

TRAGEDY AND OTHERNESS: SOPHOCLES, SHAKESPEARE, PSYCHOANALYSIS

Nicholas Ray

Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Wien: Peter Lang, 2009.

(by José Ángel García Landa. Universidad de Zaragoza)

garciala@unizar.es

167

Tragedy and psychoanalysis have always been at work within each other —with major tragedies explicitly inspiring Freud’s work, and with psychoanalysis waiting to unravel the conflict between next of kin in the works of classical tragedians like Sophocles or Shakespeare. Nicholas Ray writes from within the field of psychoanalytic criticism— a little askew, though, as the approach he favors is broadly that of Jean Laplanche, and he casts a critical gaze on the Freudian concepts and on Freud’s account of the self. The Oedipus, notably, is here an object of interrogation, rather than a psychical process which is taken for granted. Ray stresses the complexity of the process by which self relates to other in both tragedies and psychoanalysis, a complexity which may be foreclosed by Freud’s own formulations. Or perhaps by an overly strict adherence to them.

One significant point in his argument is Freud’s early formulation, and then abandonment, of the ‘seduction theory’ —i.e., Freud came to believe that neurotic symptoms did not originate in an actual traumatic childhood episode, furthering instead the view that such traumatic episodes were retroactively created fantasies. This was a crucial step for Freudian psychoanalysis to take, all the more so from the point of view of psychoanalytical poetics, since the psychic material came to be treated as being analogous to fiction. These fantasies are grounded, according to standard Freudianism, on a universal and deterministic process of sexualization. The development of the Oedipal theory coincides with Freud’s use of Sophocles

and then Shakespeare as illustrations. Ray's book sets out to reexamine the relationship between the theory and the texts, to reread the texts askew from the Freudian view, watching the blind spots of Freud's reading, and to challenge Freud's totalizing and deterministic view of sexuality and fantasy.

This is an interesting project in many senses, not just as a critical reevaluation of Freudian criticism or a new examination of tragedies by Sophocles and Shakespeare—it also provides suggestive insights for a theory of retrospection and of retroactive effects—what Freud called *Nachträglichkeit*. Ray's reexamination of psychoanalysis is indebted to Laplanche's critique of the Oedipus: according to Laplanche, Freud's account of psychosexual development is misleadingly endogenous and deterministic and does not make sufficient allowance for otherness, for the unexpectedness and contingency of the encounter with externality and the other. Freud's Copernican revolution of the human subject was also Copernican in a limited sense, that is, it did not consider the possibility that there might be no center whatsoever for the psyche. In his poststructuralist version of psychoanalysis, the self is radically de-centered, and this calls for a rewriting of the Oedipus. In abandoning the theory of seduction, and the role it gave to exogenous elements in the constitution of the self, Freud was conniving with the subject's tendency to mask his heteronomy, his dependence on the intervention of the other. Laplanche insists on the fundamental otherness of the messages received by the infant: otherness in the sense that they are fundamentally misunderstood, coming as they come from an unassimilated adult world, and otherness because of their lack of transparency to the adults, the senders, as unconscious elements are involved in any message. Therefore Laplanche goes back to the seduction hypothesis with a difference—any interaction between the child and the adult world contains a potential for the element of retroactive traumatism that Freud had identified in his early formulation of the seduction hypothesis. And the subject, and his unconscious, are structured around these unassimilated or insufficiently symbolised elements—all of which is Laplanche's own version of the Lacanian tenet that the unconscious is not so much within the subject as 'between' subjects. These psychoanalytic models would of course benefit from an integration with a theory of social interaction, and of the social constitution of the subject understood as an interiorized system of relationships—which was in part R.D. Laing's contribution—although I am not aware of any sustained and satisfactory integration of psychoanalytic work with, say, Goffman's symbolic interactionism.

Riding on the back of Laplanche's theory of the role of alterity in the constitution of the subject, the self-stated aim of the book is "to endeavour to bear witness to the irreducible alterities which inhabit the three tragedies examined, and the specific ways in which they can be shown to resist the exigency of narcissistic closure to which Freud's thought becomes more emphatically subject after the

formal repudiation of the seduction theory” (42). Ray defines, in passing, what a Laplanchean hermeneutics of art might be: a nonprogrammatic encounter with otherness, given that works of art or culture are prime examples of enigmatic otherness, indeterminate messages only partly controlled by the author, and which will produce undeterminable effects, unforeseen by the artist. “In other words, the site of cultural production is a *reopening* of the subject’s originary relationship to the other” (44). And Freud’s own production of psychoanalysis was partly derived from his encounter with the enigmatic alterity of Sophocles’ and Shakespeare’s tragedies. These texts (*Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*) apparently narrate the protagonist’s assumption of an identity, a centring of autonomous subjectivity: “Oedipus the fifth-century philosopher, Brutus the revolutionary libertarian, Hamlet the frustrated figure of an ostensibly modern severance from paternal law” (50). Ray seeks to identify in the tragedies themselves an originary de-centering at work, one which undermines the protagonist’s status as an autonomous subject. These are, moreover, tragedies about parricide, a subject central to Freud’s account of ritual and psychic life in *Totem and Taboo*. Parricide as a move necessary for the coming-into-being of the subject is ambivalent, and Ray further explores its intrinsic ambivalence, already prominent in Freud’s analysis, with an added emphasis on the role of pre-existing and external otherness in the constitution of the parricidal subject. That otherness is partly accounted for by “the contingent ideologies of the subject’s surrounding culture” (53) —the trajectory of the subject is irreducible to an intrinsic fate. As an analyst, Freud identifies with Oedipus, Brutus, Hamlet —while Ray tries to dissociate himself from this identification and underlines those elements in the text which problematize the protagonist’s autonomy, those “forces which threaten the self-presence that Freud is led to assign to the primal, parricidal text” (55).

Ray’s reading of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and of Freud’s reading of the same, emphasizes the elements of enigmatic otherness in the mythical story. This alterity is not adequately addressed by Freud, who “remains blind to the troublingly enigmatic specificity of the tragedy” (59). Oedipus, an optimistic rationalist, relies on his own intellectual strength and minimizes the significance of the Sphinx’s challenge —Freud does likewise, calling it a “riddle”, whereas the story resonates with more troubling and enigmatic overtones. Ray notes, for instance, that Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, which first addresses the Oedipal theme, was written according to Freud as “a portion of my own self-analysis, my reaction to my father’s death” (in Ray, 61). There is also a story told by Ernest Jones about a curious premonitory scene, in which Freud saw himself, like Oedipus, as a riddle solver, apparently without realizing the unconscious irony of this identification. Oedipus’ answer to the Sphinx was an answer to a riddle, but Ray notes that it should have been understood as an enigma, not a riddle. An enigma may require an answer, but

“any response will be inadequate” (63) —and, moreover, the interpreter’s relation to his answer is an enigma in its own right. Oedipus was associated with the fifth-century philosophers by Hegel and then by Jean-Joseph Goux (*Oedipus, Philosopher*), as the emblem of the new humanist paradigm which saw man as the measure of all things, a symbol of Western thought as a whole, in fact. Goux notes that, contrary to Nietzsche, Hegel did not realize the troubling and ambivalent consequences that the tragic fate of Oedipus suggests for philosophy. Freud’s notion of the unconscious comes to symbolize, too, the dark, pulsional, parrincestual nature of this move, and it is not by chance that “Freud discovers the unconscious and the Oedipal drives at the same time” (Goux in Ray: 75). Yet the reduction of fate to the unconscious, Freud’s own answer to the Oedipal riddle, only has the effect “of displacing the riddle elsewhere, namely ‘back’ into the primordial constitution of the subject” (79). Freud’s partial blindness in reading the Oedipus story discloses for Ray “a great deal more about Sophocles’ play and, in turn, about psychoanalysis than Freud was fully able to grasp” (83).

Chapter Two of *Tragedy and Otherness* is an excellent reading of *Julius Caesar*. The relationship to the Freudian project is, however, much more indirect —the play is related via a comment by Harold Bloom to Freud’s parricidal theory of ritual in *Totem and Taboo*. However, Freud’s explicit references to this tragedy are meager and indirect, and arguably Ray makes too much of them. Still, the chapter stands on its own right as an outstanding reading in the deconstructivist mode. It is also an example of the way Ray combines psychoanalytic insights with historical and contextualized readings —seeing *Julius Caesar* not merely as an instance of archetypal parricide, but as an intervention in the context of early modern debates on tyranny and kingship: “If the *tyrannus* of the fifth century BC marks out the (albeit aporetic) vector of an inaugural subjectivity, the figure of the tyrant proleptically deconsecrated by early modern tragic drama is a measure of the subjectivity which the sons of the realm are constitutively denied: their liberty and autonomy is to be attained at the cost of rising up against the absolute Father, setting him on the ‘scaffold’ and cutting him off” (120).

But was Caesar a tyrant, or is tyrannicide a legitimate step in any case? Following Ernest Schanzer’s reading, Ray argues that “the tragedy works to hold open the very question of just what it is that the assassination might mean” (122). The event itself was inherently ambiguous —the crux of the matter being that Julius Caesar was *not yet* a tyrant, although he seemed to be well on the way to becoming one. Therefore, his assassination could be described as tyrannicide only proleptically, and the doubt is cast as to whether the actions of his murderers were caught in a vicious circle, or a defectively self-fulfilling prophecy. Alterity enters the argument as follows: everywhere the play resists attempts to oversimplify the significance of

Caesar's assassination (although there is no lack of one-sided views coming from many characters, notably the contrasting public speeches of Brutus and Antony). What is more, the play "refuses to be assimilated to the model of anachronistic back-projection whereby the present context of its composition would impose, in terms of its own epistemological purview, a single and identifiable meaning in the past it represents" (124). Caesar is a complex character, inherently contradictory in his actions and purposes, and the play preserves the enigmatic core of his otherness—which could only have been dissipated by the non-existent future which was cut short by the murder. And the conspirators' actions also had unintended consequences (notably the Civil War), different too from the ideal restoration of the Republic they invoked as their purpose.

Once again, Ray's reading is finely attuned to the narrative interplay of prospection and retrospection. In this case, too, he points out that Freud's reading of this tragedy (to the extent that there is one) forecloses the play of difference, for example in the interpretation of Brutus' character. Brutus too is complex, divided within, hesitating between two father figures or ancestors, Caesar himself, perhaps, and (or, rather, *or*) the ancient Brutus who expelled Tarquin from Rome and instaurated the Republic. Ray examines the way in which Brutus' "double coinage" is manipulated by Cassius and others, and the way the paradox of the self cannot be solved here either: "The moment of centring, the accomplishment of selfhood, is equally and necessarily one of decentring" (141), and so Brutus fashions himself as an inherently divided subject. The tragedy incorporates the double genealogy of Brutus with a greater tolerance for contradiction than is found in Plutarch—emphasizing the way Brutus is, like Rome, at war with himself. The difference between tyrannicide and tyranny is also deconstructed, as the logic of their actions drives the conspirators into mimicking the very gestures of "hermeneutic tyranny" they reject in the prospective tyrant.

In formulating his seduction theory, Freud had to acknowledge that the original (now traumatic) event cannot be returned to its exact original state, as the Same—and Ray uses this analogy to emphasize the element of otherness that the conspirators' deeds and their interpretations add to Caesar's self and actions. Perhaps Hillis Miller's conception of the performative would be a useful complement to Ray's perspective here: the conspirators try to define Caesar as a tyrant, etc., and they do not recognize the constitutive and performative element in their own portrayal of him, due to the inescapable prematurity of their deed. As to the play itself, in Ray's reading it systematically refuses to determine the meaning of the events it portrays: one could perhaps say that its own performative intervention in the events is a deliberate self-dismantling one: "Shakespeare's metadrama seems to say that the deed can be repeated, the scene reconstructed, the words spoken translated, but that this alone will not give us access to what the

scene means” (159). It might be added that this view holds a suggestive potential of implications for the staging, one could almost say the performative performance, of Shakespeare’s play. The conspirators themselves imagine the future performances, but quite characteristically they assume their meaning will be nonambiguous. The playwright knows otherwise.

The Freudian connection comes almost as an afterthought to this chapter: in *Totem and Taboo* Freud assumes that the Primal Patriarch’s murder is unequivocally an instance of tyrannicide, although a reactive performance of guilt will follow in the rituals developing from it. Ray makes Freud side with the conspirators in their tendentious denunciation of the tyrant —since Freud conceives of the archetypal patriarch as consistently tyrannical. But one wonders whether Freud, like Brutus, was not somewhat more ambivalent in his views on the patriarch, under the surface of his text. “Complex, not the same as itself from the outset, the event, like the experience of trauma, makes possible and necessary the deferred and constant returns to it of which Shakespeare’s [*or Freud’s?*] text is only one of innumerable instances” (170).

Ray finds significant that Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* was written in response to the death of Freud’s own father. This book’s reading of the protagonist’s Oedipal conflict in *Hamlet* is well known, and it will therefore come as no surprise that Ray’s last chapter on *Hamlet* engages more directly with Freud. While it examines the play from an interesting and original perspective, I find that it is less suggestive and intense than the previous chapters on *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Julius Caesar*. The main point is once again Freud’s failure to adequately engage with otherness —in this case “leaving increasingly unacknowledged the significance of parental desire in the constitution of the subject’s psychic life” (174). Once again the historical context plays a role —praying for the dead being at the time a Catholic custom recently banned under the new dispensations of the Church of England. The Ghost’s call “Remember me!” rather than “Revenge!” should be interpreted in this connection, as well as Hamlet’s general predicament, trapped in a mourning ritual without issue. This argument blends well with Stephen Greenblatt’s reading of *Hamlet* in *Will in the World* or in *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Ray’s reading complexly engages the critical literature on Hamlet understood (mistakenly, he argues) as a modern subject; Ray emphasizes the imagery of audition and “poisoning through the ear” —as symbols of excessive remembrance. Polonius’ injunctions to Laertes are reread here, paradoxically, as representing a quite modern self-fashioning, free from the excessive weight of fatherly instruction. There is no absolute freedom from the father in Hamlet, but it is only when Hamlet becomes more self-determined, like Laertes, that he achieves a measure of freedom from the weight of paternal overdetermination, and is able to fulfil his mission. “Auto-fidelity must, in the final analysis, override fidelity to any of the

father's foregoing precepts" (207). But, as shown by the example of Polonius, this autonomy from paternal authority is also elicited and enabled by the father himself. As noted before, one might argue that there is in Ray's Hamlet an element of self-portrayal—as regards this distancing from the psychoanalytic Father, the better to fulfil his mission and also fashion his own life path.

An afterword insists that Freud's approach was not "mistaken" but rather caught up in the exigency of his own ipsocentric focus on the individual psyche. Ray, with Laplanche, emphasizes the role of unforeseen, multiple, and irreducible *others* in the constitution of the self. Attention to the role of otherness in the de-centered subject, he argues, should make psychoanalysis more aware of the multiple dimensions of the cultural field, and transform itself into a more de-centered, and more complex, inquiry into the structure and constitution of human subjects and their cultural artifacts. His book is an excellent contribution to this project.

Works cited

-
- FREUD, Sigmund. (1900) 1953-66. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Vols. 4-5 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. James Strachey et al. Trans. James Strachey. 24 vols. London: Hogarth Press/Institute of Psychology.
- . (1912-1913) 1953-66b. *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. James Strachey et al. Trans. James Strachey. 24 vols. London: Hogarth Press/Institute of Psychology, 1953-66. 13.1-161.
- GOFFMAN, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Rev. ed. Garden City (NY): Doubleday-Anchor.
- GOUX, Jean-Joseph. 1993. *Oedipus, Philosopher*. Trans. Catherine Porte. Stanford, CA: Stanford U.P.
- GREENBLATT, Stephen. 2002. *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P.
- . 2004. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. New York and London: Norton.
- LAING, R.D. 1960. *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- LAPLANCHE, Jean. 2006. *Problématiques VI: L'après-coup*. Paris: P.U.F.
- SCHANZER, Ernest. 1955. "The Problem of Julius Caesar." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 6: 297-308.
- MILLER, J. Hillis. 1990. *Tropes, Parables, Performatives: Essays on 20th Century Literature*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester.

