



2500 Years Later...

Ancient Greek Tragedy Study Group

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Abstract

In the present paper I will describe the activities of the HESTAFTA Ancient Greek Tragedy (or Literature) Study Group that has been meeting once a month for the past five years, in an attempt to highlight the therapeutic elements of ancient Greek tragedy, and on a secondary level to explain how the discussion about it among a group of therapist helps us in our role. The following analysis came as a result of studying various texts and through the interaction of the Study Group. The decision to write this paper was inspired by studying the worship of Dionysus (a healer god), to whom ancient Greek tragedy was dedicated, as well as reading Nietzsche's study of ancient tragedy, where he analyses its collective dimension (the concept of belonging).

Study Group and reflections

What do we therapists want to learn from these literary works? Our goal is to enrich our work without making the art of poetry poorer.

A few years ago, in the midst of the socioeconomic crisis, at a time when the need for feedback and reflection was greater than ever, I read *Philoctetes* by Sophocles and it was as if, suddenly, a new world opened before me. I have been exploring this new world in my free time ever since, with increasingly greater self-fueled enthusiasm. I soon realised that these timeless works are susceptible to many levels of reading and can be compared to therapeutic processes. Thus, a study group could multiply the depth of understanding, as every member's associations could contribute something different and unique. Moreover, I felt the need to share the pleasure, and was also curious as to how the other members would perceive these texts. Ultimately, stories are nothing more than one person saying to another: "This is the way it feels to me. Can you understand what I'm saying? Does it also feel this way to you?" (Kazuo



Ishiguro Nobel lecture, 2017). As we already know, a group is greater than a sum of its parts. It is a space where a process of sharing meanings occurs, like in therapy).

Thus, five years ago, inspired by the aforementioned experience with Philoctetes, I suggested to HESTAFTA the formation of a study group for ancient Greek tragedies. Studying these poems of timeless ecumenical value is a very fruitful process for therapist that creates fertile thoughts with implications for psychotherapy. The group was also joined by three philologists with immense interest in ancient Greek dramatic poetry, so that the dialogue would be enriched by their knowledge.

The group started meeting once a month, up close in the beginning and virtually once the pandemic broke out. Meetings were two hour long, and members had read a tragedy in translation in between meetings. The conversation was usually held in two parts: The first one usually focused on impressions and comments regarding the play, while the second one focused on discussing and processing what came up in the first part... Furthermore, we discussed possible implications for our psychotherapeutic work. The dialogue led members to new notions and reflections that remained in our thought after each meeting has ended.

It is not our goal to analyze the poet and his work in the way that a philologist would, but rather to understand how it works inside us on a mental level, first in a study group and then in our work.

The focus of the tragic poets is man, exactly as it is for us. In other words we let the text inspire us, touch us and we reflect on it. At the same time, it is as if we are widening the scope of observation, going back in time, like a cultural genogram, and also widening the scope towards other approaches. Like for example towards the field of anthropology, sociology and other sciences, as we study and share papers from other fields apart from ancient Greek literature.

Ancient Greek Theatre is art and it was also a collective competitive institution that commented and worked simultaneously on the biological level (through the satisfaction it produced), the psychological, the social and the political level, functioning in an educational and therapeutic manner that humanised man. Humanisation is the central component of education (Francoise Dolto).

Tragedies are sources of timeless and universal inspiration. They are deeply humanly moving. Sophocles' Antigone alone has inspired 30 operas, on a global scale, not to mention other artistic creations (plays, movies etc.) So why should it not inspire us too?



If we look at it from a systems theory perspective, ancient Greek tragedy is particularly dialectic in its structure (thesis, antithesis, synthesis) and utilises the Chorus as a reflective team that processes the action on a different level, like the team behind the one-way mirror. In some plays, we even see the deus ex machina as the supervisor, who can see the action from another external level and help in finding a solution when things have reached a stalemate (9).

We know that ancient Greek tragedy performances had a therapeutic objective for patients and their escorts in the festivals of Asclepius (Λαμπρινουδάκης).

In our group, we have noticed that the discussion relaxes us and revives us. I think it functions as a transitional space of cultural experience that connects us. Winnicott wrote: "The interplay between originality and the acceptance of tradition as the basis for inventiveness seems to me to be just one more example, and a very exciting one, of the interplay between separateness and union. In the myths that were a product of oral tradition there could be said to be a cultural pool giving the history of human culture spanning six thousand years. It is these cultural experiences that provide the continuity in the human race that transcends personal existence. I am assuming that cultural experiences are in direct continuity with play". The space where cultural experience is placed is the space between the individual and the environment that can either connect or separate. This space between infant and mother, between the individual and society or the world, depends on the experience that leads to trust and can be considered sacred for the individual.

In our case, ancient Greek tragedy is a reliability pool for man and his passions, which are viewed with compassion and endless acceptance. The same can be said about play.

In the "Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy", Marx contemplates whether products of art are connected to a specific historical context... whether their birth, their structure, their meaning are only comprehensible within this context... How then can we explain the fact that they remain alive and continue to speak to us, even when the forms of social life have changed on every level, and the necessary conditions for their creation have ceased to exist? In other words, how is it possible that we confirm the historical character of tragic plays, while simultaneously realising their constant presence throughout the centuries, their time lessness? According to Marx, the difficulty lies in the fact that they still offer an aesthetic pleasure that under specific circumstances are useful to us as rules. They are, for us, an inaccessible standard. For Marx, ancient Greece is humanity's childhood, and it is attractive to us as normal



child would be attractive, with its naivety and vigour that are charming for an adult as in them he can find, through a natural and spontaneous form, the beginning of what led to his maturity. In other words, he rediscovers a version of himself that is valuable because it has been lost forever.

Marx's approach is interesting, because like Winnicott, he connects the cultural experience and pleasure with childhood and transitional objects. Production in art does not only create "an object for the subject" but also "a subject for the object", in the sense that it shapes the listener/spectator (and, why not the therapist also?). Pietro Barbetta, concluded his lecture in this year's METALOGOS conference by saying: "Read Aeschylus and Sophocles to become better therapists".

But how are humans portrayed in tragedies? Jean Pierre Vernant highlights two points: 1) tragedy draws its themes from heroic legend, but the hero is no longer portrayed as a model, but rather as a problem. A problem, a riddle without an answer, whose double meaning is always left to be deciphered (for every era, for every society). 2) Through imitation, the spectator experiences the theatrical illusion (realisation of the fantastic) that is both the prerequisite and the outcome of tragic plays. What is interesting here is that (like in child's play) when the imaginary ceases to exist and becomes real, the objective of the tragedy is lost. That is what happened with one of Phrynichus' plays "The capture of Miletus", where as described by Herodotus, all of the spectators were crying because they had been reminded of the actual capture of Miletus that had occurred two years previously. The play was then banned from ever being performed again, and Phrynichus paid a fine of 1000 drachmas. This is reminiscent of the young child's play that can be interrupted when reality invades its space. Likewise, when tragedy ceases to take place in the transitional space of the imaginary, it receives a fine for not achieving its objective, as it has stopped functioning therapeutically.

For Aristotle tragedy has greatest value and more truth than history by refusing to take place in the realm of current events. Thanks to the freedom ensured by the imaginary element of myth, tragedies approach the general, while history is confined to the partial.

Ancient Greek Drama reveals the game of opposing forces that rule over man. Tragedy poses questions to the spectator regarding his human condition, its limits and its finite nature. Thus, it possesses a certain knowledge; it is a theory regarding human matters.

Today, the reading of tragedies (Sophocles' Philoctetes and Ajax in particular) is utilised therapeutically in groups of Iraq war veterans with PTSD.



I will now go back to our tragedy study group. The question is, what do we find in tragedies that makes us keep meeting and discussing about them? It is like going 2500 years back in time, when philosophy, psychology, humanities, political science, anthropology, social sciences, psychotherapy and pedagogics were not yet divided into separate disciplines. Here we find united as a whole that which we are attempting to achieve by combining our different innovations.

The study group worked on three axis in its study of ancient Greek theatre.

The first axon was the joy of studying literary texts so multidimensional but at the same time so simply and brightly written, that they are a breath of fresh air for our thoughts and minds; an energy source that relaxes us (transitional space).

The second axon was, I would say, a sort of “cultural genogram” (if I may use this novel term) that allows us to start from antiquity but make connections to today.

The third axon was how this study could be utilised in therapy. Thus, as we were discussing the ancient texts, we frequently made connections to issues in our therapeutic work and ended up talking about the families or the individuals that we have in therapy.

Tragedy moves on two levels simultaneously, the individual level (Apollonian) and the collective (Dionysian).

How does the modern reader benefit from the texts of Athenian theatre? Aristophanes, in “The Frogs” has Aeschylus and Euripides, who are disagreeing about everything, agree on one thing: That theatre is the most appropriate way to educate adolescents.

But what do we as readers and systemic therapists learn from these texts? How do we restructure or enrich our own work?

I will try to describe some common elements of ancient Greek tragedies that reflect therapeutic concepts.

- 1) First, the topics in tragedies concern an extreme traumatic event. Despite the fact that it is always evident which person is responsible, the responsible party is never accused or stigmatised. As a person he is always worthy of compassion and understanding (the texts reflect empathy for all the heroes).
- 2) The dramatic procedures that lead to the dramatic outcome are thoroughly analysed, as the process is the most important element.



- 3) There is always a Chorus that functions in a reflective manner, away from the action, looking at things from a different, more detached collective perspective external to the hero's individuality.
- 4) The topics are approached simultaneously on an individual level (Apollonian, according to Nietzsche), a collective level of "belonging" (Dionysian according to Nietzsche) as well as a political level. According to Walter Nestle, tragedy is born when one begins to gaze at the myth through the eyes of the citizen.
- 5) Tragedy draws its themes from Greek mythology, (the narrations of which have a timeless value and represent the age-old unconscious knowledge). Each poet, however, treats the myth in his own creative manner, emphasising what he chooses. According to Walter Burkert, myths contribute in the formation of a "conscious collective identity".
- 6) The gods (nature, random, unpredictable events as we would probably say today), are part of the causation, along with human responsibility, with neither one weakening the other.
- 7) Humans are called mortals as a reminder that human existence is finite. This, however, does not function nihilistically or pessimistically. In the context of the tragedy it functions in a unifying manner for humans, uniting them in human reality.
- 8) Tragedies have a dialectic structure (thesis – antithesis – synthesis).
- 9) Tragedies, according to Aristotle, always end in "catharsis".
- 10) They answer a collective metaphysical need, and thus relieve existential anxiety (Nietzsche).
- 11) The multi-layered narration affects our narrations about our clients.
- 12) When Aristotle refers to the perfect tragedy, he says that the characters shift from being in state A to being in state B, and this shift shows the measure of how functional or not functional the tragedy is (Γιατρομανωλάκης). This is reminiscent of Bateson's "difference makes the difference".
- 13) Very often, you cannot distinguish between perpetrator and victim; everybody suffers.

We must not forget that ancient Greek theatre originated in the worship of Dionysus. Dithyramb, from which tragedy sprang, is the triumph (victory – rebirth) of Dionysus. The structure of tragedy (parodos - contest or agon – exodus) is the same as that of the Seasonal Dioysian Drama (procession or pompe – the contest or agon – second procession or komos) (Λεκατσάς). In the troupe of Dionysus, in ecstasy, the individual loses his boundaries and becomes one with the god. He becomes a Bacchus, tastes



absolute pleasure through the connection with the divine (this, in Greek, is the root of the word enthusiasm). Dionysus is a mortal god that dies and is resurrected every year. In the Great Dionysia festival they celebrated Dionysus Elefthereus.

In ancient Greek tragedy, rules are set so that they can be broken, or because they have already been broken. That is why tragedy is connected to Dionysus, god of confusion, of transgression, and of transformation.

Below, I will refer to a passage of Nietzsche's book "The Birth of Tragedy" that helped me comprehend the tragic phenomenon.

Nietzsche speaks of the Apollonian and the Dionysian spirits in ancient Greek tragedy. The Apollonian refers to the illusion of image, of dream of individuality that makes the reality of existence bearable (epic poetry, plastic arts). The Dionysian, on the other hand, is that which connects to the primeval beginning of the world. It is the god of intoxication and the connection to Nature.

According to Nietzsche, the existence of the world is only justified as an aesthetic phenomenon. The Apollonian form gives meaning to everything by relating it to life, while the Dionysian wisdom knows that this meaning is unfounded because it is based on the lack of meaning of life itself (life signifies meaning but does not itself have meaning). Thus, this knowledge threatens life. Nietzsche believed that Greek tragedy was born through the reconciliation of the two opposing gods Apollo and Dionysus (who, by the way, are both healers)¹. The ancient Greek tragedy poets combine the features of Apollonian and Dionysian artists. They, simultaneously, answer the human need to be an individual, but to also occasionally lose the boundaries and belong to a group. Drama is the Apollonian representation of the Dionysian concepts and influences. The Satire was the deep voice of nature, which Greeks had learned to listen to with respectful admiration.

"We shall never comprehend the supreme value of tragedy until, like the Greeks, we experience it as the essence of all prophylactic healing energies, as a mediator between the strongest and inherently most fateful qualities of a people", Nietzsche will write. "Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo, but finally it is Apollo who speaks that of Dionysus. At which point the supreme goal of tragedy, and indeed of all art, is attained".

Nietzsche explains the delight of tragedy and catharsis not as a moral religious redemption, but as a simultaneous Apollonian and Dionysian emotional excitement of the spectator (the metaphysics of art). The superior passion may only be an aesthetic



game. This, according to Nietzsche, reminds us of a Dionysian phenomenon, the playful building and tearing down of the world of individuality as an outcome of primordial joy. The same way that Heraclitus compared the creative force of the world to a child that, while playing, gathers rocks here and there, stacks piles of sand, tears them down and starts over again. “The metaphysical solace which, I wish to suggest, we derive from every true tragedy, the solace that in the ground of things, and despite all changing appearances, life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable, this solace appears with palpable clarity in the chorus of satyrs, a chorus of natural beings whose life goes on ineradicably behind and beyond all civilization”.

Can this metaphysical solace ultimately be the synthesis of the individual and the collective, in the sense of the human need to be both differentiated as a person and, at the same time, to belong to a wider collective?

In the chorus of Satyrs, we will find many common elements to the carnival. People do not just watch the carnival, they participate, they all live in it because, in the same sense, it involves everyone, its character is universal. Bakhtin, without naming it as such, makes the same distinction as Nietzsche between the Apollonian and the Dionysian spirit of art. In Rabelais' carnivalesque festivity forms, as described by Bakhtin, one can find many analogies to the festivals of Dionysus (the grotesque), in contrast to the Apollonian spirit of the official art of the New Age.

Concluding this paper, I realise that I shift from the ancient Greek tragedy to the Study Group and from the Study Group back to the tragedy, as if it is hard to distinguish between them; they become intertwined, at least in my mind they do.

Afterword:

I could describe my experience in the ancient Greek tragedy study group and the discussion of reflections in the group with the following poem by Katerina Anghelaki – Rooke:

“I wonder what other connections life (and man) will invent between the trauma of absolute disappearance and the miracle of everyday immortality”.

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