

Mob, Cabal, or Utopian Commune?

The Political Contestation of the Ancient Chorus 1789-1917

Introduction

In 1901, the Russian revolutionary intellectual Anatoly Lunacharsky had returned from Germany and his period of direct association with Rosa Luxemburg and the German Spartacists. Now in political exile in Kaluga, an industrial town ninety miles south-west of Moscow, he turned to creative writing, and in a linen mill organised a workers' theatre, which he called 'a miniature Athens'.¹ One of his works was a revolutionary epic poem, *Music. A Dithyramb to Dionysos* (1901), which builds to an excited climax in which the plural lyric voice of the Dioyniac brotherhood calls for unification as an ecstatic, unindividuated 'we':

Let us intoxicate ourselves
with the juice of the grape
Let our dithyramb ring out
Loud and strong
Let us in our ecstasy break
Down all barriers
And steal a kiss from the lips
Of Bacchus.
Be welcome, Death: A just
Reward awaits us
In our hearts we all shall
Live again.

Evoe! Give me your hands, my

Brothers

And forget that you are only

You --

Let us be We: and in a sea of

Misery

*Create great beauty for an instant too.*²

The indivisible thiasos of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* meets the idiom of the choruses of Euripides' *Bacchae* in a strikingly Modernist call to aesthetic as well as political revolution: 'Let us be We: and in a sea of Misery / Create great beauty for an instant too.'

Lunacharsky was to become one of the chief architects of the ideology of both Russian revolutions, and in 1917 Lenin appointed him Commissar of Enlightenment. In *Music*, he expressed his deep-felt intuition that the dithyramb provided the perfect form for the expression of the collective yearning for socialist utopia shared by the international working class. When 'you' and 'I' become merged into 'We' in the Dionysiac thiasos, we can 'break / Down all barriers.' In a new development, the specific Greek chorus to which the political revolutionaries now began to look, along with the anthropological 'ritualists' such as Jane Ellen Harrison and Gilbert Murray,³ was the chorus of Euripides' *Bacchae*. In the 19th century, on the other hand, as we shall see, the choral archetypes which dominated the cultural imagination were rather different. They were usually those of the Aeschylean *Prometheus* or *Oresteia* and Sophocles' *Antigone*, especially after the international impact made in the 1840s by 'Mendelssohn's *Antigone*'.⁴ There was also a pervasive stereotype, used in negative characterisations of groups, of a chorus of emotionally effusive young

women, a type broadly associated with Euripides' *Hippolytus* or *Medea*. But by the turn of the twentieth century, when Lunacharsky discovered Euripides' maenads, the Russian theatre was also moving on from the more traditional apprehension of Greek chorality into something much more avant-garde: Stanislavsky's *Antigone* of 1899 still used Mendelssohn's Romantic musical setting. But he experimented with quite different, mass choruses in his subsequent productions of classic drama, notably *Julius Caesar*, which he conceived as 'bright, burning, and revolutionary', at the Moscow Art Theatre in the 1903-4 season. The chief role was played by the People, and Stanislavsky used a cast of more than two hundred Romans, played by workers and university students,⁵ in an experiment in mass chorality of the type which was made more familiar in western Europe a few years later in the *Oedipus Rex* directed by Max Reinhardt.⁶

The revolutionary potential of Greek theatrical chorality was more clearly realised than ever before in revolutionary Russia, but it was of course built into the medium from the moment of its genesis. The Greek tragic choruses which have survived are the products of democratic Athens, a society which had recently given more political power to more – and poorer – people than any previously. The complex generic form and fluctuating metrical components of our extant fifth-century dramas reflect at a mediated aesthetic level the social tensions and radical newness of the Athenian revolution.⁷ Since as early as the 17th century, the more astute commentators on the ancient genre saw that the chorus had a subversive and radical political potential which, in at least some of the surviving Greek tragedies, created a tension in the monarchical constitutional worlds they recreated. Corneille and Dacier, for example, had objected to the lack of loyalty—even treasonable insubordination—which the chorus in Euripides' *Medea* shows towards their king by taking Medea's side.⁸ Brumoy's *Le Théâtre des Grecs* (1730), read widely in Britain, sees the political culture of democratic Athens as explaining the chorus: they are a reflection of the Athenian spectators, who were

‘accustomed to be involved in public affairs’ and therefore had ‘a quite different taste from the French spectators, who meddle not with anything in their own happy and tranquil monarchy’.⁹ In England, on the other hand, Ralph suggests that the chorus was a result of the *decline* of Athenian freedom, added as an ornament after Pericles established the theoric fund, to mask the decreasing political freedom of the playwrights.¹⁰ Richard Hurd was one of the few to see the political complexity of the relationship between democratic Athens and her tragic choruses. The chorus can only speak the *truth* if it consists ‘of citizens, whether of a republic, or the milder and more equal roialties’. Yet Hurd sees that a good playwright can use the chorus even of a play set in a tyranny to imply political truths. His subtle reading of *Antigone* points out the chorus’s reluctance to protest against Creon’s edict, and the way its members ‘obsequiously go along with him in the projects of his cruelty’. But Sophocles, he argues, was still using the chorus in a morally effective way. He is deliberately showing how men become incapable of moral protest under despotism. Sophocles ‘hath surely represented, in the most striking colours, the pernicious character, which a chorus, under such circumstances, would naturally sustain’.¹¹

Discussion of the ancient tragic chorus, in the era sometimes known as ‘Modernity’ between the later Enlightenment and the Modernist moment just before World I, that is, between the French and Russian revolutions of 1789 and 1917, provides a particularly accurate aesthetic and intellectual thermometer with which we can test the temperature of the political arguments of the times. The ancient chorus represents the plural voice of a community consisting of people of identical status. As such, it is an inherently radical or subversive entity if viewed from the perspective of a society which endorses anything other than absolute equality. For the hierarchical world of pre-revolutionary Europe, there was no contemporary equivalent, in terms of political bodies or groups, which was not problematic. It is not just that the shift from feudalism to early capitalism and subsequently

industrialisation delivered the death blows to any ancestral traditions of collective dance or song in northern Europe, alongside the triumph of bourgeois individual subjectivity in most media and genres of art.

More importantly, and more directly, in the Greek chorus a substantial group of absolute equals is seen and heard operating in unison. Moreover, as ancient critics were aware, the chorus-members are not of high social status, like the principal characters of tragedy: in the old days, says an author in the Peripatetic tradition whose works have come down to us under Aristotle's name, in tragedy only 'the rulers (*hēgemonēs*) were heroes, while the rest of the people (*hoi de laoi*), to whom the chorus belong, were ordinary human beings' (*anthrōpoi*, [Aristotle], *Problems* 19.48).¹² In the 18th and 19th centuries, the 'problem' of the Greek tragic chorus was usually articulated in aesthetic terms: it seemed incongruous, or absurd, or superfluous to the world created in theatre. But these aesthetic reactions were related to, and functioned to obscure, the underlying political issue. How could the tragic chorus not seem absurd, when there was no social or political equivalent to the chorus as a group of equal, ordinary human beings whose interests only partially coincided with those of their rulers but whose opinion actually mattered?

The Chorus between Nation and Class

Greek tragedy is conventionally acknowledged to have chimed in tune with some of the central concepts of Modernity--scientific rationalism, Kantian idealism, Darwinian anti-providentialism and above all European nationalism. In *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy* (2012), for example, Goldhill has recently emphasised the connections between German idealism, tragic theory and nationalism, especially as focussed in discourse on the tragic chorus. He has gone so far as to argue that the supreme manifestation of Greek tragic

chorality for Modernity is in the foundational works of the 19th-century German national operatic repertoire, basing his argument on a claim that the master episteme for understanding the chorus in the 19th century was a fusion of the emergent idea of a unified Germany, Kantian idealism and the promotion of the ‘ideal spectator’ (*ideale Zuschauer*) by Schegel, who of course found this concept in another part of the same Aristotelian text as the class distinction between the individual characters and the chorus to which I have referred above (*Problems* 19). In 2011, Goldhill claimed in a paper delivered at conference on ‘Tragedy and the Idea of Modernity’ organised by Josh Billings and Miriam Leonard at University College London that ‘when we look at the chorus of Greek tragedy on stage, we are always viewing through German-tinted spectacles, and we are always engaged in re-formulating our ideas of modernity.’ But there is a conundrum here. It would be silly to dispute Goldhill’s demonstration of the triangular connections between the theorisation of tragedy, German nationalism, and German idealist aesthetics. It would be even sillier to disagree with his claim for the prominence and centrality of Wagnerian opera to the 19th-century cultural scene as a whole. Yet I begin to part company with him when he makes the grander claim that it is in these foundational works of a particular medium in a particular culture—the German operatic repertoire—that we find the definitive manifestation of Greek tragic chorality in this era (and his enthusiasm for Wagner’s magnificent music implicitly suggests, perhaps in all eras).

An equally good case could be made that the definitive manifestation of chorality in this period is to be found in the much more status-and-wealth-conscious delineation of the tension between individual self-determination and the demands of society and community in the repeated use of the Greek chorus as model in the English-language novel from George Eliot to Thomas Hardy, George Meredith and Virginia Woolf.¹³ In this article, however, I look at two other fields in which the cultural presence of the ancient chorus was often felt

outside Germany. First, it is a regular image conjured up in British journalism, and secondly, it is an important constitutive idea in the development of radical lyric poetry, an advanced stage of which is exemplified in the verses by Lunacharsky which opened this chapter. In the English-speaking tradition the most influential contribution was made by Shelley's great lyric poems inspired by Aeschylean drama, *Prometheus Unbound* and *Hellas*. Shelley's admirers and imitators were, however, by no means confined to English speakers, and his radical use of the chorus found parallels in the work of poets in every European land, from Pushkin to Rimbaud. When Rimbaud briefly joined the 1871 Paris commune, for example, he experimented with new collective verse forms to suit the revolutionary future to which he and his associates aspired, for example in the oscillation between 'We' and 'I' in '*Chant de guerre parisien*' and '*Qu'est-ce pour nous, mon coeur...*'.¹⁴

The manifestations of chorality in the genres of journalistic prose and poetic lyric were inter-related, and mutually affirmed one another. In the later 19th century, an admirer of Byron compares him with a Greek chorus, inspiring and admonishing struggles for freedom and revolutions against tyranny across the European continent: 'Contemporaneously with discussions in the press and debates in Parliament, with the chronicle of foreign risings or the struggles of native parties, the strains of the self-exiled bard rose, year after year, like the monitory warnings of an old Greek chorus, giving forth to the audience of assembled nations the pregnant comment on unmerited suffering, and successful crime.'¹⁵

The chorus as understood by journalists and lyric poets also, as we shall see, shared an aetiology extending back not only to 18th-century Celtic revivalism. More importantly, the chorus had a past very specifically in the landmark mass choruses of the French revolution, the 'voice of the cities'.¹⁶ Not only did newly composed popular songs help spread the revolutionary identity across France, but in Republican spectacles and especially festivals, there was 'an unparalleled development in music, open air music made for all the people,

simple and comprehensible in form, sonorous and grandiose in its effect, with massed hundreds of thousands of performers'.¹⁷ The illiterate could learn catchy songs in which to 'express their longing for bread and security, their will to build a better social order.'¹⁸ At the great festivals, the collective became the protagonist in its own mass choruses as it was in the history of the times, in accordance with Rousseau's admonitions concerning outdoor spectacles in his *Lettre a M. d'Alembert sur les Spectacles* (1758): 'present the spectators as a spectacle; make them the actors themselves; let each one see himself in the others that all may be better united.' But the main point I would like to press in this article is that both journalism and lyric poetry throughout the long 19th century reveal that one reason why the chorus was so often and so prominently evoked was that it offered a place for thinking about the other pressing political issue of the day, besides nationalism—democratic revolution. The chorus did without question offer a promising paradigm in imagining a univocal *Volk* or compatriots within the emergent ideal of the unified nation-state. But surely it is of equivalent significance that it could also look like a threatening rabble or a utopian projection of an egalitarian commune, depending on your *class*-political perspective?

Two contrasting examples from the British press of the 1860s will demonstrate this beyond any question. First, the author of an article in a conservative newspaper in Cheltenham writes in 1866 to defend a Tory Member of Parliament who has been accused of financial corruption. The central strategy is to denigrate the M.P.'s accusers: 'working-men's clubs, missionary societies, broken-down tradesmen, unemployed labourers, political hangers-on, and the members of that Greek chorus of applause who believe it to be their duty to howl themselves hoarse at election times'.¹⁹ Organised labour activists, philanthropic Christians and the unemployed are here seamlessly fused with 'political hangers-on' and a cabal of noisy demonstrators—a Victorian rent-a-mob. This rhetorical procedure allows the author to insinuate a comparison with a Greek chorus, conceived as a group who like to shout

for the sake of it rather than because they are committed to any particular cause or have any valid point to make. Here is the Greek chorus as terrifying crowd, the *ochlocracy* into which ancient political theorists always feared any democracy could descend, explicitly connected with organised labour, social-reformist Christianity and the unemployed under-class.

Yet the use of the stereotype of the Greek chorus in an insult can also be found frequently in writers of quite the opposite political persuasion. Three years later, a storm of controversy broke out when Frederick Temple was appointed Bishop of Exeter. He was regarded as dangerously avant-garde, since he was a vocal opponent of doctrinal conservatives and an ardent campaigner on behalf of the working class, especially for improvements in the state education system. But other reformist Christians could not praise his appointment too highly, one of them complaining vociferously about the stranglehold of respectable mediocrity on the Church of England, where ‘the workers and thinkers in the clerical ranks are passed over in favour of elderly gentlemen of good connections and unexceptionable manners, who have never thought far enough to have their doctrinal soundness questioned nor acted with sufficient energy to make enemies, who are great on a Greek chorus and infallible judges of old port?’²⁰

So a Greek chorus, in political invective, could denigrate *both* an unthinking revolutionary rabble—an out-of-control *ochlos*--and the preferred reading of the conservative faction in the Anglican establishment, depending entirely whose side the rhetorician was supporting. In the factional politics of Ireland, the allegation that the opponents are using corrupt witnesses and pleaders in a court of law typically produced the comparison of their evidence to the effusions of a Greek choral rabble.²¹ The cultural history of the relationship between the Greek tragic chorus and Modernity is not only more political in the sense of its relationship with agitation for democracy and widening of the franchise, but more nuanced, dialectical and conflicted than the model focussed on the nation state and Wagnerian opera

has allowed us to appreciate. The tension between the German Idealist model of chorality and the increasing political contestation of the plural lyric voice underpins an intelligent review of A. Lodge's English translation of Schiller's *The Bride of Messina: A Tragedy with Choruses* published by Bohn in 1841:

The chorus of old was a voice of sympathy and contemplation elevated far above anything personal: to use Schiller's own words, it "forsook the contracted sphere of the incidents to dilate itself over the past and future, over distant things and nations and general humanity, in order to deduce the grand results of life and pronounced the lessons of wisdom": but in the *Bride of Messina*, it professedly contracts or enlarges its sphere with every new necessity of the scene; each contending party has his peculiar and rival chorus; and we cease to consider it in any loftier light than as an actor in the piece."²²

In 1841, as the Chartists in Britain were making rapid progress, this literary journalist asks whether the Greek chorus could and should be the ideal disinterested spectator, or the voice of an *engaged* collective demanding to be a *participatory* agent with claims that rival those of other parties.

The political dimension of the Greek dramatic chorus was even contested in the discussions surrounding the most popular forms of British musical theatre. The most politically radical of the burlesque dramatists, William Brough, insisted that his chosen medium descended directly from the tradition of the working-class heroes and heroines and their choral as well as solo songs in John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*.²³ He raised eyebrows when

he intermingled ‘popular negro melodies’ with Italian choruses and arias in his extravaganza adaptation of Bellini’s *La Sonambula*, and especially by the ‘liberty’ he was accused of taking ‘in introducing two characters who act at the beginning as a kind of negro “Greek chorus” to introduce the leading persons.’²⁴ On the other hand, James Robertson Planché, by far the most conservative writer of burlesque, used the Greek chorus to deride advocates of social reform and universal suffrage in his adaptation of Aristophanes’ *Birds* (1846),²⁵ and offered a quite different model of the chorus from Brough’s in introducing the arch, knowing, cynical, reactionary and ultimately ‘safe’ character of Public Opinion into his new libretto to the music of Offenbach for *Orpheus at the Haymarket* (1865); she reappeared ‘intermittently throughout the piece to comment, like the ‘old Greek chorus’’.²⁶

I am not denying that British national identity could draw on the Peripatetic/Schlegelian model of the ideal spectator quite as much as Wagnerian opera did; indeed, the ideal British spectator was often invoked in the British press to imply that the dispassionate Anglo-Saxon was watching with sad gravity the ‘Greek tragedy’ of violent politics on the international scene. British statesmen can be said quietly to reflect on the ‘sad drama’ of the deteriorating international relationship between the Tsar of Russia and the USA, like the Greek chorus, but without intervening. A British M.P. addressing electors in 1860 praises the conduct of the British parliament in relation to the wheeling and dealing over France’s annexation of Savoy on the Continent:²⁷ ‘In the momentous drama which has been acted in Europe during the last few months, it has supplied the place of the Greek chorus, and its sentiments have ever been in accordance with justice, virtue and truth’. But often there is far more to this clichéd formulation than national self-definition. Indeed, it provides us with a handle with which to grasp the connection between chorality and discourse on revolution.

Take the different conceptions of the chorus underlying two articles in British newspapers from the years 1848 and 1849, at the time of the wave of revolutions which began in France but swept across Europe and even to South America. These show that even the *nature* of the Greek chorus and its performances was not as settled a matter as Goldhill's emphasis on the Peripatetic/Schlegelian 'Ideal Spectator' implies. This idealised figure does indeed lurk beneath the smug observation in a London newspaper discussing the 1848 revolution in France: the foreign perspective of the author, he claims, 'involves some advantages. It sees, for the most, impartially and broadly, without prejudice or prepossession; it looks on, at a certain distance, like a Greek chorus, and appreciates motives, incentives, conditions of action, far better than the actors themselves engaged'.²⁸ The patronisingly calm Briton can see far better than the frantic French what is really going on in the country: the implication is that the relationship of the British (who have managed to avoid outright revolution despite the best attempts of the Chartists) to the French is something like that of a Sophoclean chorus (and, because of the gender of the journalist, a male Sophoclean chorus in one of the 'Theban plays' at that) to the violent, criminal and frenetic principal characters battling it out within the royal house of Labdacus. Here we see, I think, the enduring legacy of the 'Mendelssohn' *Antigone*, the contemplative choral music of which was contrasted very positively with the 'mob' to which the Continental operas of the excitable inhabitants of France and Italy subjected their audiences: as one English reviewer of Mendelssohn's score wrote in the revolutionary year of 1848, 'how wonderfully he has sustained and interpreted the antique grandeur, and breathed into it the living principle! It must be kept in mind that the Greek chorus was not the mere mob of the modern opera. In the ancient drama the chorus was the grand exponent, not a mere accompaniment'.²⁹

In another article observing French radicalism published in a London newspaper just a few months later, however, the rhetorical effect depends on the invocation of a very different

stereotype of the Greek tragic chorus: the idea that it was inherently a superfluous ornament, which could all too easily become absurdly comical and probably constituted by young women rather than sagacious old men. The article, entitled ‘A scene amongst the French Socialists’,³⁰ adopts a rather snide tone as it describes the electoral visit of the notorious populist politician, the ‘tribune’ Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin, to Chateauroux in central France. He had been invited there ‘to preside at a socialist banquet’ for seven hundred people held in the capacious store-room of a timber-merchant. In a theatrical civic display, four stewards escorted M. Rollin to the feast, along with a Greek tragic chorus:

twelve young damsels, clothed in white, and adorned with red sashes, accompanied him the whole of the way. The young girls were stationed at his side in the tribune, and very innocently passed their time in eating gingerbread and apples. The maidens were intended to represent the chorus of the ancient drama, and to cough, or stamp with their feet by way of giving the signal when the guests were to applaud!’

In a throwback to the ancient Greek female costumes and festival choruses clad in white so popular in France during and after the 1789 revolution, the socialists of this provincial town have furnished their hero with a full chorus of triumphal maidens. They are the figures of by far the greatest absurdity in this British deflation of French ostentation: the journalist insists that the French politician himself found them comical: ‘It was with difficulty that M. Ledru Rollin himself could keep his gravity at the sight of the virgins in white by his side’. He himself becomes the butt of the humour subsequently: ‘As a matter of course, he delivered a few of his sonorous phrases about liberty, equality, and fraternity, and other such branches. The part of the speech which produced the greatest effect on his guests was when he made a

fierce attack on the inhumanity, and the injustice of the government in keeping up the tax on spirituous liquors, and which was applauded with phrenzy.’ But the maidens of the chorus upstage even Rollin when it comes to ludicrous effect.

What these newspaper articles reveal is that the Greek tragic chorus is indeed a useful tool in the creation of national identity and the disparagement of the identity of other nations, but that such rhetoric is also expressing fundamentally *class-political* positions related to the electoral and economic organisation of society. The first British journalist can identify himself as a spokesperson of an ancient chorus if that chorus is understood as serious, male, and dispassionate, perhaps the citizens of *Agamemnon* but more especially those of *Antigone*. The second journalist, setting out to disparage French radicalism, can extract good mileage out of the idea of a young, female, rather hysterical Greek chorus of white-robed local virgins of a Euripidean type, working an audience into an emotional (alcoholic) frenzy. The patronising British national stereotype of the passionate and political Frenchman, indeed, found a longstanding resonance during the Victorian period in the idea of the near-hysterical Greek chorus, as is evident from an account from the 1860s of a Frenchman at the London Adelphi Theatre, who was arrested after watching a performance of Watts Phillips’ *The Dead Heart: A Story of the French Revolution in a Prologue and Three Acts*: ‘So much did the sufferings of his compatriots affect him that he exercised himself in crying, shouting, and screaming, taking the part of a voluntary Greek chorus’.³¹

In Britain, one of the most frequent contexts in which reference is made to the Greek tragic chorus is education, where it becomes a symbol of the elitist class connotations of the Classical curriculum. Reading choruses in the school or university classroom was regarded as mentally strenuous. The Greek tragic chorus often functions as a symbol of extremely advanced esoteric intellectual matters or educational achievement, as people today talk about ‘rocket science’ or ‘brain surgery’. One newsman argues that the popularity of comedy in

British theatres is a result of a general lack of serious education: audiences want light theatre because they have no acquaintance ‘with atomic theory, the Greek chorus, the polarisation of light, the Lockian [*sic*] and Kantian metaphysics’, or other ‘heavy matters’ of that kind.³² But in the polemics of educational reformers, the Greek chorus—or at least the advanced matter of the scansion of its recalcitrant lyrics—becomes the emblem of ‘useless’ education for its own sake. In 1871 a Yorkshire advocate of reformed, utilitarian and science-based education wrote an article entitled ‘Useful versus Ornamental Learning’:

Many men brought up in the strict traditions of academical learning will look with eyes of scorn upon the new College of Physical Science, just opened in Newcastle-upon-Tyne... How can a nation prosper, will old college Dons think, whose sons let their wits go wool-gathering after chemistry and natural philosophy, when they ought to be hard at work unravelling the intricacies of a Greek chorus, which sounds remarkably well in the sonorous rhythms of Eurypides [*sic*], but which is found to be a trifle vague, not to say idiotic, when translated: to be, in fact, a series of platitudes worthy of Mr. TUPPER himself.³³ Verily will our Don think the old order changeth when hydraulics and hydrostatics are prized above choriambics and catalectic tetrameters....³⁴

In many other, similar polemics, the very names of the lyric metres of the choral sections of Greek drama come to stand metaphorically for the entire reactionary curriculum of the public schools: ‘it is a sad waste of a life destined to activity, to learn little or nothing else—to be taught, as the summit of achievement, the knack of putting together ordinary Alcaics, or to scan the antispastick acatalectic tetrameters of a Greek chorus’.³⁵

Yet while some educational reformers thought that the Greek tragic chorus should be consigned to the dustbin of educational history, others apparently argued that education in the nicer points of the Greek chorus could and should be made available to all social classes. At least, that is what is implied by the professional man who sneers at the kind of earnest do-gooders who have cranky views on education, the sort of ‘educated man who believes that an ignorant servant, who cannot with both her eyes read “slut” visibly written on a dusty table, can...read a Greek *chorus* with her elbows’.³⁶ The rhetorical effect here comes from the manifest absurdity of imagining that a working-class female could achieve the high educational standard symbolised by reading a chorus in Greek. The major point is dependent on extreme class snobbery as well as misogyny: the serving girl, whose brain can never be developed (note that the body part mentioned is her elbows, symbol of manual labour), is only by a syntactical hairsbreadth not dismissed as sexually depraved as well as educationally retarded. In a short story published twenty years later, the responses to an educated person of a repetitive old lower-class woman are said to be ‘as bad as a Greek chorus’.³⁷ Lurking beneath these tropes is the standard joke of the classically educated English gentlemen at the expense of the Euripidean chorus of lower-class females, especially the Troezenian laundresses of *Hippolytus*. At one point in negotiations about the 1772 staging of William Mason’s *Elfrida*, a musical drama ‘on the Grecian model’ featuring a lyrical chorus of twenty Anglo-Saxon virgins, the Covent Garden manager George Colman wittily threatened Mason with a chorus of Grecian washerwomen.³⁸

The Politics of Aeschylean Choralities

If the ‘Euripidean’ chorus of lower-class women was useful, as a point of negative comparison, to witty gentlemen or reactionary polemicists, the sympathetic chorus of the

Aeschylean *Prometheus Bound* was, from the late 18th century onwards, adopted as the ‘ideal Spectator’ of the suffering of slaves and the poor by abolitionists and other social reformers. Aeschylus had not been become available in any modern language, including English, until the 1770s. The possibility that Aeschylus might profitably be translated was entertained after the appearance of the Marquis J. J. Le Franc de Pompignan's French version of 1770,³⁹ and the first English rendering of *Prometheus Bound*, by Handel's erstwhile librettist Thomas Morell (1773). These were followed by the complete 1777 translation of Aeschylus by the Norfolk abolitionist Robert Potter. Shortly afterwards, in 1774, J.G. Schlosser published his German translation *Prometheus in Fesseln* in Basel, soon followed by versions in other European languages, including Ferenc Verseghy's Hungarian translation of 1792 and Melchiorre Cesarotti's Italian of 1794. The sudden accessibility of Aeschylus' play certainly lies behind the ease with which Prometheus became such a pervasive political icon on an international level for the Romantic period, representing, as Curran has shown, the ultimate triumph of liberty through steadfast courage against a tyrannical regime.

At a time when slavery was climbing ever higher on the political agenda, however, any image of the chaining and fettering of a naked body—the ghastly sight which confronts Aeschylus’ chorus of Oceanids--inevitably triggered a connection with the terrible descriptions and images of punishments of slaves in the contemporary world that abolitionists were ensuring achieved widespread circulation. The edition of the Greek text of Aeschylus by the renowned English classicist Richard Porson was published in 1795, interleaved with engravings by Tommaso Piroli of illustrations by John Flaxman, the artist so closely associated with Josiah Wedgwood (who also produced the famous 'Am I not a man and a brother' cameo for the abolitionist campaign). These engravings were published separately during the same year. *Prometheus Bound* could now be easily read in English, and its effect in performance, with the chorus of sympathetic, anti-tyrannical witnesses, helpfully

visualised, for example in an image of the Oceanids clustering around Prometheus in Flaxman's 'The Storm'.⁴⁰

I have written elsewhere about the popularity of *Prometheus Bound* in British and North American abolitionist poetry and iconography in the decades following Goethe's unfinished *Prometheus* (c. 1773),⁴¹ which (although no chorus) is a visionary lyric in which Prometheus finds a new role as spokesman of *Sturm und Drang*, calling for cosmic *Freiheit*. The centrality of this particular ancient Greek play to the discourse on slavery is underlined when it even becomes appropriated by individuals *opposing* precipitate action to abolish it. The secretary of the American Colonization Society and pamphleteer, the Revd. Ralph Gurley, argued in an 1839 speech in Pennsylvania against any abolitionist action that might instigate a civil war in the USA, fearing that the new republic of the Union, in this interpretation the Promethean symbol of world liberty, will be torn apart:

All nations will gather in grief around the agonies of our dissolution as, old Ocean and his daughters gathered with sympathising hearts around the tortured Prometheus, chain-bound inexorably by Force and Fate to the Caucasian rock. At the horror of the scene they might be tempted to cry out, with upbraidings of destiny, the words of the ancient tragic chorus:-

" I see, I see — and o'er my eyes,
Surcharged with sorrow's tearful rain.
Darkly the misty clouds arise--
I see thine adamantine chain:
In its strong grasp thy limbs confined,
And withering in the parching wind,

Is there a god whose sullen soul
Feels a stern joy in thy despair ?
Owns he not pity's soft control,
And drops with sympathy the tear?"

Oh! in case of so dreadful a catastrophe, where will be found a heaven-born
Prometheus, to reanimate, with a Divine spark, the lifeless form of Liberty?⁴²

This speaker tries to reclaim Promethean ‘liberty’ from the abolitionists and bestow it on the now creaky ideal of the (slave-owning) American independent republic, the unity of which, in his view, must take priority over bestowing liberty on the slaves in its citizens’ possession. Yet by the 1840s, the Aeschylean *Prometheus Bound* was actually associated with revolutionary politics that went far beyond the abolition of slavery. Karl Marx represented the censorship imposed on his revolutionary newspaper *Die rheinische Zeitung* as a scene from the play: Marx is chained to his printing press, tortured by the eagle of Prussian censorship, and comforted by a chorus of equally persecuted Oceanids who have become fused, as Rhine maidens, with the impoverished farming, vine-growing and fishing families of the Rhineland on whose behalf Marx’s newspaper was protesting (FIG). For between the early abolition debates and the 1840s there lay one of the most influential poems in the history of the Greek chorus in modernity, the *Prometheus Unbound* of Percy Bysshe Shelley (1820), written, as he states in his preface, to indulge his ‘passion for reforming the world’.

There is a sense in which the many different choruses of *Prometheus Unbound* are ‘largely mystic and lyric embodiments of ideas’ and they ‘lead the drama toward song’.⁴³ In the Greek tragedy, as Shelley seems to have intuitively grasped, the chorus is used far more

extensively than in many plays, and in a very specific way later described with his usual acuity by H.D.F. Kitto: this chorus, he writes,

does not tell a plain tale plainly; it is not interested in the telling of a tale. It allows memory to hover and to pounce on the memorable scenes and to omit the rest. Logical and chronological order are nothing to them; these are lyrics and this is the lyrical method. The chorus does not narrate, putting itself at our disposal and arranging its material for presentation to us; it follows the wheeling flight of its own thought and we are to accommodate ourselves to it.⁴⁴

Yet it is quite as important that there is there is more than one chorus using ‘the lyrical method’ as it ‘follows the wheeling flight of its own thought’: the claim to the authority of the collective consciousness is contested from beginning to end. Shelley pits the sympathetic and progressive spirits against the chorus of reactionary Furies, the chorus of *Prometheus Bound* against that of *Eumenides*. The function of his chorus of Furies is to reveal the full horror of all regimes based on terror and revenge, and in particular the terror which followed the 1789 revolution in France.

In fact, Shelley is responding to a pre-existing tradition. In the poetry created by the original French revolutionaries, the Furies had been identified with the old despotic order which the events of 1789 were intended to eradicate forever. One of the *Republican Odes to the French People* published by ‘Lebrun-Pindare’ (i.e. Ponce-Denis Écouchard Lebrun), the ‘Hymn of the 21st of January’, celebrates the execution of Louis XVI:

Les flammes d'Etna sur ses laves antiques
Ne cessent de verser des flots plus dévorants.
Des monstres couronnés, les fureurs despotiques.
Ne cessent d'ajouter aux forfaits des tyrans.
S'il en est qui veulent un maître,
De rois en rois dans l'univers
Qu'ils aillent mendier des fers,
Ces français indignes de l'être,
Ces français indignes de l'être!

Etna's flames of ancient lava
Ceaselessly flow, ever more devouring.
Crowned monsters, despotic furies.
Ceaselessly add to tyrants' hideous crimes.
If some want a master,
In a world from King to king
Let them beg for shackles
Unworthy to be called Frenchmen,
Unworthy to be called Frenchmen!

The very form of the song, as a choral ode with strong Pindaric resonances (especially the lava of Etna so intimately associated with *Pythian 1*), is locked in struggle with the images it conjures up of the monstrous monarchs, and despotic furies, '*les fureurs despotiques*'. This hymn was indeed sung by choruses, to especially commissioned music, at the festivals organised to celebrate the revolution.

Yet the bloodletting into which the revolution soon descended invited parallels with bloodthirsty and vindictive furies in its turn. By January 1795, a new choral song had been adopted by the Thermidorean reaction, the '*Réveil du Peuple*' ('Awakening of the People'). To a tune by Gaveaux of the Opéra Comique, the text adjures the people of France to resist the horror and carnage around them:

Peuple français,
peuple de frères,
Peux tu voir, sans frémir d'horreur,
Le crime arborer les bannières
Du carnage et du terreur?

It is the republicans who have now dialectically turned into the opposite of the emancipatory chorus and are now the drinkers of human gore, the '*buveurs de sang humain*'.⁴⁵

The possibility of the *counterposed* choruses was built into the French revolution from the start, when Louis XVIth had responded to the early republican adoption of collective song as an instrument of mass mobilisation by commissioning market women to emulate an ancient chorus by dressing in white and greeting him with laurel branches.⁴⁶ It became confirmed when the revolution started to devour its own children, and to persecute disappointed interest groups such as the proletarian Babouvists: they had their own 'counter-choruses', the words of which have only survived because they appeared in the court records of the evidence used to prosecute the singers. The '*Chanson Nouvelle à l'usage des Faubourgs*' sings of the people 'dying of hunger, ruined, naked, degraded, troubled,' who are contrasted with both the rich and the corrupt heads of the government.⁴⁷ But the opposition of bloodthirsty Furies and Promethean liberators in Shelley's poem may however have been

more directly influenced by verses written by the radical abolitionist James Grahame, and entitled ‘Prometheus Delivered’. Although long forgotten, this poem was well known in Shelley’s youth, since it opened a widely disseminated collection published in order to celebrate the passing of the 1807 Slave Trade bill. The poem uses the liberation of Prometheus by Hercules to symbolise British legislators aiding slaves, but opens with Prometheus being nailed to his rock in the presence of a vindictive chorus of Furies who revel in his suffering:

‘Come, Outcast of the human race,
Prometheus, hail thy destined place!
Death shall not sap thy wall of clay,
That penal being mocks decay;
Live, conscious inmate of the grave,
Live, outcast, captive, victim, slave!’

But in Shelley’s near-cosmic Caucasian landscape, the chorus of benign Spirits in the fourth and final Act do eventually drown out the bloodthirsty voice of terror in which the Furies of Act I had expressed themselves.⁴⁸ It is still difficult not to be moved by the utopian ardour and energy of the Spirits’ evocation of a human race which can transcend its bloody history and aspire to living in a paradise ruled not by hatred but by love:

Years after years,
Through blood, and tears,
And a thick hell of hatreds, and hopes, and fears,
We waded and flew,

And the islets were few
Where the bud-blighted flowers of happiness grew.

Our feet now, every palm,
Are sandalled with calm,
And the dew of our wings is a rain of balm;
And, beyond our eyes,
The human love lies,
Which makes all it gazes on Paradise..../..../

And our singing shall build
In the void's loose field
A world for the Spirit of Wisdom to wield;
We will take our plan
From the new world of man,
And our work shall be called the Promethean.

Chorality and the Anthopology of Empire

The chorus as vehicle for emancipatory sentiments is also a central feature of the poetic drama Shelley completed the year after *Prometheus Unbound*, his similarly Aeschylean *Hellas* (1821), inspired by the Greek tragedy *Persians* and the uprising against Ottoman rule in Greece. Shelley was drawing on a tradition already inaugurated by the time of Thomas Maurice's *The Fall of the Mogul* (1806), a tragedy 'attempted partly on the Grecian model', which borrows from the Sophoclean Oedipus, but also from Aeschylus' *Persians*. The latter

play is especially apparent in Maurice's battle narrative and the laments of his mutinous choruses of Brahmin and Zoroastrian priests, who predict that the persecution their religions have suffered will become worse under their newest Islamic ruler, Nadir Shah, before the subject Hindu and Parsee peoples will one day be liberated from imperial oppression. The political thrust, Islamic principal characters, Indian slaves, eastern palace setting and transhistorical vision of Maurice's choruses directly anticipated those of Shelley's *Hellas*. Shelley also synthesized contemporary Turk with ancient Achaemenid Persian. His scene is set at Constantinople, in the seraglio of Mahmud II, who was the Ottoman sultan between 1808 and 1839.

Shelley replaces Aeschylus' chorus of male Persian elders in the Greek tragedy with a chorus of Greek captive maidens. The shift from masculine to feminine seems to allow him to write much less warlike sentiments, thus creating an opportunity for more spiritual expansiveness; this chorus' fundamental role is to translate the specific events unfolding in 1821 into events of diachronic and cosmic significance, in which the current struggle is emblematic of, and an important step in, the march of history towards a transcendental notion of human Freedom. In the fifth stanza of their first ode, while Mahmud sleeps on his couch surrounded by opium petals, they invoke the idea of Freedom, the mighty mistress; by stanza nine they are warming to the theme. 'In the great morning of the world, / The spirit of God with might unfurl'd / The flag of Freedom over Chaos/...'. It turns out that Freedom's splendour first 'burst and shone' from 'Thermopylae and Marathon'. With this move, the ancient Greek resistance against Persia and the contemporary struggle are explicitly associated. In a truly memorable image, maternal Greece is figured as mourning at the funeral of the infant Freedom, whose bier she follows through Time.

There is a contradiction in this chorus, created by Shelley's ambivalent stance on Christianity. Himself an agnostic moral idealist, with leanings towards the epistemological

and metaphysical theories of George Berkeley, in this poem he had the chance to divorce the question of the political domination of Greece from the religious conflict between Islam and Christianity. But faced with the history of monotheisms, he stepped back from such a radical step on its very brink. In the second long choral lyric, the famous ‘Worlds on worlds are rolling over’, the universe is run by the mysterious cosmic figure of ‘the unknown God’. But this unknown deity, in Shelley’s conception of the history of religion, has from time to time sent forth to humanity individual figures, including the ‘Promethean conqueror’, who trod the ‘thorns of death and shame’. This chorus argues that Olympian polytheism died in the face of the star of Bethlehem (‘Apollo, Pan, and Love, / And even Olympian Jove / Grew weak, for killing Truth had glared on them’). Islam subsequently arose, but will be shortlived:

The moon of Mahomet
Arose, and it shall set:
While blazon’d as on heaven’s immortal noon
The cross leads generations on’.

All this is in the mouth of the Greek chorus. They are presumably Orthodox Christians, although they are endowed, like the chorus of *Prometheus Unbound*, with a vision that transcends their specific identity and place in space and time. Yet their own religious stance can never offer a parallel to the eclectic, mystical and global spirituality of *Prometheus Unbound*, which was profoundly affected by Shelley's interest in both Platonism and—in a response to the early works on comparative religion by the Indo-Europeanist William Jones and other British imperial scholars in India--Hinduism. Shelley was well aware that in the issue of religion he faced a real problem in *Hellas*, for he appends an extensive note to this chorus, in which he attempts to explain what exactly it is that he means. Here he tries to have

his agnostic cake and eat it; Christianity is on the one hand just another temporary and contingent manifestation of humanity's relationship to the supreme Being; but, on the other hand, it is was in the past superior to, and more truthful than, pagan polytheism; it is now superior to the Islamic religion, and will undoubtedly outlast it. He writes,

The popular notions of Christianity are represented in this chorus as true in their relation to the worship they superseded, and that which in all probability they will supersede, without considering their merits in a relation more universal.

He continues in this note to argue coherently and precisely for the necessity for agnosticism: that 'there is a true solution of the riddle [of the universe], and that in our present state that solution is unattainable by us, are propositions which may be regarded as equally certain'.

In *Hellas*, however, Shelley has found it impossible to configure the Greek War of Independence in terms solely of the human need for ethnic self-determination and political self-government. The true extent of Shelley's absorption of the Christian imagery of the infidel emerges in the interchange between Mahmud and his henchman Daood. The poet has been unable to liberate his verse sufficiently from the contemporary stereotypes of Islam, and the Christian rhetoric of the crusade, in order to leave the notion of a religious war back in the medieval period where it surely belongs. The still stirring politics of and utopian idealism of *Hellas* are thus compromised by its complicity in the ideology of the Christian crusade. It was certainly in imitation of Shelley's work that a whole tradition of patriotic Salamis choruses was established in proudly imperial crypto-Christian Victorian literature, including William Bennett's 'The Triumph for Salamis', a 'lyrical ballad' for twin choirs of young men and

female virgins. The imaginary setting is a circle on an Attic beach around the victory trophy. These young Athenians, transparent avatars of the staff of the British Empire, sometimes even forget that they are pre-Christian pagans, as when they execrate ‘the fell barbarian’, who was ‘accursed of God’, and lusted ‘to crush the guiltless and the free’.

But it was probably the quasi-Aeschylean Furies of Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* rather than his Greek maidens in *Hellas* who underlay the frequent association in the 19th century of Aeschylus’ ancient Greek chorality with a vindictive press. A politician who has fallen from favour then suffers further public humiliation when ‘the newspapers burst out upon him like a Greek chorus’.⁴⁹ In an example which is striking because abject terror and calls for vindictive reprisals were the almost universal response in Britain to the 1857 uprising or ‘mutiny’ in India, an article in *Reynold’s Newspaper* took a critical and humane line on the British attitude to the rebel ‘sepoys’, and in particular the plans for mass executions as advocated in *The Times*:

‘The *Times* preaches the horrible doctrine of indiscriminate slaughter and incendiarism... we cannot yield India, in the sight of the world. Such is the dilemma in which our rulers have placed us. And now they own nothing, amend nothing, promise nothing. They seek only to rouse the fierce passions of the thoughtless. The *Times* raves, like a Greek chorus in some old tragedy scenting blood, and crying for victims to the ruthless Nemesis, whom it invokes, inebriated with the horrid fumes of vengeance.’

This rhetorical move is remarkable because in British imperial discourse on India, the primitive chorus had almost always been identified with the colonised natives of that sub-continent rather than the British colonising power. Writers on India conventionally construed its inhabitants – Hindu, Muslim and Sikh -- as akin to ancient Greeks themselves.⁵⁰

Manifestations of group song and dance performances were identified in Hindu artworks which reached a wide audience in Britain through the circulation of engraved reproductions. Vasunia has shown how in the *Lakshmi* of Dalpatram Dahyabai, this Gujarati adaptation of Aristophanes' *Plutus*, published in 1850, synthesises Gujarati folk culture and performance styles with the Athens of Aristophanes.⁵¹

It is significant that Dalpatram had been encouraged in this project by Alexander Kinloch Forbes, his associate and the Assistant Judge of Ahmedabad. Indeed, Forbes' own perception of India as retaining some cultural elements from the archaic Indo-European past reflected in ancient Greek literature can be seen in his own description of women engaged in a ritual lament, first published, like *Lakshmi*, before the uprising (in 1856):

...the relations and neighbours assemble at the house of the deceased; and, like an *entre acte* to the tragic drama, commences the humming moan of lamentation. The nearer relatives enter the habitation, exclaiming, 'O, father! O, Brother!'. The women, standing in a circle near the door, bewail the deceased, and sing a funeral dirge, beating their breasts to the sad accompaniment of the measure... The dirge, which usually consists of unconnected exclamations of grief, is sung by one or two women, while the remainder join in chorus...⁵²

As Parita Mukta has observed, by setting this display of grief in a public space and comparing it with the performance of a Greek tragedy, Forbes is both familiarizing the Indian women to his classically trained readership, and rendering them archaic and alien – twins strategies typical of the coloniser's vision of the colonized.⁵³

Examples could be multiplied of the Greek chorus being invoked in descriptions of the recreational activities of pre-industrial societies,⁵⁴ especially India. A reporter in Lucknow trying to describe a native musical entertainment in which young women danced, says that the effect is profoundly confusing, reminding him simultaneously of Roman triumphs, Druidic rituals, the ‘Greek chorus’, the dancers around David as he introduced the ark of the covenant, and indeed ancient Nineveh.⁵⁵ The elision here of Druidic rituals and the Greek chorus with the biblical dances of ancient Hebrews and Babylonians is however very significant. The cultural background to this kind of colonial-ethnographic trope will underline just how radical was the sudden transference of the idea of a primitive Greek chorus—and a furious, vindictive one at that—to the implementers of British rule in India in *Reynold’s Newspaper* at the time of the mutiny. For the chorus had been an important presence in the 18th-century colonial thinking of, for example, the musicologist John Brown, about non-western peoples. John Brown drew parallels with the Iroquois in North America. He argued that a form of drama similar to Greek tragedy is practised by all primitive tribes: a Chief sings some great action of a god or hero, and ‘the surrounding Choir answer him at Intervals, by Shouts of Sympathy or concurrent Approbation’.⁵⁶ The 18th century had adopted the chorus in its anthropological version of the chorus in primitivism as the ‘other’ or the anterior, like Thucydides’ vision of backward barbarians still doing things, such as participating in athletics fully clothed, which the Greeks used to do in the past (I.7). From this perspective the chorus was not an inspiration for a more civilised future, like Shelley’s benevolent time-transcendent Spirits of revolutionary utopianism, but a marker of Modernity’s colonised other, of ethnographically defined anti-Modernity.

Yet the politics of this identification of the chorus with a less advanced level of civilisation had become complicated decades before Shelley at the moment that progressive thinkers began to sense that some models of ideally freedom-loving and egalitarian

communities might be discovered in their own national pre-capitalist pasts. Fiona Macintosh and I have written elsewhere about William Mason's *Caractacus*, a successful play performed at Covent Garden 1776-1778. *Caractacus* stages a conflation of Tacitus' description of the indomitable Briton captured during the reign of Claudius (*Annals* 12. 33–7) with the same historian's account of the last stand of the druids of Mona (Anglesey) against Suetonius Paulinus (*Annals* 14. 29–30). Mason's tragedy is modeled, however on Greek tragedy, not only in content (the plot imitates Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*), but in its form. 'Written on the model of the ancient Greek tragedy', *Caractacus* presented its audience with a singing, dancing, involved and interactive tragic chorus. Mason's choice of identity for the chorus (druids and bards) demonstrates the extent to which Hellenic and ancient British revivalisms were conflated. But it also demonstrates the impossibility of separating the aesthetic from the political: Mason's druids, by singing of ancient Celtic resistance to Roman tyranny in the ancient Greek plural lyric voice, are a dramatic analogue of Collins' Druidic temple of Freedom in the British woodland, allegorically also representing the renewal of English poetry (*Ode to Liberty*, 1746):

In Gothic pride it seems to rise,
Yet Graecia's graceful orders join
Majestic through the mixed design.

Making connections between ancient Britons and ancient Greeks seemed appropriate at a time of British opposition to Rome's descendants in the 'ancient regimes' of Europe. *Caractacus* encouraged identification with the Greeks and the drawing of parallels between the culture of Athens, where tragedies were performed, and that of early Britain. During this period classical and 'Gothic' political revivalism were not so very different. Whigs like

Mason believed that early British culture, until the Norman invasions, had enjoyed a democratic assembly—the Anglo-Saxon *myclegemot*—equivalent to that of classical Athens.

The play's rituals blatantly conflate the British druids with ancient Greek choruses. The druids enter with a circular dance in the 'sacred space' of the grove on Mona. Later, they perform rites to the sound of the harp: the chorus leader Mador sings antiphonally to them, 'Rustling vestments brush the ground, | Round, and round, and round they go'. The druids share the grove with bards, who play 'immortal strains' on their harps: 'In visible shapes dance they a magic round | To the high minstrelsy'. The choral odes are sometimes sung by the druids, sometimes by bards, and evince diverse metrical patterns, antiphony, solo and *kommos*, refrain, and dyadic or triadic systems with strophe, antistrophe and epode. It is impossible, moreover, that Shelley was not aware of Mason's freedom-loving rebel chorus. Both Byron and Wordsworth show traces of Mason, and his type of Hellenism lay behind the self-styled 'Greek school' of minor romantic poets. These included Frank Sayers, who in 1790 published two tragedies using 'the Greek form' with choruses of bards or druids, and Robert Southey. In 1808 a balletic version of *Caractacus* was performed at Drury Lane. It opens on Mona with a chorus of harp-strumming bards, and concludes with another bardic chorus singing defiantly in the Roman forum.

The Bolshevik Chorus

This article sprang from my conviction that there was much more to the story of Greek tragic chorality in the long 19th century than German idealism, German nationalism and Wagnerian opera. The collective of equals, not of high status, who express themselves in the first person plural, moving as one, had resonances that were often connected with groups defined by status or class rather than nationality (although the ideas of the nation and the political

collective often overlapped or coincided, as when British writers who criticised the French were actually criticising political movements). We have seen how the idea of the Greek chorus could be used both to denigrate and promote egalitarian reform and democratic agitation. But perhaps the most important point is that Greek chorality was indeed a ‘supreme’ cultural touchstone of Modernity because the way it was conceived oscillated so frequently and perceptibly between the two great collectives of 19th and early 20th-century thought: the collective as an ethnic/national entity, and the collective as the working class, which could and should transcend all national barriers and define itself not against other nations but against the interests of the international plutocratic ruling class.

The pageant Jack Reed organised for the Paterson silk-workers’ strike in Madison Square garden on June 7th 1913 featured choral singing of socialist anthems as a central strategy of the Industrial Workers of the World who were sponsoring the strikers.⁵⁷ But the chorus as the revolutionary workers’ collective perhaps attained its own ‘supreme manifestation’ in the great public performances held in Russia in the years immediately after the 1917 revolution, which were enacted by large groups of ordinary people. One of the largest, most famous and certainly the best documented was the mass spectacle of May 1st 1920, *The Mystery of Freed Labour* directed by Yuri Annenkov and Alexander Kugel, one of many such events all round Moscow streets and parks and public areas. But this was huge. It was performed between the portals and on the step of the former Stock Exchange. The class struggle was conceived on three levels of space – top platform, stairs, and approach area. The Kingdom of Freedom was inside and the class struggle took place on the stairs. There were no fewer than 35,000 spectators in the square! The idea was to create a new revolutionary mythology and the first stage in the *Mystery* was Spartacus’ uprising, followed by the 1670 revolt of the Cossak leader Strenka Razin, and then the October revolution. Slaves and serfs were acted by men from the Red Army Theatre workshops.

The first scene depicted a life of leisure with ancient Romans eating and drinking and pantomime dancers entertaining the rich. Then, to the tune of Chopin's 'Funeral March', a crowd of slaves filled the space in front of the stairs. A mime of the work of slaves was performed while the rich ate and were entertained. Gradually, more attention became focussed on the slaves and the hardships they were facing (brutal whippings). At different moments the slaves stopped working to listen to the summons from the Kingdom of Freedom (in a reminder that the appeal of Wagner was not exclusive to German nationalism), a tune from *Lohengrin* sounding from backstage. They revolted, with Spartacus leading them, a red flag in his hand, but were beaten back by Roman soldiers from the steps: their storming of the Kingdom of Freedom was delayed until the end of the spectacle.⁵⁸

In *The Mystery of Freed Labour*, the mass chorus supplied by the Red Army performers erased completely the distinction between mimetic spectacle and history, as they recreated the very same Kingdom of Freedom they believed they had in reality wrested from the hands of the ruling class during the 1917 revolution. But instead of any tunes from Chopin or Wagner, the rather traditional choice of composers used in the spectacle, the piece that became the semi-official anthem of the Russian revolution harked back to earlier Promethean choruses—it was Alexander Scriabin's *Prometheus: the Poem of Fire* (1910). Scriabin had studied at the Moscow Conservatory with Sergei Taneyev, the composer of the *Oresteia* first performed at the Mariinsky in 1895 and much admired by the Commissar of Enlightenment Lunacharsky, with whose revolutionary dithyramb this article began. But in *Prometheus*, Scriabin created an artwork, complete with chorus, so aesthetically and technologically revolutionary that, on the rare occasions when it finds a full performance, it still amazes today. Scriabin wanted to create a synaesthetic performance where colour and light interacted with sound, both instrumental and vocal, in the creation of a world of sensory experience more total and more radical than anything which had gone before. It includes a

solo piano part and one for a machine known as a *Luce* or *Clavier des Lumières* or ‘colour organ’, designed especially for *Prometheus*. His own machine can still be seen in the museum situated in his apartment in Moscow. Although played via a keyboard like a piano, the machine generates light of different colours which is projected onto a screen in the concert hall.

But the choral part is as revolutionary as the beams of multi-coloured light. There is no ‘libretto’, and the ‘text’ is usually said to be the first important instance in musical history of the completely ‘wordless’ chorus, where the massed human voice becomes the instrument of emotion and meaning beyond any specific time, place, language or culture. In the final section, the full choir of mixed male and female voices sings in succession ‘Ah, oh, o, é, a’, ‘raising the music to a prodigious climax of sound’.⁵⁹ This chorus is pre-linguistic, but also post-linguistic. In a world where the revolutionary immersion of self and other will not only erase all hierarchies and class distinctions, but extend to all nationalities and all languages, why would the choral collective need to close off its open vowels with the consonants which demarcate one language from another? It is scarcely surprising that the fire-poem chorale became the Bolshevik theme-song in a futuristic novel by Alexander Chayanov called *Journey of my Brother Alexei to the Peasant Utopia* (Moscow: 1920). This imaginatively describes the rural economy of the blissful post-revolutionary world of small-holdings which will have been established by 1984; it is predicted that the churches of Moscow will still be open, but pealing out Scriabin’s *Prometheus* instead of any national anthem.⁶⁰ Neither the terror following the 1789 revolution in France, nor the painful failure of the historical Soviet Union, which we now know was in 1984 headed for dissolution, should be allowed to blind us to the extraordinary experiments in egalitarian chorality which the revolutionary moments in these two countries produced.

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¹ Tait (1984) 46, 60.

² Tait (1984) 48.

³ Hall (2012a) ch.11.

⁴ Hall and Macintosh (2005) ch. 12.

⁵ Nemirovitch-Dantchenko (1937) 245, 248-52.

⁶ Macintosh (1997); Macintosh (2009).

⁷ Hall (2012).

⁸ Hall and Macintosh (2005) ch. 7.

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- ⁹ Hall and Macintosh (2005) ch. 7.
- ¹⁰ Hall and Macintosh (2005) ch. 7.
- ¹¹ Hall and Macintosh (2005) ch. 7.
- ¹² Hall (2006) 319.
- ¹³ See Deen (1960); Reader (1972); Fowler (1999).
- ¹⁴ See Rancière (2004).
- ¹⁵ Leader in the *London Morning Post*, Wednesday, October 17, 1866 (issue 28970) 4.
- ¹⁶ Hughes (1940) 193.
- ¹⁷ Hughes (1940) 194.
- ¹⁸ Hughes (1940) 194.
- ¹⁹ Quoted in *The Bristol Mercury*, Saturday, September 1, 1866; Issue 3987.
- ²⁰ ‘Archdeacon Denison and Dr. Temple’, *The Bradford Observer*, Wednesday, October 20, 1869; pg. 2; Issue 2130.
- ²¹ ‘Altar denunciations in Kerry’, *The Belfast News-Letter*, Thursday, November 6, 1862; Issue 15428.
- ²² ‘The Literary Examiner’, in *The Examiner* (London), Saturday, October 23, 1841; Issue 1760.
- ²³ ‘Mr. William Brough’s Lecture on Burlesque’, *The Morning Chronicle*, Tuesday, January 20, 1857; Issue 28105.
- ²⁴ ‘Public amusements’, *Liverpool Mercury*, Tuesday, February 4, 1868; Issue 6247.
- ²⁵ Hall (2007).
- ²⁶ ‘The pantomimes’, *The Morning Post* (London), Wednesday, December 27, 1865; pg. 5; Issue 28718.
- ²⁷ ‘R. Grant Duff, M.P., at Elgin’, *The Morning Chronicle* (London), Friday, October 5, 1860; Issue 29247.
- ²⁸ ‘September 19, 1848’, *The Morning Chronicle* (London), Tuesday, September 19, 1848; Issue 24621, p. 4.
- ²⁹ ‘French Plays’, *The Morning Post* (London), Thursday, January 06, 1848; pg. 6; Issue 23114.
- ³⁰ ‘News for emigrant’s friends’, *Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper*, Sunday, May 6, 1849; Issue 337.
- ³¹ ‘Ulster Railway Company’, *The Belfast News-Letter*, Thursday, February 25, 1869; Issue 44390.
- ³² ‘Modern Comic Writers’, *Manchester Times*, Saturday, February 8, 1851; Issue 237, p. 3.
- ³³ Martin Farquhar Tupper (1810-1889) was the author of a collection of notoriously sententious and archaising verse *Proverbial Philosophy* (1837).
- ³⁴ ‘Useful versus Ornamental Learning’, *The Huddersfield Chronicle and West Yorkshire Advertiser*, Saturday, October 28, 1871; p. 8; Issue 1319.
- ³⁵ ‘Spirit of the Press’, *The Leicester Chronicle: or, Commercial and Agricultural Advertiser*, Saturday, March 14, 1840; Issue 1530. See also the wry reference in a polemic against the temperance movement to the numerous people who can’t function without alcohol, including ‘scholars who cannot unravel a Greek chorus’ without it (‘Mr. Lawrence Heyworth on the Temperance Movement’, *The Derby Mercury*, Wednesday, October 22, 1856; Issue 3391.
- ³⁶ ‘Provincial medical and surgical association’, *Trewman’s Exeter Flying Post or Plymouth and Cornish Advertiser*, Thursday, August 26, 1852; Issue 4522.
- ³⁷ ‘Clumsy Players’, *Manchester Times*, Saturday, October 19, 1872.
- ³⁸ Hall and Macintosh (2005) ch. 7.
- ³⁹ Macintosh (2008).
- ⁴⁰ Hall (2011).

⁴¹ Hall (2011).

⁴² Gurley (1841) 40.

⁴³ Weaver (1949) 132.

⁴⁴ Kitto (1950) 70.

⁴⁵ Hughes (1940) 199.

⁴⁶ Hughes (1940).

⁴⁷ Hughes (1940).

⁴⁸ Cameron (1943).

⁴⁹ ‘Mr. Edwin James’, *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, Thursday, April 18, 1861; p. 4; Issue 786.

⁵⁰ Hall (2010).

⁵¹ Vasunia (2007).

⁵² Forbes (1878 [1856]) 635-6.

⁵³ Mukta (1999) 34.

⁵⁴ A typical example occurs in an 1860 description, during an account of travels in Georgia, of ‘the favourite dance of the Georgians, which is exactly like the Greek chorus. A number of men form a large circle, each lays his hands on the shoulders of his neighbours, and off they go, round and round, singing in a circle, and the loud acclamations of the bystanders, who beat time by clapping their hands. The songs...are mostly descended from olden times’. See : ‘Street Life in Tiflis’, *Liverpool Mercury*, Friday, September 5, 1851; Issue 2325.

⁵⁵ ‘R. Grant Duff, M.P. at Elgin’, *The Morning Chronicle*, Friday, October 5, 1860; Issue 29247.

⁵⁶ Hall and Macintosh (2005) ch. 7.

⁵⁷ Hall on ‘Greek Tragedy and North American Modernism’ in Boshier, Macintosh, McConnell and Rankine.

⁵⁸ The source for most of this is the eye-witness *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism* by Fülöp-Miller.

⁵⁹ Hull (1927) 344.

⁶⁰ See Stites (1989) 186 and the English translation of Chayanov’s story in Smith (1977).