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The Absence of the Tragic Human

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"There is no true life without a sense of the tragic."
A. Camus, *Carnets II, 1942-1951*

The tragic human who emerged as a democratic individual in both the public and private spheres during the brilliant era of Athenian democracy in the fifth century B.C., and who was simultaneously brought to prominence and shaped by ancient Greek poetry and philosophy, is today strikingly absent from the Western world. The nihilism that characterizes central educational practice not only obstructs the formation of such a figure but even prevents its very imaginative conception. I maintain that the thought of two major 20th-century philosophers, Kostas Papaioannou and Cornelius Castoriadis, contributes decisively to understanding the significance of the historical creation of the tragic and democratic human as a priority of pedagogical, political, ethical, and aesthetic concern. Moreover, I argue that their thought also serves another crucial purpose. At a time when the value of self-limitation is being systematically discredited and when one-dimensional certainties and hegemonic narratives dominate, undermining any disposition toward collective self-institution and rendering Western societies vulnerable to forms of domination, the thought of Papaioannou and Castoriadis enables us to envision a way out of this condition. It also allows us to understand that such an exit is by no means an easy undertaking, yet it is not impossible, provided that the Western human proves capable of re-creating, with prudence, the necessity of the presence of the tragic human.

Keywords: tragic human, pedagogical absence of the tragic human, democracy, K. Papaioannou, C. Castoriadis, contemporary Western world

Introduction

The enduring significance of the question concerning the tragic human being arises from the fact that, as an ontological, political, ethical, and pedagogical question, it touches the very essence of human existence. Through this question, the human being is able to reflect on the meaning of life, of freedom, and of the boundaries that constrain their existence. In this sense, it is a fundamental question—one that must remain perpetually open, challenging the individual to contend with the meaning of a life that is worthy of being lived.

From its earliest appearance in ancient Greek poetry and philosophy, the question of the tragic human being confronted anyone capable of formulating it with the nightmare of non-being, of the incoherence of being, with the nightmare of meaninglessness (For a general approach to the issue, see indicatively Malevitsis, 2010; Vernant & Vidal-Naquet, 2001/2005; Lambropoulos, 2006). And it was precisely the knowledge of this nightmare

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that enabled him, since he is a *deinótaton* (most awe-inspiring) being, as Sophocles tells us, to attempt to confront it, while at the same time, through his very inquiry, activating the presence of hybris, which could, of course, destroy him. Yet the grandeur of this human being lies in the fact that he strives to break free from the terrifying cycle established by hybris and to offer an answer to the question of the order of the world and of society. He thus endows both the world and himself with a meaning that resists hybris, a meaning that bears the name of self-limitation (Soucy Jetté, 2008; Theodoridis, 2009).

If the renewed posing of this question carries significance for us today, it is because it compels us to recognize that the modern Western human being is incapable, through the very process of his education, of investing existence with tragic meaning, for he appears to have settled irrevocably into the realm of hybris, expressing an uncompromising need for omnipotence on every level (economy, labor, production, mastery over nature, and mastery over the human being himself). And this incapacity, of course, does not remain without consequence. The great fear that arises from such hubristic behavior is that it may once again seal his entry into the desert of totalitarianism, a future no longer difficult to imagine after the experience of the twentieth century, given that the disintegration of the social has now assumed explosive proportions and is intertwined with psychic disintegration at the level of individuality, as well as with moral and political decline more generally.[1]

The contribution of Kostas Papaioannou and Cornelius Castoriadis to clarifying the significance of the tragic human being—as the democratic human being—has been decisive in the history of contemporary thought. It is this endeavor that we shall bring to light in what follows, so that, subsequently, by drawing upon their contribution, we may consider what we might do within the contemporary Western world in order for the formation of such a human being to transcend the at times explicit and at times implicit nihilism of pedagogical practice and once again become one of its central concerns. We hold that this creation (or re-creation) and its immense difficulty constitute the only possible solution to the problem of the emergence and establishment of the totalitarian human being in the contemporary Western world.

The Tragic Human in the Thought of K. Papaioannou and C. Castoriadis

From a very young age, Papaioannou turned his attention to the study of the tragic human being (Papaioannou, 2003; 1995a).[2] He concurred with Nietzsche that tragedy brought to light the Dionysian foundation of classical culture and constituted the highest Athenian spiritual event of the fifth century, a view that had, of course, led the German philosopher to rebel against the Renaissance interpretation. Yet Papaioannou also showed us why Nietzsche was unable to integrate into his thought the transition of the dithyramb from Sicyon to Athens, as well as the relation between the Dionysian and Apollonian elements and the Greek political regimes, and above all, their relation to Athenian democracy (Papaioannou, 1995b).

Indeed, within the framework of Nietzsche's philosophy, it would have been impossible for him to relate the emergence or decline of tragedy to democracy. Nevertheless, both Papaioannou and, later, Castoriadis acknowledge their debt to Nietzsche for recognizing that tragedy is an aesthetic phenomenon that transcends the spatio-temporal boundaries of the fifth-century Attic theatre. For Nietzsche, Greek tragedy is, ultimately, a

[1] The eruption of Western omnipotence, which culminated in the rise of the totalitarianisms of the 20th century and in the mysterious climate of nihilisms we are experiencing once again today, was discussed in an exemplary manner already from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th in the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger.

[2] It is remarkable that when Papaioannou wrote his work *Mass and History*, in which he examines the creation and development of tragedy and democracy in ancient Athens, he was only 22 years old, while at the age of 26 he composed his equally important book *Man and His Shadow*, whose subject is the historical consciousness and the anthropology of the last centuries in the West.

historical and aesthetic crystallization of a comprehensive vision of the world and of life, one achieved through tragic reflection. Moreover, for Nietzsche, the tragic extends beyond an aesthetic category and becomes an existential stance. More than a perfect work of art, tragedy is exalted as the embodiment of a superior mode of being, one that lies beyond morality and rationality (Nietzsche, 1977).[3]

From Nietzsche's remarkable discussion of the Dionysian and the Apollonian, undertaken in order to grasp the essence of Athenian tragedy and, at the same time, to develop a philosophy of culture, human existence, and art, it emerges that these two principles do not constitute a merely apparent opposition of competing forces that would be reconciled within some higher unity capable of ensuring eternal peace and harmony (Nietzsche, 1977). It is a contradiction that governs becoming perpetually; a contradiction that life cannot overcome, since it is inherent in the fundamental reality of the world. One may then wonder how this contest of forces that jointly sustain life—without ever merging with one another, this adverse coexistence of the lucid and the chthonic, the individual and the universal, the objective and the subjective, the superficial and the inward, the serene and the passionate, measure and frenzy, self-knowledge and the forgetting of the self, pleasure and pain, could offer anything positive to the human being. What the philosopher proposes is precisely the acceptance of this contradiction: consent to transience and annihilation, the "yes" spoken to opposition and to conflict; the voluntary and joyful affirmation of becoming, which presupposes the negation of the very concept of being (Nietzsche, 1977). For Nietzsche, the unity of being is located within the very multiplicity and plurality of the world. An absolute yes or an absolute no to one of the aspects of becoming opens an existential abyss that ultimately engulfs the human being who pursues exclusive choice and one-sidedness. Suffering, consequently, must be accepted on an equal footing with joy. Destruction must be legitimized alongside creation. And this is because the terms of the contradiction do not negate one another but rather complete one another (Nietzsche, 1977; 1996).

For Nietzsche, moreover, the unconditional acceptance of contradiction is not sufficient; what is required is its full lived experience. This affirmation is its very essence and is identical with the will to power. At the moment when the human being discovers this primordial contradiction at the heart of things, he seeks to free himself from the individual, the phenomenal, and the finite, and to rise toward the universal and the essential. It is at this moment that tragic reflection begins (Nietzsche, 1996).

Consequently, tragic knowledge for Nietzsche is the painful and at the same time joyful recognition that the essence of the world is marked by two countervailing forces, equally decisive, which consecrate suffering not in the name of any moral outlook but in the name of a protean truth. In this sense, the greatness of the tragic human being does not lie in devising an image of the world that might appease his conscience, but in the enthusiastic acceptance of his terrible fate. The love of destiny is the most important thing for the human being: not merely to tolerate the inevitable, and even less to conceal it—since every idealism is a way of deceiving oneself before the unavoidable—but to love it.[4]

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[3] We must emphasize here that Papaioannou saw in Nietzsche's attempt (in essence combating every form of totalitarianism) to confront the tragic epoch of Athens the precondition for a true Renaissance of Europe, a tragic humanism whose primary indication would be the reconnection of music and myth with reason. He did not fail, however, to note the German philosopher's misinterpretation, which generated great confusion in the Western world when, quite arbitrarily, Nietzsche identified European rationalism with Socrates and constructed an arbitrary view of a classical civilization disintegrating under the corrosive influence of a force that differs little from the positivist rationalism of the 19th century with its bourgeois-liberal superstructure. From this standpoint, Nietzsche is entirely foreign to Socrates, as well as to what was being enacted in the theatres of ancient Athens.

[4] For Nietzsche, amor fati marks the boundary of his thought on the tragic. Such a conception of the tragic could not open the path to a form of political action capable of explicitly self-instituting a collective body.

Papaioannou, gradually distancing himself from the influence that Nietzsche's work had exerted on his thinking, would draw upon Nietzschean tragicity but transform it radically. He would thus trace the moment when the Mass entered, as if divinely inspired, into the heart of the Athenian polity in order to establish the enigmatic power of justice and of tragedy (Papaioannou, 2003).[5]

In his view, the Dionysian-romantic forces, in which the acknowledgment of evil and the reconciliation of the human being with the negative and with death predominated, constituted the forerunner of the democratic revolution, both in ancient Athens and in romantic Europe.[6] And despite the difference that exists between these two cultures with regard to the movement of tragedy, he subsumed both under the Aeschylean category of *pathos*… Wherever there was revolt, hybris, greed, transgression of measure, self-punishment born of guilt, reverence, terror, revolution, and tragic fear, the religious and metaphysical forces of Dionysus prevailed. The value of these forces became all the more apparent when the rationalism that dominated the polis set as the aim of life comfort, the self-satisfaction of power, wealth and the allure of possession, the concealment of human finitude—in short, the distortion of the tragic texture of the human being. Inasmuch as the Dionysian forces referred back to the Aeschylean *pathos*, the other pole, the Apollonian forces, expressed the powers of Aeschylean *mathos*. Paradoxical as it may seem, these outwardly serene and reformative forces were the only ones that recognized the metamorphoses of Eris and Hybris and regarded the human being as a most awe-inspiring being (Papaioannou, 2003; Vernant, 1982).

These forces, the forces of Form, as well as the gods who expressed them, were reformative gods, gods of the courage of education and of culture, and they constituted a kind of civic religion, in the sense of the equal participation of all citizens in civic festivals and contests, in the decisions of the Demos, and in the unrestricted questioning of things. At the moment when the Apollonian rational elements and the Dionysian non-rational elements, united, succeeded in dissolving the primordial tragic fear of life, as occurred precisely in fifth-century Athens, there arose, like a flash of lightning, that ideality which, as justice, would become the regulator of the universe, because only it could give form and overcome the monstrous aspect of human action, and, as an embodied principle, keep alive for a time within the world the human destiny and the positive values of the Demos (Papaioannou, 2003; Sewell, 2007). Only then could the tragic forces, with their abstract forms and magical masks upon which democracy had been erected, join with Polyclitus, Phidias, Zeuxis, Polygnotus, Homer, Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Anaximander, and Heraclitus. This, moreover, was the reason, according to Papaioannou, that "Aeschylus and his generation perceived in the beauty and order of the universe the presence not of a deterministic necessity, but of a justice" (Papaioannou, 2003, p. 58; Sewell, 2007).

Indeed, in the hearts of these Athenian creators, justice constituted that erotic, poetic force which bestowed form upon the freedom of the city. Otherwise, this freedom, instead of expressing the form of the Athenian citizen, risked becoming something disembodied and impersonal, a prospect wholly at odds with the aspirations of the Greeks. It is no accident, moreover, that all the revelatory political ideologies of Western history, setting as the chief aim of their action the subjugation of nature and of the human being, were built upon the conflict between freedom and justice, while eliminating the latter entirely (Papaioannou, 1996; 2000). We may suppose

[5] "Dike", the philosopher writes, "the symbol of the unity of the religious, moral, and political values that constitute the citizen's 'justice', was originally the political slogan with which the democratic revolution in Greece was carried out" (Papaioannou, 2004, p. 126). Dike presents within the tragic the eternal, indestructible order of the world, untouched by the tragic itself. Through tragedy and democracy, Papaioannou will describe above all the confrontation between hybris and Dike.

[6] Papaioannou rightly recognized that Nietzsche's great merit lies in the fact that, through his thought, he helped Europe after the 19th century to grasp the meaning of classical tragedy and the Dionysian foundation of classical civilization.

that these two meanings, freedom and justice, corresponding not only to the Dionysian and Apollonian elements but above all to the Aeschylean *pathos-mathos*, were for Papaioannou the two central meanings that predominated in Athens and governed its instituting.[7] For this reason, when, for example, the generation of Sophocles overcame the tragic fear of life,

> what came to the surface was not the will of the will of modern man, but rather the triumph of the cosmic soul, which, through prudence and through self-discipline itself, recognizes and opens itself to the order and beauty of the world. (Papaioannou, 2003, p. 32; 1995a)

By tracing the elements that, in Papaioannou's thought, are linked to the emergence of the tragic and of democracy, we may say that, although for him the tragic and human characteristics are common to all human societies, Western civilization—Athens excepted—was unable, through its theatres, to create "theatrocracies", that is, primordial myths that would determine its historical life, as occurred in ancient Athens with *Dike (Justice)* and *catharsis*. As a result, Western theatre, living secretly under the sway of the Apocalypse, remained foreign to the creation of democratic societies and ultimately confined its works to the ahistorical realm of symbols and allegories, without ever managing to acquire a mythical character (Papaioannou, 2003; Theodoridis, 2015, pp. 35-46).[8] Thus its form dissolved into the ahistorical realm of the lumpen or into refined versions of humanism that at times concerned themselves with questions of duty and morality and at other times culminated in the creation of theocratic societies, barracks, and commercial companies. By contrast, in Athens the cathartic power of tragedy prevented the Athenian democracy from being lost in the dilemma of theocracy or barracks (Papaioannou, 2003, p. 93; 2000).[9] In his essay *Cosmos and History*, Papaioannou showed convincingly the reasons why the Western "theatrocracy", being unable to generate the Aeschylean *pathos-mathos*, was led in the 20th century to the generalized nihilism of the totalitarian regimes, as well as to the need for a transvaluation of all values, as Nietzsche and the great poets of the 19th century had foretold.

It is true that, judging from the struggles for domination and the manifold wars of the past five centuries among the religious peoples and empires of the West, Western civilization was led toward the creation of a *pathos* without *mathos*, toward a tragedy of irreconcilability, toward the formation of a world of tension, frenzy, and horror, in which the supremacy of the will, at once enraging and diminishing the soul of Europe, prevented Westerners from accepting the Aeschylean *pathos-mathos* and the wholeness of the tragic psyche that

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[7] For Papaioannou, the tragic linkage of democracy and tragedy marked and glorified the popular uprising which, in the form of Dike, remained the golden thread of the same inscribed line after Aeschylus. "Society", he writes, "is not governed by decrees nor by laws imposed from above, but by the pathos-mathos of society as a whole, insofar as that society finds within itself the strength to respond to its own destruction" (Papaioannou, 2003, p. 74). See also on this matter, Theodoropoulou, 2000; 1992.

[8] Comparing Attic tragedy with the two modern genres of theatre, the classicist and the Elizabethan, Papaioannou regarded Aristotle's reference in the Poetics to the medical term catharsis as a decisive innovation. He considered the term to possess ontological content. It signifies the restoration of cosmic order from the disturbance inflicted upon the foundations of the world by every human action, as well as by history understood as the totality of human actions (Papaioannou, 2000, pp. 83-84). According to the philosopher, tragedy does not constitute a representation through which the subject triumphs over the demonic forces of the world. On the contrary, the destruction of the hero restores the metaphysical foundations of the world. Yet neither the classicist theatre of a Racine nor the Elizabethan theatre of a Shakespeare was able to preserve the ontological content of ancient Greek theatre. The audience at Versailles was educated in rational discipline and in the conflict between duty and feeling. French theatre, anti-popular and therefore anti-tragic, stifled the tragic experience carried within tragic poetry. Likewise, Elizabethan theatre, despite the stature of its dramatists, such as Shakespeare or Marlowe, was unable to transmute *pathos* into *mathos* (Papaioannou, 2003, pp. 95, 102, 133).

[9] According to Papaioannou, the Athenian *Demos* needed the forces of Injustice and Arrogance to be tamed. Tragic poetry, by pointing to these cosmic values, stood as one of the institutional means of democracy, so that the democratic self-institution of the city might be secured and preserved, and so that classical civilization might ultimately be consolidated through its laws and institutions.

characterized Athenian society. The peoples of the West suffered all manner of calamities and, at the same time, produced the most apocalyptic and annihilating wars in human history, and yet they learned nothing from their deeds.[10] In effect, there is no *Catharsis* capable of saving this intricate yet barbaric civilization of the will from *hybris*, since the pair *hybris* and justice is, as a rule, absent from its apocalyptic formation. This is why it has been unable, even to this day, to develop politically in the way the Athenian citizens once did. There is *pathos*, but there is no outlet that might, through *mathos*, redeem the Western world. For this reason, and despite the religiosity of Western drama, its great theme, as Papaioannou observes, becomes the rejection of Christianity and the supremacy of Fortune (Diano, 1997). Moreover, out of the fragmented European world that emerged after the Middle Ages there arose a tragic experience inconceivable in the Christian medieval period: the idea of the pure contingency of existence, the idea that the human being is thrown, wholly by chance, into the infinite space and infinite time of an anonymous universe that terrified Pascal (Papaioannou, 1995b, pp. 115-124).[11] It is to this contingency of human existence that Heidegger will return, under the designation "state of abandonment",[12] in order to grasp the character of this world, and along this same path, though in different terms, Castoriadis will soon find himself as well (Castoriadis, 1990; 1996a).

In 1993, Castoriadis concluded a text of his titled "Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime" included in *The Rise of Insignificancy*, in an enigmatic manner, writing:

> Democratic politics is, on the factual level, the kind of activity that endeavors to reduce, as much as it possibly can, the contingent character of our social-historical existence as far as its substantive determinations are concerned. Obviously, neither democratic politics on the factual level nor philosophy on the ideal level can eliminate what, from the standpoint of the singular human being, and even of humanity in general, appears as the radical accident (this is what Heidegger was aiming at in part, though he bizarrely confined it to the singular human being, with the term Geworfenheit, dereliction or thrownness) (…).

And further on:

> The mere consciousness of the infinite mixture of contingency and necessity—of necessary contingency and of ultimately contingent necessity—that conditions what we are, what we do, and what we think is far from being what freedom truly is. But it is a condition for this freedom, a requisite condition for lucidly undertaking actions that are capable

[10] Papaioannou linked this illusion of omnipotence to the ideology of progress that holds together the modern Western world. "This belief in the progressive purification of every historical drama", he writes, "secures the tranquillity of the modern human being's conscience in the face of any tragic questioning concerning the value, meaning, or consequences of his historical action" (Papaioannou, 2000, p. 67). Instrumental reason, then, as the agency that leads to progress and to whatever prosperity may accompany it, is liberated to act without guilt and without restraint regarding the destruction it will cause. In this sense, it becomes intelligible how the Christian idea of the forgiveness of sins takes, in Hegel, its most extreme and radical form and becomes historical consciousness. What we therefore call progress, or history, or historical necessity serves to justify evil for the Western human being (Papaioannou, 2000, p. 68).

[11] Papaioannou emphasized, quite rightly, that this condition was revealed, through Nietzsche's critique, as modern nihilism. (The seeds of this reversal are, of course, already present in Hegel and Schopenhauer.) It concerns the surrender of the human being to the corrosion of the void, of contingency, and of the absurd, which has made the human being a problem for himself. Cast randomly into the world, he devalues the higher values, ceases to seek in spirit the root and the certainty of his essence, and seeks it instead in objective reality, within which he appears as a thing. It is precisely this that nullifies him.

[12] The "state of abandonment" in Heidegger denotes the human being's being "thrown" into the world at birth. It is not a psychological abandonment but an ontological one, characterizing the human being prior to any decision. "The meaning of being is time", the philosopher notes. "This means that being is not something that endures by persisting, but something that passes away, that is, it is not presence but event. If one had the courage to reflect deeply upon one's own death, one would discover one's existence as a finite event of being. In this way one would have attained, almost, the highest degree of self-knowledge, the highest degree to which Dasein can reach (…)" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 190). This recognition on Heidegger's part gave his philosophy the character of a tragic philosophy, but above all the character of ambiguity, as Levinas believed. Cf. on this and Jaspers, 1990. For a discussion of the notion of the tragic in existential philosophy, see also, Goldman, 1955; Scheler, 1952; Lukács, 1974.

> of leading us to effective autonomy on the individual as well as on the collective level. (Castoriadis, 1996b, pp. 240-241, translated from the French by Curtis, 1997).

For the understanding of the tragic, Castoriadis, in turn, turned to ancient Greece. He linked the tragic to justice and endowed it with an ontological and political character. Like Papaioannou, he also connected the tragic with democracy.

For Castoriadis, Greece is first and foremost a tragic civilization. The grandeur of the civilization it created and its transhistorical significance, in other words, its contribution to the humanization of the human being, lies in the fact that it was able, by facing the Abyss of the world and thereby activating the presence of *hybris* (arrogance, insolence, excess, violence), to offer an answer to the question of the order of the world and of society, through an attempt to break out of the terrifying cycle that *hybris* establishes. This answer bears the name of self-limitation, Greece sought to give both through its struggle for democracy and through the struggle of a mode of thought that measures itself against one and only one ultimate certainty: the certainty of non-being, of definitive meaninglessness, of death (Castoriadis, 1986; Carter, 2011). Greek *paideia*, therefore, is defined, according to the philosopher, by its opposition to *hybris*, and, correspondingly, it does not succumb to the illusion that the response to *hybris* amounts to its elimination.

The inaugural experience of the Greek human being may thus be said to be the experience of the fact that the ultimate order governing being is the succession of genesis and destruction, a succession devoid of meaning. This experience, which is none other than humanity's experience of recognizing itself by opposing non-meaning and thereby creating itself, is what renders Greek civilization tragic. This tragic character is already inscribed in Homer, Hesiod, and the Orphics, before finding expression in Presocratic thought, in the great classical thinkers, and, of course, in the tragic poetry of the fifth century (Vernant & Vidal-Naquet, 2001/2005). Castoriadis's analysis shows us that the Greek response to the question posed so sharply by the inevitability of non-meaning is articulated within this very framework. This response, which, in addition to taking the form of a philosophical approach, also assumes the form of a poetic approach in the texts of the tragic poets of the fifth century, conceives *Dike* in a different manner (Castoriadis, 2001; Loraux, 1999).[13] It thus brings to light the immense importance of self-limitation, both on the individual and on the social level, and it bears the name of law and justice. "The demos must fight for the laws more fiercely than for the walls of the city", Heraclitus says at the end of the sixth century (Diels & Kranz, 1966, 22 B 44). The Orphic variations of the mythology of that same period, as well as Pindar, show us this path (Pindar, 1997). This path is also traversed in exemplary fashion by Aeschylus in *Prometheus Bound* and by Sophocles in *Antigone*.[14]

What Greece becomes capable of doing, therefore, is not, according to the philosopher, merely the revelation of chaos, but also the will to confront chaos, since already from the seventh century the certainty emerges that there is always a need for law. Thus, a shift takes place from the field of Homeric moiras (*destiny*) and Anaximander's *chrēōn* (cosmic necessity) to the field of a reflective praxis and a political praxis. Since the order of the world, as continuous genesis and destruction, is without meaning, the Greeks create philosophy and democracy in an attempt to break out of the cycle of *hybris*, without any prior assurance regarding the truth of

[13] In this text, Loraux shows us, among other things, the reasons why tragedy shapes the moral and political consciousness of the Athenians and, as an institution, contributes to confronting pain and uncertainty. Here, Athenian tragedy is examined as a social and political phenomenon that makes possible a public reflection on power, justice, and moral and political responsibility, while also expressing the contradictions and crises of Athenian democracy. The texts included in this volume further reassess earlier interpretations of the phenomenon, linking the aesthetic dimension of tragedy to its political dimension. Cf. on this, Cooper, 2014.

[14] See Aeschylus *Prometheus Bound* and Sophocles *Antigone*.

thinking or the value of acting. They become capable of giving flesh and bone to the democratic demand of *logon didonai* (to give an account), by establishing a genuine public space for the first time in the history of humanity. Greece is the first example of a society that explicitly reflects upon the question of its laws and its justice, and that changes these laws whenever necessary, since its members embody the capacity for judging (*krinein*) and choosing (*epilegein*) accordingly. The *dēmos*, as *autonomos* (autonomus), *autodikos* (*the people hold supreme judicial authority*), and *autotelēs* (self-contained), establishes the possibility of examination and questioning without restrictions; it establishes *logos* as the movement of speech and thought within the framework of political collectivity, without ignoring that there exists no means of eliminating the dangers of collective *hybris* (Gourgouris, 2014; Karagiannis, 2010; Karalis, 2014).

The political dimension of tragedy, therefore, lies both in its ontological foundations and in the role it plays as an institution of self-limitation within democracy.[15] Its ontological foundations are those that lie, as we have said, in the Greek conception of the world.[16] Tragedy continually affirms, through the presentation of things, that being is chaos and allows everyone to see it. And, obviously, as chaos here one must understand the manifest absence of any positive correspondence between the intentions of human actions and their results. Yet tragedy also shows us a project of action that may appear as the projection of an individual's desires or passions, but may equally be a restoration of order in the world. Tragedy assures us that we are not masters of our actions, while continually addressing *hybris* in its various manifestations. Let us also note that this *hybris* does not necessarily concern non-Greeks. In this sense, Arendt was right to observe that impartiality appears in the world with the Greeks.

By allowing us to perceive the uncertainty that inhabits the perpetually fragile field of causes and motives on which we base our decisions, tragedy often underscores that these motives are not necessarily pure. We therefore have, as we have said, a continual warning against *hybris*, even when *hybris* hides behind noble motives. Tragic reflection reminds us that even when we believe that our decision to act rests on the best motives in the world, it is still possible that we may make monstrous decisions or decisions whose consequences will be monstrous (Castoriadis, 1986; Arendt, 1998).[17]

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[15] The tragedy with the greatest political depth is arguably Sophocles' Antigone, which has already been the object of numerous interpretations since the early 19th century, particularly by German thinkers, among whom Hegel and Heidegger are, of course, included. Castoriadis shows that the political lesson of the tragedy is that each person must listen to the opinion of the other, since no one is ever right on their own (*"phronein monos" to think alone,* v. 707). "Even if someone is right", he writes, "if they listen only to their own sense of what is right, they are in the wrong. This is what Antigone speaks about, and not about the superiority of divine law over human law. Naturally, the stubborn Creon does not heed the warning". Castoriadis also draws attention, of course, to the related saying of Heraclitus: "*xynon esti pasi to phronein*" (*thinking is common to* all) (Castoriadis, 2007, pp. 218, 219). For Castoriadis, Antigone helps us perceive the uncertainty that pervades the field of political action, "the permanently fragile and incomplete character of the reasons and motives upon which we can base our decisions". What is represented in tragedy, he argues, is a persistent warning against hybris, even when it is concealed behind invisible motives and speaks a language that is rational and rationalized (p. 250).

[16] Castoriadis had of course studied the thought of J.-P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet on the question of tragedy. In the work of these two great Hellenists, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne*, it is made clear that tragedy is born "when myth begins to be examined from the standpoint of the citizen, … (and) the world of the city is placed in question, while its fundamental values are challenged as the consequence of a public dialogue" (Vernant & Vidal-Naquet, 2001/2005, p. 33). Tragedy depicted the conflict between, on the one hand, the new, emerging legal and political thinking of the *polis* and, on the other, mythical and heroic traditions. For the authors, tragedy constitutes an indivisible unity—social, aesthetic, and psychological: "From the perspective of the institution of the tragic contests, it may be considered a social phenomenon; as the emergence of a new literary genre, it constitutes an aesthetic creation; and through the introduction of the notions of tragic consciousness and the tragic human being, it represents a psychological transformation. These three aspects form a single phenomenon and require the same mode of interpretation" (p. 9). For the authors, as for Castoriadis, tragedy is a radical creation.

[17] In this text, Arendt recognizes the tragic dimension inherent in the nature of political action, which is unpredictable and deeply exposed to the possibility of error. Since action can produce outcomes contrary to our intentions, tragicness, according to Arendt, is bound up with freedom and responsibility (Arendt, 1973).

The Greeks know that *hybris* exists, Castoriadis emphasizes, because fixed norms are absent, because there is no rule, apart from destruction, capable on its own of intervening to limit human deeds.[18] For this reason, *hybris* cannot be prevented or corrected; it always leads to ruin. *Hybris*, made present within the human being and driving toward transgression, brings about destruction which, in a certain sense, is also a restoration (Castoriadis, 1996c). Restoration, of course, has no relation to purification as the consequence of a sin. Christian sin belongs to the domain of heteronomy. Already in Anaximander, existence as injustice violates the ontological condition of coexistence, and for this reason particular beings must render justice to one another and restore their injustice through their disappearance. *Dike* watches over the observance of measure, guaranteeing coexistence through the continual destruction of particular beings. For this very reason the Greeks conceive *Dike*, as we have said, in a different sense and seek, through self-limitation, to offer an answer to the question of the order of the world and of society.[19]

By humanizing himself through the law he gives himself, while by nature subject to no internal or natural limitation and recognizing that nothing can determine its content in advance, that is, that there exists no extra-social or transcendent rule capable of regulating this content, the human being was able during this period to create admirable works. Democracy is indeed the only regime that can set the only realizable limits to the indeterminacy of society, namely limits that are internal. It is entirely appropriate, moreover, that from this perspective Castoriadis recognizes memory as one of the institutions of self-limitation in democracy.[20] This is precisely what Pericles does in the *Funeral Oration*, when he calls upon the young men of Athens to prove themselves equal to the mature generation, so that Athens may continue to be regarded as the *paideusis* of Greece.

Yet we must emphasize once again that although democracy is indeed, according to Castoriadis, an answer to *hybris*, it in no way constitutes the elimination of *hybris*. Democracy is defeated in the Peloponnesian War, succumbing to its own errors. Castoriadis observes that democracy ultimately could not avoid its own excess because it neglected one of its own principles, namely its universal dimension. The Athenians did not seek to extend the field of justice to relations among the cities. They continued to move toward the hegemony of Greece, neglecting the clear lessons of their own poets. It is precisely at this point that Plato attempts to intervene. Having linked the causes of democracy's defeat to the very nature of the political regime, he posits an external limit to the possibility of human *hybris*. This measure he seeks, and finds, in God himself, thereby opens the way to a unified ontology that continues to play a regulatory role in the way we think about the questions of the *politeia* (Castoriadis, 1999). Goldschmidt rightly emphasizes that in Plato there is no place for the tragic, either in his view of human existence or in his view of being in general. And this is not only because

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[18] Cf. on this, Camus's highly insightful conception of the tragic, in which he understands it as the conflict between the human need for meaning and the silence of the world. This discord gives rise to the absurd, which constitutes the modern form of the tragic, as a conscious revolt at the limits of finitude. From this perspective, the tragic grandeur of the human being lies in the fact that, while fully aware of the fragility of their existence, they nevertheless choose to live, to act, and to create with dignity (Camus, 1985; 1951). For a comparison of the tragic in the thought of Castoriadis and Camus, see Sharpe, 2000, pp. 103-129.

[19] Papaioannou also notes that this *chreōn* (*cosmic necessity*) of Anaximander is the *Dikē* of tragedy, the dread deity of *pathos-mathos*. See Papaioannou, 2000, p. 41. The annihilating forces of *hybris* and of the injustice that beings inflict upon one another, forces which human beings themselves carry within them, are, according to Necessity, those that bring about the intervention of *Dikē* and punish the one who has transgressed the measure.

[20] In his seminars at the EHESS, Castoriadis will also analyze three other institutions of self-limitation: the *graphe paranomon* (an indictment for an illegal proposal), the *apatē tou dēmou* (fraud against the people), and the *nomon mē epētēdeion thēnai* (for a law to be unsuitable).

Plato stands outside democracy, but also because it is the result of an ontological necessity (Goldschmidt, 1949).[21]

For Castoriadis, the experience or the ontological-emotional disposition of the Greeks is the discovery, the illumination, of the Abyss. He has no doubt whatsoever that it is precisely here that the core of the rupture lies, as well as the character of the eternal truth that has endured ever since. In this sense, the philosopher's contribution to the clarification of this truth is significant. Through his thought we have been able to understand that the great truth of Greece is not harmony and measure, nor the appearance of truth as revelation, but the positing of the question of non-meaning. The Greek world is constituted beginning from the awareness of the incompatible and paradoxical character of our presence, of the excess of being and non-being that we represent within a self-sufficient world.

The democratic-tragic human being, then, is the one who, being aware of this necessity and gazing into the Abyss, partakes in the essence of beings (Theodoridis, 2010). He becomes capable of loving the beautiful and wisdom, always together with others, for the essence of the tragic concerns not only the individual but also the *politeia*. By distancing himself from the conceit of believing that he knows, he activates the open question and sets self-limitation as a boundary both for himself and for the *politeia*. He does not accept hubristic univocity and dissolves the need for omnipotence. He knows that he may well go astray, unlike the non-tragic human being, who has, in any case, already gone astray. By embodying the essence of the tragic, the conflict between unyielding principles that characterizes the human condition, he recognizes that he is the only danger to himself and assumes this danger, thereby creating his own history. He fears only his own errors. By instituting the world, he learns to coexist with the Abyss. He knows that this coexistence is both impossible and unavoidable. He strives to place a limit on arbitrariness or to relativize relativization. He responds to the question of non-being through law and justice. He is bound by the ethos of mortality, upon which, and only upon which, democratic education can be grounded.

The Significance of the Pedagogical Absence of the Tragic Human in the Contemporary West

If, after the discussion we have undertaken, we now ask to what extent, in the contemporary Western world, the exit from the cycle of *hybris* and the embodiment of the essence of the tragic constitute fundamental aims of education today, then our conclusion can only be negative. This world proclaims in every possible way that it does not fall within the tragic wisdom of the Aeschylean *pathos-mathos*. We might even say that, in order to convince ourselves that no skeptical attitude is required regarding the correctness of this conclusion, we need only compare the education received by the Athenians when they attended tragic performances with that received by people today when they watch television. History shows us, with regard to Western societies, which are historically situated within a tradition of struggles for freedom and democracy and which, within this

[21] Indeed, in Plato's philosophy there can be no uncompromising conflict between two equally ultimate principles, since the entire spirit of his thought seeks to unify, homogenize, reduce to first principles, and reconstruct the world on the basis of those very principles. It follows, as a matter of ontological necessity, that the tragic element can only be absent from his perspective. Yet even in Aristotle the political dimension of tragedy is not evident, as critical scholarship has shown. Aristotle inherits the theory of mimesis from Plato when he turns to the question of tragedy. This does not mean that he condemns it, but he does not regard war, the conflict, that is, between uncompromising principles, as a defining feature of the human condition. For this reason, in the final part of his definition of tragedy, where its ultimate end (telos) ought to appear, reference is instead made to its psychopedagogical function, which has, of course, given rise to controversies ever since (Aristotle, Longinus, & Demetrius, 1995). The absence of the tragic in Platonic thought has been discussed by various thinkers in their work. See, indicatively, Dodds, 2022; Vernant, 2005. For the Aristotelian conception of the tragic, see indicatively, Halliwell, 2002; Else, 1957.

framework, up to a certain point recognize themselves, that the only social meaning is still alive today from the two central ones with which they once identified, and the only one that allows coexistence to persist, however marginally, through education, is the meaning of the unlimited expansion of a rational domination over everything, over nature and over human beings (Lebow, 2003).[22] For the other meaning, the meaning of freedom is undergoing a phase of prolonged eclipse, unless freedom is understood within the framework of so-called "democratic individualism", that is, as a freedom in its most pitiful form, for which these societies seem to strive while at the same time undermining its essential meaning.

It is clear that the more Western societies maintain the illusion of omnipotence by fleeing from the certainty of death, the more definitive their installation within the cycle of *hybris* and their distancing from the essence of the tragic will become.[23] The more they grow insolent in their alliance with techno-science, the more the destruction of the earthly environment will intensify, with consequences that today have become more than evident. The more they disparage politics, refusing to see democracy as a regime of self-institution and seeking extra-social guarantees instead, the further they will slide into their own self-destruction. The more they devalue the principles that once nourished creative political action and reflective action, and conceive freedoms merely as supplements to the machinery of individual pleasures, the more they will sink into crisis and move toward annihilation (Papaioannou, 1991). Yet the anthropological type of individual produced by these societies through a hubristic form of education appears by now to have become firmly established. And there are no evident signs of its alteration. On the contrary, we might say that through a costless rhetoric which, by radically distorting meanings, liquidates the vitality of the Hellenic-western tradition, this type of individual is strengthened by the education provided, indeed in the very name of that tradition.

If everything we have said thus far is true, then the great question we posed at the outset, and with which we must now grapple, is whether and how this orientation of education, an orientation that tends toward the forgetting of the tragic substance, might be changed, and who the human beings would be who could undertake such an endeavor (Theodoridis, 2009). And in such a perspective the question becomes even sharper. It is enough to consider that if the result of this education touches the anthropological organization of the social individual, then the anthropological transformation posited as the aim within this perspective is equivalent to a turning point in historical development. For how can such a transformation occur when the meanings through which human beings understand themselves and the world (money, consumption, power, prestige) have taken root, laying siege to that vital region of the psychic sphere called desire? How can one imagine another world and oneself within it when society, as we know it today, has made us its own (its servants) through desire?

Conclusion

It is evident that such a socio-political condition activates the need for absolute foundations, such as rigid ideologies, absolute leaders, absolute laws, or doctrines of every kind that render questioning impossible. And

[22] In this text, Lebow, taking into account the fact that politics on the contemporary international scene—as in Athens in its darker moments—is marked by uncertainty, recklessness, and arrogance, with unpredictable consequences, argues that Greek tragedy offers the most powerful theoretical framework for understanding this phenomenon.

[23] Today, tragedy suggests that progress can render weapons of destruction even more lethal, as Castoriadis observes, if it does not submit to Justice. And horror, in turn, can become more massive and more efficient. Perhaps this growing horror is the very terrain of the tragic today. Papaioannou concludes his book *World and History. Greek Cosmology and Western Eschatology* with the following verses from Pindar, which resonate with what is being said here: "There is a most vain kind of human beings (reckless, base) who, scorning what lies close at hand, gaze toward distant things, chasing the unattainable with hollow hopes" (Pindar, 1997, Lines 21-23).

this need, of course, creates fertile ground for the development of authoritarian forms of power that promise order and security in a world that appears uncertain and chaotic. Today, in Western societies, the human being and the knowledge he brings forth are not formed through the institution of education, with the result that the value of self-limitation is discredited and univocal certainties and hegemonic narratives prevail. These certainties and narratives destabilize any inclination toward collective self-institution, which functions as a shield of democracy, and thereby render these societies vulnerable to dominant forms of power.

Of course, we are not yet living in the age of the end of democracy and, correspondingly, the end of philosophy. Yet since nothing can any longer persuade us that such a dark future, already taking shape before us, will be averted, we must at all costs activate the last remnants of a democratic consciousness, a consciousness worthy of embodying the tragic spirit, before the moment arrives when the democratic stance is surrendered without resistance to a new barbarism.

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