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ON THE EXISTENTIAL LINK OF CATASTROPHE AND TRAGEDY

Abstract

The main thesis of this dissertation is set out in its very title, and to prove it will be necessary to eliminate the usual negative or melodramatic meaning of the two concepts that appear there and take them rather as the two extremes of the dialectical process of redefining the sociopersonal consciousness. In accordance with this, any catastrophe implies the violent breakup of the normal conditions of existence due to a natural or human factor whose direct consequences each one must understand and overcome on the triple ontological, social, and psychological determinations of the self. For its part, tragedy stands for the phase of critical and reflective integration that follows the catastrophe, which goes a lot beyond the sheer negativity of sorrow and even death, since even if the person or the people carried away by the catastrophe die, others will be able to make the most of that and the sociopersonal consciousness will be rearticulated. Of course, this implies that the self at issue is not only the individual one, so that other members of the lifeworld must be considered for the phenomenon to reveal a new or critical sense of existence beyond any previous approach to it. Thus, although there is an undeniably negativity throughout, it aims at a deeper level of

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comprehension of existence, which finally implicates that catastrophe is contextualized in a concrete cultural framework and not only as a sudden unsettlement and that tragedy is accordingly conceived as a philosophical tool more than as a literary genre that deals with the cruelty of fate. To get its aims, the dissertation will be divided into three sections of variable length: in the first one it will be analysed the experience and sense of catastrophe; in the second one, that of tragedy; in the third one, it will briefly be shown why understanding the nexus of both phenomena is axial for the current intellectual dynamics.

Keywords: violence, finitude, situation, consciousness, dialectics.

Da ligação existencial entre a catástrofe e a tragédia

Resumo

A tese principal deste artigo está exposta no seu próprio título. Para prová-la, será necessário eliminar o habitual significado negativo ou até melodramático dos dois conceitos que aí figuram e tomá-los ao invés como os dois extremos do processo dialéctico de redefinição da consciência sociopessoal. Deste modo, qualquer catástrofe, devido a um factor natural ou humano, implica a ruptura violenta das condições normais de existência, cujas consequências directas cada um deve compreender e superar nas tríplice determinação ontológica, social e psicológica do si próprio (*self*). Por sua vez, a tragédia representa a fase de integração crítica e reflexiva que se segue à catástrofe, a qual vai muito além da negatividade pura da dor e mesmo da morte. Porque mesmo que morram a pessoa ou as pessoas levadas pela catástrofe, outros poderão tirar o máximo partido disso e a consciência sociopessoal será rearticulada. Claro que isto implica que o si-próprio em questão não é apenas individual, mas que outros elementos do mundo da vida deverão ser considerados para que o fenómeno, para além de qualquer abordagem prévia, revele um novo ou até crítico sentido da existência. Assim, embora ao longo de toda a sua existência exista uma negatividade inegável, é visado um nível mais profundo de compreensão da existência, o que implica afinal que a catástrofe seja contextualizada num quadro cultural concreto e não apenas como súbita perturbação e que a tragédia seja, assim, concebida como um instrumento filosófico mais do que como um género literário que lida com a crueldade do destino. Para alcançar os seus objectivos, o artigo está dividido em três secções de extensão variável: na primeira será analisada a experiência e o sentido da catástrofe; na segunda, a da tragédia e na terceira, será brevemente mostrado por que é que a compreensão do nexos de ambos os fenómenos é crucial para a dinâmica intelectual actual.

Palavras-chave: violência, finitude, situação, consciência, dialéctica.

1. The triple existential sense of catastrophe

According to the dictionary, a catastrophe is «an event causing great and usually sudden damage or suffering»². In this definition the most interesting feature is doubtlessly the contraposition of instantaneousness and great devastation without the normal course of nature, as it happens, for instance, when an earthquake reduces a city to rubble in a jiffy. For even at best it takes a lot of time, usually centuries, to build a city, and during that time the inhabitants have to sustain a continuous effort to give the place a certain identity beyond the simple fact of its being a setting as there are millions in the world, and all that seems to be vain or absurd at the end by the action of telluric forces that belie the illusory security that the city was intended to provide its inhabitants with but also the peculiar character that they wanted the place to stand for. Thus, there is an ominous incommensurability among the singular temporality of the phenomenon, the normal dynamism of nature, and the human effort required to do something with a sense of its own, which at bottom contradicts the normal flow of existence and the possibility of comprehending it: «what is questioned [before a catastrophe] is a way of thinking subjected to the exigence of logical coherence [...]»³.

Needless to say, although this incommensurability can vary, according to the combinations of its three factors, it always is perceptible as when, for instance, a drought lasts time enough to ruin irredeemably a region, no matter how prosperous it had previously been. In this case, instead of breaking out all of a sudden as in an earthquake, the catastrophe ravages for some years the regularity of natural cycles and the availability of resources for the survival both of man and of the rest of the members of the ecosystem. Therefore, on amplifying the scope of adversity so as to embrace the totality of the organic interrelations, the phenomenon puts at risk the existential identification of man and earth but also that of life beyond man and the capacity of earth to provided it with the elements indispensable to flourish and spread. This means that *there are two levels in the catastrophe, the transcendental one (which has to do with the sense of the experience for reinterpreting existence) and the empirical one (which refers to the degree of the objective harm and to the measures taken to face it)*. For the catastrophe ruins the ideality of human existence and the balance of life and seasonal or geological cycles to the extent that what seemed to be the place for the harmonization of man, life, and nature ends up revealing the precariousness of the latter.

In addition to these two variables of catastrophe there is a third one that is the most important for understanding the potency of the phenomenon to redefine

² *Oxford English Dictionary*, corresponding entry.

³ P. Ricoeur, *Le Mal. Un Défi à la Philosophie et à la Théologie*, Labor et Fides, Geneva 2004, p. 19. The interpolation is mine.

existence beyond any objective cause: that that arises when you have taken any possible measure against adversity and that is however useless at the end because you lose everything and you have no real possibility of making up for it: for instance, after having worked all your life you invest your patrimony in a bank or a firm that is supposed to be solid and it goes bankrupt when least expected, leaving you destitute when by your age or by any other factor you do not have any objective possibility of overcoming the situation. In other words, you have to get round all by yourself the catastrophe without your having the least material capacity of doing it, no matter how much readiness or willpower you have. In such a circumstance, instead of pointing to a recovery that could be shared with others thanks to the mutual help or to the possibility of acknowledging and reconstituting the existential bond of man and nature, the catastrophe simply throws you mercilessly to the direst indeterminacy, which is all the more unbearable in view of the measures that you had previously taken to prevent that from occurring.

If at the kernel of any catastrophe it is perceptible so the impotence or at least the feebleness of man before any unsettlement of temporality and nature when by whatever reason the latter interrupts its normal course, there are extreme cases like the one just imagined where it seems to appear an overwhelming unfairness that despite its being in principle perfectly explainable cannot however be truly integrated in a personal comprehension of existence because it implicates that you are like any of the numberless beings that simply keep in motion the cycle of nature without having any value beyond that, which belies both transcendently and empirically the would-be dignity of the personal self: «not only *why?*, but *why me?*». ⁴ Furthermore, this revelation of the final senselessness of every effort to get security and a name (which obviously goes beyond the sheer economical aspect of the issue) is inserted in a causal chain at the other extreme of which there is either a process that goes on by its own dynamism or an anonymous individual that has nothing to do with you but whose action has ruined you just for the sake of a profit that will neither be significant for anyone in particular. Thereat, even understanding the impersonal causality that has sparked off the catastrophe, it is impossible anyhow to integrate it in a vision of existence where you can recognize yourself: And that is not a problem of intelligibility but of self-perception: «what I discover [...in a catastrophe...] is the deep movement of transcendency that is my own self, the simultaneous contact with my being and with that of the world» ⁵.

A catastrophe gets then an existential dimension when there is no objective or conceivable possibility of overcoming it, *i.e.*, when you cannot identify with the empirical turn of reality and simultaneously with your own past: although you as everyone else knew that there is nothing absolutely secure in life and that your ruin

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, p. 436 (the interpolation is mine)

is just the outcome of the combination of some financial or statistical factors with your age or your ignorance regarding patrimonial matters, the phenomenon is so crushing that there seems not to be a sensible attitude for you to adopt. The situation overcomes so the shallow contraposition of optimism and pessimism, and its brutal exceptionality seems to be a mockery of all the would-be originality and dignity of the individual being whose fulfilment is taken so foolishly for granted. Instead, then, of enjoying success and recognition, you must experience by yourself that «vanity of vanities, all is vanity», as the Scripture says⁶.

In this predicament, the opposition of self and lifeworld is both absolute and insurmountable, which confirms that (bar those shallow uses of the word that take it merely as a synonym of a casual loss or mishap) *any catastrophe demands to reinterpret radically one's own being and the corresponding value of the different planes of reality*: instead of reaping the fruit of your work, you discover that you have been the plaything of chance or simply that you are subjected to the pitiless causality of profit and that justice is a barren idealization made to deceive those that like you are unable to claim for it. Thus, on taking to its limit the comprehensibility of what has happened, the catastrophe opens the door to the perception of the monstrous incongruity of any human endeavour and the empirical interconnections of nature.

What is more perturbing here, nevertheless, is that due to its violence and to the lack of any possibility to make up for it the catastrophe carries you away almost inevitably to the interpretation of the whole chain of events as the outcome of a kind of anomaly in existence that ravages the would-be dignity of man as well as the sense of any other kind of reality: if a rational being is treated this way, what could any other hope for? And from this there is just a step to take the phenomenon in as the punishment of a guilt or at least a wrong that you or anyone else have committed whether consciously or not: what was behind your endeavours, a natural desire of securing your future and the welfare of your loved ones or, which is very different, sheer pride? And since any answer that you give will implicate the sense of the whole reality, the possibilities of elucidation proliferate *ad nauseam* while you get lost among a swarm of uncertainties.

Needless to say, this concatenation of catastrophe and guilt that is *prima facie* purely negative or rather 'purgative' also can be seen as the contrary, i.e., as the starting point of a process of anagnorisis and self-criticism that would be unimaginable without the burden of adversity. For beyond rage and anguish, the unsettlement of your consciousness follows the effort to accept how in the middle of all the possible combinations of causality it has prevailed the one that has spoiled your precautions: for instance, you chose the institution where you invested your patrimony because as far as you knew it was practically impossible that it went bankrupt. And in the lack of any objective probability that makes justice to all you have striven for the only

⁶ *Ecl*, I, 2.

expedient is to resort to a conscious attitude, which, as it has just been said, can at best change the catastrophe into the thread of a process of self-knowledge that goes hand-in-hand with the possibility of valuing differently existence so as to overcome guilt in favour of responsibility: «instead of blaming God or speculating about a diabolical origin of evil in God himself, let us act ethically [...] against evil».⁷

Now, the ambiguousness is axial in these conditions, for the acceptance of the fact that you lost everything because you were as any other being subjected to chance, far from reducing your past to nothingness, confirms it although there will be no *deus ex machina* for you. It is again the burden of existence that was originally your best spur, although you do not have anymore the capability to make the most of it and just feel its prick in your flesh. Oddly enough, such a recognition of the insurmountable finitude of the self could very well show that the best attitude towards existence would be to give it up without resentment, which is somehow or other what responsibility lies in. Why? Because to be responsible is merely to do what must be done in the plane of reality where you define your being, which in this case would be that of overwhelming failure and destitution⁸. On the other hand, this does not justify any concrete behaviour that you adopt, for you can the same kill yourself or learn to live as the destitute live.

This experience of being literally “beyond good and evil” and simultaneously under the utmost pressure is undeniably the most disturbing that anyone could face, and that explains why when one hears of how someone has acted in such a situation, the hope of finding therein a clear sense vanishes among the intricacy of the psychological and moral causalities, whose final result (that is to say, the line of conduct that someone follows) is more often than not hardly comprehensible. Thus, whereas the truisms about the coherence of attitude and reality tend to minimize the oddness of the moral choice and the incongruity of the personal behaviour before adversity, the experience of catastrophe reminds you of the irreducibility of the self to any standard and of the tremendous drive of chance over will. And the best proof of this is surely the *Book of Job*, whose protagonist, instead of resigning himself to the misfortune that crushes him as his own friends tell him to do, cries out to God.

This emphasises that *the incommensurability of self and world is just the reflection of that of catastrophe and sociopersonal sense of reality*, so that if there is no easy solution to the unsettlement that the situation implicates, that is at bottom due to the elemental weirdness of becoming and of the impossibility of determining once and for all what values would agree with such unsettlement. And since this is what transvaluation lies in, it must be taken not as the joyful expression of an idealistic creativeness or of the subjectivist limitless freedom of the self, but as the critical answer that the essential

⁷ P. Ricoeur, *Le Mal. Un Défi à la Philosophie et à la Théologie*, Op. Cit., p. 59.

⁸ For an explanation of my stance about responsibility, vide the corresponding entry (as «responsabilidad») in J. Ferrater Mora, *Diccionario de Filosofía*, v. IV, Ariel, Barcelona 1994.

negativity of existence gets out of man.

Needless to say, despite its being essential for the sociopersonal consciousness, the reflective approach to such an experience cannot be generalized because it demands a certain characterological framework that only comes to light through the radical reduction of the ‘natural attitude’, i.e., of the kind of existential perception that takes for granted the sense of everything, above all that of the own self⁹. For the natural attitude, what matters is not so much the reintegration of the wreck in a personal vision of reality that includes the problematic singularity of human identity as the solution thereof on a practical plane, as when the survivors of an earthquake begin to rebuild their city after the initial bewilderment or when you start to look for a way to get over destitution as soon as possible without your going further into the spiritual complexities that it had aroused. This shows that the natural attitude matches throughout a general or operative approach to any kind of catastrophe that is not at all wrong before what the situation at issue imposes (as when it must be decided what to do with the inhabitants of a region devastated by drought). Therefore, the natural attitude must be valued by itself as the timely conduct in view of social or material wants that never interfere with the limits of comprehensibility of existence that for most people are metaphysical subtleties.

To recapitulate this section, although “catastrophe” is a term usually related to failure and sorrow, it has an enormous potential for reinterpreting the sense of existence on the natural, the social and the personal planes. Thus, you discover that contrary to the abstract opposition of culture and nature that has been one of the milestones of modern thought, both factors are intertwined in an organic process and that unlike what the vulgar subjectivism preaches regarding the limitless willpower of everyone, human agency has insurmountable limitations due to the sudden readjustments of the natural cycles and/or to the impersonal process of the socioeconomic development that ride roughshod over everyone’s wants of security and welfare. The depth at issue is neither the mysterious transcendence of reality nor that of the personal spirit but the unfolding of a consciousness that strives to reidentify with the dialectical otherness of the lifeworld.

2. The ontological and psychological complexity of tragedy

The best way to redefine tragedy philosophically after the precedent analysis is undoubtedly to return to the enigmatic revelation of an ontological finitude that is at the core of any catastrophe, above all when it must be faced by you alone. In such a case there is an abyssal incommensurability between the rational explanation of the

⁹This definition is an interpretation of the concept as it is expounded by Husserl in *Ideas concerning a Phenomenology*, French Trans. Paul Ricoeur, Gallimard, Paris 1950, P. I, pp. 13-16.

misfortune and the vision of your own self in a world whose empirical determinations are not supposed to subdue the ideal transcendence of man. That incommensurability changes so into the ground of a perception of existence under the sway of evil and of a guilt that follows the mere fact of being, all of which unleashes a great anguish that (according to the individual characterological framework and of the cultural symbolizations thereof) can intensify more and more or, on the contrary, can be overcome by a critical reflection on the limitations of the personal agency in reality, which is at bottom the same as the transvaluation of every value insofar as the latter always implies the multifariousness of desire and the relativity of its aims: «in other terms, to be a full human agent, to be a person or a self in the ordinary meaning, is to exist in a space defined by distinctions of worth»¹⁰. And the best name for this process of transvaluation is precisely ‘tragedy’¹¹.

This approach contradicts, however, the usual sense of the term as «an event causing great suffering, destruction, and distress [...]»¹². What right do we have to redefine it as the thread of transvaluation? To begin with, although the starting point of any tragedy is the potency of adversity over the self, the very violence thereof imposes the peremptory want of finding a way-out, and the condition *sine qua non* for that is valuing existence otherwise, considering that it is the existential burden of suffering what compels the self to look for overcoming that: «tragedy is not a matter of masochism, of grovelling self-abasement, of the glorification of suffering. But if such suffering is forced upon you, there may be ways of turning it into the preconditions of a changed existence».¹³ Because of this, it must be emphasized the ontological density of suffering, which tends to be taken in as a psychological or emotional phenomenon that depends solely on what behaviour you adopt regarding adversity, whereas its proper domain is the sociopersonal dimension of the self (as the three examples analysed in the former section show). Therefore, suffering must clearly be differentiated from pain or sorrow, above all when the latter is idealistically considered an ennobling variety of the force of misfortune over the self that propels a *sui generis* spiritualization. Far from that, suffering always ravages the personal lucidity, which explains why madness, cruelty and hatred play so relevant a part in any tragedy. But there is an additional reason for opposing suffering and spiritualization, and that is how the former devastates the bodily constitution of the self that from a phenomenological standpoint always is the ontological counterpart of its social articulation. In fact, and beyond any physical or objective determination that it can

¹⁰ C. Taylor, *Human Agency and Language. Philosophical Papers, I*, CUP, Cambridge 1985, introduction (ebook).

¹¹ Vide V. G. Rivas López, «On the Fourfold Ontology of Evil throughout Western Tradition and its Final Disappearance in the Present Time» in A.T. Tymieniecka (Ed.), *The Enigma of Good and Evil; the Moral Sentiment in Literature*, Springer, Dordrecht 2005, pp. 325-329.

¹² *Oxford English Dictionary*, corresponding entry.

¹³ T. Eagleton, *Sweet Violence. The Idea of the Tragic*, Blackwell, Malden 2003, p. 98.

have in accordance with the natural attitude, the body is «[...] the vehicle of the self in the world»¹⁴, which means that at bottom it is the way you identify and orientate yourself amidst the rest of reality in a certain circumstance and that on an ontological plane will always resort to some sociocultural values. And such an identification will hardly foster a dynamic sociability when suffering overwhelms you¹⁵.

The best testimony of this devastation is doubtlessly that passage of *Philoctetes* where the homonymous protagonist is literally torn by the sharp pain of a sore that he has in the foot and, out of his mind, belies the would-be Greek serenity on clamouring Neoptolemus to relieve him once and for all of a suffering that he has nevertheless stood for a decade: «I cannot hide it from you. Oh! It shoots, it pierces. Oh unhappy! Oh! My woe! I am lost, my son, I am devoured. Oh me! Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Pain! Pain! Oh pain! Oh pain! Child, if a sword be to thine hand, smite hard, shear off my foot! Heed not my life! Quick, come!»¹⁶. Thus, suffering gets a bodily force beyond either the purely emotional or even 'spiritual' spheres that are instead usually considered the ground of tragedy and the engine of transvaluation. On the other hand, this crushing power of suffering is directly linked with the social sense of identity since the protagonist has passed ten long years alone in the island where the Greek warriors have forsaken him under the advice of Ulysses, who considered that with his cries Philoctetes could unsettle the rest of the army that was about to besiege Troy. And the anguish before the possibility of being forsaken again is the reason why the protagonist tries to hide his suffering from Neoptolemus until the prick of the sore compels him to clamour for relief. Suffering puts simultaneously at stake the bodily and the social senses of existence. These can however be blindly passed over or reduced to a psychological problem whose solution lies in the adoption of a 'positive' stance.

Furthermore, the passage allows to grasp the dialogical nature of the comprehension that tragedy aims at (unlike any purely logical understanding). Philoctetes is perfectly aware that he depends completely on the goodwill of Neoptolemus and that he must conceal his pain so that he is not annoying to him as he were to his fellow warriors years before, but under the power of suffering he does not have an option other than hoping for the comprehension of the youth, which for its part demands that he overcomes the hatred he feels against all the Greeks. Thus, if suffering puts at risk the social sense of the self, it also offers the possibility of finding a new relationship with others, who for their part must reinterpret too what they had originally thought (in this case, that it was better to forsake a fellow warrior in pain than to stand his clamours). And the thread of this mutual comprehension is the want of reintegrating at last the social unity of the Greek world that has been for

¹⁴ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, Paris 1945, p. 111.

¹⁵ Vide T. Eagleton, *Sweet Violence, Op. Cit.*, p. 29.

¹⁶ Sophocles, *The Complete Plays*, Trans. L. Campbell, (e-book) 2009, *Philoctetes*, II Ep., vv. 740-750.

ten years under the sway of adversity in Troy.

This ontological sense of suffering in the sociopersonal dynamics explains the insurmountable ambiguousness of tragedy, which has here been considered a dialectical process, although its preeminent meaning, at least from a cultural or historical perspective, is that of a literary genre that originated in Athens in the course of the sixth century BC and that sets out the human misfortune (as it is embodied by warriors, aristocrats, and royals) under the power of fate¹⁷. And the question arises again: what right do we have to change a cultural definition into a philosophical one? The answer to which is simply that the want of dealing with adversity and suffering is not a feature of the ancient Greek civilization but of the self whose existence is always threaten by irrationality, *i.e.*, by the incommensurability of its forces and of those of reality. Furthermore, irrationality only can be overcome when it is reintroduced in the dynamism of the social world through the literary genre that the Athenians devised as a means for both perceiving the depth of existence and preventing themselves from being carried away by pity and fear, as Aristotle and tradition know: «Tragedy is thus for regulating social feelings [...]»¹⁸.

This regulation, however, cannot be conceived as a kind of general psychological therapy, let alone as the representation of other people's mistakes for the individual to learn, so that its true aim comes to light through the feature that according to Nietzsche is the kernel of tragedy: the participation of the chorus¹⁹. Whereas the protagonists are crushed by suffering, the chorus as a whole reminds them that «[...] at bottom, and in spite of all the change of appearances, life is indestructibly powerful and pleasant [...]»²⁰. And this does not mean that the chorus keeps aloof, on the contrary, it expresses very lively the horror that seizes it but also its full certitude of the potency of reality over suffering and death. Thus, instead of fighting alone thanks to an unyielding willpower or to resort to introspection after a fathomless wisdom (the two ways of facing individually reality that subjectivism upholds as far as it takes consciousness as a solipsistic psychological representation and not as an ontological determination), the protagonists must be up to the chorus and that is how they themselves get to overcome the emotional blow of adversity and even the ominous threat of a bloody death.

The chorus gives so the clue to bind the potency of adversity with sociopersonal consciousness, which the subjectivist approach to existence tries at all costs to hide because it takes for granted the total positivity of becoming. Therefore, when things go wrong, subjectivism is incapable of offering the self a way-out, bar that of strengthening still more the mental and voluntarist determinations, which leads

¹⁷ A. Lesky, *La Tragedia Griega*, Spanish Trans. J. Godó, El Acanilado, Barcelona 2001, p. 111.

¹⁸ T. Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 153.

¹⁹ Vide F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Spanish Trans. A. Sánchez P., Alianza, Madrid 1973, p. 73.

²⁰ *Idem.*

at worst to the generalization of solipsism despite the force of suffering, which is so violent that the best way to express it is the bodily harm that both the protagonists and the totality of the lifeworld each to its own experience, as it is shown better than in any other work in *Oedipus the King*, whose very dramatic framework agrees point by point with the exegesis of the existential link of catastrophe and tragedy.

It is meaningful that the work begins with the entreaties of the chorus to Oedipus to do something against the terrible plague that ravages both the city of Thebes and the whole region where even the plants wither, since that it reminds us of the philosophical import of catastrophe as the unsettlement through which it comes to light the insurmountable limitations of human agency over nature, which in this case refers above all to Oedipus. For independently of his having fatally been destined to the worst crimes, he is guilty because he tried to evade fate instead of comprehending what the oracle meant on revealing him that he was to kill his father and marry his mother. If he had dwelt upon that as it deserved, he would perhaps have prevented it from happening, so that his guilt is at bottom the rush and the consequent blindness concerning his being, as Tiresias says explicitly when he is summoned by Oedipus to help to face the plague: «Ah! Terrible is knowledge to the man whom knowledge profits not»²¹.

We return to the incommensurability of sense and self that is the thread of tragedy throughout thanks precisely to the intensity of the bodily and social suffering that Oedipus will experience when he changes his symbolic blindness into a physical one and simultaneously loses his royal dignity due to a fault that must be comprehended. Which although can be absurd to a current mentality, nurtured as it is by relativism, shows unmistakably the transcendence of any human action in the lifeworld that also embraces nature as an organic horizon: «nature is not just *around* us; or rather, there is no *getting around* Nature, which is at all times *under* us, indeed *in* us»²². Thus, the fact that someone disrupts even unintentionally the natural cycles affects all the living beings and earth itself, understood not as the deposit of raw materials indispensable for survival but as the ground of any kind of human balance, so that everyone and everything must suffer the consequences thereof. What is objectively a singular fact changes into the origin of a new ontological dimension and that is why Oedipus resorts eagerly to any means within his reach to know the truth about his birth, pressed by the dynamism of nature and not by a shallow psychological want, such as knowing whom he is son of.

Mutatis mutandis, what the chorus expresses on listening to the revelation of the crime must not be mistaken for the impressions of a group of spectators

²¹ Sophocles, *The Complete Plays, Op. Cit., Oedipus the King*, I Ep., vv. 315-318.

²² E. S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place. Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2009, p. 186.

that registers an event, for it really contextualizes it upon the terrible potency of temporality that the catastrophe makes patent. Therefore, the sense of history at issue is neither that of a transcendent predestination nor that of the operativity of a general economic or sociocultural structure, but the narration of *a possibility of overcoming the incommensurability of self and sense*. And this leap from representation to comprehension has a dramatic strength that the performance of the work must reveal to «[...] put consonance where there is only dissonance»²³. For contrary to the mere chronological or successive development of events that is usually taken as the ‘objective’ sense of history, or to the would-be subjection of them to the general structure that is usually taken as the ‘philosophical’ sense of the former, tragedy shows through the reactions of the chorus that the comprehension of temporality (which is the sole aim of history) is beyond the self on any empirical level, which is why the mediation of a dramatic framework to get the ontological concretion is indispensable. Thus, the literary and the philosophical senses of tragedy coincide dialectically and suffering or even death are integrated beyond the empirical opposition of the recurrent natural cycles, the convulsed political contradictions, and the insurmountable personal finitude: «no genre is so definitively dialogic, nor conceals the authorial persona to such an extreme degree».²⁴

3. On the nexus of catastrophe and tragedy for the present

The reconsideration of history that thanks to works such as *Philoctetes* or *Oedipus the King* gets a truly poetic depth does not lead (however much it makes feasible the integration of temporality) either to the idealization of the self or to the definitive overcoming of the conflict. For although the possibility of identifying time and human intentionality makes perceptible a *sui generis* consonance, the latter just shades but does not suppress the elemental dissonance that is the kernel of existence as the famous dictum of Heraclitus says: «War is the mother of everything»²⁵. Regarding human agency, this means that no value escapes the dialectical condition of existence and that the consequent want of continual reflection on the passional drive of the self cannot be satisfied once and for all as every general system of political or moral rules pretend to do²⁶. And through this ontological and practical dialectics the very self is redefined, which shows the groundlessness of the would-be absolute psychological substantiality

²³ P. Ricoeur, *Temps et Récit*, 3 vv., Seuil, Paris 1983, v. I, p. 138.

²⁴ E. Hall, «The Sociology of Athenian Tragedy» in P. E. Easterling (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge 1997, p. 119.

²⁵ Fragment 22 B 53.

²⁶ Vide A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1984, p. 55.

that any vulgar variant of subjectivism takes for granted. Obviously, that continual contextualization of the self explains, on the one hand, why the tragic conflict leads to lucidity despite its violence and, on the other hand, why the reactions that protagonists face are however so much disconcerting or frankly shocking from any conventional standpoint: «[...] in classical tragedy [...] an agent's identity is shaped over time in relation to necessities of both circumstance and character. His 'real self' is, so to speak, a negotiated self; he is defined in part by his recognition of and his attitudes to what must be, and by how these are reflected in his practical judgement»²⁷.

This shows moreover that tragedy reintegrates dialectically (instead of relatively) any catastrophe into the total becoming of the lifeworld, which far from being reduced to an academical issue is on the contrary one of the central aspects of the present culture, ruled as the latter is by a rampant subjectivism that tries to abolish at all costs the critical and hermeneutical complexity of the self in favour of an 'image' that you can play with at your ease. But this reduction of self to image is just a derivation of the main problem, which at bottom lies in *the ominous reduction of evil to a malleable negativity that can even be joyously manipulated through willpower and/or the right technique*. Whereas the protagonists of any tragedy are crushed by an evil that emanates, so to speak, from the all-embracing potency of fate that even the gods fear, the present vision of existence takes it as a shallow emotional disturbance or social tension that can be corrected without further ado. And this is an unmistakable denial of the ontological weight both of adversity and of suffering that man and the rest of the livings must endure in accordance with tragedy, whether the latter ends in death or in the opening of a new epoch (possibilities that instead of contradicting each other, perfectly match)²⁸.

Still more, for tragedy the problem is not so much the fatefulness of crime and misfortune or the cruelty of punishment but something a lot more perturbing, namely, *the essential dreadfulness of human nature*²⁹. This expression means the peremptory want of transgressing any natural bond for the sake of the utmost sway over reality that is perceptible both in the exploits of heroes and rulers and, on the other extreme, in the most despicable or distorted manifestations of conscience such as greed and remorse. Contrary to what the optimisms of every kind uphold, there is so a tendency to unbalance in man that bursts when least expected and that is hardly tameable by fear or guilt, as Oedipus shows on killing Laius without thinking that the latter could be the father that he was destined to kill. This feature must not however be understood as a characterological fault (that is the mistake of any moral

²⁷ A. Denham, «Tragedy without the Gods», *British Journal of Aesthetics*, V. 54, N. 2 (2014) 158-159.

²⁸ Vide V. G. Rivas López, «Lo femenino como poder conciliador del cosmos en el pensamiento trágico», *Graffilia*, V. I, N. 1 (2003), p. 46.

²⁹ Vide M. Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Spanish Trans. A. Ackermann, Gedisa, Barcelona 1993, pp. 138-139.

vision of existence), for it follows the lack of a proper place in reality that opposes man to any other being and even to himself, which takes the issue to the ontological determination of reality as such: if man tends to unbalance is because existence tends to it by itself, as the so weird rhythms of temporality make patent. At bottom, the dreadfulness of man is just the inverted reflection of that of nature and becoming.

Now, what is the fundamental expression of this for the present culture and what is therefore the value of tragedy for it? Undoubtedly, the ecological and cultural unsettlement that in the lee of a massive liberation tinged with inclusiveness has in the course of the last half century supplanted the dialectics of the sociopersonal consciousness with the prattle regarding the limitless right of everyone to do and experience everything. Nevertheless, such a stance prevents the self from answering to dreadfulness with a radical transvaluation, which obviously requires an even bodily exertion to be carried out and rejects the immediateness that characterizes instead the current subjectivism, whose global scope makes it furthermore almost unassailable. Thus, as a general conclusion of this analysis, it must be said that the disappearance, as a cultural value, of the basic ontological difference between self and sense for the sake of a total experience is then the most worrying form of catastrophe nowadays, but it is unfortunately far from evident that there is a form of tragedy able to express it. *Vale*.

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