

**SEVERAL REMARKS ON DEATH IN GREEK TRAGEDY  
AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF MARTIN HEIDEGGER**

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***Abstract***

*The article sets out to highlight the connections that can be made between the issue of death in Greek tragedy, especially in Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound, and some of Martin Heidegger's concepts. Just as the tragic heroes are responsible without being free, because they are subject to fate or to the forces within them and therefore responsible for what they do with what has been given to them, Heidegger's Dasein has certain determinations which he cannot free himself from. Thrownness (Geworfenheit) and state-of-mind (Befindlichkeit) must be mentioned in the context of death in the tragedies since they express, on the one hand, constraint, delimitation, and on the other hand, the freedom which this constraint opens to. In his treatise On Limit, Gabriel Liiceanu writes about a matrix of mankind's borders and limitations, about mortals' unchosen and immutable 'given'. Moira and tyche in Greek, as well as fortuna and fatum in Latin have a partly similar, partly different meaning. Prometheus is the one who made mankind aware of death, who revealed to them that they are mortals without letting them know the moment of their death. Thus, knowing that he will die, man lives in the horizon of his own death. It is what Heidegger calls Sein-zum-Tode, which means being-towards-death.*

***Key-words:*** tragedy, death, Prometheus, Heidegger, Dasein, existentials

**1. *The ontological-existential 'given'***

In his book *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Greek Tragedy*, C. Fred Alford makes two lapidary statements which have determined me to research more closely the connections between tragedy and Heidegger's philosophy. The former statement is that the subconscious is the essential dimension of Being in Heidegger's philosophy and that man cannot free himself from his determinations, just as, in tragedy, man cannot firmly separate himself from that hostile world and that ultimate hostile reality which lies not only outside, but also within himself <sup>2</sup>. The latter statement is based on Prometheus'

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<sup>2</sup> Alford thinks that tragedy shows what it is like to live as a human in a world in which man himself is often an enemy of his own humanity, and that the humane anti-humanism of the Greek tragedians is the only attitude compatible with the truths of the psychoanalysis, as man's duty is to build a humane world against the anti-humanism of the gods.

speech from Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, in which the Titan mentions that he is the one who made mankind aware that they are mortal, but kept secret the moment of their death. Alford sees here no connection with Heidegger or with any other author, coming down to this seemingly simple remark, which yet proves to have manifold meanings and a huge literary and philosophic potential.

### 1.1 *Thrownness (Geworfenheit) and state-of-mind (Befindlichkeit)*

Regarding these determinations that man cannot free himself from (which does not mean that they have any negative connotations or that man would necessarily try to free himself from them), my discourse will not take place on a psychological level, but on an ontological-existential one. The latter level is prior to the former and makes it possible, just as it is prior to all the other levels and makes all the others possible. The above mentioned determinations are the object of Heidegger's best known and most important work, *Being and Time (Sein und Zeit)*. He calls these concepts "existentials", and the most relevant for this study are *thrownness (Geworfenheit)* and *state-of-mind (Befindlichkeit)*. Similarly purposeful and rich in significance is Gabriel Liiceanu's *intimate-foreign background*, which he speaks of in his treatise *On Limit*.

As a possibility of his existence in the world and as a 'given' of this existence, Heidegger's *Dasein* is already determined by having a mood (the *Da-sein*, or the *Being-there*, is the human being as the privileged place where Being opens itself in its 'immediateness'). In other words, there is no initial neutral approach to the world, but any opening of the *Dasein* towards the world and even his primary and most specific way of being in the world are "colored" emotionally. In Heidegger's peculiar words: "The state-of-mind opens the *Dasein* as he is in his thrownness and in his state of dependence upon the world which already opens itself every time together with his being." (Heidegger, 2003: 191)

Any understanding implies, therefore, a state-of-mind. Both *thrownness* and *state-of-mind* are fundamental existential modes, the latter being the originary determination of mood, the one that makes possible any mood, any feeling, any humour. Hence, the *Dasein* cannot be but emotionally situated, as he is endowed with that primordial openness which makes any emotion possible. The *state-of-mind* predetermines our entire network of relations with the world, our emotional reference to all that is around.

*Thrownness* is that core structure of the *Dasein's* constitution which expresses precisely his preassigned condition, the fact that he never masters his most specific being, which is, instead, given to him. *State-of-mind* is grounded in *thrownness*, the mood representing the way in which I am, every time, the thrown entity. It has been said about thrownness that it represents the arbitrary of the human existence, with all its frustrations, pains and exigencies which we do not choose ourselves, like kinship, duties, social conventions, a matrix which we did not opt for, but which is not entirely compelling, as it includes our portion of freedom (Dahlstrom, 2013: 212). In the same way, the tragedy heroes are responsible without being free: they are responsible for what they do with what has been given to them.

### 1.2 *The "intimate-foreign background"; the Greek and Latin sense of predestination*

Speaking about *the intimate-foreign background*, Gabriel Liiceanu defines it as our unalterable given, in whose composition are included, first of all, being, conscience and finitude, to which one must add the epoch one lives in, his/her bodily and spiritual dowry, the race, the gender, the birth place, the ancestry, the mother tongue, the religion and the caste. All these precede our choice, but along with them we are also inevitably given our freedom, which in turn is only possible together with the limits that have been preordained to us. This idea is expressed in a different but similar way by *μοῖρα (moira)* and *τύχη (tyche)* in Greek and by *fortuna* and *fatum* in Latin. *Moira* sometimes means allotment, part or rank, but it usually has a dynamic meaning, of fate, destiny or death; it is the same

with *tyche*, which means contingency, luck, destiny or grief. The first meaning of *fortuna* is chance or luck, and only the second is fortune or social condition; *fatum* means prediction, oracle (>lat. for, fari, fatus sum = to say, to utter; the Parcae are also named Fates (lat. Fatae), namely the oracles, the ones who foretell), and also destiny, doom, catastrophe and death. There is also δαίμων (*daimon*), meaning guardian spirit or, on the contrary, maleficent genius, but also fate or death, as well as ἦθος (*ethos*), which means mood, character, habit, temper. Hence, we encounter on the one hand the statical meaning, the one of allotment, part, rank, fortune, social condition, which is 'the given', corresponding to *the intimate-foreign background*, and on the other hand the dynamic meaning, much more frequent, of happening, destiny, trouble, therefore an action rather than a feature, something given as an event, something that is doomed to take place, the lifespan, the thread of life generated by the Moirai/Parcae, the fate in its development, while the intimate-foreign background designates precisely what does *not* change, one's immutable existential dowry, received once and for all. We can say that the course of one's life is immutable as well, it is also a kind of 'given', but not from one's point of view. In one's eyes, it is unknown, changing and surprising, compared to the intimate-foreign background which is well known and stable, cannot be renewed, does not make surprises but is part of one's constitution right from the start. It is intimate as it belongs to you only and fundamentally, comprising the primary determinations which make up your being, but it is foreign as it is not the result of your choice and you have no say in it.

## 2. *Prometheus and being-towards-death (Sein-zum-Tode)*

Prometheus is the hero which brings to mankind the awareness of their death, but not of the moment of their death. If they did not know they are mortals, humans would not be above beasts. They would be like the ants Prometheus likens them to before giving them wits (*Prometheus Bound*, 450). On the other hand, if he knew exactly when he would die, he would be too scared by the on-coming of death. Fear would paralyze him and he could not accomplish anything that would make his life meaningful. Since we do not know the moment, the end itself, albeit certain, becomes relative. Prometheus offers man a mix of knowledge and ignorance which turns death, from a fall in vacuum, into a boundary which gives life a meaning. I cannot but mention here, again, Martin Heidegger's philosophy, as the foregoing idea accounts for the core of his foremost book, an idea particularly reflected in the concept *being-towards-death (Sein-zum-Tode)*. We could be tempted to say that Heidegger, as a connoisseur of the Greek culture, probably found in Prometheus' myth a fertile source of inspiration, but he does not go back so far when tracing the route of this idea.

Heidegger's Dasein is, in its very essence, *potentiality-for-being*. He "anticipates", he is always engaged in the dynamics of temporality, he is always ahead of himself (Heidegger, 2003: 616-620). He faces death as a *possibility* which ceaselessly radiates backwards upon every moment of his life, as the horizon he lives in. He is *towards-the-end*, always referring to the end, and only in this way he is what he is: the Dasein is never *at* the end, as an object or as an animal, but *towards* the end, living his finitude as a possibility, and it is precisely this fact of *being-towards-the-end* in this specifically human way that Prometheus offered to man, thus molding him in his condition. A man's life is not a simple series of data, but its entirety, which results from placing him in the horizon of death, of the possibility of 'ceasing to be'. The fact that he might die at any moment determines his behavior, his concerns, his choices and decisions, his intentions and actions:

*By anticipating, the Dasein becomes free for his possibilities which are dictated to him as coming from the end. He becomes an authentic existence by being ahead towards death as a possibility of the impossibility of his existence. The Dasein assumes himself and his possibilities of being by starting from the possibility of his 'ceasing to be'. (ibidem: 618)*

Looking at *The First Letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians*, the German philosopher shows that this placing of the Dasein in the anticipation of death has a theological spring: in the center of the Christian life lies the expectation of *the return of the Lord*, called παρουσία (*parousia*), which

determines and molds in retrospect, from the future to the time of day, each moment of such a life. It is an expectation whose fulfillment will come without fail, in a moment we do not know, which molds the entire behavior of the believers. Speaking about His second advent, Saint Paul the Apostle does not say when exactly it will happen, but we know that it gives us 'a state of wakefulness', a concern due to which death does not come as a surprise anymore. Those who find their peace and safety in this world and do not know the restlessness of this expectation live in the dark, will have a sudden death, which they have not prepared themselves for, and therefore will not be redeemed. This is the source of the existential analysis of death which Heidegger makes in *Being and Time* and the source of his idea that the specifically human life is only that which is built in the anticipative horizon of death. The present is permanently built by keeping a close watch on and being aware of the end.

Coming back to Prometheus, he is the one who puts man in the condition of the Dasein: man can be conceived of as being ignorant of his death, as it had been before Prometheus, or on the contrary, he can be imagined to be even knowledgeable of the moment of his death, while the Dasein is necessarily *towards* death.

When the chorus asks Prometheus:

*Speak and tell us in great detail:  
Why has Zeus punished you  
so terribly and humiliatingly? (195-198)*

he answers:

*I dared to free the mortals  
from descending to gloomy Hades thunderstruck. (237-238)  
(which means that before they had not known that they would die)*

.....  
*I stopped the mortals from seeing their fate. (250)  
(He did not let them know when they would die)*

.....  
*I sowed the blind hopes in their soul. (252)*

Hope was considered evil by the Greeks, and it was mixed with the other evils in Pandora's box, as it appears in Hesiod's *Theogony*. Pindar did not see it in a positive light either. As far as hope is concerned, Prometheus appears in Aeschylus' play as a Christian *avant la lettre*. Just as Prometheus is the first to have placed man in the purposeful and meaning-giving horizon of death, prefiguring the expectation of the *parousia* referred to by Saint Paul the Apostle and turned into concept by Heidegger, in the same way Hope as we understand it nowadays, as a privileged state, as a virtue and a gift from God, brought to mankind for the first time by Jesus, had been offered to humans for the first time, in myth, by Prometheus, whose mercy and love for people brought him terrible pain. In these respects, and keeping the due proportions, we might say that the Greek myth had anticipated the Christian religion, which was then capitalized on by philosophy: mythology, religion and philosophy – a continuum which springs from the primary intuition of man's relationship with death and fulfills itself in the way he exists on Earth.

### **3. Conclusions:**

*Thrownness* and *state-of-mind* must be mentioned when speaking about death in Greek tragedy as they express both constraint, delimitation, boundary, and the freedom which they open to. *State-of-mind* precedes any relationship of the Dasein with the world. Any such relationship bears the imprint of a state, of a preassigned disposition, being emotionally 'colored'. Any particular human feeling takes root in this inherent availability for affect, in this primordial openness to the world. *Thrownness* expresses nothing else than the predetermined condition of the Dasein, the fact that he lives in the

world pre-conditioned by certain structures. The Dasein is *thrown* in the world with a certain state-of-mind. In his treatise *On Limit*, G. Liiceanu speaks about a matrix of our delimitations, about our immutable 'given', which includes the determinations we are born with and we can neither choose, nor change. Only on this ground can the freedom we are given together with this dowry unfold. The Greek and Latin terms which express this idea have a mostly dynamic meaning, that of fate, happening, calamity, therefore designating an action, an event, the lifespan, the thread of life, unlike the intimate-foreign background, which expresses a characteristic and is rather statical, unchangeable and well known.

In the Greek tragedy there is a hero whose deeds remind us again of Heidegger's philosophy: the Titan Prometheus. Knowing from the Titan that he will die, man lives in the anticipation of his own end (it is what Heidegger calls Sein-zum-Tode), which reflects backwards on his entire life, on all of his actions, on all he decides and accomplishes. Man does not live as if he were immortal, or as if he did not know he would die. On the contrary, he lives under the power of this final moment which thus becomes paramount in his existence: the end that sheds light, in retrospect, upon the entire path and gives a meaning both to the whole and to each step which is a part of it. Man does not know *when* he will die, but as he lives projectively, death is for him a permanent possibility, which opens, from the future to the present, towards all his other possibilities. Prometheus puts man in the condition of the Dasein: we can think of a human being that does not know he/she will die, as was man before Prometheus, or of one that knows even *when* he/she will die, but this is not Heidegger's Dasein. The Dasein is necessarily *towards* death.

Saint Paul the Apostle had shown that the center of the Christian life is the expectation of Christ's second advent, *parousia*, and this is the source that Heidegger claims for his idea when he places his Dasein in the horizon of death: every moment of a Christian life takes place in the contemplation of this advent and is determined by it. It will happen for sure, but we do not know when, and therefore those who are waiting for it are always prepared for death. We cannot but remember that in Plato's times philosophy was named "a preparation for death".

The same Prometheus is the one who taught humans to hope. Although "blind" (τυφλή), considered rather evil by the Greeks, hope will be brought to mankind as a divine gift by Jesus (in a very different way), together with love and faith. Saint Paul is also the one who speaks about them in his *Epistles*. In this Christian framework, hope means first of all the hope of redemption, but also the hope for the better, for the victory of the good. Due to his love for humans, for whom he suffered so much, Prometheus is also, in myth, the one who brought hope into their souls, appearing to us in this respect as a first Christian on the rich and diverse canvas of Greek mythology. Making mankind aware of death, which gives life, from the future backwards to the time of day, its human-specific significance, different for each individual (or rather its human-specific 'meanings', depending on the choices we make with each step in the anticipation of death), Prometheus announces the Christian *parousia*, which will give birth, later on, to Heidegger's concept.

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