

Subject, Dialogue and Transcendence in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*

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Abstract

This paper approaches the existential journey of the subject — Oedipus — from negation to affirmation, from darkness toward light. It will explore the dialogues in the play, and how transcendence is achieved at the moment of the subject's death.

Este trabajo se centra en el momento existencial de la decisión o la escogencia, donde los sujetos —Antígona y Nora— toman conciencia de su ser en el mundo, y donde su situación social se opone a la expresión de su “ser más profundo”. Para el análisis se tomará en cuenta la distinción de la semiótica existencial entre el ser (Self) y el ser profundo (Moi).

Oedipus at Colonus takes up the question that *Oedipus Rex* had raised implicitly, regarding whether or not Oedipus is responsible for his actions, whether or not he is guilty. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, the readers or spectators find an old and weak Oedipus, who after a long journey as a wanderer and exile arrives, with the aid of his daughter Antigone, to an unknown «place» in a new land. He arrives at a place which is symbolic: it is a mythical place; concrete, qualitatively present, with borders. Although he knows not the place and can not see it, for lack of sight, Oedipus senses it is the one the oracles had long ago foretold.

In the earlier play, the god Apollo through the prophecies of the oracle at Delphi had told the young Oedipus, as we know, that he would kill his father and marry then his mother, from whom he would bring disgraceful offspring into this world. But the oracle had also prophesied that he would end his life in glory. The oracle had told Oedipus that he would find a place where he would rest in peace. The journey of the subject towards affirmation that we may only guess in the previous play, comes here into full completion.

Oedipus at Colonus reveals a gamut of emotional states or «attunements»^[1] and strong passions that are interwoven between its main characters. We find hatred and anger that intensifies into fury; we find love but also indifference. The play could be read as a «revenge play.» Both inner modalities of ‘will’ and ‘can’ and also the exomodality of ‘must’, fuse together in the aim of fulfilling revenge. Furthermore, these modalities fuse with *metamodalities* for the same purpose, since the Apollonian ‘will’, as told by the oracle advises revenge.^[2] So the fulfilment of revenge in this play is also a transcendental ‘must’.

Love appears as filial love between Oedipus and his daughters, Antigone and Ismene, which leads them to fulfil their filial duties of attending old aged parents, as was a ‘must’ in Ancient Greek society. The same cannot be said of Oedipus’ sons, Eteocles and Polynices who abandon filial duties, showing themselves indifferent to their father’s sufferings. In *Oedipus at Colonus* we find also the thirst for power in Oedipus’ sons. They want power no matter the means to obtain it. Their lack of care and ambition for power provoke Oedipus’ terrible curses. So, in this one play one could see reunited the Shakespearean plays of *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*.

Nevertheless, unity of time, space, and action; the Aristotelian principles, apply here. We contend that what is central in this play is its transcendental dimension. The journey of the subject towards transcendence, through ‘affirmation’, is the thread conductor that weaves the theatrical piece together.

COLONUS: THE PLACE WHERE SIGNS LEAD AND ENDS MEET

Oedipus at Colonus begins with the appearance on stage of the wandering Oedipus, now an old and blind man in filthy rags who is led on the way by his young daughter Antigone. From

[1] «Attunement» is the translation into English, by Joan Stambaugh, of Martin Heidegger’s existential «Befindlichkeit.»

[2] Regarding the existential semiotic concept of *metamodalities* and *transcendence* see Tarasti, Eero (2000).

the viewpoint of the existential semiotic categories of 'being-in-itself', Oedipus has suffered a socially degrading transformation of state: from being a King of Thebes to being a wandering beggar. Nonetheless, from the viewpoint of the inner category of 'being-for-myself' Oedipus is still in conjunction with 'nobility' and the long years of suffering have taught him 'acceptance'.

Since he was expelled from Thebes against his will, he has been uprooted from his culture and society as an exile, a movement which has a spatial and a temporal dimension. The Narrative Program related to the spatial dimension is to find a place long ago foretold by the oracles that would be Oedipus' haven, a place where he would finally rest in peace, but also a place which is sacred for the inhabitants of Colonus; a mythical place of «power». In this sense the play seems to start at the end, since at the very beginning of *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus arrives to the sought for place from where he is decided not to move as long as the play lasts. It seems that the subject is conjuncted euphorically with the object of his search. So, Colonus, and more specifically the place near the sacred grove, is more than the 'setting' of a story; it is a place significant in itself where the main character Oedipus will suffer transformations of state. No great actions occur in this place while the play lasts. Most of the actions related to the battlefield occur outside its borders and are narrated by the chorus and by some of the main characters.

The place found by Oedipus allows him to acquire 'inner vision' to understand himself and the others; it is where prophetic vision of the past will meet, in the memory of the subject, with prophetic visions of the future. It was an imaginary place to be found in the future which becomes present when Oedipus finds it, but it is also a place where important battles will take place in the future, as Oedipus, himself as clairvoyant, foretells. Colonus then is the longed for place from where Oedipus does not desire to be moved. It is a center of attraction, to which and from which, all the other characters move. It is a place charged with energy, where modalities and metamodalities are in action. It is the place where the main character will be 'revealed' in a process of *anagnorisis*.

So Oedipus' Narrative Program with respect to spatialization, as regards his physical mobility, comes to an end with the finding of the place at Colonus. But his movement as a subject does not stop there.

Regarding the temporal dimension in its horizontal movement Oedipus will meet his end in that place; he will die and his body, transformed into an object of value and power will fulfill his 'will' of revenge, which is also Apollo's 'will'. When Oedipus finds out, through his daughter Ismene, that Creon and his son's intentions to take him back to Thebes is not really to welcome him back, as one of them, and bury him in Theban soil, but to bury him outside Theban borders — to keep him at a distance so that he will not become a menace to them — Oedipus is enraged and decides to take revenge. But the complete fulfillment of revenge is to take place in the future, after Oedipus' death.

Colonus then is a place where transformations of state occur. It is a place where narrative programs meet, both euphorical and disphorical. It is a place where the human being and the gods meet, where the borders between the 'dasein' and the 'transcendent' are blurred and dissolve into transparency in the heroic subject who faces his death in anticipation.

THE SUBJECT' IDENTITY: ANAGNORISIS

In *Oedipus Rex*, the young Oedipus reveals himself guilty. In his obstinate search for the truth, he finds he is the criminal he was searching for. It is the same obstinacy that we find in the old Oedipus when he asks for the name of the place that he has arrived at. In a dialogue between the citizen of Colonus and Oedipus, the name of the place is not given immediately; the revelation of the place occurs progressively.

Oedipus cannot 'see' where he is but Antigone tells him they are near the city of Athens, although she does not recognize exactly where they are. Oedipus insists he wants to know the name of the place where he has sat to rest. When he is ordered by a dweller to stand up and leave the place because it is holy ground, Oedipus is more excited and obstinate in not leaving the place before he learns its name and the name of the Gods that are worshipped there. When at last the terrible name is revealed; that the place is inhabited by the Eumenides, daughters of earth and of the Darkness, Oedipus knows he has found the place told long ago by the Oracle, he answers energetically that he will never leave that place. All the signs lead to Oedipus' revelation of the place; he has found 'his' place, and with it a transformation occurs in Oedipus' 'inner' self or 'Moi'.

His blindness develops into 'inner vision', his lack is filled with the power to 'give'. He has brought a 'gift' to be offered to the Athenian king. When he asks for a messenger to be sent to the king telling him that «with a small service he may gain a great deal» (1984:288) the citizen of Colonus answers disdainfully: «what is to be gained from a man who cannot see?» (idem.) Oedipus affirms that there will be «great vision in every word he says»... (idem.) So Oedipus is self-conscious of his power, he seems to grow in power from the mythical place.

Instead of summoning the king, the citizen considers he must first summon the people of Colonus so that they may decide whether Oedipus may stay or rather move on. The citizen recognizes Oedipus' being of noble blood. When Oedipus is left alone he addresses the terrible goddesses of the place in a long dialogic monologue: he begs them not to be harsh with Apollo or his own self. Oedipus traces back his memory to Apollo's prophecies of doom but also to the promise of finding a place where he would rest in peace. There his life would end and he would be a blessing to his hosts while disaster to those who drove him out.

Oedipus is led by Apollo, the god of light and also of revenge into individualization. The Apollonian vision deepens into prophetic vision where the subject discovers himself and the others; where past, present and future come together. In the subject's desire to leap into 'affirmation' he addresses the goddesses and asks them to grant his life, as Apollo's voice had foretold, some final passage, some great consummation at the end. The voices from the chorus, old citizens of Colonus appear searching for Oedipus, and a dialogic interaction ensues where they cruelly ask Oedipus to reveal his identity. Without pity they make Oedipus tell of his guilt. They want to hear from him once more the horrible story. So, Oedipus' identity, as seen by the others, is confounded with his guilty actions in the past: He is the 'guilty' one.

After the confrontation with the chorus, Ismene, Oedipus' other daughter has arrived to tell him the new prophecies told by the Oracle: the Thebans will want him dead or alive because they need him for their survival. Oedipus says: «what good could anyone get from the like of

me?» and Ismene answers: «They are in your hands, the oracle says, their power rests in you» (op. cit.:306). Oedipus then answers: «So, when I am nothing — then am I a man?» (Idem.). The answer is: «Yes! The gods are about to raise you to your feet — till now they were bent on your destruction»(Idem.). So, from this moment starts the turn of events: the reversal of fate, the leap of the subject into 'affirmation' by action of the gods.

Oedipus is enraged to hear from Ismene that upon his death the Thebans would not cover his corpse with Theban dust; that is to say, they will not accept the guilty one as part of them.

As happens in the dialogue with the chorus, in the angry dialogue with Creon (see op. cit.: 328-332), who comes to take him back to Thebes, Oedipus defends himself of his guilty actions. He killed his father in self-defense, so he is not guilty in the eyes of the law, and married his mother unknowingly, against his will. It is all the god's doing since for having served his city he received as prize the marriage with his mother. The oracles had revealed his father that his son would kill him, so the punishment is to the Theban people as a whole. By a process of self-consciousness Oedipus reveals himself innocent. He separates his actions from his 'inner' self, since he affirms he is not a criminal 'deep inside' himself.

DASEIN AND TRANSCENDENCE

Oedipus comes with a gift for the king of Athens and the gift is accepted. It is his own body. Oedipus' 'will' of revenge is transcendent, since revenge will be accomplished by means of his body, after his death.

Oedipus recognizes that the moment of his death has come, when natural signs; thunder and lightning, appear. But his death is not produced by a natural cause: he disappears in a supernatural way. This is a powerful moment of mystery and awe.

Oedipus summons the king Theseus and leads the way through the woods to the place where he is to die. Theseus, as only witness, is to keep this place secret in order to preserve its power. Oedipus needs no help to lead the way, as if the gods had given him back his eyes, he says: «I stand revealed at last, look a strange new role» (op.cit.: 376).

When he is doing the preparatory rituals for death his emotions and love for his daughters still attach him to Dasein but the Gods speak to him from the transcendent dimension, telling him not to delay. The horizontal temporal movement leads the subject towards the unavoidable death, but through the vertical temporal movement of self-consciousness, the subject in anticipation of death, 'leaps' into transcendence by affirmation, in honor and glory, fulfilling his will of revenge that is also Apollo's will.

The will of revenge is tied to his Dasein through the mediation of his body. The passion of revenge will be accomplished as an action in the future. Oedipus says: «some far-off day when my dead body, slumbering, buried cold in death, will drain their hot blood down, if Zeus is still Zeus and Apollo the son of God speaks clear and true» (op.cit.: 322).

The will of vengeance will be completed, and thus, justice restored when Oedipus satiates his thirst of revenge with the blood of his enemies' defeat at the spot of his secret burial ground.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As a contrast with Christian tradition revenge was well seen in Ancient Greek society and the God Apollo was its transcendent entity. So vengeance was an ethical value in that society and Dasein, with regards to this particular play. Each passion has its own rhythm and the time of vengeance is a long and slow one. The tragic hero is revealed in his inner self as innocent. The guilt acts upon his own people who will be defeated at battle by the will of revenge.

This play seems to be a reversal of the earlier play *Oedipus rex*. It seems to teach 'acceptance' since the 'other' is not separate from 'ourselves'.

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