” as Robert S. Gall puts it. It is situated at the hinge where a conflict of two different concepts of being is played out.

Heidegger focuses his analysis of tragedy on *Antigone*, paying attention to the concepts of man and being introduced

in the first strophe which starts with these words: “Manifold is the uncanny, yet nothing/ uncannier than man bestirs itself” (Sophocles in Heidegger, *Introduction* 156)¹. To the Greek mind, the manifold or the whole that is made of many things and unites them, being, is uncanny, *unheimlich*, but nothing is uncannier than man. The Greek word which Heidegger renders into *unheimlich* or the uncanny is *deinon* which covers a wide range of meanings that includes strange, fearsome, awe-inspiring, overwhelming, terrible, powerful and unfamiliar (Geiman 174). Being is that which overwhelms man with its strange power and manifests itself through him. In his second interpretation of tragedy, Heidegger, in *Holderlin’s Hymn “The Ister,”* translates *deinon* as *unheimlich*, the unhomely, or that which does not belong to home in the sense that it is both unfamiliar and awe-inspiring, as he renders it (56). Being is, therefore, uncanny but the being of man is the uncanniest of all. In tragedy, the attempt of the strange and the unfamiliar to become at home takes place. Antigone needs to perform the religious ritual for her brother and bury him in the city in order for him to have a place in the afterworld. Against this religious homecoming, Creon, on the other hand, seeks to preserve the political right of the city that no one deemed a traitor should be buried in its soil. Antigone is not at home in Creon’s political world and he is not at hers. In *Oedipus Tyrannos*, the eponymous hero, faced with the prophecy, cannot accept murdering his father or marrying his mother, both of which go against the Greek code of honor. He seeks to be at home in the Greek world. Both Oedipus and Antigone, hence, seek to be at home in the Greek ethical

world, to belong to the Greek ethical substance. This is their homecoming. This reading of tragedy as homecoming in *Holderlin's Hymn "The Ister"* is a development of the earlier reading in *Introduction to Metaphysics* in which the meaning of being at home is a revelation of what it means to be.

Heidegger's earlier reading of *Antigone* is introduced in order to examine the "poetic projection of Being-human among the Greeks" which comes right after his examination of the meaning of being, *phusis*, in Heraclitus (Heidegger, *Introduction* 156). Art "in a distinctive sense, brings Being to stand and to manifestation in the work as a being" (170). Hence, his reading of tragedy should be interpreted in terms of his investigation of the Greek concept of being, not apart from it. Through reading *Oedipus Tyrannos* in the context of the change from the pre-Socratic concept of being to the later Greek one, it is contended here that it is possible to witness a change into a reified concept of being which dominated tragedy and the Western understanding of being for more than two millennia.

Heidegger starts his investigation of the pre-Socratic concept of being by inquiring about the meaning of *phusis*, *logos* and *alētheia* in Heraclitus. "Being essentially unfolds as *phusis*" (Heidegger, *Introduction* 112). When translated into its Latin counterpart *Natura*, which refers to giving birth to living things, *phusis* loses its distinctive Greek sense (Schoenbohm 145). The idealist understanding of nature as "petrified intelligence" in Schelling and Hegel is also alien to the Greek concept (Stone 57). The English word nature which refers to a system governed by the laws of physics is

an invention of the renaissance and the Enlightenment that does not capture the meaning of *phusis* (Wooton 367). Even in Aristotle, the physical can be understood only in contrast to the metaphysical which totally misses the pre-Socratic meaning in which this Platonic distinction did not exist.

The Pre-Socratic sense of the relation between *phusis*, *logos* and *alētheia* is part of a concept of being that has been covered over. The manifold faced the ancient Greeks as a mystery, *deinon*. Heidegger digs beneath the concept of *logos* as reason since logic had not become a separate science or study of the rules of correct reasoning except in Aristotle's setting of formal rules (Heidegger, *Introduction* 136). He traces Heraclitus's *logos* to the verb *legein* which means to gather (137). This sense still survives to some extent in modern English use when one says 'I gather' in the sense of I understand from what has been said. Gathering for Heraclitus is not about language. What is gathered from the manifold which manifests itself is, therefore, *logos*. As it reveals itself, it comes into *alethēia* or unconcealment. Truth had not yet come to be defined as correctness in the sense of the correspondence of a statement to an external state of affairs. It happens as *alethēia* or unconcealment of the meaning of what is unconcealed. "Because Being is *logos*, *harmonia*, *alethēia*, *phusis* ... it shows itself in a way that is anything but arbitrary" (148). It shows itself in harmony and is, therefore, apprehended, *noein*. Apprehension is the ability to find one's way into the manifold. It is not a mental faculty but rather a practical procedure to find one's way to deal with beings (156-57). Truth, *alethēia*, is, therefore, something that

happens or an event in which meaning is revealed not correspondence. Thus, *logos* is *phusis* that is gathered and *alethēia* is the meaning apprehended. Prior to their separation in Socratic thought, they belonged together. “The transformation of *phusis* and *logos* into idea and assertion has its inner ground in a transformation of the essence of truth as unconcealment into truth as correctness” (212). This transformation in the meaning of *phusis*, *logos* and *alētheia* is a change from one concept of being to another; a transformation that is bound to exercise the most profound effect on the Western mind.

The three correlated concepts enjoyed unity in the pre-Socratic understanding of being. Heidegger quotes Heraclitus’s most renowned dictum: “everything flows” which he interprets as “the whole of beings in its Being is always thrown from one opposite to the other ... Being is the gatheredness of this conflicting unrest” (Heidegger, *Introduction* 148). For the pre-Socratic mind exemplified by Heraclitus and Parmenides, being is not something static. It is not a thing at all. It is a state of becoming. In this process of becoming or emerging from concealment – Heidegger uses the example of the emergence and blossoming of a rose – opposites like existence and non-existence flow into each other (15). Heraclitus illustrates this constant becoming with his poetic dictum: “You cannot step into the same rivers twice” (Heraclitus in Burnet 150). In this state, “all things are one” since opposites flow into each other (146). Heidegger stresses the process of *alethēia* as the coming out of unconcealment, out of being concealed in mystery to stress

the difference of this concept of being from the later Socratic one. Unlike the Platonic and Aristotelian concepts of truth, *alethēia* partakes of the pre-Socratic concept of being in that concealment flows into unconcealment in a process of becoming unconcealed. In the unity of *phusis*, *logos* and *alētheia*, “logic did not yet exist” (160). John Burnet vindicates Heidegger’s investigation of the pre-Socratic concept of being which does not set logic as the rules of correct reasoning in a realm of purified logos, language or thought. Logos had not yet been abstracted, reified and set apart as a group of formal rules into a realm of its own because such a realm has not yet existed. It started to exist with the falling apart of the pre-Socratic unity, with the separation of the visible and the invisible, the physical and the metaphysical. Metaphysics started with the platonic separation of the primordial unity. “Ethics, physics, and logic arose for the first time in the school of Plato. Thinking became philosophy, philosophy science and science an academic discipline” (McNeil 166). This is how the aforementioned decline of *logos* into logic in Plato and Aristotle takes place.

Heidegger compares this understanding of logos to its Christian rendering in the *New Testament* as “Word.” “A world separates all this from Heraclitus” (Heidegger, *Introduction* 149). The later separation of *phusis* and *logos* into being and thinking sets the stage for the metaphysical history of the West in which being must be understood, guided and controlled by thought. Here starts the metaphysical forgetfulness of being. This fateful separation

takes place when apprehension becomes a mental faculty rather than a practical finding of one's way into beings. Here, the possibility of misinterpretation occurs. Thinking, hence, requires guidance in order not to go astray; in other words, it requires rules for the correct application of reason. This is when *logos* turns into *logic*. The pre-Socratic concept of being was not clear enough in the minds of Greeks and therefore required definition. This is also when metaphysics starts to rise in Plato's thought, denies the former understanding of being and determines the meaning of being and, consequently, the history of the West. "Plato, who rejects the concept of change, believes that knowledge is impossible in Heraclitus' changing world" (Cankaya 304). Since knowledge is defined as grasping the unchanging essence of an object or a phenomenon, it is denied to the pre-Socratic concept of being in which becoming is the rule. Knowledge in Plato, hence, is defined on the basis of an understanding of being as static.

For Heidegger, the history of the West is the history of a certain interpretation of being; the metaphysical technical interpretation. This interpretation determines how *phusis* is conceived and shaped by human making, craft or *techné* which is, for Heidegger, a "kind of knowledge" (Heidegger, *Introduction* 18). Yet, the modern concept of knowledge as pure theory, natural science or an abstract academic discipline is far from the Greek concept which is close to what is referred to today as know-how (Geiman 169). Through *techné*, man brings things, like art, artefact and the city-state, into existence according to his understanding of

being. For the Greeks, art is a product of *techné* (Husain 22). Art is not an exercise in aesthetic creativity but both an expression and a determination of the meaning of being. Art formulates and fixes a certain manifestation of being.

Techné, in creating a work (especially a work of art), establishes a locus of manifestation or phainesthai. The work, however, tends immediately to insist on its own ontic privilege, to reify the world-structure within which it functions, and to support hegemonic constructs (Fóti 168).

Art both conceals and unconceals being. In its unconcealment, it fixes a certain manifestation and denies other possibilities. It, therefore, reifies the world-structure it reveals. There is a “strife,” hence, between what is revealed and what remains hidden as a mystery, the uncanny (Heidegger, *Poetry* 48). In Greek tragedy, being reveals itself as *diké* which can be understood as “the overriding sway of being that exceeds the economies of phenomenal presencing” (Fóti 168). *Diké* is also a “claim of justice or right” (Gagarin 13). Therefore, in Greek tragedy, being reveals itself as one claim to justice and is in conflict with another *diké*. These opposing claims are manifested by *techné* which fixes and reveals them in a certain form that reifies the world-structure within which the work is created.

The opposing *dikés* or claims to truth and justice in tragedy manifest the Heraclitan becoming as the overall process of the unity of opposites. In Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*, for instance, the eponymous hero has to lead the Greek army to invade Troy. The reason behind this

expedition is that Paris, the King of Troy's son, seduced and eloped with Helen, Agamemnon's sister-in-law while he stayed as a guest at her husband's home. Since hospitality is protected by Zeus, betraying it must be punished. Agamemnon cannot let such an act of betrayal go with impunity, otherwise he would not be observing Zeus's law. In order for the ships to move, Artemis's anger has to be assuaged by sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia. Such a horrible sacrifice is the only way for the ships to move. Since it is a Greek man's duty to honor and obey all the deities, Agamemnon has no choice but to perform the sacrifice. If he does not fulfill the condition, everyone including his daughter will die and he will be violating Zeus's command (Nussbaum 34). The two *dikés* are formulated in a work of art in which *techné* reveals and fixes a certain world structure in which man is subject to opposing powers. The same may be said of *Antigone*. She has to perform the rituals and bury her brother Polynices in the city in order for him to go to the other world. "I will bury him./ It will be a noble act, even if it leads to my death./ Loving and loved, I shall lie with him—/ a pious criminal" (Sophocles 141). Yet this religious act has been forbidden by Creon because her brother led an army against Thebes in order to take control of it from his brother Eteocles. As the new king of the city, Creon must be obeyed. "My laws will make the city great,/ and now, in accord with them, I proclaim to every citizen/ my edict concerning the children of Oedipus.... it has been decreed that no one/ may mourn him, nor honor him with burial;/ his body must be left exposed, in shame,/ food for dogs and birds of prey" (146). The religious and political *dikés* are in conflict (Nussbaum

38). These religious and political claims reveal themselves in life and are fixed in the artwork. This conflict of *dikés* unconceals the “gatheredness” of “conflicting unrest” which is the pre-Socratic concept of being (Heidegger, *Introduction* 148). Heidegger turns to tragedy in the course of his investigation of the pre-Socratic concept of being because, like Heraclitus’s writings, it reveals this concept before it changes into the later Greek concept.

Heidegger’s investigation of the concept of being in late Greek life and philosophy may furnish a better understanding of the reification of intellectual life and artistic production. Georg Lukács confirms that late Greek life and philosophy fell into reified forms in the sense that it had certain solid forms separate from the world which produced them.

Reification did play a part in Greek society in its maturity.... Greek philosophy was no stranger to certain aspects of reification ... It had one foot in the world of reification while the other remained in a natural society (Lukács 111).

Heidegger’s investigation of the concept of being in Aristotle reveals how the pre-Socratic concept came to be reified in late Greek intellectual life and in Aristotelian philosophy in particular. This reification manifested itself in tragedy as well.

The meaning of being in pre-Socratic philosophy is *phusis* which is related to a process of emergence, coming into being, coming out of unconcealment into presence. It means coming forth and “staying around for a while” (Seidel

34). Yet this “presencing of the present” is a very empty concept that can so easily be filled up with what comes to presence, with the thing that is present (36). Here, the process turns into a thing. It is reified. What remains is not the process but the present thing itself. It is the need for definite definition of things, of what is present, which leads to the Platonic and Aristotelian quest for stable essences. In Plato, the essence becomes the transcendental idea freed from all change and development. Veronique Fóti describes the change from the pre-Socratic *phusis* to Platonic truth as follows:

Since pre-Socratic thought was, in Heidegger’s judgment, unable to render its guiding insight explicit, or to bring it to fruition, the latter engendered an ambiguity between differential and totalizing modalities of understanding manifestation, which Heidegger traces in terms of the relationship between *alētheia* and *orthotés* in Plato’s doctrine of truth. He finds this ambiguity to be already weighted, in Plato, toward privileging archic unification or totalizing unconcealment and displacing differential presencing (*anwesen*) in favor of sheer presence (*Anwesenheit*) and present entities (*Anwesendes*) (164).

Due to the ambiguity of the concealment-unconcealment movement or the “differential presencing” of *alētheia*, it was replaced by sheer presence in Plato. Truth as a process of unconcealment turns into presence.

In spite of his difference from Plato, the same holds true for Aristotle. The word which Aristotle uses to refer to being is *ousia*. This concept of being does not refer to a process of emergence and coming into being but rather to something present (Sadler 47). This is why “Aristotle reduces the question ‘what is being?’ to the question ‘what is *ousia*?’” (49). *Ousia* means something that is present in its thingliness. In its pre-philosophical usage, the word originally referred to “‘possessions’ or ‘estate’” (74). In *The Essence of Human Freedom*, Heidegger writes: “In fact, by *ousia* nothing else is meant but *constant presence (ständige Anwesenheit)* and this is simply what is understood by being-ness (*Seiendheit*)” (37). When the question of being turns into the quest for the essence of something present, into a question regarding its substance as that which does not change, the meaning of being is forgotten. It is literally reified. Being is defined as the constant and enduring material of which something is made. Aristotle was aware of the shift from becoming to being defined as *ousia* or constant presence.

While Aristotle realizes that the earliest philosophers were concerned more with becoming than with being, he does not interpret this as meaning that philosophy of becoming is an alternative to philosophy of being, but rather that early philosophy must be forgiven for its as yet inadequate grasp of its subject (Husain 10).

The definition of being as constant presence leads to the determination of being, and all beings, in terms of stable static things. Everything is conceived of on the model of a

present thing. This renders the pre-Socratic concept of becoming not an alternative vision of being but rather an early stage that leads to being. Being is conceived of on the basis of a static entity, *ousia*. Becoming is relegated to an early stage in which beings have not reached their full potential and human understanding has not acquired an adequate grasp of the world. As a result of this interpretation of a certain concept or phenomenon in terms of another which Aristotle regards as its telos, he considers plants, for instance, as “defective animals” lacking eyes, reason, speech and history (Grossman 27).

In his study of Greek mathematics in *The Decline of the West*, Oswald Spengler confirms that the ancient Greeks conceived of presence as primary and hardly had any mathematical principles based on non-presence. He confirms Heidegger’s conclusion *avant la lettre*. The ancient Greeks did not have a concept of zero which comes from a concept of absence.

This zero, which probably contains a suggestion of the *Indian* idea of extension – of that spatiality of the world that is treated in the Upanishads and is entirely alien to our space-consciousness – was of course wholly absent in the Classical. By way of the Arab mathematicians (which completely transformed its meaning) it reached the West, where it was introduced in 1554 by Stipel (178).

While the Indians and Arabs conceived of non-presence and the idea is ingrained in their spirituality and in the concept of

Deus Absconditus, the deities of the ancient Greeks were present for them (Heidegger, *Poetry* 40). Erich Auerbach confirms the same idea in his analysis of the *Odyssey*. “[T]he Homeric style knows only a foreground, only a uniformly illuminated, uniformly objective present” (Auerbach 7). In the Greek worldview which, as Heidegger has shown in his analysis of *techné*, forms the ground on which modern science reveals the world, everything is conceived on the ground of presence as a present entity, an *ousia*. The pre-Socratic concept of becoming was relegated to an early stage of thought. The idea of being became reified as the presence of a present entity.

Therefore, Heidegger regards the nature of metaphysics to be its inability to think of being as something other than an entity or a thing. The idea that being is not an entity but rather some total concept which shapes our understanding of what beings are is banished into oblivion. This is what Heidegger calls the forgetfulness of being, *Seinsvergessenheit*, which has dominated the history of the West since Socrates till today. Hiding differential presencing in favor of totalizing sheer presence is the source of the forgetfulness of being and the reification of the concept of being and of beings. It is responsible for the production of the modern scientific mentality which regards everything as an entity that is determined and manipulated according to the laws of physics.

As a result of the metaphysical reification of thought, everything which does not have material form is conceived of on the model of something material. Everything is

described in terms of an entity or material (*ousia*) with qualities (*symbebekota*). This is why Aristotle defines tragedy in *Poetics* as “a representation of an action of a superior kind – grand, and complete in itself – presented in embellished language, in distinct forms in different parts, performed by actors” (23). When described in terms of substance with qualities, tragedy is formalized, reified and separated from the being it can reveal. Since its qualities are determined by the definition, the investigation should be a formal one which examines whether the form of a particular tragedy lives up to the perfection of the definition or the excellence of certain model plays. In contradistinction to this formalist aesthetic, Heidegger, in his investigation of the pre-Socratic concept of being, returns to Greek tragedy in order to go beyond the reified metaphysical definitions.

A late Greek tragedy like *Oedipus Tyrannos* was produced at this stage in the history of being when Socrates started questioning the essence of phenomena. This quest for essence led to the definition of tragedy as a certain form characterized by *peripeteia* or reversal of fortune which became the basic feature of tragedy. Oedipus “brings about his misfortune by means of an act that aims at avoiding the very misfortune in question. This is what, or more precisely, how *Oedipus Tyrannus* defines tragedy – as irony” (Menke 11). Unlike Agamemnon and Antigone who make conscious choices, knowing that the consequences may not be favorable, Oedipus brings about his downfall by attempting to avoid it. This renders irony the essence of tragedy. In history, almost all other features have been dispensed with –

including the three classical unities, the poetic style and the high rank of the tragic hero – except for the ironic reversal of fate which makes tragedy what it is.

When examined beyond its formal features and in the context to which it belongs, *Oedipus Tyrannos* may reveal itself as a movement from one concept of being to another. The word *Tyrannos* in the original title of the play does not mean “absolute ruler” (Knox 7). It means neither tyrant nor king as the Latin translation of the title, *Rex*, renders it. The original Greek meaning was forgotten in the translation to Latin just as the early Greek meaning of being was forgotten in the shift to the late Greek and Roman worlds which formed the ground of Western culture. *Tyrannos* means something akin to the first of men, “a ruler who has seized power, not inherited it. He is not a king, for a king succeeds only by birth; the tyrannos succeeds by brains, force, influence” (8). The idea of man occupies a central place in the play. Man is also the answer given by Oedipus to the Sphinx in response to the riddle. When the play was written in the 5th century BC, the word man echoed Protagoras’s “Man is the measure of all things” (8). This statement was very problematic at that time not only because men are different and so are their ideas and values but also because this statement posed a direct threat to the Greek religion which regarded deities as the measure of everything. Greek deities represented the most important values which the Greeks accepted and believed in, like Aphrodite representing the value of beauty, Athens wisdom and so on (Tarnas 25). The Platonic establishment of archetypes is an attempt to

establish values on a rational basis rather than a mythological one (3-5). When man becomes the measure of all things, this threatens the Greek moral and social life with relativity. This is why the play was written as a polemic against Protagoras's famous statement. *Oedipus* shows the first of men as a plaything in the hands of the deities. All he can do is to realize the prophecy they have already revealed. The play shows the limitations of man and confirms the conventional Greek wisdom "*gnothi seauton*" or "know thyself," the most established meaning of which is "to know one's limitations" and "the measure of one's capacity" and therefore to humble oneself before the deities (Wilkins 12). The play, hence, confirms the Greek religious and moral principles.

Oedipus reveals different concepts and presuppositions about what it means to be. As a polemic against Protagoras' dictum, it offers a vision against relativism. The dictum "man is the measure of everything" comes from a book by Protagoras entitled *Alétheia* which subscribes to a vision of truth as unconcealment not adequation (Lee 1). In *Oedipus*, truth is still something revealed to man. The prophecy tells the truth which Oedipus has to discover for himself after a long attempt to deny it in order to live according to the Greek code of honor. The play still subscribes to a vision of truth as *alétheia*. Yet, unlike Agamemnon and Antigone, Oedipus does not choose between two different courses of action. He does not choose deliberately between sacrificing his daughter or not, knowing the consequences in each case. Also, he does not choose consciously between burying a family member or not, with the repercussions in his mind. He makes the only

choice possible to a Greek man abiding by the code of honor. The development of the action merely confirms the prophecy against his best efforts, showing, thereby, the impossibility of escaping from the revealed fate. The play confirms the religious vision and the priority of the deities. In other words, it confirms Greek faith and stabilizes the status quo. Through *peripeteia*, Oedipus merely confirms what has been revealed. There is no possibility of change. The ironic reversal of events does not show any possibility of overcoming the status quo. It merely confirms it. "This notion not only of a static undialectical world of ideas, but of undialectical myths that break off the dialectic, points back to its origins in Plato" (Adorno 267). While it is true that Oedipus dialectically rises above his status by inflicting punishment on himself, proving himself higher than a blind animal merely acting out his fate, the Greek vision and the status quo are confirmed not challenged. In fact, Sophocles was awarded the first public distinction for his drama at the Greater Dionysia in 468 B.C. with "a view to his political conservatism" (Fóti 165). *Oedipus*, thus, reveals two different manifestations of being; truth is still defined as *alétheia* yet the ironic structure of the play does not allow something new to take place. It merely confirms society as it is. It confirms the status quo and rejects the concept of becoming. It is, as Robert S. Gall says, a poetic manifestation of being at the beginning of metaphysics (190). *Oedipus* is situated at a juncture in which the change from the pre-Socratic concept of being to the later reified Greek concept of being as *ousia* with its denotations of stability, objectivity and presence was taking place.

Arthur Miller's Reformulation of Greek Tragedy

The metaphysical definition of being as *ousia* determines beings as objects that can be manipulated to achieve human ends. *Techné*, as the human mode of knowing and creating, unconceals being. Being is never manifested completely and the manifestation made possible by *techné* is, hence, both concealment and unconcealment. Yet the metaphysical determination of being as entity renders it completely subject to *techné* and conceals any other manifestation of being. It renders itself the only possible manifestation and banishes any other (Heidegger, *Question 27*). "Technicity is ... indissociable from the history of metaphysics" (Fóti 164). The sway of metaphysical technicity determines everything to be either a reserve or a tool and conceals any other dimension. This metaphysical unconcealment of being has determined man to be the center of the world and rendered everything, including other people, to be tools utilized to achieve ends.

In the twentieth century which has been called the age of "consummate meaninglessness" by Robert Pippin, following Heidegger, due to the denial of all dimensions of meaning by metaphysical technicity, tragedy seemed to be almost obsolete (119). Arthur Miller undertook the mission not only of proving its possibility but also of displaying that it is the most balanced and accurate representation of man (Miller, *Essays* 10). Working within the frame of realistic representation of society to man, Miller undeniably remains in the humanist vision which accepts the centrality of man. Yet what starts to unconceal itself in his plays is something

different from the technical determination of man as a maker or a tool. While he remains within the metaphysical frame, some different unconcealment of being starts to reveal itself. If Heidegger returned to early Greek tragedy to witness an unconcealment of being different from that determined by metaphysics in the work of Socratic philosophers, Miller's tragedies, which are still within the metaphysical framework determined by the metaphysics of representations, start to unconceal a different revelation.

Miller's declared goal in writing "Tragedy and the Common Man" is to show that the paucity of tragedies cannot be explained by the lack of heroes among us and that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy as kings and queens (7). The paucity of tragedies is the result of the onset of a certain type of thinking, an intellectual framework that dominated the West since the late nineteenth century. "[O]ur lack of tragedy may be partially accounted for by the turn which modern literature has taken toward the purely psychiatric view of life, or the purely sociological' (9). Modern materialist science, product of the technical view of the world which denies all non-material dimensions, produced a vision of man according to which all his choices and actions are determined by either social or psychological factors. In such a material frame, what distinguished man, what sets him apart from material entities, is concealed. Psychology and sociology are two human sciences which study man as a natural phenomenon; his actions are mere reactions to external or internal stimuli. In both cases, man is not regarded as a free agent. He is a material phenomenon

that can be studied and explained in naturalistic terms. These sciences stem from a technical vision of man and of the world. Miller seeks to restore a fine balance between the material nature of man and his being as man. "From neither of these views can tragedy derive, simply because neither represents a balanced concept of life" (9). Miller, hence, seeks to move beyond the explanations of man offered by the materialist sciences and uses tragedy to offer a view of human being that departs from materialist determination. He seeks to move beyond the vision of the being of man determined by technicity.

In the materialist mind frame, man is seen as "a dumb animal moving through a preconstructed maze toward his inevitable sleep," writes Miller in "The Nature of Tragedy" (12). This concept of man cannot produce tragedy for two reasons; first, it does not suit the dignity of a human being, let alone that of the tragic hero. The tragic hero must make a choice which will turn out to be a wrong one. In the deterministic vision of materialist sciences, every action is considered a response to a stimulus. Freedom has no place in this mind frame. Second, enlightenment is impossible in such a vision. Man cannot learn anything about himself beyond the uncoincidental made possible by materialist sciences and even if he does, such knowledge would not avail him in his pursuit of a better life. Tragedy can be produced only in a concept of being which allows for the non-material dimensions of human being to unconceal themselves. In other words, tragedy is possible only within a concept of

being that is not reducible to the determinations of the technological view of life.

The concept of being as *ousia*, which has defined being since Aristotle to the present day, is characterized by stability. It denies becoming. As a result, the status quo is seen as a matter of fact. To think of beings in a process of becoming, of what they have been and what they may be in the future is either denied by the technical metaphysical view or relegated to a position secondary to the discovery of their essential nature. Perhaps, Miller's seminal contribution to the theory of tragedy is not rehabilitating the common man as a tragic hero but something else he does in the process. He shifts the tragic flaw from the individual hero to society and, in doing so, questions the seemingly stable nature of society itself. Society is not stabilized in the face of the individual. It is society itself that needs to change.

[I]n the process of action everything we have accepted out of fear or insensitivity or ignorance is shaken before us and examined, and from this total onslaught by an individual against the seemingly stable cosmos surrounding us – from this total examination of the “unchangeable” environment – comes the terror and the fear that is classically associated with tragedy (8).

In redefining the source pity and fear, Miller does not ascribe them to the downfall of a good man in a high position but rather to the questioning of the seemingly stable and unchangeable nature of society. He does not subscribe to the

stability of social being but, in his critical tragedies, questions it and approaches a different concept of social being as unstable and changeable.

In his reformulation of tragedy, Miller does more than question the stability of being. He redefines the tragic flaw as follows:

In the sense of having been initiated by the hero himself, the tale always reveals what has been called his “tragic flaw,” a failing that is not peculiar to grand or elevated characters. Nor is it necessarily a weakness. The flaw, or crack in the character, is really nothing – and need be nothing – but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status (8).

The tragic flaw is not necessarily a weakness in the character of the hero. It stems from his conflict with society, his unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what degrades him. In this way, Miller shifts the tragic flaw from the individual to society. “[I]f it is true that tragedy is the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly, his destruction in the attempt posits a wrong or an evil in his environment. And this is precisely the morality of tragedy and its lesson” (8). In doing so, tragedy changes from a conservative form that confirms the status quo and reveals a static concept of being to another that bears witness to vision of change, to a process of becoming in which the

stable nature of society will no longer remain what it is. It bears witness to a new concept of being that is yet to be unconcealed. Miller changes the nature of tragedy itself from an art form that confirms static being to one that unconceals becoming. He dereifies tragic existence.

In *All my Sons*, the Greek idea of fate as something sealed, unchangeable and totally separate from the individual is denied. Unlike the prophecy in *Oedipus* which will hold true against the hero's best efforts at avoiding it, the fate of Larry Keller is no sealed in the stars. Dr. Jim Bayliss prepares a "horoscope" for Larry Keller and finds that the day he is presumed dead is a favorable day for him.

It was a day when everything good was shining on him, the kind of day he should've married on. You can laugh at a lot of it, I can understand you laughing. But the odds are a million to one that a man won't die on his favorable day. That's known, that's known, Chris (Miller, *Plays* 137)!

According to the horoscope, to the fate revealed by the stars, Larry could not have died on the day he died. Unlike Greek tragedy, there is no sealed fate. The prophecy in *Oedipus* confirms the priority of the Greek deities and, consequently, confirms the values of society and culture. It subscribes to a fixed and unchangeable view of existence. The rejection of such a fixed vision of existence departs from the confirmation of the status quo and the reified state which the tragic form has always accepted.

This change is so enormous that it can be considered a challenge to the history of tragedy as a whole. In Greek tragedy, the individual needs to adjust to society and its moral code. Miller writes that, for a moment, everything is questioned before society confirms itself again. “The Greeks could probe the very heavenly origin of their ways and return to confirm the rightness of laws” (9). This stable nature of society and its mind frame continues to dominate tragedy afterwards. In Shakespeare, tragedy takes place when there is a disruption in the chain of being, like when the king is murdered or his throne usurped by another person lower in the chain. Tragedy ends with the restoration of order. In Miller’s tragedies, the individual’s flaw is representative of social morality – American pragmatism and materialism for instance. It is society and social morality that need to change. The tragic flaw of the hero is not a peculiar characteristic of a particular individual – like hesitation, procrastination, credulity and over-ambition – but rather a manifestation of a social flaw common in American society like extreme individualism, unrestrained pragmatism and unlimited pursuit of self-interest.

The technical concept of being determines entities as objects of use. The world is seen as a reserve to be used to serve human ends. Everything, including other people, is seen as a tool.

The earth and its atmosphere become raw material. Man becomes human material, which is disposed of with a view to proposed goals. The unconditioned establishment of the unconditional

self-assertion by which the world is purposefully made over according to the frame of mind of man's command is a process that emerges from the hidden nature of technology. Only in modern times does this nature begin to unfold as a destiny of the truth of all beings as a whole (Heidegger, *Poetry* 109).

In the concept of being determined by the sway of technicality, man becomes human material or what is referred to today as 'human resources.' Man becomes a resource used to serve a technical or economic end, similar to other resources. Technicity forms the background of the industrial world presented in *All My Sons* in which Joe Keller, "a manufacturer of aircraft engines," lives and thrives (Bigsby 78).

Miller considered himself a writer in the mainstream of drama started by Aeschylus (Murphy 10). He regarded Greek tragedies as his model for their magnificent form. The similarities between *All my Sons* and *Oedipus*, for instance, are striking. Like *Oedipus*, *All my Sons* is a tragedy of truth, of the relentless pursuit of truth as an ideal at any cost (Menke 9; Bigsby 78). Like *Oedipus*, truth in *All my Sons* is revealed to the characters and brings about the fall of the tragic hero. Like it, the search for knowledge is carried out in the framework of crime and trial (Menke 9). In both plays, guilt comes from the past to haunt the hero and cause his downfall. Moreover, self-interest and the preservation of one's honor come in conflict with state affairs and public duty. *Oedipus* seeks to live an honorable life according to the

Greek code of honor yet commits a crime that must be punished if the city is to be cured of the disease inflicted by the deities. Joe Keller seeks to keep his own factory in business and pass it to his children but in order to do so he commits a crime. Both tragedies take place in the intersection between one's public duty to the state and private duty to himself and his family. This, by no means, hints that *All my Sons* is a modern rewriting of *Oedipus*. It only means that Miller had Greek tragedy in mind while he was reformulating the concept of the tragic for the twentieth century. In his article "On Social Plays," he writes that the Greeks "had discovered some aspect of the Grand Design which also was the right way to live *together*. If the American playwrights of serious intent are in any way the sub-conscience of the country, our claims to have found that way are less than proved" (Miller, *Essays* 71). If, according to Miller, the Greeks found that way, it would follow that some of their theatrical output, like *Oedipus*, would confirm it. If the American playwrights, on the other hand, have not found this way, it also follows that Miller seeks to negate the status quo in pursuit of a different condition.

All my Sons is a play about a man, Joe Keller, who places himself before society, values individualism above social responsibility and pragmatism above any ideal. For Miller this is not an individual failure but a social malaise produced by the disintegration of the unity of the individual and society which can be witnessed in Greek society. "The individual" in the Greek Polis, according to Miller, "was at one with his society" (Miller, *Essays* 69). In modern society,

on the other hand, “nowhere in the world where industrialized economy rules – where specialization in work, politics, and social life is the norm – nowhere has man discovered a means of connecting himself to society except in the form of a truce with it” (72). Joe Keller’s individualism and pragmatism are not individualistic traits but social conditions produced by the nature of modern industrial society. This is why his tragic flaw is not an individual problem but a symptom of a social malaise. His destruction comes out of realizing that putting oneself and one’s family above society as a whole is bound up to destroy it. If the Greeks had confirmed their laws and values, confirming modern values would not save society but may lead it to destruction. It would merely confirm the reified vision of man as a producer who uses other people as human resources to achieve his subjective goals. Unlike the ancient Greek values, modern values, if confirmed, would lead to the disintegration of society.

Chris Keller, Joe’s veteran son, finds it difficult to accept society as it is with its materialistic values. Chris compares the society he cannot accept to his experience in Vietnam War. “The cats in that alley are practical, the bums who ran away when we were fighting were practical. Only the dead ones weren’t practical. But now I’m practical, and I spit on myself” (Miller, *Plays* 148). In his experience in the army, he finds a different model of community from which he can condemn the social values he finds unacceptable. In the army, he saw people sacrificing their lives for each other. This stands as the extreme opposite to his father’s egoistic

deed. When Larry's suicide letter is produced by Ann, Joe Keller finally realizes that his egoistic act which meant to save himself, his factory and family is self-destructive and resulted, ironically, in his son's death. This shows the self-defeating nature of the modern individualistic, industrial society in which people are resources or tools used by others. This calls for a different kind of society which breaks with the reified technical manifestation of being which has been determined in late Greek thought.

All my Sons shows a kind of morality and social being which has reached its logical end. It shows a different model of experience in which people act in a different way. Moreover, it refers to one social formation reaching an impasse and another that has not yet been born. It only shows intimations of a kind of being in which people are not determined by their economic status and their ability to exchange their physical and intellectual effort for financial value. Man's being would not be technically determined as a human resource. In the contrast between the two modes of being, one still alive and the other struggling to be born, the play shows a process of becoming at its inception. This change from one concept of being to another can also be witnessed in the rise of consciousness of the environment which has been turned into a "standing reserve" and the global disasters this has incurred. The growing consciousness of the disastrous products of the technical determination of being awaits some new revelation, some new way of viewing beings as something other than sources and tools. It shows

awareness of the reified nature of technical revelation and, as a result, seeks a non-reified vision.

In conclusion, *All my Sons*, as a twentieth century tragedy, reveals signs of change from one self-defeating mode of existence to another healthier state. Unlike *Oedipus* which confirms Greek society and moral code, it does not confirm the status quo but seeks to negate it for the sake of another post-technical mode of existence. In this negation, it reveals change from a concept of being as something static and unchanging to a concept of becoming, of something that will be revealed. It reveals signs of dereifying tragic existence.

Heidegger turned to tragedy in the course of his study of the pre-Socratic concept of being in order to restore a pre-metaphysical concept of human being, and of being in general, prior to Plato's and Aristotle's metaphysical determinations of what it means to be human. He sought to restore the uncanny nature of human being prior to Aristotle's metaphysically determined definition of man as a rational animal or animal characterized by reason in *Nicomachean Ethics* (20-22). This definition follows the same metaphysically determined formula of substance, *ousia*, with qualities, *symbebekota*. Aristotelian definitions determine everything in the form of substance or material followed by the trait which sets it apart from other species that belong to the same genus. They determine everything in a reified manner as an entity. Heidegger's study of the pre-metaphysical concept of being may point the way to a post-metaphysical vision of man.

The unconcealment of being through *techné* which has come to dominate the West and all its material and mental production and determined it to be *ousia* and human beings to be “human resources” (*menchliches Material*) since the shift from the pre-Socratic concept of being as *phusis* to being as *ousia* in Aristotle, with its different variations, has regulated all revelation and banished any manifestation that does not agree with its technical essence (Heidegger, *Poetry* 109). Reading tragedy in its inception at the threshold of the metaphysical determination of being and near the end of this metaphysical vision unconceals not only the shift that took place early in history but also reveals intimations of what may come, of a new revelation of being that is not determined from a technological configuration of being.

Just like the tragic hero, humanity in the twenty-first century arrives too late on the scene. The meaning of being was determined 2500 years ago. We merely have to act it out. This is why Heidegger sees that philosophy is tragic in nature. Like Oedipus’ fate, the meaning of our being is revealed only at the end. Yet, in finding this meaning out, we somehow recognize that something has run its course and that we remain marooned at an end, waiting for a revelation of a new concept of being that may overcome the determination of the reified meaning of being as *ousia* and of human beings as resources. When we investigate the late form of tragedy and how it reformulates the earliest, we realize that we are witnesses to a change. Which direction and what meaning of being may be revealed remain to be seen. It is doubtless that it is necessary to escape from the

hold of technology. As for the manner, this is yet to be known. Heidegger says in his posthumously published interview with *Der Spiegel*, “only a god can save us” (57). Out of the sway of *techné* which has lasted for more than two millennia, there is no way out of the dominance of the scientific and materialistic metaphysical determination of beings – things and humans – except by the intervention of some sort of spirituality; a spiritual view which breaks with the determination of beings as useable entities into a new revelation of being which allows man to see them and himself in a new non-materialistic way.

Notes

- 1) Since modern translations are somehow different from Heidegger’s, the reference here is made to Heidegger’s translation of the Greek text as he renders it in *Introduction to Metaphysics*.

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نزع تشيؤ الوجود التراجيدي:

قراءة التراجيديا الإغريقية وإعادة تشكيلها على يد آرثر ميللر من منظور

فلسفة هايدجر

ملخص

اهتم مارتن هايدجر بدراسة التراجيديا الإغريقية في معرض استكشافه لمفهوم الوجود عند الفلاسفة السابقين على سقراط. وتقدم دراسته للتراجيديا فهما لمعنى الوجود قبل تحديد أفلاطون وأرسطو لهذا المعنى بشكل ميتافيزيقي. ترصد دراسة هايدجر تحولا كبيرا من مفهوم الوجود عند الفلاسفة السابقين على سقراط إلى معناه عند التالين له. يفسر هايدجر تاريخ الغرب بأكمله على أنه نتاجا لهذا التغيير في معنى الوجود. تسعى هذه الدراسة في البداية إلى تحديد موضع مسرحية "أوديب ملكا" لسوفكليس في تاريخ الوجود لكي نقف على هذا التحول من المفهوم المبكر إلى المفهوم المتأخر. وتقوم الدراسة بعد ذلك في الجزء الثاني بقراءة إعادة تشكيل التراجيديا الإغريقية على يد آرثر ميللر في القرن العشرين. وذلك في محاولة لكشف نتيجة التشكيل الميتافيزيقي والتقني لمعنى الوجود. ويمكن اكتشاف حدود التشكيل التقني لمعنى الوجود في تراجيديا "كلهم أبنائي" لآرثر ميللر. وعند هذا الحد، يبدأ مفهوم جديد في الكشف عن ذاته.