Goethe’s *Iphigenia in Tauris*:
A Modern Use of a Greek Dramatic Theme

Let me start, in order to identify myself, with a very German question, a question that has worked a spiritual upheaval first in the country in which it was so insistently asked and that, eventually, was to redirect the whole course of Western civilization: How can I justify myself? To put it less theologically and dramatically: What am I doing here, and what gives me the right to be here? Am I just a guest from the outside, or do I belong here? I do belong—and not only for personal reasons—for men of Classics and I belong together, because there is no German spirit without the spirit of the classics; and whenever my home country’s spirit reached its highest heights, it was anointed with a drop of sweet honey from Mount Hymettos.

Starting out by putting the shoe on the wrong foot, I want to remind my classical readers that they owe the German spirit a profound debt of gratitude, because surely they cannot forget the monumental contributions that Germany made to their discipline. Yet these contributions assuredly were nothing else but a loving, though modest, payment of the debt that Germany, the finest of Germany, owes to Greece and the Greeks. In the heroine’s opening monologue of the greatest German classical play, Goethe’s *Iphigenia in Tauris*, which I will discuss, the line rings out: “Seeking the land of
the Greeks with my soul”; and it is this search that has haunted the German mind, the best of the German mind, more powerfully, I think, than that of any other nation from the earliest times, especially from the days of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who rediscovered the greatness of Greek plastic art around the middle of the eighteenth century, to the days of Nietzsche at the end of the nineteenth, and well beyond.

But let me dwell for a moment at least, before I turn to my subject, Goethe’s *Iphigenia*, on Friedrich Hölderlin, the most exalted, intoxicated, and heart rending German traveler to Greece between Winckelmann and Nietzsche, the purest vessel of the δαιμόνιον of πολέμους, if ever there was one. No, I am wrong; he was not a traveler to Greece. What makes him so unspeakably moving is the fact that, his heart and mind filled with his love for the woman he called Diotima, he literally saw Jupiter discharging lightning and rain over the tiny garden patch in his Swabian village; and when he watched the vintagers coming down from their vineyards above the Neckar river, he took them for Dionysos sweeping down the hills with his followers, all the Greek Gods poised to set sail for his homeland, and he the herald of their arrival, which would transform his poor and barren Germany and make her the “holy heart of all peoples.” To be sure, it was madness, and in madness it had to end. But Hölderlin’s insanity is the most noble sacrifice ever offered by a nation upon the altar of Greece, a price so precious that it fully pays for the gift received.

There are some to whom this price seemed exorbitant and this search for Greece so obsessive and misguided that they diagnosed it as a positive disease and an aberration of the German mind. For instance, an immensely intelligent writer of the recent past, the Eng-
lishwoman E. M. Butler, published a book thirty-five years ago entitled *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* (the year was 1935, a time when, I am afraid, a very different tyranny held sway over that country), in which she claimed that Winckelmann's magic formula "noble simplicity and serene grandeur," by which he had tried to capture the spirit of Greek sculpture, had detracted the greatest German poets from their genuine essence and true destiny. She ends her fascinating presentation of Goethe, or rather should it not be called her fascinating settlement of accounts with Goethe, by proclaiming: "The potent spell of Winckelmann's Golden Age had proved a sinister one for Goethe. It had deflected the greatest Northern genius of modern times from his true and pre-destined bent."

I shall not argue against Miss Butler's thesis. I just want to cast a short glance at this "sinister spell" at its most potent in German literature, Goethe's *Iphigenia*, and, in so doing, address myself very modestly to the topic of ancient and modern use of dramatic themes. In no other instance of his entire literary production has Goethe so closely followed a canonical model, in this case the Euripidean tragedy, and yet given us, in his reworking of the ancient myth, so intensely personal and intimate a confession. By this I mean not only that a transmutation has occurred, which any of the old stories is bound to undergo when recast by a son of a later age, from Seneca to Jean-Paul Sartre, but that the given material has been infused with the spirit, the ideals, the demands, the hopes, and the despairs of his own times. Of course, Goethe's *Iphigenia* is a document of the intellectual climate of his period, and very decidedly so. It is the reflection of a guardedly optimistic, enlightened humanitarianism as it could emerge only at that particular place in Europe and at that par-
ticular moment in European history. But underneath it is—and we may, indeed, call this a modern use of a Greek dramatic theme—a direct projection of the poet's very personal and very unique existential problem and condition: curse-laden and curse-driven Orestes is Goethe himself, in the anguish of his heart, pursued by the furies of his own restlessness and uncontrollable tensions; Iphigenia, both sister and beloved, is the woman he met in Weimar, who by her strength, patient endurance, and purity was to lead him back to his lost and forfeited "home" and to lift the curse that he felt to be his inexorable inheritance. This is not only an old myth in a modern dress but a handed-down, again-and-again transformed story as a vessel of the most intimate personal confession.

It was perhaps this intense personalization of the ancient theme that induced Schiller, Goethe's most perceptive and intelligent critic, to call his friend's Greek play "astonishingly un-Greek." Right he was, and for another reason as well, a reason that, at first glance, seems to contradict what I have just said about the eminently confessional character of Goethe's Iphigenia. No matter how poignant a projection of his own emotional travail, his play is at the same time a conscious formulation of the human condition as such. And here we encounter, I think, another modern use of a Greek dramatic theme. Even though the great tragic writers of Greece rendered in their tragedies situations and constellations that were generally applicable to, and seen as, manifestations of man's fate, they did, it seems to me, consider their fables a presentation of a specific human case or a specific human situation, often linked to identifiable local establishments, cultic establishments of the Greek οἰκουμένη—as, for example, Pallas Athena's inauguration of the Athenian Areo-
pagus in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, or the veneration of the statue of Delphian Artemis to which the Iphigenia material is linked. By this I do not want to suggest even faintly that the Greek writers ascribed historicity to the events of and in tragedy. It was, after all, Aristotle who drew a sharp dividing line between history and μῦθος, when he defined, "History relates what, let us say, Alcibiades did or suffered, poetry represents the general, and this consists in how a human being of a certain character is likely or compelled to speak and act." A human being of a certain character—this given individual—this "case"; and I think cases, sensational and often gory, were given to us in all the reworkings through the centuries, psychologically or psychopathologically enriched as in Racine’s *Phèdre* or O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra*, interlaced with the author’s personal philosophy or the intellectual temper of his age as in Voltaire’s *Oreste* or in Alfieri’s *Agamemnon*, or used as vehicles for some timely political concerns as in Werfel’s *Trojan Women*, Giraudoux’s *La guerre de Troie n’aura pas lieu*, or Anouilh’s *Antigone*.

Goethe’s *Iphigenia* is different. He presents her story as what we today would call archetypical in the strictest sense, not only speech and action of a certain character under a set of given circumstances, but as a projection of the condition humaine per se, the breaking through of man into his authenticity. It may very well have been this redirecting of an ancient dramatic theme that made it possible for a great anatomist of the human soul, coming a little over a century after Goethe’s classical play, to discover in Sophocles’ *Oedipus* the most powerful ancient dramatic theme, the basic and unchangeably valid pattern of every son’s position between his father and his mother, a conception that I venture to guess, is far from what the old Greek legend
had even remotely in mind. And what Goethe did with the Iphigenia material is, so I believe, equally far removed from what the ancient story had in mind.

What he did with it amounts, indeed, to the search for, and conquest of, man's authenticity, and it is for this reason that his whole play centers around the discovery and the confession of truth. The play celebrates that which alone can lift the curse imposed upon us by suprapersonal forces, by the inexorable decree of the gods: the veracity of man's existence, his breaking through the shell and the snares of an unalterable determination into the recognition of his autonomous substance. Exactly in the middle of the play, at its very center—and center here is not simply an indication of place—Orestes, facing the unknown priestess of Artemis, Iphigenia, who does not know him either, exclaims: "Between us twain be truth. I am Orestes." At first glance, this may seem no more than the standard scene of recognition—*αναγνώσω* the Greeks called it—that forms one of the high points of so many Greek tragedies. But it is, in the case of Goethe's *Iphigenia*, much more than that. It is not only, as in the Euripidean tragedy, the moment when the two protagonists reveal their identities to each other; it is, rather, the moment of truth: Orestes cutting through the veil of deceit, of inauthenticity, with which he, or to be exact his friend Pylades, had shrouded his very existence by making Iphigenia believe that he was not who he really is. What Orestes lives through here is an agonizing act of confession, because by naming himself, he names and confesses his unspeakable crime, the murder of his mother. It is this confession, this making himself known, that is the beginning of his recovery and of his liberation from the suffocating grip of guilt and corrosion. "Between us twain be truth"—Iphigenia, Goethe's
Iphigenia, could repeat these very same words when she faces King Thoas and informs him of the deceitful stratagem that with her consent, has been hatched against him: the theft and abduction of the statue of Taurian Artemis and the surreptitious flight of the three Greeks. It is a confession fraught with mortal danger—and Iphigenia is fully aware of it—because the irate king could easily destroy her, her brother, and his friend. Again, the moment of truth has come, the demand to assert and confess one's own verity, no matter how deadly the risk, no matter how cruel the price this truth may exact. It is at this point that Goethe has strayed decisively from his model, for the act of Iphigenia is a clear defiance of the god Apollo, who had ordered her brother to travel to the land of the Tauri and to bring back to Greece the statue of his sister-goddess Artemis languishing in the barbarian land. Yet Iphigenia, fully aware of the god's decree and of the promise that its execution holds for her brother, for herself, and for her whole house, will—at the critical moment—thwart the fulfillment of the divine command because to her it is inconceivable that the gods want a deed carried out that involves deceit, betrayal, and trickery.

In Goethe's version Iphigenia's courage to recognize and speak the truth, her own and that of the situation in which she finds herself, has the farthest-reaching ramifications. After she has broken through to the very core of her personal truthful existence, and only after she has done so, the truth of the gods, the true meaning of their will, stands revealed. As it now turns out—and this is Goethe's most radical departure from the ancient version of the fable—Apollo, when ordering Orestes to bring home the sister, was not thinking of his own sister, Artemis, but of Orestes' sister, Iphigenia.
This reinterpretation of the divine oracle and its fulfillment may seem no more than a bit of dramatic sophistry designed to assure a happy ending, which will include, besides the three Greeks, the barbarian king as well, who, losing the beloved priestess of Artemis as he must, will at least keep the hallowed statue of the goddess. Yet, it is, of course, more than that. It is proof of the Goethean conviction that only when and after man has found and professed his authenticity, the divine is free to speak truly and to announce the very meaning of its will. The act and triumph of self-recognition, of discovering one's veracity and very substance extends, beyond the human sphere, to the godhead itself.

To be sure, this is a twist astonishingly un-Greek, a radically modern use of an old theme in which the dramatic action as such, the events of the myth, are no longer of primary importance as Aristotle had insisted they should be, but the whole play is turned into a paradigm of the process that leads to man's self-awareness and self-realization. And as such, as a catalyst in the experiment of discovering one's own truth, Goethe experienced all themes, dramatic and otherwise, that Greek poetry had bequeathed to mankind; exactly the opposite, it would seem to me, of what Miss Butler diagnosed as a "potent spell" deflecting one's true and predestined bent. Late in his life, in one of his many general maxims, Goethe explained of what use the ancient Greeks were to him, and it is exactly this use that he had made the very topic and action of his own Greek play. He offers this clarification in the form of a little imaginary dialogue that runs as follows: "Someone said to me: 'Why do you trouble yourself so much with Homer? You can't really understand him anyway.' To this I answered: 'Neither do I understand sun and moon and stars; yet they are passing over my head and
I recognize myself in them while gazing up there, and doing so I wonder whether perhaps, one day, I might amount to something, too.' "To recognize oneself so that one day one might amount to something, too—this means, indeed, putting the ancient themes to new and good use. Upon reflection, such an attitude may be the most desirable outgrowth of that self-critical spirit that developed in Greece during her most glorious period. In any case, it is answer and echo of the admonition that was inscribed on Apollo's temple in Delphi as the highest task the god of light and poetry had assigned to man: γνῶθι σεαυτόν.