Here, and Here

Here, and Here
Essays on Affirmation and Tragic Awareness

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Introduction

An ongoing discussion, mostly a silent one, persistent and always on the move, but rarely uneasy. It goes back to Heraclitus and Euripides, to Thucydides and Aristotle, to discussions directly or indirectly about the idea and the phenomenon of the tragic conflict, on the structures of the tragic, in Athenian democracy, especially in relation to logos, the art of *dianoia* and *lexis*, thought and word, reflecting and speaking, that was of such importance for the Greeks on their way to representing and thinking about things, analyzing them, comparing them, questioning them and often also exceeding them in diverse ways of thinking about thinking. A certain relation to logos that through Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, who more than any other contemporary thinkers have scrutinized and problematized it so intensively and generously, helps me to arrange my thoughts and words about tragic awareness, affirmation and cosmetics.

When it comes to the phenomenon of the tragic, it is the relation to logos rather than to suffering that concerns me here, the way logos affects and is affected, controls and is controlled by the tragic. Even more than this, it is the moment and the space outside this violent structure, just before or just after it, the moment that is filled by a tragic awareness and that, hopefully, will last forever, a moment that our idea of a good democracy needs now as it has always done.

Simon Goldhill, studying the tragic as a cause of suffering, has taken a position against "generalizing about" it,[1] as this undermines the possibility to read what is specifically tragic in any tragedy. And yet either one generalizes or is specific about the different contexts that generate it, one has to take into account a discussion of the tragic independent of suffering, as when one discusses what makes one kind of suffering tragic and another not, especially if we, together with Goldhill, contest a "general notion" of the tragic.[2]

We can always start with the study of the tragic in ancient Greece in relation to the tragedies that have survived, those by Aeschylus, Sophocles

and Euripides. We can also study the passages in Plato's dialogues and Aristophanes' opinions in his comedy *Frogs*. It is, however, Aristotle's *Poetics* that provides the first definition of tragedy. Not a comprehensive theory about the tragic itself, but certainly the means to assemble a specific notion of the tragic related to a world view or to the place where an individual at a given moment stands in the world, especially if our starting point is *mimesis* or *hamartia*, or the way *hamartia* can upset *mimesis* and lead to a conflict with it.[3]

In Plato we understand that the idea of the tragic was something that could be perceived outside the genre of tragedy. Plato's thoughts about the tragic are neither many nor concrete. Stephen Halliwell writes that "there are important grounds for ascribing the first conscious delineation of the tragic, at any rate outside tragedy itself [...] to Plato."[4] Following his analysis we can read in Plato about the experience of suffering or loss in life (with the involvement of gods and fate depicted in poetry and tragedies) that philosophy could transcend in order to offer us a rational and serene picture of the good and of happiness, since the individual is able to choose "between good and evil".[5]

A similar line of thought is followed by Drew A. Hyland as he takes up the theme of eros, discussed in the *Symposium*. Hyland writes about the tragic side of eros, a side that is a result of the impossibility of achieving a complete eros: "Human eros is not just a source of consolation for foolish humans; in its multiple manifestations [eros for the laws, art and philosophy], it is the source as well of the noblest of human aspirations. [...] this makes the human situation not less but more fully tragic."[6]

Certainly one does not need the genre of tragedy or the reflections of philosophy (whether this is against it or for it) to speak of the tragic or let oneself feel its impact. As Halliwell writes speaking of Plato's view: "'the tragic' could and would have existed as a response to life even if tragic poetry had never come into being."[7] People in Athens knew what suffering and loss meant, while democracy, they believed, was a system that, when used effectively, could eliminate many negative sides of real life: war, abuse of the laws, abuse of the logos itself. This very system, however, could also abuse itself in an effort to protect itself. Phrynichus' tragedy *The Capture*

of Miletus (produced ca. 493 BC) moved the Athenians to the degree that, according to Herodotus (6, 21), they fined the author one thousand drachmas because he reminded them of "troubles they had at home". The people of Athens felt the tragedy that history produced and did not need literature to make it worse for them, something that in effect created a limit beyond which the right of free speech was suspended.

In Pericles' *Funeral Oration*, which celebrates Athens and its democracy, and honours the Athenians who fell in the first year of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC), we encounter an idea of the tragic that is related to the idea of democracy and to that of perfection, though not exactly in the way that would later be elaborated by Plato, since perfection for Pericles has not so much to do with truth as it has with happiness.

Athenians, says Pericles, have inherited a free state and have a form of government that is called democracy, "because its administration is in the hands, not of the few, but of the many; yet while as regards the law all men are on an equality for the settlement of their private disputes, as regards the value set on them it is as each man is in any way distinguished that he is preferred to public honours, not because he belongs to a particular class, but because of personal merits [...]" Within this democratic frame public life is free and people have respect for those in authority and for the laws. Moreover, the democratic city of Athens offers "relaxations from toil: we have games and sacrifices regularly throughout the year and homes fitted out with good taste and elegance [...]"[8]

Athens and its democracy offer a good life, one that has no place for the tragic if this is not an ingredient of tragedy in the various theatrical festivals. This is of course an oxymoronic statement given that Athens is at war, one that killed the men that are now honoured. Pericles does everything in his oration to hide the tragic, or rather the results of a tragic conflict. Subjects that could function as themes for a tragedy or would certainly be described as tragic by Plato are for Pericles neutralized or eliminated by the blissfulness and moderation of democracy. In Athens, says Pericles, "we are lovers of beauty yet with no extravagance and lovers of wisdom yet without weakness. Wealth we employ rather as an opportunity for action than as a subject for boasting; and with us it is not a shame for a man to acknowledge

poverty, but the greater shame is for him not to do his best to avoid it."[9]

There are apparent instances in the oration that in different circumstances would have led to thorough consideration of the manifestations and structures of the tragic in an open city, a city that has created for itself both the right and the means to contemplate the terms of its own being. Athens, "the school of Hellas", knows very well the difference between good and evil and has "planted everlasting memorials" of it. Noble men have "fought and died" for the city, "deeming it their duty not to let her be taken from them". These men "have blotted out evil with good", even if some of them were not as good in their private lives as they should have been. This is then a rich subject for a tragedy or for a discussion of a tragic way to look at what it takes to be a citizen in Athens. Soon follows another one, when Pericles speaks of the "moment of the combat" and of the brave men who think it "better to defend themselves and suffer death rather than to yield and save their lives." They have thus avoided the "shameful word of dishonour" and "in the brief instant ordained by fate, at the crowning moment not of fear but of glory, they passed away."[10]

Good and evil, nobility and baseness, death and life, honour and dishonour, the role of fate and of the free will: all these are themes for a tragedy or instances of the awareness of a certain idea of the tragic. Pericles insists upon them throughout the oration. Honour and duty and greatness are contrasted to humiliation and cowardice. Good fortune and glorious death gain power in contrast to their opposites. One is reminded of the Aristotelian *peripeteia*, when Pericles speaks of "enantia metabolê", "the opposite reversal of fortune", and of the Aristotelian pity, when he speaks of grief that is "felt, not for the want of the good things which a man has never known, but for what is taken away from him after he has once become accustomed to it." Pity is also present in his last words to the Athenian people: "And now, when you have made due lament, each for his own dead, depart."[11]

Of course the event itself, the funeral ceremony and the reasons that led to it can be seen as tragic. Pericles was certainly aware of it, as was anyone who felt the loss of a dear person or the cruel consequences of the war. In this oration, however, it is as if we have a conflict between democracy

and the tragic, between the concept and practice of democratic values in Athens and the pain that the tragic entails. In the perfect democracy there would be no place, no possibility for the tragic to emerge and affect the citizens. Honour, virtue, lawfulness and the subsequent happiness would be so powerful that they always would prevail over the adversities that lead to tragic conflict and the subsequent suffering. In any case Pericles in his oration avoids this subject, as he avoids the abyss that it can open. But this abyss is hanging under the democracy nevertheless and its awareness is present in the oration. Thus we have a paradox here, the fact that tragedy as a genre could only have been created and flourished within democracy, while this democracy, according to Pericles, wants to flourish without experiencing the tragic.

It is also only within the limits of the Athenian democracy that logos had the possibility to question itself and also reach beyond it. The historical reality of democracy has shown its tragic side in the very person of Pericles. The strong and wise man, the master of *dianoia* and *lexis*, who had his friends among the most brilliant intellectuals of his time and had no difficulties in living together with the *hetaera* Aspasia, pushed Athens into an imperialistic policy and to a certain degree was responsible for the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. His political adversaries took advantage of the suffering that the war had caused to accuse him of mismanaging public funds. He was condemned in 430 to pay fifty talents. Although he was elected again *strategos*, this turn of fortunes can be studied both in the terms of the Athenian democracy and those of the tragic.

Likewise, democracy and the power of logos in Athens were manifested in the freedom to develop different forms of tragedy and different approaches to the tragic. The best production of a tragic trilogy was awarded a prize in a democratic way (although we do not know how they were selected for participation in the first place), and, by expanding the limits of the tragic, tragedies could shock their audiences. The case of Phrynichus is not the only one. Euripides was compelled to rewrite his tragedy *Hippolytos Veiled* in which Phaedra's daring love for her stepson had insulted the good morals of the citizens. This may be one of the reasons why that first *Hippolytos* is now lost. And then of course we have Callias' mysterious *Grammatikê tragôdia*,

the *Letter Tragedy*, where the author expands the limits of tragedy and the tragic while experimenting with the self-importance and self-awareness of both tragedy and logos.[12]

Pericles, Plato, Phrynichus, Callias and Aristotle, no matter how much they expanded logos' territory and capacities, remain within its confines. Euripides, however, is the artist and philosopher who, thanks to the same democracy that had disappointed him, could experiment with the form and the content of tragedy. Even more so, the tragedy gave him the possibility to use logos in order to allow it contemplate itself. The tragic in some of Euripides' plays (certainly in *Medea* and the meta-tragedy *Bacchae*) is a result of logos' insight into its own limits.

In all the essays in this book I am in direct or indirect conversation with Derrida and his efforts to open and examine logos' claims to a privileged position and power. His scepticism has been valuable for unsettling democracy, both the one we study in ancient Greece and modern times, and the one to come. In a way that has its parallel in the democratic Athens, we have today the best intellectual instruments to improve democracy and criticize any aspect of any imposing logos. But have we been able to influence democracy in a decisive way yet? Will we be able to do so in the future? How would then logos be used and make itself felt?

More important to the essays here is the possibility of using logos without the negative, restricting and violent aspects of logos. In this respect I speak about affirmation and about tragic awareness rather than about the tragic itself or tragic conflict, as I read texts of a literary democracy that is already here, texts by Don DeLillo, Tomas Tranströmer, John Ashbery and Thanasis Valtinos, or see arrangements by Lo Snöfall. Indeed it is all about arrangements rather than about translation, if I am allowed here to distance myself from Emily Apter;[13] it is more about knowing how to affirm and doing it rather than using language and its codes in order to transcribe, however accurate this might be. Translation is arranging tragically aware of its affirming capacity. Arrangements say yes, since they do not raise any absolute boundaries and, in a Derridean gesture (and yet beyond Derrida's recourse to negative reasoning–this being a form of the violence that Nietzsche endowed his Dionysus with), do not claim

to have their ground in a truth that would resist or be in immediate need of deconstruction. The absence of a ground gives place to the abyss that generates the tragic awareness, which in its turn intensifies the affirmative activity. The arrangement is a logos without logos: it is a cosmos, where affirming is a tragically aware cosmetics. Cosmos is neither the world nor any ordering or embellishment of this world, but an openness as the incalculable accumulation of arrangements that say yes in their awareness that they do not amount to an ontology. Here we can speak about a reverse tragic, one that–unlike what takes place in Aristotle, Hegel or Nietzsche–imposes limits to openness, order to abyss.

Chapter 1

The tragic elusiveness in John Ashbery's *The Heroes*

John Ashbery could be read as a pre- or post-tragic writer, one who allows a certain tragic awareness to inform his relation to the world and the people who inhabit it. This awareness, prevalent in *The Heroes*, first produced in 1952, distinctly influences the manner in which the persons move and think in the play.[14] The same tragic awareness is to be found in all his poetry, in which, as in *The Heroes*, it emanates from and always returns to an affirming position that, at the same time, is an opening up of limits in unforeseeable ways.[15]

We can approach the tragic with the help of Aristotle, as a literary or aesthetic phenomenon with its own specific morphology. We can approach it with the help of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Friedrich Nietzsche, as part or subject of the philosophical logos that addresses terms of truth, identity, language or knowledge; or we can approach the tragic with the help of Plato, Aristotle, Aristophanes (through his comedy *Frogs*) and Nietzsche in relation to the range of feelings that it provokes. We can also, with the help of Hegel and some recent theories, such as the one by George Steiner,[16] study the ways history receives and is transformed by the tragic and, in turn, the tragic is transformed by history.

For Aristotle, Hegel and Nietzsche, three philosophers whose writings are unavoidable in any discussion of the tragic, the tragic opens an unexpected gap in the inner world of the tragic hero and shatters the hero's relationship with the outer world. For Aristotle and Hegel this gap takes place within the confines of logos. The Aristotelian *hamartia* and the Hegelian conflict between two powers do not threaten the very foundations of logos. The Aristotelian *peripeteia* is grounded on the clarity and the controlling faculties of logos, as is catharsis, which depends on logos in order to be able to influence the eventual insights of the tragic hero. Of

course we can compare catharsis with the Hegelian conciliation, to which the tragic conflict leads and which exceeds the tragic hero in order to finally place her or him within the harmony of logos and the completeness of the spirit. The gap, however, that according to Nietzsche the Dionysian powers open, both undermines and exceeds logos, and it does so to the degree that Nietzsche allows us to perceive a Dionysian tragic situation that does not always depend upon logos or on the conflict with logos, or Socrates, or Apollo, or metaphysics in order to express itself.

The criticism of the metaphysics of logos has been given its most exhaustive forms and its most subtle nuances by Jacques Derrida's deconstructive questioning.[17] It is a Nietzschean, a Dionysian questioning that, at the same time, allows us to wonder whether there is a point in continuing to speak about the tragic the way we have done until today.[18] The deconstructed truth is expected to keep and show its tragic power in a very different way from the truth, which is safely grounded on logos. What do Agamemnon or Clytemnestra, Orestes, Oedipus and Antigone represent today? And if we pursue this line of thought, we can easily understand Medea as a Dionysian enemy of the logos rather than as a helpless woman overwhelmed by jealousy. If this were not clear enough in Athens when *Medea* was first staged there, Euripides emphasized his war against logos again in *The Bacchae*, where Medea returns in the shape of Dionysus. Derrida, and before him Nietzsche and Euripides, by questioning and even removing the ground under the feet of metaphysics or rupturing the limits of identity, allows neither the conflict between two powers nor the tragic as such to take a definite or effective form. The tragic hero is not given the possibility to define herself or himself, or the suffering she or he goes through. It is only natural then to ask what kind of a hero Agamemnon or Clytemnestra, or any other devastated personality, is.

It is, therefore, challenging to take a step further in searching for possible manifestations and structures of the tragic today. The uncertainty that is produced by the Dionysian or the deconstructive activity is dependent upon a metaphysical ground, which it constantly questions or undermines. Nietzsche's Dionysus needs Apollo in order to tear him to pieces, while Derrida's deconstruction needs the field of metaphysics where it enacts

itself. The negation that for both Nietzsche and Derrida remains at the heart of affirmation (for it is the affirmation beyond the negation that both philosophers seek) is the connecting link with the metaphysics, it is what keeps them depending upon the interference of metaphysics.

Could we, however, speak of a tragic that is not grounded on a metaphysical logos? Is, above all, such a logos possible? Could we reach an affirmative condition that does not need negation or the violence of negation in order to express itself? If yes, then it would be possible to speak about a different kind of tragic, one that for the moment could be called a *reverse tragic*, one that is not due to the decomposition or shortcomings of logos, but of the imposing of logos and its powerful order on the affirmation that otherwise is to be found beyond metaphysics. It is an affirmation, however, which, while it says its yes here and now, can in any case sense the tragic and its abyss, as well as that which at any moment could attempt to limit or cancel it, that which never stops hovering threateningly above affirmation.

It is an affirmation in action that is not limited by logos and its negative dimension, it does not lead to dramatic conflicts, neither does it need their violence in order to justify itself. The direct impact of the tragic and its violence would appear now only when the need for self-assertion would impose itself, when Apollo, in a reverse movement compared to the one in Nietzsche, would decide to overpower Dionysus. Not the opening of an abyss, but the power that imposes, suppressing thus, this opening would be the cause of the tragic. Not the results of war, but the logos and the structures that sustain it and control it would be the expressions of the tragic.

Can we perceive Agamemnon or Clytemnestra before or after their violent acts in such a way that this is a result of affirmation rather than negation? Is such an attempt meaningful? Can we find within the text of tragedy the possibility for such a reading? If indeed an affirmative condition free from metaphysics is possible, can we see Clytemnestra and Agamemnon as something other than museum items or caricatures that have nothing to offer to our efforts to critically or aesthetically partake in the world?

We will return to the idea of caricature in relation to *The Heroes* shortly. Firstly, we could remain a little longer in the thought of the affirmative

tragic. It is a reverse tragic, in that in it we do not encounter the destructive opening of the abyss that dissolves the order, but the enforcement of order on an already open abyss, the imposition of that which in different ways exercises different forms of power. The affirmative tragic takes place in a limitless openness, in the flux that allows the tragic as a sort of feeling or presentiment, a premonition, a foreboding and a threat that a limit entails that the violence of metaphysics will return and make itself felt. The affirmative tragic is an awareness of a tragic conflict that has already taken place. The tragic awareness does not take a definable place, it is the openness itself, and it is within this openness that the tragic is elusive. It is in the affirmative, tragically aware openness that anything that has to do with truth and identity, and raises metaphysical claims is transgressed, rounded, trivialized and even laughed at by the tragic elusiveness, by the traces of a tragic conflict that has already taken place very far and very close at the same time.

Ashbery's *The Heroes*, written in 1950, was first produced in New York by the Living Theatre in 1952.[19] This is one year earlier than Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which was first performed in 1953 in Paris. In his play, Ashbery turns his back on existentialist questions which were dominant at that time[20] and he treats, instead, a tragic subject in a context that ignores and even undermines the conception of an Aristotelian, Hegelian and Nietzschean tragic. He employs, moreover, what could easily be called a postmodernist aesthetic at a time when theatre modernism was still decisively strong. One more aspect that makes the play stand out is its open treatment of homosexuality at a time when, as Ashbery once put it, "two men dancing together on the stage could easily be considered scandalous."[21]

In his play, Ashbery brings together the different temperaments and characters of Achilles, Circe, Theseus, Ulysses and others, and he allows them to confront each other and expose their inner worries, so that a dramatic conflict with violent tragic consequences or full of modernist purposefulness is avoided. And yet a strong sense of loneliness and loss is evident in the play, while death and absence contribute to the presence of a tragic awareness.

In the opening scene of the play we meet Theseus and Patroclus sitting

in a "*living room of an undeterminable period*" and in "*costumes that are vaguely Greek*".[22] Already here we are given a picture that avoids definitions and the clear structures that could function as a ground on which to build a conflict or a reliable dramatic crisis. The play itself has an open beginning: Theseus' words start in the middle of a thought that does not help us to appropriate its meaning, at least not at once and not clearly. He speaks about a "problem" that is "simple" without at any time telling us what this problem is. It is a problem, however, which he says needs "imagination" to be solved rather than rigid logic. Patroclus finds all this "wonderful", but Theseus has confused himself, as the stage direction let us know. He gives up and asks for "a drink". How then will the play go on, if confusion about what is said and what to do marks its beginning? And as Patroclus lets us know, nothing much happens in the "great old stupid house" in which he lives with Achilles. "It must be rather dull for you here, Patroclus," says Theseus.[23] However, the fact that there might be nothing exciting going on in the house or in the relation between Patroclus and Achilles maybe is in Patroclus head only, maybe Achilles leads an interesting life of his own. Theseus thus asks: "Does Achilles read much?" To which Patroclus, by avoiding anything that might betray the beginnings of a conflict or create a dramatic situation and by, at the same time, emphasizing just this, answers: "Oh forget about him. Talk some more about the minotaur." This is what follows:

> Theseus: I've never told anyone about it before.
> Patroclus: Oh... But I promise it will be a secret.
> Theseus: You're very sweet. Well, as I think I said, the minotaur itself was the least important part of the whole scheme. I'd always supposed the world was full of fakes, but I was foolish enough to believe that it was made interesting by the varying degrees of skill with which they covered up their lack of integrity. It never occurred to me that the greatest fake of all would make not the slightest effort to convince me of its reality... not a pretense! But there it was–a stupid, unambitious piece of stage machinery.[24]

Theseus has never before in the play spoken of his meeting with the

Minotaur, a confrontation which has already taken place and which, moreover, is not important to talk about. The violence, the fear, the dramatic circumstances of this meeting are not of any importance to the hero who just happened to find himself in the middle of them. Or maybe is he not a hero either? Does he place himself rather beyond the dramatic field that is promised in any confrontation? Whatever this might be, Patroclus will keep it a secret, it will never become public knowledge and it will not concern anyone except a bored Patroclus. Theseus does not attach much importance to Patroclus' promise: "You're very sweet", is his immediate reaction. This is very kind of Patroclus, but it is not a big deal after all. There is no gravity in Theseus' words, he does not even remember. In addition, he is not sure if he ever said anything about all this in the indefinable time before the beginning of the play: "Well, as I think I said", he says in his uninterested effort to go on and talk about a story, in which one of the most important parts of the myth, the Minotaur, "was the least important part" of the adventure. Any conflict or struggle is trivialized or left outside that which formed Theseus' experience. The Minotaur was a fake, one among all those fakes that the world "was full of", in fact the "greatest" of them all, which in its greatness and in its "reality" did not make the "slightest effort" to hide its falseness. This fake can never offer itself as a ground for a tragic conflict, it does not put its truth in doubt and its identity is not threatened, because it simply does not have any. It cannot even be taken seriously: it is "a stupid, unambitious piece of stage machinery". Why would Theseus want to tell anyone of something so incapable of provoking a conflict, of creating a dramatic or tragic confrontation, of making a difference? Theseus does not see any "purpose" in all this in the sense that Patroclus tries to do: "There was nothing to do but give the thing a well-aimed kick and go home."[25] This is a clear decision and a resolute action in an uncertain and negligible situation. Theseus turns his back on what was supposed to be a conflict, a struggle that could have seriously threatened his life.

But maybe it is not as easy, as trivial as Theseus presents it. Patroclus asks: "But what about all the maidens it was supposed to have devoured?" "All dead," answers Theseus.[26] There was pain, fear and death after all, and yet these elements that could otherwise be part of, the cause or the result of

a tragic conflict, are not given any consideration in the play. Theseus decides after all to give Patroclus a picture of "what it was like" in the maze, the "stupid device" of Daedalus:

> Sometimes the cracks in the planks admit sand. There are frequent large holes in the roof, so the visitor is free, if he wishes, to climb out on top and survey the ground plan of the whole edifice. In short, he is in the dubious position of a person who believes that dada is still alive.[27]

The maze is not a closed construction; it does not frighten the one who finds himself trapped in it. In fact, it is impossible to be entrapped in such a "stupid device", which has "holes in the roof" and the visitor can "climb out" of it. It is a "dada" machinery that could never enclose the consistent chain of events that can lead to a tragic clash, to fear and pity, and even to an insightful catharsis.

The maze is not consistent, it cannot constitute a reliable ground, and neither can its visitor. This is how Theseus goes on to explain what happens:

> Now comes the strangest part of all. You have been in the maze several days and nights, and you are beginning to realize that you have changed several times. Not just you, either, but your whole idea of the maze and the maze itself. This is most difficult to explain, and it is the wickedest thing Daedalus ever did. The maze looks just about the same as ever–it is more as if it were being looked at by a different person.[28]

The visitor does not have a stable identity, while the maze that encloses him is neither a maze nor does it have a constant identity. The tragic that needs identifiable polarities in order to enact itself cannot take place in the "wickedest thing that Daedalus ever did". However Theseus has felt "horror" in the maze, it was a "dark" place. Yet, at the same time, it was a place where he "was so happy", as he tells Patroclus. It was the horror in a place that fascinated and made Theseus happy:

> For now at last I was seeing myself as I could only be–not as I might be

> seen by a person in the street: full of unfamiliarity and the resulting poetry. Before, I might have seemed beautiful to the passerby. I now seemed ten times more so to myself, for I saw that I meant nothing beyond the equivocal statement of my limbs and the space and time they happened to occupy.[29]

The happiness of feeling and being unfamiliar, the poetry and beauty that this results in, "ten times more so" for Theseus than for the "passerby" after the experience in the maze, is as far from the modernist estrangement as possible; and, all at once, far from the ground that could sustain a tragic development. No truth or definition is imposed on the place or the subject within this happiness. In fact, the subject could never enter the process of a conflict, since it does not mean anything outside itself, being a self that is utterly unfamiliar with itself, always an other to itself. The tragic eludes us here, it lies there in the impossibility to identify oneself, to mean something to somebody or something, to reach beyond the equivocal state of the alienated subject; and yet what comes forth here is an affirmative tragic elusiveness, which brings happiness to the subject, makes it feel "ten times more" beautiful in a state of poetry.

This aesthetic euphoria provokes feelings "of love" in Patroclus, who urges Theseus to continue; and Theseus explains now how he "possessed the only weapon with which the minotaur might be vanquished–the indifference of a true aesthete". He lost all interest in any substantial interpretation of the circumstances in which he found himself. The religious, historical or philosophical side of the event he was part of was not of any importance to him any more. Yet he did not turn his back to the myth and its innate violence, he did not throw away his sword, he did not walk away or laugh at the whole thing. On the contrary, he drew his "sword with as much assurance as you might deal a card" and he "kicked open the door to the little privy-like enclosure where he [the minotaur] lay".[30] Theseus opts for an attack and the use of violence, but he knows that he is not part of any metaphysical scheme and his action will not lead to a struggle with any violent or tragic consequences. His indifference gives him the ease to confront a monster in a way that lifts it outside its mythical

substance. It does not matter what the monster looks like or how it will react. The whole myth has already collapsed. It is no surprise to Theseus then that what he meets on the other side of the door is the mockery of the myth, "a great big doodle-bug made of wood and painted canvas". Patroclus is thrilled by now, but Theseus is just happier, ecstatic in fact, when, as the stage directions describe, he "*rushes*" to Patroclus, "*grasps*" him "*about the middle*" and lifts him "*above his head*".[31]

The mockery of mythology and in fact of the whole of Greek religion is given a new emphasis when Circe, who entered the scene a while ago, says that by not being frank to each other the heroes in the play "no more resemble human beings than those silly figures on the front of the Parthenon do".[32] Heroes and gods are for Circe nothing but humans and, moreover, they are not to be taken seriously. The tragic elusiveness makes itself felt here as gods lose their status, as they are degraded to humans; they are silly, humiliated and dismissed. They are unable for tragic grandeur, and yet they can be seen as tragic victims in a reality that negates them. But Theseus, who is still in his pleasurably aesthetic state of mind, does not "agree with" Circe. He sees no traces of elimination, deprivation, no ground for regret, pity or contempt. He thinks that "those figures are beautiful". Moreover he thinks "that people are beautiful in the same way".[33] Those beautiful "figures" are for Theseus distinct from "people", and thus the presence of the metaphysical horizon is not entirely eradicated. However, the elusive presence of the divine element is here undermined or ignored, since it is only the aesthetic that is of any importance to Theseus.

It is all the time evident, though, that elimination, death and violence are present on the stage in different ways, which inevitably point to the potentiality of a tragic conflict and a tragic sense of life. A hysteric Patroclus wants the "aesthete" Theseus to tell him "about the maidens", who, as Theseus has already said, "were all dead".[34] Moreover, Theseus talks to Circe about "a man and a woman" he had been observing, who might have been "planning a murder";[35] and a moved Circe says a little later that she is capable of murder, when she is being insulted, that this is what people "always expected" of her.[36] Patroclus, a little later in the play, speaks about the dead "youths and maidens", about his fear that Theseus "would slay"

him when he lifted him "over his head".[37]

But any attempt to establish some sort of a solid frame that would allow the forceful or intimidating appearance of the tragic is undermined at once. For instance, for Circe there is "only one thing to do" when she is angry: to put on her girdle that "will make every man who sees" her "in it fall hopelessly in love with" her. She adds: "Love conquers all, as the poet said."[38] As for Theseus, who finds Circe "a very beautiful woman",[39] love and poetry win over death and violence. And when it comes to Patroclus' assurance as to what Theseus had told him about the devoured people, maybe this tragic event had never taken place. As Achilles says to Patroclus: "You're lying. He [Theseus] must have told you previously that the minotaur was not a live being."[40] We hear the same contradiction later in the play:

> Chorus: May I ask you a question?
> Theseus: Do.
> Chorus: Weren't you awfully scared in the labyrinth?
> Theseus: Not really. I felt it was quite natural that I should be there.
> Chorus: But didn't the minotaur frighten you?
> Theseus: No. You see, he wasn't alive, really.
> Chorus: But he's supposed to have killed a lot of people.
> Theseus: That's something that's always puzzled me.[41]

This contradiction makes Patroclus conclude "*pensively*", as if absent from this unresolved situation: "Either the minotaur was alive or those maidens weren't dead."[42] Some killing might have taken place or maybe not; perhaps the monster was never alive or maybe it was never a monster. Maybe the labyrinth was not a place to scare anybody. For Theseus, anyway, it was a natural thing to be there, he found happiness and beauty in that improbable place, he seems to have found his own self, he realized that he did not have a self outside himself, that he was ever changing in the unfamiliarity of himself. So much so that, as he says to the Chorus, he was "keyed up", happy and pleased in the maze to the degree that he "didn't notice" if there were "any signs" of killed people there. "Then how do you know they're dead?" asks the Chorus. "I just have a feeling," answers Theseus.[43]

The evidence of any tragic action in the labyrinth is reduced to a "feeling" Theseus has. The elusiveness of the tragic is even greater, since we are already aware of the apparent contradiction. The Minotaur was never alive; or maybe he was once, maybe he was killed before he turned into a "fake", "a stupid, unambitious piece of stage machinery", "a great big doodlebug made of wood and painted canvas". How are we then supposed to react to this contradiction? Is there any substance in it, anything that would make the persons in the play lose their sleep? Achilles prefers to speak about something else after Patroclus' pensive summary of the contradiction: "Forget about Theseus. Listen, Patroclus, you know the old story of Circe and Ulysses?"[44] And so does Circe immediately after Theseus tells the Chorus about his "feeling": "I certainly love your place here, Achilles."[45]

Life goes on irrespective of perplexities, which were not there in the first place, but which, as a matter of fact, were there before this first place, in the place of the myth. This myth is not valid any more, nobody seems to care about it, Theseus certainly does not, and nor do Circe and Achilles. Whatever tragic conflicts and experiences might have taken or could have taken place in the labyrinth is something that eludes Theseus and the rest of his company:

> Ulysses: It's so strange–our meeting again. So many conversations
> are forgotten,
> faces blotted out.
> Circe: What is there left to say.
> Ulysses: That's the strangest time. When there's nothing. When two ancient personages meet. Known to everybody in the world, disfigured by trash of folklore, excrement of centuries. Two gigantic piles of rubbish, poking through the twilight of the world. And unlike mountains, we're not even thoughtful.[46]

The eventuality of any tragic conflict cannot but be demolished by such words. There is no reason and no energy for it to emerge. But the tragic awareness remains nevertheless in the memory of the past times and in the plight in which these two "ancient personages" are found now. They are

figures that carry the past into a present that is too unable or too indifferent to stage a violent confrontation, which might have tragic consequences. "The only thing", says Ulysses to Circe, "we know about each other is that we happen to be in this room",[47] which reminds us of Theseus' words earlier in the play that he "meant nothing beyond the equivocal statement of [his] limbs and the space and time they happened to occupy".[48] These persons have only themselves within a context where they are not sure of themselves and the role they play, or of the context itself that nevertheless sustains them. More than that, they know that they do not matter to anyone or anything, they are not in any position to bring about a tragic conflict or a decisive dramatic situation. The tragic, however, is present and works as a reminder, a trace that does not allow a wholly unproblematic affirmation of life. As the Chorus says coming in, looking for Circe and Ulysses, "I have seen many many people in every possible relation to each other and I have never seen any good come of it."[49] The gloom of a potentially tragic event is hanging in the air, especially when in the space of the play there are "people" who carry a violent past. Ulysses says to Achilles: "Why have you let him [Theseus] put conflict between yourself and Patroclus, between Circe and me? [...] Oh Achilles! Theseus! Figures suggesting combat remorse return. Under all, the antique charade."[50] The traces of the tragic before or after a conflict are thus invoked, but it seems that the tragic event as such will never be given the opportunity to present itself as it has already turned into a "charade" that makes Ulysses exclaim, "Oh it does not matter who we are!"[51] And yet it does indeed matter, since the heroes are not indifferent or immune to what befalls them. At the end of the play, Ulysses says to Theseus who has fatally broken Patroclus' heart and who after all is an intruder, a hero from another mythic context: "Isn't it enough that you've wrecked all our lives, or at least made them unrecognizable?"[52] Theseus makes them all aware of the tragic in their life, of the sorrow and estrangement that this entails, but without conflicting with anyone, without putting one will or one principle against another, even as he says that he "can't even remember what [his] life was like before [he] came here". On the contrary, he feels distant to everything inside and around him, as his last words in the play reveal: "I don't know why everyone always picks on me!"[53] A great hero

turns the play into an affair about himself, away from the epic world that engulfs the different "ancient personages". It is a self that "sometimes feel[s] as if [he is] still in the maze, and that to stop anywhere would be as pointless as to continue",[54] who is not aware of the reasons why he affects others as he does after all. And not only does he affect them, but he also carries along with him all the traces of the tragic, which has once taken place and which might take place again.

Chapter Two

Tragic awareness in the poetry of Tomas Tranströmer

The lyrical openness in Tomas Tranströmer's poetry depends upon and interacts with a specific tragic awareness, but at the same time it turns this tragic awareness into an affirmative approach, an affirmative interpretation of the world. The openness ensures the decisive and always absent presence of the unreachable within and beyond the openness, an openness that, thanks to the tragic awareness, is never reduced to a limited and determining presence. The tragic awareness stems from the fact that the ground of language and its truth mechanisms, the ground of logos, is hovering over an abyss, constituted by whatever in it is unreachable or impossible to limit. In the poems of the collection *The Sad Gondola*, but also almost everywhere in his poetry, Tomas Tranströmer creates a lyrical flow in which the tragic conflict has already taken place, leaving behind it the traces that enables the poem to affirm the abyss that the tragic awareness keeps open. Borders and boundaries in the poetry of Tomas Tranströmer are temporary and only mark the direction of the poem's flow; they establish the contours that, strengthened by the tragic awareness, underline the openness of the poet's world.

Tragic openness

In the poem "From July 1990" ("Från juli 90")[55] we read about a life meeting death and, more importantly, how death enters life and life death, how the boundaries between the two open up and allow, in a paradoxical and impossible way, the flow from one region to the other:

It was a funeral
and I felt that the dead man
was reading my thoughts
better than I could.

The organ was silent, the birds sang.
The grave out in the sunshine.
My friend's voice belonged
on the far side of the minutes.

I drove home seen-through
by the glitter of the summer day
by rain and quietness
seen-through by the moon.

The dead man reads the living friend's thoughts from a beyond that allows for more contemplative clarity, a sharper intellectual understanding, a better understanding of what surrounds or is taking place within the subject. Death comes into life and brings more life to it, enlarges it. Yet this is an impossibility that at the same time makes itself present and actual in that it underlines the limits of life, of the living, of what the living can do or how far they can reach. Moreover the deceased and the thinking he provokes emphasize what exceeds the limits of the living, they open up the abyss under the living's feet. The deceased lies in the hole in the earth ("grop" is the word the poet uses), an open pit lit by the blazing sun ("solgasset" is more than "sunshine", it is strong, even hot sunshine). It is death from under the ground, from the back side of time ("på minuternas baksida") that enables the clarity about the futility of life or its greatness beyond present time, from an unseen and unthought-of time. This impossible beyond takes place in a here and now, and in the bright light of sun, a presence that is lived strongly by the subject: the sounds from the organ and the birds, the light of the sun, the flow of time. Within a limited space and during a short period of time in a short poem the poet gives us a strong interaction between space and time, between the close and the far away, the present and the absent,