

Greek Tragedy: a Metaphor of Public Debate and Democratic Participation

Tragedia griega: una metáfora de debate público y participación democrática

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Abstract

Athenian citizens deliberate in the assembly, but the theatre also becomes a place for public debate. In addition to being a consequence of economic or cultural aspects, democracy is a consequence of the development of a democratic imaginary. Located in that imaginary, Greek tragedies, regarded as «democratic myths», work to reaffirm Athenian democracy. Far from being dogmatic, the tragic myth explores the contradictions of social and personal life and implicitly or explicitly seeks their correction. This dramatic genre encourages participation from the spectator (citizen) that greatly exceeds the schematic reduction in Aristotelian theory of catharsis. Greek tragedy proposes the existence of an «audience», of spectators who need a sufficient level of maturity to make that assessment. Democracy is a path, or perhaps an active utopia, which should combine the political order with a coherent culture and art.

Keywords: Greek tragedy, democratic myths, catharsis and spectators-citizens

Resumen

Los ciudadanos atenienses deliberaban en la asamblea, pero también el teatro se convierte en un lugar de debate público. Porque una democracia (también la ateniense) no solo es consecuencia de aspectos económicos o de orden cultural, sino también del desarrollo de un imaginario democrático. Y es en dicho imaginario donde se inscriben las tragedias griegas, consideradas como «mitos democráticos» que servían para reafirmar la democracia ateniense. Lejos de cualquier dogmatismo, el mito trágico explora las contradicciones de la vida social y personal, y se pregunta, de manera expresa o tácita, por su posible corrección. Este género dramático induce a una participación del espectador (ciudadano), que va más allá de la esquemática reducción de la teoría aristotélica de la *catharsis*. El teatro griego propone la existencia de un «público», de unos espectadores que precisan de una gran madurez para emitir ese

juicio. La democracia es un camino, o quizás una utopía activa, que debe conjugar el orden político con una cultura y un arte coherentes.

Palabras clave: Tragedia griega, mitos democráticos, catarsis y espectadores-ciudadanos.

1. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

The present work intends to demonstrate that Attic tragedy can operate as a metaphor of democratic art, distances and historical differences aside. While tragedy is one of the most powerful human constructions that attempts to present and disclose the underlying enigma of peoples' lives, the democratic city, bursting with riddles and conflicts, also penetrates those lives.

To a certain extent, we follow J. P. Euben (1986) when he argues that Greek tragedy was the context for classical political theory and that such theory read in terms of tragedy provides a ground for contemporary theorizing. Euben shows how ancient Greek theatre offered opportunity for reflection on the democratic culture.

Our multifaceted view of tragedy leads us to a deduction that is the result of an in-depth study of Athens during its time as a democratic polis, when it played a prominent role in its victory over the *Persians* and experienced a series of internal and external conflicts, which also included tragedy. Tragedy is probably better thought of as a more or less natural expression at the cultural level of a set of social and mental habits of democratic society (Wilson, 2011: 26).

How did that happen? Here is where one of the basic drivers of our approach appears. An impulse, a driving force created by a discovery, the perception that all the surviving Attic tragedies (thirty-two in total) exude political issues, but never in the form of propaganda or exaltation of certain ideas.

In that context, we consider the truly amazing fact that, because the government of Athens was a religious and political institution (together with the Assembly and the Parthenon), it could have used its theatre to transmit certain ideas and values. And yet, the plays offered to citizens during the Dionysian and the Lenaia festivals usually presented a conflict in a way that always allowed different readings. All the known plays leave a margin of interpretation to the viewer. Hence, the primary perception is that tragedy seeks to educate in freedom of judgment, proposing the existence of an audience, of spectators that require great maturity. The viewer, the citizen, has to build democracy, rather than follow democratic sermonising.

A basic question arises immediately from this finding: whether Greeks believed that theatre was a means of democratic education for the whole of society.

For this reason, Greek tragedy, understood metaphorically, of course, may contribute to democratic and civic education by raising the notion of civic *paideia*.¹

But, what elements from tragedy contribute to democratic culture?

Democracies require reasons but also «democratic myths»;² and thus we can describe this artistic expression as a model of public cultural policy.

If, as Pericles remarked «the entire city is Greece's school» (Thucydides, II, 41), Greek theatre has its own space in that activity. That deliberation is present in a tragedy, that «educates» citizens in democracy, tolerance and freedom.

From these considerations, the work is structured as follows. First, we discuss the role of tragedy in democracy, in reference to the relationship between citizen and spectator. After defining this relationship, we define «democracy» according to our thesis. Next, and after remembering the intellectual status pointed out by Aristotle, we propose a consideration of tragedies as myths (so we cannot ignore their relationship with *logos*). Then we introduce the concept of «democratic myths» to conclude with the example of several tragic works studied from a hermeneutical perspective.

2. CITIZEN AND SPECTATOR

The main theme of tragedy are humans facing their freedom and their destiny. In addition to this anthropological issue, tragedy always shows men linked to the polis, to civic life and therefore has a crucial political meaning besides the educational one. The political role of tragedy is an indisputable fact, since this art form does not live on the sidelines of political events in the polis. But although the function of tragedy is hard to question, we cannot ignore the controversy it arouses.

Before entering into this debate, however, we would like to make it clear, following D. M. Carter, that Greek tragedy is politically relevant for the polis, democratic or not.

1 As defined by W. Jaeger in his book *Paideía* to include a variety of terms such as civilization, culture and education.

2 This concept is part of the main thesis of my book: *La tragedia griega y los mitos democráticos*. Vid. Bibliography.

In this sense, as Carter says, «to insist too heavily on the generality of polis culture in tragedy is to risk an approach that is, as the democratic approach, narrow, for isolated allusions to democracy can appear in even the most unpromising dramatic situations» (2011: 13).

The relationship between politics and tragedy has been studied in depth by P.Vidal-Naquet who sees tragedy as a genre that is aesthetic, literary, political and religious, and he considers every tragic work to be the painful restoration of order, and the traumatic birth of duty in its dual aspect: from the religious viewpoint, developing the antagonism of existence between man and the Cosmos; from the political viewpoint, explaining the underlying conflagration between man and power. But Vidal-Naquet also notes that the relationship between politics and tragedy has been considered in various ways in different studies.

- 1) The first way to relate tragedy to politics has to do with the discovery of political allusions in Greek tragedies (Vidal-Naquet, 2004: 17). It is true that the Assembly (*Ekklesia*) is not directly represented in tragedy, but multiple mentions have been found. Like, for example, the mention that relates the end of *The Oresteia* with Ephialtes' reforms of 462 BC, which put an end to the role of the Areopagus, limiting its function to blood crimes. It must be remembered that *The Oresteia* was represented in 458 BC., four years after that important democratic reform.
- 2) The second section of this research explores the specific political commitment of tragic authors, including any political affiliation. Let's leave it there, as a note, because what really interests us is not specific data, but the complex relationships between tragedy and the Athenian polis.
- 3) The third point is the one that is most in line with Vidal-Naquet's comparison of tragedy with a «broken mirror», which he formulates by remembering the tragic filters of history: «If the Athenians had wanted a mirror as direct as possible of society as they saw it, they would not have invented tragedy, but photography or cinematographic information» (2004: 53).³

We have highlighted this threefold study on the relationship between politics as the basis for understanding the central theme in our work, that is, the importance of tragedy in the development of Attican democracy. But first

3 All translations from Spanish into English are the author's.

of all, it must be said that this controversial theory is not shared by all historians of the ancient world. For example, P.J. Rhodes questions whether Athens consciously dealt with the debate of democratic values in its theatre.

Given that the democracy was not always tolerant of questioning and dissent, given that many of the presuppositions in the plays seem to me to be polis presuppositions more than democratic presuppositions, given that the institutional framework within which the plays were performed seems to me to be a polis framework more than a democratic framework, I am reluctant to make that jump. My title, 'Nothing to do with democracy', is an exaggeration; but I see Athenian drama as reflecting the polis in general rather than the democratic polis in particular (2003: 119).

Rhodes' approach raises the question: Is tragedy essentially a democratic genre or merely «of the *polis*»?

It is interesting to pause here to observe J. Gallego's comparison (2016) between the Athenian Assembly in V. B. C. and the audience in the theatre. That is to say the possible homology between Assembly and theatre, a civic body that can be considered according to the respective roles of citizen and spectator. This homology would also encompass public meeting spaces: the Pnyx, agora and the Theatre of Dionysus (2016: 20). Gallego advocates for an active role of Athenians as spectators at the theatre and as citizens, based on the idea of «audacity» pointed out by both Thucydides (*The Peloponnesian War*; II, 40, 3) and Plato (*Laws*, 700e).

Whereas in the Assembly citizens argue in order to take political decisions, in the theatre they argue about the conflict presented in the play as we shall see in a moment. But before doing that, we should point out that this homology is not clear in the different studies recently published. For example, S. Goldhill argues that the fundamentally democratic character of tragedy focuses initially on the festival context, establishing a framework of what he regards as elements specific to the civic ideology of the democratic regime in theatrical performances. Goldhill considers that respectful fear of authority has been lost. Specifically, the spectator who has the ability to sit as a spectator and at the same time the ability to judge as a political subject, is an important asset in building democratic culture (1990: 5-8).

On the other hand, N. Loraux (1990) raises a criticism of the idea of homology. Many studies against homology that seek the political significance of tragedy are unable to grasp the «subversive» nature of the Theatre of Dionysus with respect to the norms of public life. According to Loraux, there is no homology between the role of citizen and spectator because, among other things, in the Assembly the problems of the city are discussed and in the theatre, problems of existence.

There is a story by Herodotus (VI, 21: 2) in which the effects of the defeat of the Milesians by the Persians in Athens of the early fifth century BC are recounted. According to Loraux, the defeat caused intense sorrow among spectators, while the citizens decided to forget that unfortunate event. Two courses of action that call Goldhill's theory into question.

Within this discussion, P. Burian (2011) looks at Athenian drama not as the proponent of specifically democratic and/or anti-democratic ideologies, but as a locus of debate about the merits of an existing democratic ideology and practice, and a place to imagine what, for better or worse, democracy might yet become. The same author concludes that tragedy itself mimics democracy by placing the audience in the position of listening and judging, just like a citizen, rather than by depicting democratic situations.

In this line, Carter states that the performance of tragedy in Athens is related to the teaching of rhetoric, especially democratic rhetoric (2011: 47). Some of these conclusions are illustrated through a discussion of Euripides' *Medea*.

Carter in particular says: «A decision of the people is referred to as 'your' decision just as it would be by someone speaking before the assembly or a democratic jury» (2011: 57).

In contrast, N. Villacèque (2013) analyzes the role of the audience in the theatre according to the ways in which both the comic and tragic poets addressed spectators by transforming the performance into deliberation. For Villacèque, popular sovereignty was a common element of collective practices in the theatrical space and in politics. To some extent, the political decision may well be regarded as tumult and deliberation at the same time. Was that not theatre itself?

In addition, Villacèque provides a well-documented analysis of the figure of the «spectator citizen» and of a history of democratic deliberation in its relations with theatre. In Athenian democratic theatre, spectator participation and cohesion between the orchestra and the cavea are particularly remarkable. In *Eumenides*, or in *Seven against Thebes*, the spectators resemble a meeting of citizens, used to deliberate.

Villacèque emphasizes that, in democratic Athens, there is a theatricalization of politics and a politicization of theatre, and tragedies were directed at the spectators, transforming the show into an agora. As well as emotion in the theatre, there was also a role for the emotional in political decision making. The basic question, both for political decisions and for how the spectators reacted to the plays: were the Athenian people active or passive agents when debating and making decisions?

Remember that in the *Funeral Prayer*, Thucydides puts the need to use *logos* and the need to think in the mouth of Pericles (II, 40, 2-3).

At the same time, the above mentioned text weighs the political effects of the assembly procedure positively, insofar as it develops a collective thought process. The rhetorical and persuasive aspect of language is basic, both to politics and to the citizen-spectator. These spectators had the faculty of deciding and interacting with respect to the development of the show, of which they were part, not as mere passive receivers, but as active agents of their development (Gallego, 2016: 39).

As confirmed by J. P. Vernant (1990), Greek democracy rests on a series of social and mental innovations that start from the birth of the city as a collective way of life.

Beyond this controversy, what interests us, as has been said, is the metaphorical role of tragedies as democratic education.

After examining the importance of tragedy as a mode of knowledge inserted in democracy, we must then outline the concept of democracy. Of the multiple definitions, we have selected some which support our thesis, beginning with the one provided by Pericles.

Thucydides attributes to Pericles the definition of a series of characteristics that indicate a democratic regime «to imitate». Freedom was only conceivable from the public sphere. According to Pericles, the laws of the community should not be obeyed through terror, but with respect for the decisions that the assembly takes in its deliberations.

To define democracy, from a contemporary point of view, we take the perspective of the tradition initiated by A. Tocqueville (2002) that regards democracy as a way of life, not simply a mechanism. In our view, a democracy (including the Athenian one) is not only the consequence of economic and cultural aspects, but also of the development of a democratic imaginary. Greek tragedies are included in that imaginary, as important parts of the reaffirmation of Athenian democracy.

However, the term democracy, according to G. Sartori (2007), has two meanings, since we can speak about an ideal, an aspiration, but also about an imperfect manifestation. In that imperfect manifestation, in the real world of democracy, we find that tragedy presents endless conflicts and issues that do not appear to be resolved by current political philosophy; including dilemmas such as aristocratic *paideia* versus democratic *paideia*; what is public interest and what interests the public; communitarianism and liberalism.

Within this way of understanding democracy, Burian considers that the idea of discursive democracy has at its center what J. Habermas calls the

«public sphere». As Burian says: «It is particularly worthy of note that tragedy can permit debate about the value of free speech, popular sovereignty, and other essential features of the democratic regime» (2011: 103).

We may add that in the city-states of ancient Greece, the sphere of polis was separated from the private domain of the *oikos*. Public life happened in the market square and in the assemblies, where citizens met to discuss the day's issues; this outline of the public sphere was, in principle, an open field of debate with each other as equals.

In this context, we consider myth as conflict. The myths of the past are stories born to celebrate the feats of heroes, gods and rulers. However the tragic myth explores the contradictions of social and personal life and asks, implicitly or explicitly, for them to be corrected.

This conflict has a special meaning in what M. Nussbaum (2001) calls «narrative imagination», that is, the ability of narrative art to provoke compassion. Also, P. Ricoeur (2000) considers literary work as modifying the character of the reference, since to interpret it will consist in explaining the world of the life accessible from the text, what Ricoeur denominates the «world of the text».

Therein lies the core of everything: tragedy allows argument from two different points of view. And there are two ways of looking at this fact, from a Hegelian perspective –with its subsequent overcoming, obviously– and a more recent one, that speaks of a tragic sense that perceives the axiological complexity and the antinomic constitution of human action. This perception follows M. Weber and his reference to the tragic essence in every action and, especially, political action which: «Often, no, even regularly, stands in completely inadequate and often even paradoxical relation to its original meaning. This is fundamental to all history» (1991: 117).

The tragic sense converges with E. Morin's complexity paradigm (1994: 95). He takes as object the combination of concepts that confront each other, those profound truths that complement each other and yet remain antagonistic. Complexity arises at the point where a contradiction or a tragedy cannot be overcome.

From the above perspective, the virtue of the tragic sense is that it expresses the antinomic and labyrinthine texture of human beings. And more than that, in contrast to fiery speeches, Greek theatre does not tell us how to be democratic, but asks the pertinent questions of a democracy. It poses conflicts in order to educate democratically, to contribute to freedom of judgment and a sense of responsibility towards ideas and thoughts. Tragic plays are not maxims, but questions that we need to face, with our intelligence, our

emotions, our memory, our projects... And, thus, it helps us to understand the deep meaning of democracy.

Hence, tragedy acquires an anti-dogmatic and pluralistic tone because the endings are not closed (or only circumstantially closed) and this dramatic genre can be considered as the way humankind raises awareness. Attic drama constitutes privileged ideological narratives which, at the very least, presuppose a democratic polis, but can also imaginatively extend the range of participation in it to those otherwise formally excluded, and even offer criticism of democracy itself (Burian, 2011: 117). Another explanation can also be found in the broader context, in the various political and social changes that led to the foundation of Athenian democracy, where priority was given to the main change, namely, the need to establish a democratic imaginary and a moral order. Interestingly, in this context, C. Castoriadis (2006) clearly relates *logos* with the instauration of *demos* and of a *public space*.

Furthermore, as Ch. Taylor (2006) helps us to see the link between a modern political community and a shared historical imaginary, in this same context, we can see that tragedy is partly to do with the transition between the aristocratic *paideia* to a democratic *paideia*. An aristocratic vision is fundamental for understanding the behaviour of tragic heroes; but not entirely, because although the heroes are certainly aristocratic, their lives come into conflict in an idiosyncrasy of new values. Tragedies extol the heroic virtues of those who, at the cost of their own suffering, embody the civic ideals of the *polis*.

If we bear in mind that in ancient democracy and also current realities, many democratic convictions as well as non-democratic ones (let us not forget) are underpinned by myths, it becomes essential to clearly elucidate those myths and understand their meaning.

3. DEMOCRATIC MYTHS VERSUS TRADITIONAL MYTHS

Tragedy, to our mind, advocates democratic myths that contrast with the original aristocratic and traditional myths.

The key feature of epic theatre plays is the myth. As Aristotle said in his *Poetics*, a mythos is the first principle and as it were the soul of tragedy (1450a). The mythos, «plot» or «structure of the incidents» is for Aristotle the main part of the tragedy. Thus, to some extent, tragedy becomes part of a kind of knowledge. However, myths provide an initial interpretation of the world or

its meaning. And if we accept Nietzsche's view, the crisis of mythical meaning is the crisis of a way of understanding the world.

And the myth, as we understand it, becomes a story subject to multiple interpretations. Or as C. García Gual states: «The myths that nurture the tragic repertoire evoke the misfortunes and vicissitudes of the heroes of the past. The passions and pains of those characters, in the traditional mythology, are the ones that the playwright retells and stages» (1989: 182).

Nonetheless, there is a profound difference between the original ritual myth and the literary disseminated myth (Rodríguez Adrados, 1999: 20). Literature absorbs certain myths, it selects them. And from then on, they are interpreted in a variety of ways. Those interpretations enable tragedy to use the myths to teach Athenians about contemporary issues.

We only need to compare the version Aeschylus provides in *Prometheus Bound* with Hesiod's version in *Theogony* and his *Works and Days* to realize how two great authors can retell the same myth with substantial variations, not only due to their different poetic personalities, but also because of the ideological considerations and interpretations imposed by time and their audiences.

As a result, poetic knowledge in the Greek world enjoyed a certain amount of freedom and thus was preserved from intolerance, unlike other mythologies that were closely guarded by a clergy protective of its privileges and convinced of their revelatory nature.

The ritual and social situation of the drama thus sets up a powerful tension between the fictional and the actual rite and between character and audience that is essential to Greek Tragedy and possibly to all tragedy (Segal, 1986: 69).

Myth is linked to rite,⁴ but represents a transcendental step forward, because myths help to create art, as well as new thinking. Myth maintains a connection with *logos*, simply because *logos* emerges from a determination to overcome myth-based thinking and narrating.

Our path goes beyond the mere consideration of myth, since it wants to reach the concept of democratic myth, but first we need to define the myth and its relationship with *logos*.

⁴ Not always, according to F. Rodríguez Adrados, who points out that some epic myths are not linked to rite, although they are only exceptions.

3.1. The importance of *mythos* before *logos*

For M. Morey, *logos* replaces myth but lives with it as well. In order to clarify this idea, Morey confirms this premise when he points out that «myth establishes an inaugural event to explain the reason for the existence of the collective», it is also «a particularly important organizing principle of social life: it simultaneously establishes a body of prescriptions and a principle of intelligibility» (1988: 13).

By voluntarily renouncing the dramatic and the marvellous, *logos* acts upon the spirit at a different level from that of mimetic gestures (*mimesis*) and emotional participation (*sympatheia*). In other words, *logos* seeks the truth through scrupulous inquiry, and the need to express that truth in a way, in theory at least, that only appeals to the reader's critical intelligence.

E. Cornford's (1912) standpoint lies there, as he changes the approach to the origins of philosophy and rational thinking, by fighting the theory of the Greek miracle, which presented Ionic physics as an abrupt and unconditional revelation of reason. From this perspective, Cornford goes on to assert that the myth was a story, not a solution; now *logos* will try to solve what has been presented mythically.

In this respect, G. Thomson assigns to such struggle the logic of opposition, of complementarity (1995: 141). Vernant clarifies that in Greece there is no immaculate conception of reason. As philosophy is completely separated from *mythos*, it may create problems that solely belong to the discipline, and are resolved with its own concepts, but many aspects of reality still require mythical explanations. This is the case of tragedy, which from its mythical base reinterprets reality but differently from *logos*. The myth reflected in tragedy can complement *logos*. However, it cannot be said that tragedy, despite its mythical nature, lacks rationality.

This issue reminds us that the Aristotelian poet-philosopher has a greater insight than the ordinary man because he can discover the true essence of things, their universals, and those relations that exist between one and another. Therefore, the purpose and cause of all art is nothing but the delight of primary cognitive or intellectual nature and tragedy, as poetry, has a high intellectual and moral status. As A. López Eire emphasizes, «Aristotle stands valiantly between science (*episteme*) and experience (*empeiria*), between full theoretical knowledge and routine know-how. It is placed in the domains of the *techne* combining the *empeiria* with the *episteme*» (2002: 158).

López Eire concludes this argument with the following sentence included in Aristotle *Poetics*: «For this reason poetry is something more scientific and

serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts» (1451b).

For Ch. Segal, the rationality of the form of Greek tragedy only sets off the irrationality it reveals just below the surface of myth (1986: 45). That is to say, it approaches myth as a system of tensions and oppositions. The function of myth is to mediate fundamental contradictions in human existence.

Even though, as Segal says, the relation of tragedy to the expression of the social order encoded in the myths is particularly complex, its complexity is one that enlightens us to this novel way of raising democratic myths (1986: 46).

According to T. L. Adorno, «though discursive knowledge is adequate to reality, and even to its irrationalities, which originate in its laws of motion, something in reality rebuffs rational knowledge. Suffering remains foreign to knowledge» (1997: 18).

What is certain is that if we speak about mythical symbol, according to Vernant, we are referring to something that never rests and whose contents are always in tension. Hence the permanent vitality of myths, since they constantly receive renewed meanings, and over time incorporate new commentaries and interpretations which open them up to other dimensions (1990: 238). And that is indeed what tragic authors do with heroic myths.

We are therefore interested in myth integrated in social life and in its role in shaping ideas, behaviours, values and even institutions. Or more than that, as M. Mauss notes, while myth provokes a vague expression of individual feelings or popular emotions, it can foster a way of organising experience (1969: 195).

Indeed, what we are trying to expound here is that myth not only influences the pre-modern world, but it also persists in modern contexts. In effect, Greek tragedy tries to liberate through the myths, which we call democratic, to reformulate the ancient epic, describing the conflicts in which society and the individual are confronted. The tragedies show human potential and weaknesses, and the contrast between the human condition (always limited by gods and oracles) and the condition of citizen (always limited by sometimes difficult conflicts). The tragic myth raises a dialogue through a conflict. The tragedy, in this way, provides «tragic wisdom that gives life to a model of rationality from an integrative (and, therefore, not unilateral) rationality model. [...] You need, in short, a public debate» (Herreras, 2010: 322).

From there, the tragic myth engages the viewer, makes him the protagonist of a reflection, leaves him with the weight of a just resolution. The idea is, therefore, to conceive Greek tragedy as a transforming sphere.

4. ANALYSIS OF SEVERAL DEMOCRATIC MYTHS

Justice is in fact key to understanding Aeschylus' oeuvre. According to multiple interpretations, Aeschylus considers there is no escape for those who do not participate in securing justice. The tortuous path towards knowledge and re-establishment of the final balance constitutes two sides of complex human reality that complement each other.

While Zeus is a compendium of the ideas that govern the world, Aeschylus regards justice as the stabilizing element for the imbalances that threaten the world of man: injustice and its correlates, guilt and punishment. Justice guarantees a beautiful destiny for humankind, as it does at the end of the *Oresteia*.

The trilogy comes to a fair but not happy end. Although, there is some happiness, in a literary sense, and calm, because Athena, through the proper use of reason has saved Orestes from being sentenced to death for killing his mother (Clytemnestra), who in turn had killed his father (Agamemnon). In the third part of the *Orestia* (the *Eumenides*), Athena intervenes in the process, firstly, by setting up a Tribunal made up of the most upright men in the City («whoe'er are truest in my town», in the words of the goddess); later, by forcing the parties to put forward arguments, and finally, in view of the tied vote from the judges between those who considered Orestes guilty and those who did not, she voted with the latter group. It was a question of eradicating the cycle of revenge in the Atreidae family, to make it clear that crime cannot be answered by crime, and that the city's justice must solve the problems, seeking always to correct the causes.

For that reason, Athena establishes a «council-court pure and unsullied by the lust of gain, sacred and swift to vengeance, wakeful ever to champion men who sleep, the country's guard» (v. 705). In order to do so, however, she has to convince the chorus of Erinyes, (female deities that avenge family crimes) who came from an ancestral world and had become Orestes' public prosecutors, after pursuing him. «The ancient right Ye have o'erridden!», the Erinyes reproached Athena, but she persuaded them with good arguments, reminding them that without *dike* (justice) human existence is not possible. Anyway, according to Goldhill, «the means of the goddess's persuasion of the Erinyes here to accept institution of the law court is, interestingly, based on a shift of words, a sort of inherent pun or verbal play, that is hard to capture in translation» (1986: 29).

The Erinyes become the Eumenides, who help to protect the city. According to F. Rodríguez Adrados (1998), there are two levels in the oeuvre: one

that points out the insufficiency of human actions and one that introduces the matter of conciliation through justice.

But that is not all, Euripides insists on an issue regarding the Erinyes previously addressed in the play *Iphigenia in Tauris*, noting that the deities do not pursue Orestes, but are within him. Hence, the problem acquires a different perspective, since it suggests that it is the person, the inner consciousness, which needs to be convinced that there is a moral constraint rather than just, let us say, rational imposition from a goddess. In one of his most recent works Habermas, in his historical context, makes a similar remark, when he reminds us of his persistent concern for the «public sphere» and the perception that «it was as yet not at all certain that the principles of a democratic order that had been imposed «from without» would become firmly lodged in the hearts and minds of German citizens» (2008: 21).

Euripides was already urging us to think that, as human beings, we can deliberate, choose and elaborate a plan and organize our objectives hierarchically, but we are also confused, uncontrolled and passionate beings. In the end, reason has great difficulties in exerting control over an action and guiding it towards the common good.

We therefore appreciate, at simple and premature sight, a relationship between passions (non-rational) and the laws that establish the city (fruit of reason), which leads us to think that the origin of political institutions and codes lies in our drives, aspirations, and so on, that is, ultimately, quite a set of conflicts.

4.1. Practical conflict

Returning to Aeschylus, his break with the tragic dilemma, that is, with the unsolvable conflicts that are usually attached to tragedies, does not mean there is no discussion in his plays of other options or «practical conflict», as Nussbaum calls it.

One of the conflicts, from a rational perspective, like that of Socrates, would be solved by discovering the right option. But tragedy remains in the complexity of the «appearances» of the experienced practical choice or, as Nussbaum notes, of the «plurality of the values and the possibility of conflict among them» (2001: 83).

To explain this idea, Nussbaum turns to the example of *Agamemnon*, the first part of the aforementioned trilogy. In Agamemnon's stance over the slaughter of his daughter, Iphigenia, two guiding commitments clash, but

there is no logical contradiction between the two. According to Nussbaum Agamemnon is forced to act, to make a decision. But his problem, as the Chorus reminds him, is that instead of having regrets for sacrificing his daughter, he resigns himself to thinking he did the right thing. That is, «a change from horror to complacency» (2001: 48).

Thus, Agamemnon cannot live as if nothing had happened, as if he had acted correctly. Because after his action he should have attempted to repair the inflicted damage, or at least, should have felt regret for what he did. Only in this way could it be said that he has learnt from his terrible decision, otherwise, as in fact happens, he simply escapes from reality. Because, in order to perceive reality, Nussbaum reminds us, the shock of the tragic suffering is necessary (2001: 45-46). It is a kind of knowledge that is acquired through suffering, which is the appropriate recognition of human life, not mistaken optimism. Since, generally, Aeschylus is telling us, pure intellectual thought is not sufficient for human knowledge.

Thus Nussbaum adds that «we have not fully understood the «tragic view» if we have not understood why it has been found intolerably painful by certain ambitious rational beings» (2001: 50). In any case, our conclusion is that a reliable truth is lost in pursuit of rather more elusive knowledge.

It seems difficult, therefore, to establish a set of fixed rules and conditions that help to decide what action to take when faced with a practical moral conflict. The above issue leads us directly to another of the great tragic plays, Sophocles' *Antigone*. This story reveals an appealing dialectical conception unveiled by Georg W. Hegel in his well-known interpretation of the conflict between Antigone (family Law) and Creon (State Law). But, moving beyond Hegel's synthesis, the value of the play, as we already intuited from the start, is the conflict between the two parts, but not understood as alternatives, or as though either Antigone or Creon were entirely right. Instead each character assumes their arguments, and the debate becomes even more interesting and lively as we assign more legitimate reasons to both parties.

We do not forget that the traditional interpretation points out the confrontation between democratic and tyrannical sensibilities, but we prefer another one. The one that warns us that a democracy should seek balance, and move away from unilateral views. Thus, in tragedy, descriptions such as the Axis of Good and the Axis of Evil are not possible, even if the intention is to achieve something good. In tragedy there is no place for narrow outlooks, such as Creon's or Antigone's, if the intention is a suitable conception of the City.

This fact leads us directly to our own time and our ongoing reflection on the problem of plurality of values and the potential for conflict between them. In particular, tragic knowledge may help us to understand the proposals regarding «deliberative democracy», and especially, A. Gutmann and D. Thompson's (1996) speculations in that regard.

Indeed these authors consider we should not expect to be able to solve all or most moral conflicts, for moral disagreement is a condition that we have to learn to live with, it is a permanent condition of political democracy. Sophocles would be warning that in a democracy the ruler should seek balances, and move away from unnecessarily excessive actions (Herrerias, 2009: 95).

Furthermore, tragedy enlightens us on the perspective of the other, that of the vanquished, not that of the conquerors. Aeschylus, in *Persians*⁵ tries to reason on the causes of the defeat, rather than leave it all to simple victorious emotivism. In all events, in his work, he overwhelms us with emotion for the feelings of the defeated party, making it clear that the main cause was Xerxes' falling prey to pride.

The democratic myth developed by Aeschylus is the greater effectiveness of a democratic regime over a tyrannical one, while at the same time, as democrats, considering the other, the one with a face, feelings and political options who must be understood. A clamor could be heard: «O you men of Hellas! Free your native land. Free your children, your wives, the temples of your fathers' fods, and the tombs of your ancestors» (vv. 402-405).

Undoubtedly, this is a way of singularizing the other, rather than reducing that other to the ideological archetype, that many societies try to construct in order to rescue themselves.

Nonetheless, this victory of freedom and reason over servility, represents, in Edward Said's famous work, *Orientalism* (whose main intellectual concern was to fight Western analysts' way of interpreting the situation in the Orient) the invention of the idea of Barbarians to contrast with the Greeks. The Barbarians fought for their freedom and the Greeks were victims of an Oriental despot's stupidity (1978: 56).

This topic is still latent, very latent, and acutely so.

5 The only tragedy that is based on a recent historical event.

4.2. Astonishing mythical richness

Tragedy lets us hear the voice of the victims, as in Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, where victory is considered a value superior to peace. There are no lies, only the cruelty of victory. The victims of *The Trojan Women*, are no longer a statistic or ghosts of demagoguery, they become beings of flesh and blood. Tragedy allows all of them to be something, since no character can be seen reduced to a sort of reification that has enabled, depending on the time and place, thousands or millions of beings, to be directly or indirectly erased from existence: Africans, Afghans, Palestinians, undocumented immigrants, missing persons. The substance of this play is the idea that we humans are interesting for one another.

In this review we cannot leave aside *Suppliant Women*, where we see clear signs of the political reality of the moment. This tragedy stages a debate concerning the very nature of politics, language and decision making. In a specific way, the Egyptians represent *hybris*.

But the situation does not lead us to a simple deduction of a divine justice, because it is not only Zeus who notices it, but also King Pelasgos, and the people of Argos who, let us not forget, feel compassion for the weak maidens and listen to their pleas. As Burian explains, Pelasgos, faced with the prospect of a terrible war with the sons of Aegyptus if he grants the suppliant maidens refuge in Argos, insists on the needs for consultation and communal decision (2011: 111).

People decide to give asylum to supplicants even if their peaceful relationship with the Egyptians is threatened. That is why we perceive that the idea of justice as universal equality is present in the work, because injustice is committing violence against the weak. An approach that takes us to the polis, where any abuse of any citizen is unfair. In short, the work proposes a conflict between what is just and what is convenient.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The study of Attic tragedy is continuing to contribute a wealth of reflections to current political philosophy. Athenian playwrights express and elaborate a new way for men to understand each other and to place themselves in their relationship with the world, with the democratic *polis*, with gods, with others, with themselves and their own acts.

To sum up, tragedy is a democratic art of public interest, because it contributes a series of conflicts sometimes related to profound issues of such democracy. Let us remember, in addition, that it is one of the first human creations to define and deeply explore the concept of conflict. The fact, that the conflict continues has nothing to do with the effort made to overcome it. An effort that the characters communicate to the spectators, opening their eyes and, in passing, enabling their entry into a public debate, that is, leaving the door open to a necessary civic education. In Greek theatre the question is important, but also some answers.

And answers are sought because, as Burian says, tragedy participates in democratic discourse through the use of dialogue and debate. Athenian drama asks each member of the audience to consider and judge between a number of points of view, just as citizens must do in the assembly or court of law (2011: 117).

Democracies, as we said at the beginning, need reasons, solid ground, principles, but also myths to help them survive, to shape a democratic culture, because, otherwise, they may be reduced to a mere constitutional framework empty of meaning and of authentic democratic life.

Tragedy, therefore, emerges from the mind of a civic artist, an artist who is directly confronted with moral and political disagreements, and it reflects on the conscience and responsibility of the individual (R. Padel), on human problems related above all with the decision, but also, as we have seen, glimpses the conflicts of the democracy. «The theatre can be seen not only as a locus for debate on the merits of existing democratic ideology and practice, but as a place to imagine what, for better or worse, democracy might yet become» (Burian, 2011: 95).

Greek theatre, in short, seeks the protagonism of human beings, their rebellion against the various mechanisms of power. Democracy, as in tragedy, cannot neglect the multiple tragic conflicts that interweave in its networks, just as a human cannot forget fortune or passions. Tragedy teaches us that democracy is no guarantee of success.

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