

## CULTURAL POLITICS

### CHANGING PARADIGMS.

#### SOME EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS IN DEALING WITH *OEDIPUS REX*

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##### *Oedipus Rex* as part of an epistemological discussion

Some years ago, in 1987, an earthquake profoundly disturbed and terrorized the friendly looking Olympian club of philologists and classicists all over the world. One of their colleagues, belonging to the department of Chinese literature, published a book, announcing from the very start the publication of three more volumes. The title of this naughty piece of research was *Black Athena*. Subtitle: *The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. The author's name was Martin Bernal. His major claim was that Classics, c.q. Western-Europe as it has been conceived by classicists, has been based, among other things, upon nationalist, ideological and sometimes even openly racist suppositions. Part one dealt with "*The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985*". For centuries, the ancient Greeks were considered to have come from the East and the South, let's say from Palestine and Egypt (from Herodot on, a common point of view), but during periods of German cultural and political domination in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the hypothesis was launched that, on the contrary, the founding fathers of Greek mainland civilisation came from the North. They were Indo-Europeans, or Aryans. During the two world wars, in German eyes, it was just impossible to accept that the intellectual fathers of Greece came from Palestine, and would have Jewish blood in their veins.

The publication of this book, written by an outsider in classical philology, started one of the major cultural wars of the last century. In 1991 the American magazine *Newsweek* published a front page picture of Bernal addressing the public with the question: 'Was Cleopatra Black?'<sup>1</sup> Robert Palter, in his article *Black Athena, Afrocentrism and the History of Science*<sup>2</sup> mentioned a video film *Black Athena: Did Europe Start in Africa?* Edith Hall opened her article in *Black Athena Revisited*<sup>3</sup> as follows: (it) 'has excited more controversy than almost any other book dealing with Greco-Roman antiquity to have been published in the

second half of the twentieth century'. The historicist Mario Liverani<sup>4</sup> even said: '(it is) the most discussed book on the ancient history of the Eastern Mediterranean world since the Bible'. Important for the development of the discussions, was the early Arabic translation of *Black Athena* in 1998 by (a.o.) the Egyptian classicist Ahmed Etman, Founder and Director of the Center for Comparative Linguistic and Literary Studies (Awarded as the Best Book, Cairo International Book Fair, 1998).

In this discussion, you easily felt the presence of leftists and conservatives, of statements and positions rarely present in decent academic circles. Later on, Mary Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers attacked Bernal in their book *Black Athena Revisited* (1996) and Martin Bernal defended his position in *Black Athena writes back* (2001). Fifteen years after the publication of the first volume, it is clear that it was not academic knowledge as such that was under fire, but the whole idea that human sciences were an innocent, value-free and neutral occupation: suddenly it became clear that intellectuals had responsibilities (cf. Jacques Berlinerblau, *Heresy in the University. The Black Athena Controversy and the Responsibilities of American Intellectuals*, 1999).

Classics was no longer a province where everybody could drop the kind of epistemological remarks he wanted, no, in the light of the current emphasis on Cultural Politics, Cultural Poetics or Cultural Studies, new forms of criticism arose, addressing classics in a striking new way. It was typical that somebody like Seth Schein, publishing an article in a reader about Cultural Studies, said in 1999: 'The main reference tool in classical studies remains a Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft that was begun in 1894 and completed in 1983. As far as methodology goes, the latest articles are often indistinguishable from those in the earliest volumes. Partly as a result of these old-fashioned emphases, Classics, as a scholarly discipline, ... seems to me somewhat outmoded and marginalized both within the university and in society generally. I think increased awareness of, ..., the new field of Cultural Studies that has established itself so strongly in the past decades, can help to revitalize the work that classicists do.'<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1990's, Classics (just like the Humanities in general) became a fully historical construction, no longer standing outside of History, but definitely a part of it, and more specifically a part of the western worldview, a historical and cultural construction between so many others. During so many centuries of self-glorification, classics was considered as an epistemological construction that created its own legitimacy, aims and methods, although it was also obvious that it adapted and changed every century some of its basic assumptions. Therefore,



Classics never ARE, they're always BECOMING, and culture has to be conceived, as Steven Greenblatt says (and New Historicists in general), as a battlefield, never as a fully harmonized institution. Hence, a tragedy like *Oedipus Rex* can neither exist as a closed monument nor a transparent window 'through which the past opens itself up for inspection', but it rather looks like a collection of 'building blocks in the collective "reality effect" to which every cultural formation gives shape and meaning'<sup>6</sup>. The last decades, it has become obvious that many classicists have been living too long in romantic and neoclassicist settings, admiring Winckelmann's nostalgia for 'edle Einfalt und stille Grösse', taking the exoticism of Ingres' and Delacroix's odalisques for the only truth.

As one of the existential categories which are in constant construction and deconstruction, Greek tragedy is now going through a period of denaturalisation, it is stripped out of its 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural clichés. Nowadays, we detect voices which were kept silence for centuries, for instance the genderspecific organization of tragedy or the 'fabrication' of its orientalist aspects (M. West, 1977; E. Said, 1978; Ch. Penglase, 1994; W. Burkert, 1999). In her book *Inventing the barbarian* (1991), Edith Hall reveals how the invention of the notion of the 'barbarian' resulted from a very explicit political will, right after the invasion of the Persians and the successive battles of Marathon (490) and Salamis (480), from a desire to create a new mythology which was spread all over the Parthenon (friezes, metopes and entablatures) and which was based upon oppositions such as male-Greek-western-rational and female-oriental-barbaric-weak-irrational. Hence, the creation of large numbers of scenes referring to an *Amazonomachia*, *Centaureomachia*, *Gigantomachia*, which opposed the weeping female orientals to the cold-blooded rational Athenians. From then on, as Edith Hall said, the story of the Trojan war could be interpreted as a precursor of recent history, a previous defeat of Asia by Hellas<sup>7</sup>. The last half of the fifth century B.C., a period called the golden fifth century of Greece, clearly excelled in a deliberate (re)use of mythology for ideological purposes (cf. Boardman John, *The Archaeology of Nostalgia. How the Greeks re-created their mythical Past*, 2002).

However, the present attention paid to the discussion of the female Other (Cf. Froma Zeitlin, *Playing the Other. Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*, 1996) or the invention of the oriental Other is no more strange or exceptional than the Renaissance and Baroque mixture of Christian and Greek (pagan) elements, than the appearance of Oedipus as the political and religious saviour in the works of Jean Cocteau 1922, Igor Stravinsky 1927, Henri Ghéon 1938, T.S. Eliot 1958, or Peter Hall, 1996, than the Freudian detection of the Oedipus complex (1900), than René Girard's ritual scapegoat theory (1972), or

the Deleuzian plea for *L'Anti-Oedipe* (1972-73). Greek culture and art have always been used for a number of 'pragmatic' reasons, a number of subjective statements reflecting changes in taste, style, culture, religion and ideology.

Therefore, today we have to ask ourselves: who is gathered here, what do we know about their intentions, whose theories will this time be illustrated by poor Oedipus? Anyway, the present discussions on interculturalism and orientalism surely make us aware of the fact that a tragedy like *Oedipus Rex* is bound to function in an epistemological context.

### ***Oedipus Rex* as part of a philosophical discussion on the tragic**

From the very start, Greek tragedy (mainly a fifth century BC artefact) has occupied a central position in shaping major sensibilities of the western world, in choosing fundamental categories, hierarchies and oppositions which express our ideas of what it means to be a cultural being. It determined for a great part our visions on life and death, on human responsibility and finiteness, on our participation both in the horizontal axis which unites us to other people, and in the vertical axis which brings along divine and the sacral dimensions, gods and fate, transcendence and the religious Other. Ever since the reappearance of *Oedipus Rex* in the famous *Teatro Olimpico* in Vicenza in 1585, this tragedy has kept on fascinating the western sensibility because it raises the problem of the unknown, a threat that could cost a man's eyes, the longing for knowledge and the price which has to be paid for achieving true wisdom. During its historical career in the West, the Oedipus tragedy (as a literary composition, as an order and a structure) went through a lot of interpretations which not always rendered in a really tragic way Oedipus' quest for his identity (the tragic as a philosophic, existential and even ontological category, cf. Storm, 1998). Baroque, romantic and religious motives turned Oedipus into a sinner or a nostalgic wanderer, into a political leader and a *pharmakos*. We had to wait for Hegel and the development of the 18<sup>th</sup> c. German idealistic philosophy to question tragedy again in terms of the tragic experience. From Kant, Schelling, and Schopenhauer on, philosophy focused again on the notion of the tragic, be it in a very idealistic and romantic way, but at the same time a number of German philosophers profoundly disturbed the Arcadian innocence of Dionysos and led us to the Nietzschean reevaluation of Dionysian reality and energy (1872). From then on, Dionysos became the radical Other, he was restored as the stranger who questioned human nature in a radical and frightening way. In the 20<sup>th</sup> c. the presence and shadow of this god could be witnessed in the disconcerting tragedies of Ionesco and Beckett, the doubts of Gide and Camus, the amazing performances of Raffaello Sanzio and La Fura Dels Baus.



It is obvious, though amazing after 2500 years, that our society still thinks in the same old categories of the tragic experience of life. However, one of the major problems of interpreting this return to 'roots', is that it is no longer clear whether or not these were really Greek. It has been a favourite western habit to refer to Aristotle and to rely upon his explanation of archaic practices and harvest rituals which were thought to have led to the origin of the tragic festivals. Of course, no one has to doubt the existence of rural harvest festivals, but why should they have been tragic? George Steiner once said that the tragic is a 'world-view summarized in the adage preserved among the elegies ascribed to Theognis, but certainly older, and present also in Middle Eastern sacred texts: "It is best not to be born, next best to die young"<sup>8</sup> Steiner is one of the rare scholars who explicitly mentions Middle Eastern texts as one of the forerunners of the Greek tragic feeling. In general the West believes that the tragic feeling is a purely Western invention and that we have to rely on Aristotle to understand its genesis. Only recently have people realized that no trace at all of the tragic experience can be found in Aristoteles' *Poetics*. Aristotle wrote an important survey of the functioning of tragedy, but he remained completely silent about the tragic experience.

Steiner and some others were right in asking our attention for Middle Eastern forerunners and especially for the story of Gilgamesh. In this epic, as has been shown in the brilliant new translation of Andrew George (1999), all the elements are present to confront us with the first fully developed adventures of a human hero who assumes all human pain and risks. This is neither a didactic nor mythological epic, it is not even primarily dealing with the gods or the kings. The Assyriologist William Moran has recently expounded the Gilgamesh story as a tale of the human world, characterized by an 'insistence on human values' and 'an acceptance of human limitations'. This observation led him to describe the epic as 'a document of ancient humanism' and indeed even for the ancients, the story of Gilgamesh was more about what it is to be a man than what it is to serve the gods. As the beginning and the end of the epic make clear, 'Gilgamesh is celebrated more for his human achievement than for his relationship with the divine', as Andrew George said<sup>9</sup>. The epic of Gilgamesh circulated in the Middle East for more than 2000 years and can now be restored and read in its 'Standard version'. The king of Uruk precedes the king of Thebes by some 1500 years and the story about his wanderings already contained the main motives of the tragic existence, although it ends in a relatively more optimistic way than most Greek tragedies do. After having lost all his possessions and dreams, Gilgamesh comes back to Uruk and understands that he has to enjoy and accept life in its complicated nature. He accepts fully the human condition, which makes this story, in Moran's phrase, 'a document of ancient humanism'. What a strange idea, that cuneiform texts found

in Basra (one of the towns under heavy fire during the last war against Iraq) offer us today a clear picture of the first tragic adventures of men, documents found in Basra and not in Boeotia. Sorry to say so, Mr. Winckelmann, but perhaps our Western roots are not only Greek, but also Iraqi.

Therefore, what this colloquium is dealing with, is the intellectual game and joy of discovering how the western mind has been functioning, how Eurocentrism came into being, how a text always functions in a much larger context, how a statement never exists alone, and how we can only see what culture enables us to see. Our twentieth century cultural system revealed to us that we are bound to make constructions about the world, about ourselves, constructions where it is temporarily good to live in (be it only because it provides us a provisional certainty about ourselves and the others, fixed boundaries, a couple of selected enemies), but it also showed the ever provisional and relative character of such an enterprise. Therefore, looking for eastern or western aspects of Greek tragedy might be a good exercise to get in touch with unusual or hidden ways of thinking, to meet the Other in ourselves.

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## NOTES

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