Notes to Literature

Weekly reading booklet

#2 : Sophocles' *Antigone*

NL

NOTES TO LITERATURE

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998.

MacIntyre, Alasdair C. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. 3rd ed. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

Nussbaum, Martha Craven. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy.* Rev. ed. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Sophocles. *The Three Theban Plays*, translated by Robert Fagles and edited by Bernard Knox. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England ; New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1984.

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Sophocles

Blest, they are the truly blest who all their lives have never tasted devastation.

From *Antigone (441 BC)*

CREON:
You, tell me briefly, no long speeches –
Were you aware a decree had forbidden this?

ANTIGONE:
Well aware. How could I avoid it? It was public.

CREON:
And still you had the gall to break this law?

ANTIGONE:
Of course I did. It wasn't Zeus, not in the least,
who made this proclamation- not to me.
nor did that Justice, dwelling with the gods
beneath the earth, ordain such laws for men.
Nor did I think your edict had such force
that you, a mere mortal, could override the gods,
the great unwritten, unshakable traditions.
They are alive, not just today or yesterday:
they live forever, from the first of time,
and no one knows when they first saw the light.

These laws – I was not about to break them,
not out of fear of some man's wounded pride,

and face the retribution of the gods.
Die I must, I've known it all my life –
how could I keep from knowing? – even without
your death-sentence ringing in my ears.
And if I am to die before my time
I consider that a gain. Who on earth,
alive in the midst of so much grief as I,
could fail to find his death a rich reward?
So for me, at least, to meet this doom of yours
is precious little pain. But if I had allowed
my own mother's son to rot, an unburied corpse –
that would have been an agony! This is nothing.
And if my present actions strike you as foolish,
let's just say I've been accused of folly
by a fool.

CHORUS.
Blest, they are the truly blest who all their lives
have never tasted devastation. For others, once
the gods have rocked a house to its foundations
the ruin will never cease, cresting on and on
from one generation on throughout the race –
like a great mounting tide
driven on by savage northern gales,
surging over the dead black depths
roiling up from the bottom dark heaves of sand
and the headlands, taking the storm's onslaught full-force,
roar, and the low moaning
echoes on and on
and now
as in ancient times I see the sorrows of the house,
the living airs of the old ancestral kings,
piling on the sorrows of the dead
and one generation cannot free the next–
some god will bring them crashing down,
the race finds no release.

And now the light, the hop
springing up from the late last root
in the house of Oedipus, that hope's cut down in turn
by the long , bloody knife swung by the gods of death
by a senseless word
by fury at the heart.

Zeus,

yours is the power, Zeus, what man on earth
can override it, who can hold it back?
Power that neither Sleep, the all-ensnaring,
no, nor the tireless months of heaven
can ever overmaster –- young through all time,
mighty lord of power, you hold fast
the dazzling crystal mansions of Olympus.
And throughout the future, late and soon
as through the past, your law prevails:
no towering form of greatness
enters the lives of mortals
free and clear of ruin.

True,

our dreams, our high hopes voyaging far and wide
bring sheer delight to man, to many others
delusions, blithe, mindless lusts
and the fraud steals on one slowly...unaware
till he trips and puts his foot into the fire.
He was a wise old man who coined
the famous saying: "Sooner or later
foul is fair, fair is foul
to the man the gods will ruin" –
he goes his way for a moment only
free of blinding ruin.

TIRESIAS.

Soon shalt thou know, as I unfold the signs
Of my dread art. For sitting, as of old,
Upon my ancient seat of augury,
Where every bird has access, lo! I hear
Strange cry of winged creatures, shouting shrill,
In clamour sharp and savage, and I knew
That they were tearing each the other's breast
With bloody talons, for their whirring wings
Made that quite clear; and straightway I, in fear,
Made trial of the sacrifice that lay
On fiery altar. But the living flame
Shone not from out the offering; then there oozed
Upon the ashes, trickling from the bones,
A moisture, and it bubbled, and it spat,
And, lo! the gall was scattered to the air,
And forth from out the fat that wrapped them round,
The thigh joints fell. Such omens of decay
From strange mysterious rites I learnt from him,
This boy, who now stands here, for he is still
A guide to me, as I to others am.
And all this evil falls upon the state,
From out thy counsels; for our altars all,
Our sacred hearths, are full of food for dogs
And birds unclean, the flesh of that poor wretch
Who fell, the son of Œdipus. And so
The Gods no longer hear our solemn prayers,
Nor own the flame that burns the sacrifice;
Nor do the birds give cry of omen good,
But feed on carrion of a human corpse.
Think thou on this, my son: to err, indeed,
Is common unto all, but having erred,
He is no longer reckless or unblest,
Who, having fallen into evil, seeks
For healing, nor continues still unmoved.
Self-will must bear the guilt of stubbornness:
Yield to the dead, and outrage not a corpse.
What gain is it a fallen foe to slay?
Good counsel give I, planning good for thee;

And of all joys the sweetest is to learn
From one who speaketh well, should that bring gain.

MESSENGER:

Neighbours,
Friends of the house of Cadmus and the kings,
There's not a thing in this mortal life of ours
I'd praise or blame as settled once for all.
Fortune lifts and fortune fells the lucky
And unlucky everyday. No prophet on earth
Can tell a man his fate. Take Creon:
There was a man to rouse your envy once,
As I see it. He saved the realm from enemies,
Taking power, he alone, the lord of the fatherland,
He set us try on course – he flourished like a tree
With the noble line of sons he bred and reared...
And now it's lost, all gone.
Believe me,
When a man has squandered his true joys,
He's as good as dead, I tell you, a living corpse.
Pile up riches in your houses much as you like –
Live like a king with a huge show of pomp,
But if real light is missing from the lot,
I wouldn't give you a wisp of smoke for it,
Not compared with joy.

From Martha Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy (2001)

By this time, the men of the Chorus have heard Creon's optimistic defense of the supremacy of the *polis*. They have also heard the guard's story of the strange burial. The word *deinon* has occurred twice in the course of the prior experiences that prepare this lyric. Both times it is used by the guard, who finds the burial *deinon* (243), fearful, incomprehensible, and who also thinks it *deinon*, terrible, that Creon should be so proud of his impious views (323). These uses lead us to expect a not unqualified optimism. Having witnessed these events and these ambitions, the men of the Chorus reflect that the human being is, in fact, a *deinon* thing: a wonderful and strange being not at home in, or in harmony with, the world of nature; a natural being who tears up nature to make itself a home, who then modifies its own nature to make itself cities. Nothing is more *deinon*, not even, the text implies, the gods. (This is, presumably, because their life is perfect harmony and control. They cannot be admired in the same way, since they have no obstacles to overcome; nor can they be feared or criticized in the same way, since they have no need to depart from their natures or to become impious in order to fulfill themselves.)

'This thing', they say, using the neuter pronoun, distancing themselves from the strangeness of this creature, attempting to give a dispassionate story of its nature and its behavior, 'crosses the gray sea,..' At first reading, it is a history of triumphant progress. We hear enumerated the awesome array of devices invented by this creature to put itself in control of the contingent. The ship and the plow, which appear before and after the ode as political metaphors, now appear literally, as examples of human inventiveness. And this remarkable resourcefulness is not limited to control over the external. For the human being has created itself as a social being, forming thoughts, emotions, institutions, governing the formerly ungovernable aspects of its own inner life. It seems indeed to have a resource for everything. There remains only the ultimate contingency, death. But, the Chorus notes, many sicknesses formerly thought hopeless have been cured by human devices. Death has been pushed back. Will a creature so resourceful really find no escape?

From Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory (2007)*

Tragic drama had very early explored the conflicts that could arise within a post-Homeric framework. Aeschylus relied on the contradictory imperatives of kinship loyalties and the equally contradictory imperatives of the theology that sustained kinship. But it is Sophocles who systematically explores rival allegiances to incompatible goods, especially in the Antigone and the Philoctêtês, in a way that raises a key and a complex set of questions about the virtues. It seems to be clear that there can be rival conceptions of the virtues, rival accounts of what a virtue is. And it seems to be equally clear that there can be disputes over whether a particular quality is to be accounted a virtue or a vice. But it might of course be argued that in all such disagreements at least one party to the argument is simply mistaken and that we can rationally settle all such disputes and arrive at a single rationally justifiable account of and list of the virtues. Suppose indeed for the moment that this were so. Could it then be the case that in certain circumstances at least the possession of one virtue might exclude the possession of some other? Could one virtue be temporarily at least at war with another? And both qualities genuinely be accounted virtues? Can the exercise of the virtue of doing what is required of a sister (Antigone) or a friend (Odysseus) be at odds with the exercise of the virtues of justice (Creon) or of compassion and truthfulness (Neoptolemus)? We inherit two systematic sets of answers to such questions.

The ancestor of one of these sets of answers is Plato, for whom as we have seen the virtues are not merely compatible with each other, but the presence of each requires the presence of all. This strong thesis concerning the unity of the virtues is reiterated both by Aristotle and by Aquinas, even though they differ from Plato—and from each other—in a number of important ways. The presupposition which all three share is that there exists a cosmic order which dictates the place of each virtue in a total harmonious scheme of human life. Truth in the moral sphere consists in the conformity of moral judgment to the order of this scheme. There is a sharply contrasting modern tradition which holds that the variety and heterogeneity of human goods is such that their pursuit cannot be reconciled in any single moral order and that consequently

any social order which either attempts such a reconciliation or which enforces the hegemony of one set of goods over all other is bound to turn into a straitjacket and very probably a totalitarian straitjacket for the human condition. This is a view which Sir Isaiah Berlin has urged upon us strenuously, and its ancestry, as we noted earlier, is in Weber's writings. I take it that this view entails a heterogeneity of the virtues as well as of goods in general and that choice between rival claims in respect of the virtues has the same central place in the moral life for such theorists that choice between goods in general does. And where judgments express choices of this kind, we cannot characterize them as either true or false.

From Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1998)

2.2. Once it is formulated, the theory of the ambivalence of the sacred has no difficulty extending itself over every field of the social sciences, as if European culture were only now noticing it for the first time. Ten years after the Lectures, the classic of French anthropology, Marcel Mauss and H. Hubert's "Essay on the Nature and Function of Sacrifice" (1889) opens with an evocation of precisely "the ambiguous character of sacred things, which Robertson Smith has so admirably made clear" ("Essai," p. 195). Six years later, in the second volume of Wilhelm Max Wundt's *Volkerpsychologie*, the concept of taboo would express precisely the originary indistinction of sacred and impure that is said to characterize the most archaic period of human history, constituting that mixture of veneration and horror described by Wundt-with a formula that was to enjoy great success-as "sacred horror." According to Wundt, it was therefore only in a later period, when the most ancient powers were replaced by the gods, that the originary ambivalence gave way to the opposition of the sacred and the impure.

In 1912, Mauss's uncle, Emile Durkheim, published his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, in which an entire chapter is devoted to "the ambiguity of the notion of the sacred." Here he classifies the "religious forces" as two opposite categories, the auspicious and the inauspicious:

> To be sure, the sentiments provoked by the one and the other are not identical: disgust and horror are one thing and respect another. Nonetheless, for actions to be the same in both cases, the feelings expressed must nor be different in kind. In fact, there actually is a certain horror in religious respect, especially when it is very intense; and the fear inspired by malignant powers is not without a certain reverential quality. . . The pure and the impure are therefore not two separate genera, but rather two varieties of the same genus that includes sacred things. There are two kinds of sacred things, the auspicious and the inauspicious. Not only is there no clear border between these two opposite kinds, but the same object can pass from one to the other without changing nature. The impure is made from the pure, and vice versa. The ambiguity of the sacred consists in the possibility of this transmutation. (*Les formes elimentaires,* pp. 446-48)

What is at work here is the psychologization of religious experience (the "disgust" and "horror" by which the cultured European bourgeoisie betrays its own unease before the religious fact), which will find its final form in Rudolph Otto's work on the sacred. Here, in a concept of the sacred that completely coincides with the concept of the obscure and the impenetrable, a theology that had lost all experience of the revealed word celebrated its union with a philosophy that had abandoned all sobriety in the face of feeling. That the religious belongs entirely to the sphere of psychological emotion, that it essentially has to do with shivers and goose bumps this is the triviality that the neologism "numinous" had to dress up as science.

Further Reading Suggestions

Recommended Secondary Literature:

* Freud, S. *Totem and Taboo* (1913)

* Gregory, J. *A Companion to Greek Tragedy* (2005)

* MacIntyre, A. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1981)

* Seaford, R. *Tragedy, Ritual and Money in Ancient Greece* (2018)

* Segal, C. *Sophocles Tragic World: Divinity, Nature and Society* (1995)

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Happy reading.

About Me : Jonathan Gallagher

I received my doctorate in 2019 from the University of Edinburgh, where I taught several undergraduate courses, ranging from medieval and early modern literature, to Romantic, Modernist and Late-Modernist poetry and drama. My doctoral research examined the relationship between processes of state-formation in early modern England and the spectacular flourishing of religious poetry witnessed during the same period. This work has been published by leading academic journals in my field, and tries to show that religious poetry was vitally and critically responsive to broad changes in social relations and practices of rule in 17C England.

In my teaching, as in my research, I'm drawn to examining intellectual history and literary art in the context of given social and political conditions. With that in mind, in 2022, I founded Notes to Literature. My hope is that Notes will grow into a distinguished provider of personalised adult education in the humanities. The plan is to go about this one client at a time.

You can learn more about Notes and me here: https://www.notestoliterature.com/my-work

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