

Contemporary “Suppliants” and the Loss of Tragic Sensibility

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Abstract

Disturbing but familiar current events, such as the disastrous results of the pandemic, the sobering threat of climate change, the continuing presence of racial and economic disparity, the audacity of autocratic rulers, the increase of populism, the return to censorship, the violation of human rights and now the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the biggest military mobilization in Europe since World War II, are priming citizens for the emergence of a new world order. Clearly, no one can know for sure what a Day After would look like.

Against such a backdrop, we cannot predict what kind of dramatic texts will prevail, or whether or not the classics might even be of help. We may therefore ask whether or not tragic writings still have the power to inspire as they inspired millions of people immediately following WWII, whether or not they can help heal the scars and trauma of suffering in contemporary cities, whether or not tragic drama is mightier than the sword, and most importantly, whether or not the actual tragedy of daily experience in conflict zones bears any relation to an aesthetic interpretation of tragedy as a creative form of expression. This paper argues that tragedy as an art form, can still aptly express the shattering experience of pain and loss suffered by entire communities of people around the world.

Keywords: refugees, tragedy, Ukraine, Aeschylus, Milo Rau, Charles Mee

The course of human history carries the visible footprints of millions of people who, for various reasons, have found themselves displaced. There is no phase in the human trajectory that does not carry stories of all these *other* people. The most recent cause of displacement, the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the biggest military mobilization in Europe since the Second World War, has exacted a devastating humanitarian toll and claimed thousands of lives. To this day (June 2022) close to ten million people have been forced into exile, the fastest growing refugee crisis of the last sixty years.

It seems that the world has returned to a bygone era, experienced at the time as the destabilizing years of the Cold War. No one can tell with any certainty what the Day After might look like. The disastrous results of the pandemic, the sobering reality of climate change, the stubborn presence of racial and economic disparities, the callous decisions of autocratic rulers, the increase of populism, the return to censorship and the violation of human rights, and now Vladimir Putin’s megalomaniac obsessions, all these indicate that

a New World is in the making, and it most certainly will not be an improved world. Many challenges, obstacles and problems must be overcome before we can begin to conceptualize a better and more equitable world.



Oedipus at Colonus, painting by Jean-Antoine-Théodore Giroust. Photo: [Web/Wikipedia](https://www.wikipedia.org). Dallas Museum of Art. Accessed 18 June 2022

Likewise, it is too early to know what kind of drama will emerge from contemporary modes of thought and lifestyle. What is certain is that dramatic performance will continue to express the suffering of such shocking experience, the pain, the loss and the trauma. Theatre, as a force of social justice and ethical deliberation, has always drawn inspiration from the dark side of life, particularly from its tragedies, combining real and fictive narratives, public and personal, national and international.



“Great Ludovisi,” an ancient Roman sarcophagus dating around 250–60 A.D., showing the battle between Roman soldiers and Germans. Within a few short years, 200,000 Goths were forced to exile. Photo: Web/Wikipedia. Collection, Museo nazionale romano de palazzo Altemps. Photographer Jastrow (2006). Accessed 19 June 2022

Theatre has always operated in liminal zones which make visible the physicality of emotions. Key examples include Hamlet and Lear in William Shakespeare, Karl Moor in Friedrich Schiller’s *Robbers*, Grusha in Bertolt Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, the Armenian immigrant family in Richard Kalinowski’s *Beast on the Moon*, the old lady in Friedrich Durrenmatt’s *The Visit*, not to mention numerous figures from classical Greek theatre, such as Oedipus, Medea, Iphigenia, Hecuba, Andromache, Cassandra, Philoktetes, Ajax, the Persians and the Trojan women, among others. All these *dramatis personae* of war, exile, suffering and political intrigue address their sense of disconnection, displacement, trauma and betrayal. Their liminal experiences are a critical appraisal of life and its sites of violence and upheaval.

I will not review what is by now well-known and better said by others, except to note the obvious. In order understand the pain and agony of the millions of people currently fleeing or having fled to save their lives, to grasp more fully the meaning of their ordeal, we also have to understand the importance of belonging, of being integrated within a greater community in which everyone has a place to call their own. In ancient Athens, for example, seeking shelter was both a religious and a moral quest. The person in exile won the sympathy of Zeus Hikesios, *Lord of Suppliants*, a god interested in people who were exiled or in flight, people who, for various reasons, did not belong to a place. The exile/refugee was also protected by the institution of *filoxenia* (hospitality), which presupposed mutual respect between the host and the visitor and functioned as a type of moral bond. Yet, the entire procedure was a serious and complicated test that frequently involved issues of public and international law, individual rights and justice.^[1]



John William *Waterhouse's* preraphaelite interpretation of Danaides (1903). Private collection. Photo: [Wikimedia commons](#). Accessed 19 June 2022

Rulers faced the dilemma of choosing between religious obligations and civic duties. That is, they protected foreign citizens, but at the same time they were required to protect the host city; hence, offering asylum was not an unconditional act. This idea was beautifully dramatized by Aeschylus in *The Suppliants*, the oldest extant text in the history of drama, possibly dated as far back as 463 B.C. *The Suppliants* is the first part of an incomplete trilogy; the other two parts were *Aegyptii* and *Danaides*,^[2] the latter of which has been analyzed as a transition between original lyric dithyramp and dramatic tragedy.

The Suppliants is the first play written to address the shift of political power from the traditional Areopagus Council to the Council of 500, the assembly and the law courts, “that is, to bodies that represented the *demos* as a whole,” as Boedeker and Raaflaub explain. As they note, “Subsequent reforms further facilitated popular participation in politics, and simultaneously made citizenship more exclusive” (115).

Using the story of the fifty virginal Danaids who avoid unwanted marriages by fleeing to Egypt and seeking refuge in Argos, the homeland of their ancestress Io, Aeschylus reveals his concern for the exercise of power. In particular, the play poses a series of questions about the wielding of power; for example, does power reside in the legal domain or among the citizens, and is it acquired through mutual accord, persuasion [*petho*], domination, brutal violence, or perhaps by marriage (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet

15)? Furthermore, the play leads participants to ask to what extent do people speak truthfully when they tell the King (*anax*) that he is “the State,” the “unquestioned ruler” that fears “no vote” (l. 72–74), and it also explores how reason figures in decision-making and leadership.

According to Burian, pressure applied on King Pelasgus by the suppliants transforms an otherwise “proud autocrat to a constitutional monarch.” From “assertions of almost unlimited power” there is a progression “to a recognition of the limitations on its exercise.” As a king, Pelasgus may wield considerable power, yet he is unwilling to exercise power without popular consent (204).

To my knowledge, this is the first textual reference to a “popular government,” to people as the rulers of the *polis*. The motivating principle is that those affected by the decision should also decide what is to be done: “If the city as a whole is defiled, let the people work out a cure together” (l. 365–66). And the community, who is clearly involved, unanimously decides in favor of the suppliants (l. 605–24). The asylum establishes holy bonds between the benefactor and the suppliant; it binds both sides for generations to come.

This reference is one of the most serious statements from ancient times about a shared feeling of justice and humanism in the political domain. Pelasgus’ hesitation is not a sign of weakness but “rather of swift . . . comprehension of the need to decide between dreadful evils.” He knows very well how far he can go.^[3] His dilemma is the dilemma of a statesman. According to Boedeker and Raaflaub, in “a time of rapid and fundamental social and economic change, when distinctions between citizens and non-citizens became blurred in many spheres, it seemed all the more important to emphasize the citizens’ share in political power, government, and responsibility” (116).

Aeschylus, with great finesse and dexterity, updates the myth so that citizens and their rulers accept the myth as their own and thus develop a sense of their civic and political responsibilities. Clearly, nothing in the way Aeschylus treats the myth is morally or ethically one-sided, even within the limits of a play. Since the time of the play, many aspects of social and political life have changed; however, the need to belong, a basic human drive, has not.

The Suppliants of Our Times

Whereas the movement of people across borders for commerce, study, recreation or family has become part of the routine fabric of life for modern citizens, the unprecedented wave of immigrants, mainly war refugees and asylum seekers has recently become highly problematic, both politically and ethically, and calls into question the role of border crossing in general.

According to the Geneva Convention on Refugees, a refugee is a person who

. . . is outside their country of citizenship because they have well-founded grounds for fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, and is unable to obtain sanctuary from their home country or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country; or in the case of not having a nationality and being outside their country of former habitual residence as a result of such event, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to their country of former habitual residence. Such a person may be called an “asylum seeker” until considered with the status of ‘refugee’ by the Contracting State where they formally make a claim for sanctuary or right of asylum.

“Refugee”

As of the end of 2021, the UNHCR reported 89.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide (www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html). Over two thirds of these people were from Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, Iraq, South Sudan, Myanmar and, more recently, Ukraine; the number continues to accelerate rapidly and represents the worst political, social and cultural upheaval since WWII. “We are witnessing a paradigm change, an unchecked slide into an era in which the scale of global forced displacement as well as the response required is now clearly dwarfing anything seen before,” noted UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres. “It is terrifying that on the one hand there is more and more impunity for those starting conflicts, and on the other there is seeming utter inability of the international community to work together to stop wars and build and preserve peace.”

Forced displacement is no longer a temporary phenomenon as it has become increasingly protracted. Displacement can last for an average of 20 years for refugees; finding lasting solutions for the forcibly displaced is a challenge. The millions of largely undocumented people in search of a new home have stories to tell and voices to be heard and the theatre is the natural place to host them. Theatre is a place of inclusion, of connecting and sharing experiences and cultures; a place for self-awareness, empowerment and dialogue. At times, theatre can be mightier than the sword, and has always been so.

That being said, contemporary artists want to explore such stories of suffering and loss and to use their art as a tool for shattering false myths. Some artists turn to community theatre that centers on the principle that individual life-experiences have a relevance to the rest of society; others turn to participatory theatre, to devised theatre, to site specific or documentary theatre; that is, to forms with the unique quality of clarifying a connection between audience and performers, between host communities and new arrivals, of promoting understanding, appreciation and improving integration and community cohesion. The shared goal is to promote understanding between peoples of different faiths and cultures.



Aerial view of Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan, July 18, 2013. Photo: Web/[Wikipedia](#)

Just like Athenian playwrights who used old myths to teach their contemporaries about complex issues that affected their life, many of today's artists also use similar stories in order to move and enlighten us, to awaken dormant feelings about humanity, about ourselves and others. In 2002, Greek director Yiannis Margaritis, for example, directed an intertextual version of Euripides' *The Trojan Women—The Long Journey*, drawing inspiration from the Balkan's conflict zones, with particular emphasis on the persecution of women of Pontic Greek ethnic background. To emphasize the panhuman character of his vision, the director collaborated with artists of Balkan origins, including Romanian-born set designer Carmencita Brosbogiou, Croatian musician Zlatan Claritz and Sergio Gaka for lyrics (for more, see Konomi 292). The same play was also staged in Cyprus twice, in 1982 and 2003, to depict the invasion of the island by Turkey in 1974, the occupation of 38% of its land and the displacement of well over 200,000 people, the largest ever number of refugees compared to the population of the island.

In 2009, director Niketi Kontouri, drawing on images and ideas from the Iraqi war, staged the same play preeminently as "a political project" (Konomi 293), incorporating documentary drama techniques in order to reinforce the play's immediate impact.

The poster of *Trojan Women* produced by the National Theatre of Northern Greece and directed by Niketi Kontouri (2009). Photo: Courtesy of the National Theatre of Northern Greece

In 2013, a group of Syrian women, all refugees living in Jordan, staged Euripides' anti-war tragedy in Amman's National Theatre. The Greek text crossed borders to meet the Arab-Islamic world and to provide the terrain for undocumented women to present their narratives of homelessness, abuse, fear and embodied violence. For them, re-enacting Euripides' *The Trojan Women* was not an intellectual exercise but felt experience. It was a vehicle to declare their presence and enact it. By expressing their desire for a space of legal existence, these women illustrated what it means to exist physically but not legally (for more on this idea, see Guterman 2014). As Maria Konomi soundly argues, this particular play has played an

important role in transcribing experiential material in performance, engaging the collective memory, and expressing facets of the post-memory of traumas of displacement and refugeehood. [It is a play] particularly prone to the ongoing debates about representational strategies and the politics of representation, as well as to wider ideological and theoretical debates about the relationship between art and reality, the critical role of stage practice and stage image, and the establishment of stage work as an ideological and cultural intervention as opposed to a strictly autonomous aesthetic creation.

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In an interview published in *PAJ* (2005), American director Peter Sellars explains why he turns to the classics:

What moves me so much about Greek theatre is the aspiration to care for and maintain democracy, which of course is where America is in serious trouble. You can make all the declarations you want, but in fact working democracy is constantly menaced, for example, by money. . . . In America, your ability to enter the public space, which has been privatized, is equivalent to your ability to pay. In Greece, democracy is a wonderful thing unless you happen to be a woman, a child, or a foreigner. Those are the people who couldn't vote and had no citizenship. Every Greek play is about women, children, and foreigners, that is voices that have been ignored in the corridors of power.

In line with this commentary, Sellars turned to Euripides' rarely performed play *The Children of Hercules* (2003) to address the problems of otherness, asylum and the rights and responsibilities of inclusion and belonging. He aimed to create the potential for a democratic public sphere where other voices could be heard, included and recognized, a space where audiences could recognize themselves as a community and, upon hearing their own voices, realize that they are not spectators but, in fact, are participants.

For Sellars, the most pressing question of the twenty-first century is how to sustain a space in which a diversity of voices resounds: "All of the questions which ask why we don't hear from certain people and from certain parts of the society," he says, "are really asking how we conceptualize and create the theatre right now. The theatre is a public space in which we are physically present. So, the creation of shared spaces across the

21st century is the primary motivating factor for me in shaping projects. . . .” For example, the *Children of Hercules* (originally performed in 430 B.C.) is the story of how Athens protected the children of Hercules when they were persecuted by Eurystheus and the Argives and driven from their homes in the Peloponnesse.^[4]

Just like *The Suppliants*, Sellar’s production of *The Children of Hercules* asks similar questions: Since the leader of the city is elected, does he also have the right to decide on the citizens’ behalf? And if so, are the citizens ready to pay the price for his decision, no matter how costly that might be? And what if they disagree with decisions made by their leader? How far will they go to protect the children? How far can they be expected to put aside their own interests for the sake of a shared humanity? To answer these questions, Sellars brings together within the same performative adventure Syrian Kurds, Turkish Kurds, Iranian Kurds and Iraqi Kurds. To my knowledge this is the first time all four groups were invited to work together on a creative project, in an attempt to create an interesting conversation within the Kurdish communities of Germany.^[5]

Banner encouraging acceptance of Ukranian refugees who cross national borderlines. Elcano Royal Institute. Photo: [Web](#). Accessed 22 June 2022. In updated figures, the UN says that, as of 21 June, more than 5.2 million refugees from Ukraine have been recorded across Europe. More than 3.2 million have applied for temporary residence: Poland: 1.180.677 Ukrainian refugees recorded, Russia: 1.305.018, Romania: 82.733, Moldova: 85.797, Slovakia: 78.972, Hungary: 25.042, Belarus: 9.006. Others have moved on to other destinations, especially those who crossed into Poland, Hungary and Slovakia. The UN says there are now more than 780.000 Ukrainians in Germany, 380.000 in the Czech republic, 145.000 in Turkey, 137.000 in Italy, 21.000 in Greece, 13.000 in Cyprus. Experts claim that there could be up to 10 million refugees by the end of this war. *BBC News*. [Web](#)

Orestes Visits Mosul

Along similar aesthetic and ideological lines, Milo Rau, after being appointed artistic director of the National Theatre of Gent, made the following statement: “The mission of theatre is no longer focused on portraying the world but on changing it; the aim is not to depict the real, but rather to make the representation itself real.” At another point in his manifesto he maintained, “At least one production of the National Theatre per season must be rehearsed in a conflict or war zone without any intervening cultural infrastructure.” His statement poses the question of whether or not the degree of aesthetic distance grows proportionally with geographic distance from the conflict zone, or whether change is limited to character and function. Does the war, or any war for that matter, imply the death of tragedy, at least for those who directly experience war compared to those who simply experience the echoes of war from afar?

Cemetery destroyed by ISIS, Qayyarah town The Mosul Distric, Northern Iraq. Photo: Mstyslav Chernov. Photo: [Web/Wikimedia commons](#). Accessed 22 June 2022

Rau chose the *remote* narrative of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* to produce in the conflict zone of Iraq; the play depicts the catastrophic consequences of an eternal cycle of violence and revenge as well as the final victory of justice, peace and reconciliation. Rau moved into the heart of a war zone when he flew with his actors and crew to Mosul, an Iraqi city

completely devastated by civil war. With the assistance of photographer Daniel Demoustier, he filmed on location scenes of extreme violence, death and loss. Justifying his decision to film in an actual war zone, he stated, “I wanted to portray what tragedy really means, where every decision is wrong, where there is no good choice” (qtd. in Rubin). Not everyone liked the show. However, irrespective of its reception and evaluation, which after all is a matter of personal taste, the production itself raised a number of interesting questions with a broad focus; for example:

1. What does it mean to create art, particularly classical art, in a war zone? Does the actual tragedy of daily experience in a conflict zone bear any relation to an aesthetic interpretation of tragedy?
2. How do theatre professionals conceptualize war as a reality after confronting directly the ruins of an actual war?
3. To what extent can a theatrical performance depict contemporary tragedy realistically and still be called theatre?
4. How can the chain of violence end? Is reconciliation as portrayed in *Oresteia* an attainable goal?
5. How can residual hatred be overcome?
6. Is artistic solidarity between Europe and Iraq (or any other nation like Iraq) possible?
7. What are the difficulties of working across cultural boundaries? As noted by one of the European actors from Rau’s company, “It feels like being a tourist, a foreigner” (Johan Leysen, Belgian screen and stage actor, qtd in Rubin); that is, a *voyeur* of otherness. For Baraa Ali, however, a 19-year-old theatre student who was cast as Iphigenia in *Oresteia*, accepting the role was a difficult decision, “My family will allow me to do it, but our society cannot accept it,” she said. “Boys are permitted to act according to our social norms, but girls are not” (qtd. in Rubin). These statements reflect the ideology of interculturalism, of cultural exchange and cultural crossing.
8. With respect to the above statement, where does meaningful and mutual cooperation end and so-called *tourism* or *cultural voyeurism* begin? How can large scale cultural difference be accommodated? For example, one part of the production that predictably caused a stir was Rau’s decision to have Orestes and Pylades, best friends in the third part of the trilogy, kiss each other on the mouth. A European actor and an Iraqi actor based in the Netherlands interpreted the roles of the two men. Some of the male Iraqi theatre students who played the Furies were uncomfortable, and some were even angry, when asked to be present for the scene. Several young actors expressed the concern that such a scene was “against [their] religion”—or would be seen by their community as tolerating overt homosexuality, which many in Iraq view as aberrant (qtd in Rubin).

These questions are not easy to address, as they all center on pressing issues of our post-tragic (or post-dramatic) times, such as war, forced displacement, immigration, statelessness, uprootedness, identity; in other words, the question of belonging.

Big Love: A Postmodern revisit of The Suppliants

A play that dramatizes correlations between the Aeschylean plot of *The Suppliants* and current social and political issues is Charles Mee's *Big Love* (2000). Those familiar with Mee's *oeuvre* know that all his plays develop, in one way or another, the motto *culture makes us first, and then we re-make culture*. Using the classical text as his springboard, Mee comments on contemporary sociocultural politics regarding the plight of international refugees and the problem of political asylum, as well as domestic violence, gender relations, selfhood, responsibility and, of course, love. He turns to characters with very different cultural, ethnic and gendered characteristics in order to show how all these predetermine their subject positions within a given discourse.

In a 2003 interview with *Open Stages* newsletter, Mee said:

I wanted to go back to what some people thought was one of the earliest plays of the Western World, which is *The Suppliant Women*, and see how that would look today. I wanted to determine if it still spoke to the moment, and of course it does. It's all about refugees and gender wars and men and women trying to find what will get them through the rubble of dysfunctional relationships, and anger and rage and heartache.

In Mee's retelling of the story, there is no transition from the state of nature to the state of law but rather from the state of law to a state of exception determined by the government. Each government establishes rules for the limits and possibilities of acceptance (or rejection), and their ruling is always decreed in the name of their perceived constituents' demands.

Big Love was written by a playwright who believes that while society is guided by a set of heterogeneous codes, it can still maintain a type of liberal autonomy to bridge the seemingly irreconcilable differences between individuals and nations and engender a sense of universal community without distinguishing between exiles and locals (for more, see Hopkins and Orr 16–17).

To quote Pelasgus' original words to the Danaids: "You're free! You're free in this city and I, with my sovereign people, are the guarantors of your freedom." Pelasgus' reassurance allows the runaway women to strengthen their presence without erasing their mark of foreignness; his attitude reflects a purely postmodern attitude.

Conclusion

Despite or because of the general critique directed against the Western canon, the classics have shown once again that they can survive the test of time. As Brown convincingly argues, "The persistence of their traged[ies] may in part be ascribed to [their] capacity to be adapted and transformed across periods and cultures, indeed to be enriched by such displacement. This robustness perhaps signals a particular bond between the workings of tragedy and the dynamic of transition." (1) "Tragedy and transition are mutual soulmates," Robert Douglas-Fairburst says (qtd. in Brown 1). The fact that most tragedies are adaptations or responses to earlier texts explains to some extent their preoccupation with the transitional in its various manifestations; by importing

the pattern of repetition into their new dramas, they produce a tragic dynamic which is most potent at moments of cultural or political upheaval, reflecting and anticipating change (Brown 2).

This practice explains why the challenge proves so attractive to those contemporary practitioners and authors who want to appropriate, annex, readjust and/or rewrite the classics. It is not an accident that many of their reworkings are haunted or weighed down by a sense of their own fictionality and textuality. In various ways, this constant recycling of tragic narratives, “the crossing of borders and frames,” according to Brown, “allows a still more intense engagement with the conflicts and predicaments which characterize the genre from its very beginning (6). The process of transition, Brown claims, “between texts can itself produce a tragic dynamic, reinforcing or even contradicting the resonances of either text read in isolation” (8).

Although there is no consensus regarding the quality of the work presented around the world, most theatre practitioners would agree that these reworkings of the tragic, ranging widely across genres, periods and cultures, is a much needed contribution to a mounting humanitarian crisis, a crisis that has always been with us from the start of our dramatic tradition; whatever conflicts it exposes cannot be easily wished away. All these plays dramatize pain, loss, national and international traumas. They build on tragedy’s shared essence, that is “the fact of suffering,” according to Eagleton (xvi), the horror deep inside. As Edith Hall maintains, suffering gives tragedy its “generic continuity” (qtd. in Silverstone 280). And that makes one rightly wonder, if this is so, how does one represent the horror of suffering and trauma? How does one represent pain? Can language speak pain, the pain of millions of Ukrainian or Syrian refugees, for example?

Elaine Scarry claims that “tragedy, like pain, resists and even works to destroy the capacity of language to order, structure, represent the world” (4; also, Silverstone 278). Trauma is not “capturable through representation,” Butler argues (qtd. in Silverstone 278). For Lyotard, art bears witness to the “aporia of art and its pain. It does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it” (qtd. in Silverstone 279). This idea of a form beyond language, beyond what can be verbally expressed, rationalized and comprehended, depicts tragedy as a unique and inviting terrain for artists and critics alike to replay its deadends; that is, bring the “tragic abyss” into full view by giving expression to its inexpressible and unbearable content, its already shaken structures of thought, of reason, according to Silverstone (279).

Revisiting the classics is a slippery journey that inevitably re-produces tensions between formal structures of representation and horrific tragic contents; classic texts are constantly on the move, crossing an array of borders, pushing boundaries, including generic, cultural, ethical and conventional. Tragedy is a genre of limits and, at the same time, a severe test of these limits, Silverstone convincingly claims; the limits apply to ethics, laws and all of humanism. By pushing the boundaries of definitions, tragedy seeks to demarcate “the limits of what it is to be human” and what counts as a grieveable life” an alternative life, a just life (Silverstone 283). As Susan Sontag pointedly puts it, “We live in a time in which tragedy is not an art form but a form of history” (*Against Interpretation*

124, 125). And the question is: Can tragedy be seen as a palimpsest of horror, as a response to Sontag's call "Let the atrocious images haunt us" (*Pain of Others* 102)? Can the power of Ancient Greek tragedy to cross borders also help heal the scars of a contemporary city, of Mosul or Mariupol or any other devastated city?

It seems that in its own way, ancient tragedy still wields this power. To borrow the words of an Iraqi participant in Milo Rau's *Orestes in Mosul*, Mustafa Dargham, "We do not need to act a tragedy," pointing at the blasted shell of the former Fine Arts Institute: "This play [*Orestes in Mosul*] is just talking about the reality of Mosul" (qtd in Rubin).

Theatre is not a disembodied observation or a context-free appraisal of the world; it does not exist in a void; it is directly affected by the vibration between different spaces such as politics, economics, popular culture, aesthetics and personal preference. Thus, theatre is directly affected by change and the demands of the age. We all change; artists change, nations change, critics change and audiences change. The only thing that does not change is change itself. And every time the world changes, there is a change both in the techniques used by practitioners to update, rework, appropriate, re-write or adapt their material, and in the attitudes of the viewers, critics and historical communities who receive them.

Especially nowadays, with national boundaries relativized and national imaginaries and national subjects destabilized, it is only natural to wonder about the future crossings of the Classics, whether there is still any room left for them to step in and make their presence felt, locally or globally; whether they can accommodate the growing diversity of the planet, in which millions of people are crossing boundaries, doing business or running away from war zones. Working with the Classics remains an open project which gradually develops in its own way in the direction of a more decentralized global model, more attentive to contact zones and artistic centers that represent more adequately local and foreign determinants (for more on this idea see Ioannidou 208). To use Turner's phrasing, it all looks more like an open borderland activity, an exploration of the liminal fields that may exist "betwix-and-between" different cultures.

The aim of this paper was to provide support for the statement that *no one owns the classics. We owe them. We move into their home territory as temporary tenants who feel the need to change certain things in order to feel at home, so we change colors, furnishings, doors and window frames. The stories, however, that haunt this home lie beyond empirically discernible human experience. And that explains why they survive the test of time.*

Ukrainian refugees in [Kraków](#) protest against the war and the tragedy it has caused. Photo: [Web/Wikimedia commons](#). Accessed 19 June 2022

Tragedy is about questioning, the risks of daring to question and the responsibilities of those who question. That applies to the heroes of tragedies as well as to those who visit these heroes.

The most recent war in Ukraine and all the unspeakable events that accompany it, have shown once again that human beings refuse to learn from life's past tragic setbacks, and live with more purpose and less violence. The ideas of a leading Russian cultural figure, Mikhail Piotrovsky, director of the Hermitage museum, expressed in an interview given to a major Russian newspaper under the title "We are Militarists and Emperors," are quite revealing as much as they are shocking and criminal. I quote parts of his interview from John Freedman's [facebook page](#):

We understand the historical mission of our country. And this feeling that our country is changing world history, and you are involved in this, is the key now. [...]

We are all militarists and imperialists. On the one hand, war is blood and murder, and on the other hand, it is the self-affirmation of people, the self-affirmation of the nation. Every person wants to prove himself. And in its position in relation to the war, it undoubtedly asserts itself.. [...]

We were all brought up in the imperial tradition, and the empire unites many peoples, finding some common and important things for everyone. It's very tempting, but it's one of the, shall we say, good temptations. Although he does not have to give in to the end, he must be able to regulate it himself. [...]

Our latest exhibitions abroad are simply a powerful cultural offensive. A kind of 'special operation' if you will. Which is not liked by many. But we roll on. And no one should be allowed to interfere with our advancement.

In the face of these incredible views expressed by a person of high official standing, the comments of British fiction writer, academic and lay theologian, C.S. Lewis, are quite enlightening. Tragedy, he says, "is more important than love. Out of all human events, it is tragedy alone that brings people out of their own petty desires and into awareness of other humans' suffering. Tragedy occurs in human lives so that we will learn to reach out and comfort others" (1952). The shrine at Delphi admonished visitors, "Know thyself." However, unlike the ancient Greeks who embedded a tragic sensibility into their culture in order to avert fate by reinforcing a communal sense of responsibility, ethics and courage, the contemporary world and many of its leading figures have totally "lost their sense of tragedy" and any appreciation of the world's tragic nature (I borrow this idea of "tragic loss" from Brands and Edel's book *The Lessons of Tragedy: Statecraft and World Order*, 2019). For powerful personalities like Putin and those like him, Josef Stalin's understanding of tragedy, fits nicely: "If a single person dies in front of you, it is a tragedy. If a million people die on the other side of the earth, it is a statistic."

As painful as it is to contemplate, the recent massacre performed by Russians against the people of Ukraine shows that those who rule the world have never learned to put tragedies to good use. Tragedies never made anyone wiser, for if they had, how could we have forgotten what history taught us: a descent into violence and war is not an answer to

problems but, rather, encourages an escalation of problems. What we need, Brands and Edel claim, and rightly so, is find ways to cultivate “our tragic sensibility” in order to avoid committing over and over again the same *hamartia*, the same *hubris*.

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Endnotes

[1] The process of welcoming foreigners was dictated by a ritualistic typology. For example, the first place they had to approach when entering a foreign city-state was the altar. They could sit on it, stand nearby or enter the temple for further security, since they were placing themselves and their plea under the protection of a god, usually Zeus, Xenios, or the Savior. They also carried small tree branches as well as ribbons to decorate the altar or sometimes crown the head of the local ruler, whom they approached with great respect and humility. The custom was to touch his beard or, kneeling in front of him, gently touch his right hand and knee. Furthermore, according to inter-state custom, foreign visitors were required to obtain the sponsorship of a protector (*πρόξενος*); that is, someone from their home city who was currently living in the host city. If such a person was not available, a visitor used the services of a messenger, whose role it was to speak to the ruler on behalf of the visitor.

[2] There are different versions of the story in circulation, yet it is Aeschylus in *The Suppliants* itself who provides the primary evidence. It was customary for Aeschylus to introduce main themes in the first part of the trilogy and develop the themes in the second and third parts. We see this in his *Oresteia*, and it is reasonable to assume that he used similar methods in the Danaid trilogy. We can also assume that themes developed in *The Suppliants* were taken up and developed further in the succeeding plays (Winnington-Ingram 56). With respect to the missing two-thirds of the trilogy, myth says that fifty grooms catch up with the Danaids, while their father Danaus secretly provides them with a dagger and instructs them to kill their husbands on their wedding nights. With the exception of one, who is put on trial for betraying the trust of her sisters, they comply with his wishes.

[3] As Kitto says, Pelasgus is the Homeric King who knows how far he should go. He very well understands “the seriousness of the dilemma” (10–11).

[4] This is the first of two surviving tragedies by Euripides in which the children of Heracles are suppliants, the second of which is *Heracles*. The Athenian leader, son of Theseus, Demophon (the voice of the people) gives the children asylum and thus saves their lives.

[5] As Sellars says in his interview for *PAJ*, “The essence of Euripides is that he does not recommend a policy of unconditionally open borders to immigrants. Rather, he advocates a policy to support immigrants as they struggle in their own countries; he believes that most would rather live in their birth countries, and choose to leave because they are desperate, not because they want to overtake the target country. This approach to dealing with immigration, which American policy makers seem to forget, is that immigrants are arriving en masse because life in their home countries is unbearable, and are asking for assistance in order to live in their home countries. However, American foreign policy has been dictated by the business community and the profit motive, which overpowers the self-determination of entire groups of people. Clearly that is not representative of a sustainable economic policy, much less a stable global political reality.”

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