Extract from *The Serpent and the Eagle. A Reading of the Oresteia* by W.B. Stanford.

The *Oresteia* revolutionizes the archaic world. Homer and Hesiod had an earlier parable of progress. Hesiod in his *Theogony* traced the gods themselves from savagery to civilization, or rather to a peak of absolute control. The *Theogony* is a story less of succession than of suppression, of fantasies acted out in filial brutality. Kronos suppressed his father, Ouranos, by castrating him. Zeus suppressed his father, Kronos, blasted him and the Titans with lightning and shackled them in Tartarus. Zeus ruled on high, not because he was good but because he was beyond good and evil, too strong for the law of retaliation that consumed his forebears. He was the invincible masculine will, the Father who triumphed over Mother Earth. His justice, his *Dike,* was the way of Might Makes Right. His way toward men was the way things are—not in the golden age when men and gods were equal but in this iron age where we grind out a subsistence, sons and fathers at each others' necks, belabored by the gods with massing hardships. Such was Zeus's reign in the third generation of his house, and Aeschylus compares him with Orestes in the third generation of his house, not only to buttress Orestes' victory but to humanize the gods. Aeschylus reopens the *Theogony,* not on a battleground but on a moral plane, the rocky and rewarding soil of the guilt-culture itself. Here Zeus's lightning bolts are of little value. He must use the forces of recrimination he had suppressed, the matriarchal Furies, yet he must contend with them as well, and he plays with a fire somehow equal to himself. The Furies will temper Zeus and make his *Dike* just.

Dike must evolve from the blood vendetta of the tribe to the social justice of our hopes. Potentially it is the force of right and orderly relations, but because of acts of recklessness it has remained a force of vengeance, cursing offenders and their heirs with endless acts of violence—the punishments of the Furies. Paris' rape of Helen is an international violation of *Dike* that deploys the Greeks against the Trojans, with Agamemnon as the minister of Zeus's Fury. But to accomplish his mission he must violate *Dike* on an internecine level, sacrifice his daughter and arouse Clytaemnestra in return. The Fury of the Father collides in Argos with the Fury of the Mother, and the Mother wins a battle to the death. But these forces reappear and concentrate within the son, Orestes; they begin to wage a dialectic struggle, straining toward a crucial resolution. Civilization hangs on their success. This *Theogony* is a battle on which the house of Atreus, the house of the gods, and all our houses stand or fall. Aeschylus insists that each generation create a new alliance between the forces in contention for its world. He presents their conflict in a range of ways: from a theological conflict between Will and Necessity, or Zeus and the Fates, the gods of the Sky and the powers of the Earth; to a social conflict between the patriarchy and the matriarchy; to a psychological conflict between our intellect and our hunger for release, our darker, vengeful drives that can invigorate our dreams of ideality, equity and balance. For while these forces strive against each other, they are allies as well. They are as complementary as Dionysos and Apollo, or their partisans who strive to explain the tragic vision— Nietzsche versus Hegel, Cambridge anthropologists versus literary historians, ritualists versus rationalists, fatalists versus spokesmen for the tragic flaw. Like Dionysos in Nietzsche's final vision of him, the *Oresteia* would invite the adversaries to embrace. The trilogy ends with a union of energy and order, the way of nature and the way of man. The shackles of the primitive vendetta lend their rigor to the lasting bonds of law. Society takes what Freud has called "the decisive step of civilization"—*Dike* turns to justice.

Many powers work toward this end, but none is more essential than the Furies. They grow in the *Oresteia* as they may have grown in Greek religion, progressing from curses to righteous causes, the ministers of justice who, as Heracleitos saw them, would detect the sun if it should overstep its limits. The Furies are a paradox of violence and potential. Snakes in their hair and black robes swarming, they represent a real, objective law—blood will have blood—yet that is a law of human nature too, and the Furies become the pangs of conscience that can lead to self-fulfillment. This is a paradox that modern psychology has prepared us to accept, especially the psychology of aggression that discovers ties between our powers of destruction and our powers of survival. Their symbiosis, in fact, may have given rise to the Furies if, as legend tells, they sprang to life from the blood of Ouranos' genitals when Kronos lopped and flung them in the sea. The Furies are the spirits of the avenging dead that bring regeneration. They are the paradox of woman, Clytaemnestra first of all, murderous in defense of those she nurtures. They are the potency of creation, now consuming, now empowering, and their transformation into the kind Eumenides may be latent in their nature from the start. To another age they would seem the archetype of evil—"these wasteful Furies," in Milton's words. Aeschylus saw them as the force of love-in-hate that impels our rude beginnings toward our latter-day achievements. The fire of the Furies is Promethean. "The former age of the Titans [is] brought back from Tartarus once more, restored to the light of day," as Nietzsche says, but the new divinity that Aeschylus confers upon them is both primordial and perfected too, a merger of the Furies and Athena. And the closing scene of the *Oresteia* rings with joy as well as tumult. A final procession forms, vivid with red cloaks and bright with torches, to escort the Furies to their new homes. The bloody robes of Agamemnon and his murderers have become the robes of law-abiding citizens and their guests. The torches that heralded assassination blaze in honor of a harmonious settlement of ancient wrongs. Athens has suffered; Athens will now go forward under the guidance of her goddess who embodies justice and compassion, the equity of Heaven and the energies of the Earth.

Aeschylus, *The Oresteia,* translated by Robert Fagles (1975) with an introductory essay by W.B. Stanford, New York: Viking Press. pp.11-13.