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# Peri Algeos: Pain in Aeschylus and Sophocles

Anda Pleniceanu

*The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor

Calin-Andrei Mihailescu

*The University of Western Ontario*

Graduate Program in Comparative Literature

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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*PERI ALGEOS*

PAIN IN AESCHYLUS AND SOPHOCLES

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Anda Pleniceanu

Graduate Program in Comparative Literature

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada

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## Abstract

This thesis is an examination of physical pain in ancient tragedy, with the focus on three plays: Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and *Trachiniae*. The study unfolds the layers of several conceptual systems in order get closer to the core—pain and its limits in tragedy. The first chapter aims to show that Aristotle's model for the analysis of tragedy in his classificatory tract, the *Poetics*, centered on the ill-defined concept of *mimesis*, is an attempt to tame pain and clean tragedy of its inherent viscerality. The second chapter looks at the dualist solution advanced by Plato and Descartes, while showing that a discourse rooted in dualism alienates pain from tragedy. The third chapter provides axes of analysis for three tragedies where pain plays a central role by using the idea of pain as an experience of the limit and looking at the different ways in which pain splits the subject. The thesis also advances the idea that, for the most part, conceptual frames act as analgesic systems that obstruct the exposure to the experience of intensity in ancient tragedy.

## Keywords

Pain, Ancient Tragedy, Aristotle, Poetics, Plato, Descartes, Dualism, Body, Limits, Discourse Analysis, Aeschylus, Sophocles

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Life is the nonrepresentable origin of representation.

Jacques Derrida

## **Introduction:**

The main purpose of this thesis is to clean the slate for a fresher reading of tragedy through pain. This goal seems overly ambitious for a master's thesis and the form of this project reflects the choices I had to make in order to accommodate and contain such a wide scope. The present thesis is also an attempt to find other means for the examination of ancient texts. I find that the most fitting methodology for this objective is discourse analysis. Through this methodology, as well as through several efforts carried out in this thesis of opening unconventional axes of analysis, I carry out this attempt, which is not one of reappropriating tragedy and affixing it to the field that I am affiliated to, but, rather, one of challenging a hegemonic frame of reference. The challenge of shifting the perspective of analysis in the specific case of the ancient corpus, which has long been under the administration of Classical Studies, is not only one of the rigour that the analysis of Greek and Latin texts necessitates, but also the challenge that the burden of proof places on one pleading for an alternative reception of ancient texts. Were this a project carried out by means of the traditional tools available to a classicist, the question of association to a field would not have been a pressing one. But then, of course, the project would have also been shaped differently, although still not devoid of theoretical challenges. As Wlad Godzich notes, “[t]here is no atheoretical approach to



literature; there are only more or less consciously held theoretical tenets.”<sup>1</sup>

Since, however, this thesis is written within the field of Comparative Literature, it is important to clarify two issues: why discourse analysis is a method compatible with this field; and why is pain a suitable entry point into a nontraditional analysis of tragedy?

This thesis does not proceed on the basis of a clear differentiation between theoretical texts and literature “proper.” It distinguishes, however, between different systems of conceptualization and tragic language. Philological analysis is usually the method of choice for the examination of ancient texts; a student in the department of Classics is usually trained, on one hand, in reading Greek and Latin and, on the other hand, in the textual analysis of the texts in the original language, with a focus on grammatical structures. In my experience, I found philological analysis to be a very useful tool, one that reveals the inner mechanisms and subtleties of texts, creating the conditions necessary for a familiarization with the language. Also, since this type of analysis functions primarily by isolating the text from its larger historical context, the result is that the classicist works primarily within the enclosed universe of the text, without taking into account the conceptual patterns that, many times, creep into his own analysis. Besides taking distance from this type of approach to textual analysis, this thesis engages in discourse analysis in order to

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<sup>1</sup> Wlad Godzich, “Emergent Literature and Comparative Literature,” in *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice*, ed. Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), 23.

challenge several conceptual patterns, such as Aristotelian categorization and dualism, which act as superstructures whenever notions of tragic language and corporeality are discussed. In an attempt to delineate the discipline of

Comparative Literature, Godzich writes:

In relation to disciplines, “field” refers to a parcel of the culturally constructed domain as it is subject to the operations of the apparatus of knowledge, whereas field (without quotation marks) is the enabling condition of cultural elaboration. At this juncture, I would like to put forward the following claim: the “field” of Comparative Literature is field. In other words, I take it that, within the prevalent organization of knowledge, it is incumbent upon comparatists to inquire into the relationship of culture to givenness, to its other.<sup>2</sup>

As a comparatist, I am using discourse analysis to question the givenness that lays the foundation of a tradition of analysis of ancient texts. In this project I am only able to address the aforementioned conceptual systems that are part of this givenness, which is only the beginning of an inquiry related to tragedy. As a comparatist with Classical Studies training, I can both work with the Greek text and distinguish patterns in the reception of ancient texts that result in the appropriation of these texts by specific fields for purposes that are in line with their own agendas only. A return to textual analysis and a recontextualization of the texts after the deconstruction undertaken in this project will be undertaken in a subsequent project, if the alignment of future events will permit it.

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<sup>2</sup> Godzich, *Emergent Literature*, 28.

I choose to center this whole project on the notion of pain first of all because, as it will become apparent, it is a notion that cannot be encapsulated by available conceptual systems I am analyzing here in relation to tragedy. It is, therefore, a tool for the deconstruction I am undertaking through discourse analysis in alignment with the scope of the discipline of Comparative Literature. Secondly, through this project centered on pain I want to clarify several concerns I have, both intellectual and spiritual: the relation between pain as the limit of the world perceived through the senses, as well as the way the experience of intense pain breaks habits and patterns of comfort, while exposing one's inherent helplessness. My interest in pain as a subject of study started a few years ago, during an intensive meditation retreat where I was practicing a type meditation called *Vipassana*, rooted in the Theravada Buddhist tradition. In this tradition, one is taught that the three marks of existence are impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and the non-self (*anatta*). Through the practice of *Vipassana*, the meditator works towards the comprehension of these three facts of existence and, by undoing the attachment to the body, the world and the false beliefs that generate suffering, he strives to “see things as they really are.”<sup>3</sup> The constant observation of sensations in the body (which is the task of the *Vipassana* meditator) leads, through consistent practice, to non-reaction—a state of being distanced from the body. This is, in

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<sup>3</sup> “The Three Basic Facts of Existence: I. Impermanence (Anicca).” Pref. by Nyanaponika Thera. *Access to Insight*, accessed September 7, 2015. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/various/wheel186.html>

my experience, a peaceful state indeed, but it is also a state of remoteness from life. Based on my own experience, I argue that, for the beginner meditator in this tradition, peacefulness is a simulation rather than a state where insight is possible. The philosophy behind the *Vipassana* practice links all emotions and thoughts to sensations in the body, which can be empirically observed. The task, then, is to not react internally, but to remain throughout an observer of all sensations and the succession of emotions and thoughts. One aspect that I consider to be problematic in this outlook is the vilification of the sensations and, consequently, of the body. This, in Buddhism, does not lead to a projection of a soul outside of the body, as I will discuss in the second chapter of this thesis next to dualism, but to a deconstruction of reality and of the narratives related to self, personality, instincts, desires, thoughts, emotions, habits and behaviour. The freedom that detachment affords comes from the recognition of the basic principle of impermanence, followed by the non-identification with the aforementioned facts related to the self. Yet, this is problematic due to the *a priori* sentencing of suffering. Moreover, the deconstruction of the self that the *Vipassana* technique aims at heralds a constructed, serene death through a process that is sometimes irreversible. In my own meditation experience I found the sensations themselves to contain more genuineness than the Theravada Buddhists give them credit for. Descartes, in his *Meditations*, uses repeatedly descriptions of sensation when laying out his dualist argument. As I discovered in my own meditation practice, pain is the sensation that, when felt with certain

intensity, would dissolve all detachment, bringing the attention back not only to the body, but to that very limb or part of the body where it manifests. Based on this, I hold that, rather than subduing the world of sensations either through this meditation technique or through conceptualization, giving credence to the body and especially to this most insolent sensation, pain, would grant a glimpse into a different kind of truth, perhaps a visceral one. I dare use this personal experience for my inquiry here, while acknowledging the risk that, at times, the tone of this thesis might turn from academic to confessional. It is ironic that narcissism be exposed in an exercise against authority, but concealment would not aid discourse in any manner either. In what follows, I provide an overview of the main ideas underlying this project.

This thesis comprises a study of three ancient tragedies centered on the notion of pain (Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and the *Trachiniae*) as delineated by the concept of the limit. The constitutional difficulty of such a project is given by the fact that, once articulated in these terms, the analysis of pain stalls, since the experience of the hermeneutist, as that of the spectator, is tuned with that of the sufferer: the imminence of pain arrests all discourse. In spite of this difficulty, pain constitutes a focus in tragic poetry and this alone is a valid reason for undertaking such a project. Pain is not simply inserted into tragedy; rather, it stands at its core. Fighting pain's inherent inexpressibility, Aeschylus and Sophocles find ways of integrating it in tragedy and the result is that all tools of expression are tested and enriched.

Language finds new ways of expressing; the characters' mythological traits are challenged, unveiling unforeseen nuances. Additionally, pain signals towards a viscerality or rawness inherent in tragedy. Out of the three tragic playwrights whose works are extant, Aeschylus and Sophocles are concerned with pain directly and the notion of viscerality, well intuited by Antonin Artaud, the avant-garde theatre theorist and performer. Artaud's writings on theatre in the beginning of the twentieth century focus on the idea of destruction through suffering, pain, and the deconstruction of language and thought. His desire is to revitalize theatre and to shake its structure until both the artists and the public recognize a need to return to a ritualized, spiritual theatre. Artaud tries to bring back to theatre some of the rawness that the Ancient Greeks had access to and, in a way, he echoes those aspects in Greek theatre that have been long overlooked. Artaud emphasizes the need for his contemporaries to pay attention to a rawness of representation that he associates with ritualistic forms of theatre, such as Balinese and Greek theatre. However, Artaud lacks a theoretical apparatus and his writings only point towards his intentions regarding theatrical representation, but they do so with a pathos that both fascinates and provokes.

I am choosing to leave out Euripides' work out of this analysis because he seems to lack the rawness in expression that the other two playwrights retain. Euripides, while still a valuable source for the examiner of suffering, is affected by a standard that resonates too well with Aristotle's mimetic model, which I

am discussing in the first chapter of this thesis. This is signalled in Aristotle's own text, the *Poetics*, where Euripides is judged as best in what concerns the construction of a tragic plot:

Wherefore,<sup>4</sup> those who are accusing Euripides with doing this in his tragedies are wrong in saying that he does this in his tragedies and that many of his characters end in misfortune. That is, as was shown, correct. A very good example: for on the stage and in competitions such plays appear the most tragic of all, if they succeed; and even if Euripides is in other respects not a good administrator, yet he certainly seems to be the most tragic of the poets.<sup>5</sup>

According to Aristotle's rules, which I will discuss in the first chapter, Euripides' incorporates in his tragedies that which Aristotle finds valuable, which, in turn, makes them the most tragic. This may be true in Aristotle's terms, but in focusing excessively on tragic action, the depth of what tragedy tries to convey is missed. This is emphatically true in the case of suffering and pain.

In the three plays I am analyzing, pain and that which it unveils takes precedence over plot. One other play, which is not included here, namely Sophocles' *Ajax*, while not directly involving physical pain, does, nonetheless, expose the main character to such intense emotional and mental suffering that

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<sup>4</sup> All translations of Aristotle and Plato from Greek (cited mainly in the first and second chapter) are my own, although several other translations and commentaries have been consulted in the process. The translations from the tragic texts are by different consecrated translators, cited in the specific sections of the thesis.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Ars Poetica*, ed. R. Kassel (Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1966), accessed 4 August 2015, [http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.01.0055,153a 24-30](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.01.0055,153a%2024-30).

it achieves the same result as the plays where physical pain is approached directly: it brings a great hero to the limit of despondency, where he is laid bare of all the extensions of his former greatness. In doing so, Ajax's case is similar to another mighty hero's, Heracles, whose story is discussed here in the third chapter.

It is necessary, for the development of this thesis, to address several conceptual systems. I am doing so on one hand in order to clear the path discourse-wise and get closer to the essence of the notion of pain, and on the other hand as a protest against subsequent developments in the theatre tradition and in the history of thought, where systems and concepts gain much acceptance and, eventually, enough political ground, turning into harmful ideologies. Whether the role of pain in tragedy is to challenge cultural stereotypes, achieve original means of expression, put the spectator on the same wavelength with a suffering individual, thus preparing him for an experience which is unavoidable, or all of the above, is very hard to determine. What is clear, however, is that Aeschylus and Sophocles do not shun pain in their plays. Elaine Scarry points to the fact that, while intense pain arrests language and is undeniably personal due to the impossibility of sharing it with another entirely, it is also impossible to hide. She notes that "pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be



confirmed.”<sup>6</sup> The complications that arise from this are explored in tragedy especially through the interactions of the suffering characters with their interlocutors, but also, and maybe even *especially* in the relation between spectators and stage. If all other elements in tragedy can be renarrativized or conceptualized differently, pain does not allow this. Nor does it allow any numbing mechanism to develop. Aristotle, Plato and Descartes take charge of the manufacturing of concepts that intermediate, explain and numb feeling. The impact these conceptual systems have results in the vilification of the corporeal and the construction of an artificial system through which one can detach oneself from the clenches of the visceral. However, Aeschylus and Sophocles refuse to prescribe this kind of pill. After challenging the analgesic systems of Aristotle, Plato and Descartes in the first and second chapter, I will be looking at pain and its exposure to different limits and pointing to the axes of analysis that this notion unveils.

Therefore, chapter by chapter, this projects unfolds as follows:

Chapter one looks at Aristotle’s *Poetics* in order to show that his model is a synthetic one through which he attempts to tame pain and clean tragedy of its inherent viscosity. My analysis in this chapter addresses mainly the concepts of mimesis and catharsis, then brings up the notion of *ananke*, which provides an alternative to Aristotle’s system in relation to tragedy. Aristotle holds that language in tragedy should be pleasant and expressive. Yet, when exposed to

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<sup>6</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4.

pain, language is broken in raw expressions and it does not follow the rules of metrics. With respect to exposing actions and character to pain, I side with Ricoeur, who favours actions as embodied series of events over plot, which is their logical reduction. Pain challenges action; as the mimesis of an action is itself an action, it stands to reason to call it an action twice removed. As action is substituted for by the plot, the action appears to be thrice removed, thus taming pain to the point of unrecognition. The heroes are also split by pain, which puts them in a passive, vulnerable position. Breaking the narrative and changing its course, pain puts Aristotle's categorical thought to test. Mimesis, then, acts as a screen between world and tragedy, where the world is distilled and pain is tamed through a process of logical categorization. The second part of this chapter deals with Aristotle's concept of catharsis, as a purgation of emotions through pity and fear. The immanence of pain challenges Aristotle's explanation of the emotions as part of the plot. Adopting Aristotle's system means that pain has a clear purpose and intelligibility in relation to the spectator; thus, pain is alleviated through logical understanding—its cure. Therefore, pain in tragedy, through its immanence and intensity, points to the rawness of representation that cannot be explained through Aristotle's system. *Ananke*, the alternative notion that I discuss at the end of the first chapter, acts as a system internally balancing life. *Ananke* does not alleviate pain because it is not used as an intermediating concept, but as a system that exposes

vulnerability. Therefore, *Ananke* does not extricate the sufferer from the world of pain.

The second chapter attempts to show that a discourse rooted in dualism alienates pain from tragedy. By focusing on the body in pain as an exposed subject and with the help of Jean Luc Nancy's notion of pain as limit, I challenge Plato's and Descartes' dualistic thought. Plato, in the *Phaedo*, argues that the immortal soul must detach itself from its mortal receptacle: the deceitful, impure body. The soul must strive to become one with the undivided, pure divine. For Descartes, on the other hand one can penetrate the body through the mind. But intense pain dissolves the opposition between body and soul, thus cancelling the possibility of cognition. So both Plato and Descartes advance systems that put the body at a distance and come up with concepts such as mind and soul to mediate between realms. This is inconsistent with the tragic sphere, where there are no concepts and where pain is immanent and undeniable. Pain is there to split and expose the subject. Confronting dualism as such does not necessarily mean that I am advancing a holistic notion of the body. But I hold that in tragedy, the body is not approached by means of an intermediating conceptual system.

In chapter three, I open the ground for several axes of analysis, through a hermeneutical approach. The investigation of pain in the texts is of a diagrammatic nature because a formalist textual analysis could not possibly serve the purpose of this thesis. In this chapter I am using pain as an

experience of the limit, and am looking at the different ways in which pain splits the subject. In the case of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, a split is produced between the immortal and mortal realms; the intensity of Prometheus' pain and his complete lack of agency challenge the notion that the body of a god belongs to a realm of immutability and plenitude. Pain and torture break down Prometheus' world. From being creator of the human world, he is exposed as a vulnerable, incapacitated being. In the case of Philoctetes, pain is used to split the sufferer from the outside world through an "epistemic blockage." Pain also tests the limits of language, by reducing the hero to an inarticulate creature. In the *Trachiniae*, the split that pain effects works at the level of the character. Heracles is on one hand weakened, humiliated and made to whimper like a girl, and on the other exposed in all his grotesque, bestial egomania.

A study of pain, no matter how well defined, securely construed or, on the other hand, evasive or labyrinthine, will always reach a limit of expression. Pain is a concept that cannot be conceptualized, a moment that cannot be pinned down in time, an impression on the body which cannot be taken out of it and represented in a direct manner. However, in writing this thesis, one idea, connected to the above-quoted passage by Elaine Scarry, which the Greeks seemed to have understood, was prevalent, namely that pain is that which we cannot express to each other, but through which we all connect: in pain we are all alike.

Finally, I must acknowledge that this project is inspired by Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, which prompted me to work against a type of Apollonian discourse and align the inquiry into my topic with a Dionysian approach, centered on pain.

## Chapter 1

### Aristotle, Pain Will Tear Us Apart

While the present thesis is not concerned with the study of tragedy as genre, nor essentially with the themes that frequently come up in theoretical works on tragedy, but specifically with the occurrence of pain in tragedy, it is still necessary to commence by taking into account Aristotle's work on mimetic art—the *Poetics*. In this tract, Aristotle examines, through a process of classification, what he considers to be essential in poetry, specifically in epic and tragedy. At first sight, the *Poetics* seems to merely provide a set of peremptory pronouncements on the art of poetry. At a second, some of the notions he sets ground for seem to be founded on fortuitous assumptions. Nevertheless, it is the first extant work that looks at tragedy's *modus operandi* without being guided to do so by a didactic impulse (although a moralizing *djinn* does creep in at 1454a and b, when Aristotle expresses his partiality towards good character in tragedy as opposed to the bad variety, prevalent in comedy).

In the *Poetics*, then, Aristotle discusses poetry as craft (τέχνη) and classifies, in twenty-six passages, the aspects that constitute good poetry. In what concerns tragedy, its six components are plot (μῦθος), character (ἦθος), diction (λέξις), thought (διάνοια), appearance or spectacle (ὄψις) and music

(μελοποιία)<sup>7</sup>. Central to his development of an analysis of tragedy are also the concepts of mimesis (μίμησις) and catharsis (κάθαρσις)<sup>8</sup>, which I will investigate in this chapter in their relation (or lack of, thereof) to pain in tragedy. The ubiquitously-cited definition of tragedy appears in section six of the tract and reads thus:

Tragedy, then, is the imitation of a serious and complete action, which has magnitude, by means of language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work, by acting, not by narrating, with incidents arousing pity and fear, in order to accomplish the catharsis of such emotions.<sup>9</sup>

The definition works on three axes: those of the action, language and emotions. In what follows, I will unpack the main conceptual elements of this classification and argue that Aristotle is missing one important component in his internal taxonomy of tragedy, one that the incidence of pain in most ancient Greek plays and particularly in the tragedies that constitute the corpus for this thesis, provides the clue to, namely the viscosity of representation.

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<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, section six.

<sup>8</sup> I will not continue the pretentious practice of transliterating all Greek terms; I will use, from here on, the terms not italicized, especially since mimesis, catharsis and praxis are commonly used in critical theory as such. Other terms, less frequent in critical literature, which I am introducing as the argument proceeds, such as *ananke*, I will italicize throughout.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b 24-28.

## 1.1 Mimesis, Praxis and Pain

Mimesis, which is usually rendered in English translations either as “imitation” or “representation,” is the first concept I will be dealing with here, since it is central to Aristotle’s definition of tragedy. In fact, this is the only concept that expands throughout the whole tract. There is a generalized tendency among Aristotelian scholars<sup>10</sup> to examine the main ideas in the *Poetics* as rooted in the need to respond to Plato’s dismissal of poets and their art in the *Republic* and *Laws*. However, there is no textual evidence in the *Poetics* that Aristotle is attempting to counter Plato’s dogmatic critique of mimetic poetry. For Plato, as Paul Woodruff explains:

(...) mimesis is often understood to involve deception, and is very often used pejoratively of arts or crafts which Plato considers harmful or at least inferior. When Plato does not use the term pejoratively he uses it as part of a metaphysical theory. Yet neither the pejorative nor the metaphysical use surfaces in the *Poetics*, though most scholars hear echoes of Plato there. What is even more remarkable, Aristotle makes no mention of any differences he may have with Plato’s mimesis.<sup>11</sup>

Aristotle, then, is not concerned with Plato’s metaphysical preoccupation with what concerns mimesis. For Plato, especially in Book X of the *Republic*, the work of art imitates things as they appear in the world, while these things

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<sup>10</sup> Such as: J. W. H. Atkins, *Literary criticism in antiquity* (Cambridge, 1934) and Richard McKeon, “Literary Criticism and the Concept of Imitation in Antiquity,” *Modern Philology* 34 (1936): 1-35.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Woodruff, “Aristotle on Mimēsis,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*, ed. Amélie Rort (Chichester : Princeton University Press, 1992), 75.



themselves are imitations of ideas. This is problematic in Plato's case because it follows that the work of art is twice removed from the world of ideas and, therefore, artists deceive through their mimetic art and should not be entrusted with education in Plato's ideal state, as he claims they are. Paul Ricœur, in the first volume of *Temps et récit*, is correct in noting that, as opposed to Plato's rendition of mimesis, "Aristotle's mimesis has just a single space wherein it is unfolded—human making [*faire*], the arts of composition."<sup>12</sup>

In order to analyze the use of mimesis in Aristotle's definition of tragedy, I will track it back to the beginning of the treatise. Aristotle uses the term mimesis several times, but he never defines it; instead, the concept's meaning transpires through his contextual use of the term. Its first use, at the outset of the *Poetics*, is the following generalizing statement, where he puts all forms of poetry under the umbrella of mimesis and where he also starts the process of categorization, which will lead to his definition of tragedy:

Epic and the poetry of tragedy, as well as comedy, dithyrambic poetry and most of flute playing and citharaplaying—all together happen to be modes of mimesis; but they differ one from another in three ways: in representing<sup>13</sup> either by different means, or in the different objects or in representing not in the same way but in a different manner. For example through both color and form people represent many things, making

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 34.

<sup>13</sup> I have translated the verbs that are cognates of mimesis by "representing," since "making mimesis" is redundant.

likeness of them<sup>14</sup> (some by means of a craft and some through acquaintance), while others by use of the human voice. In this way, in the mentioned arts, they all make representations in rhythm and language and tune, using these means either separately or in combination.<sup>15</sup>

Mimesis, then, has different facets, depending on the means, objects and manner of representation, all of which apply to tragedy and are mentioned in Aristotle's definition; yet mimesis is also a unifying concept. Given the broadness of this enumeration, it is not clear how mimesis is related to craft (τέχνη). Likewise, it is unclear if the making of an object's likeness is related to acquaintance or custom. Here he uses the word συνήθεια, which seems to carry somewhat derisive implied accents, as it suggests a sort of *ingenium* honed through *ars* as opposed to acquired artistry; in Aristotle's assessment, the balance noticeably tilts towards the latter. This is an intriguing point because the relation between craft and nature is facilitated through mimesis, as he argues in *Physics* (199a), where mimesis is a method of intervention when nature is faulty (through the craft of medicine, for example). It is reasonable to postulate, then, that Aristotle builds a system with the aid of the concept of mimesis through which he attempts to cure or at least correct that which is aberrant in nature, such as pain. If, then, representing things through custom, acquaintance, *ingenium* and, by extension, instinct, is a lesser activity than

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<sup>14</sup> ἀπεικάζω translates, unlike μιμέομαι, as “making a copy in the likeness of something,” but also as “imagine”. It is related to the noun ἀπείκασμα, which means “copy,” “representation”. So, if considered hierarchically, the former is one step down on the scale of abstraction.

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1447a 15-22.

representing through craft, tragedy is stripped of a certain type of rawness, which, I believe, is crucial and completely overlooked in most studies concerned with tragedy from Aristotle onwards. So turning towards the notion of pain through the occurrences of which I will show that not everything in tragedy is a construct that aims to explain or resolve, it can be shown that Aristotle's mode of classification misses the point. In what follows, I will take up each of Aristotle's categories and illustrate how in ancient tragedy, especially in the plays I am looking at, pain shakes the ground on which these modes are built and, therefore, the concept of mimesis itself is thus challenged.

### **1.1.1 Means of Representation**

There are certain arts which use all those means that were mentioned; I am speaking of those such as rhythm and tune and metre, for example dithyrambic and "nomic" poetry and tragedy too and comedy: they differ is that some use all these at once, others use them in succession. These differences between arts, I say, are those that bring mimesis into existence.<sup>16</sup>

So rhythm, tune and metre are the means of representation in poetic arts here, but "language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work" appears in the definition of tragedy. Hence, while the means employed in mimetic arts in general are the three aforementioned, tragedy hinges on language, which is diversified (or made pleasant) through other modes, by which I infer that language assists in the procurement of

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<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1447b 25-28.

aesthetic pleasure rather than serving a purely utilitarian purpose. Following through with the definition, I also deduce that language must be sufficiently detailed in order to convey a range of actions and emotions (although the relevant ones here are pity and fear). However, when examining the incidence of pain in tragedy, it is clear that language is neither complex, not pleasant.

Building towards a theory of pain, Elaine Scarry argues that the experience of pain escapes language, abandoning the victim confused and muted by its incommunicability. Her argument is based on the rightful assertion that language is destroyed by pain: the experience is forceful and words fail as soon as one is exposed to it. It is impossible, according to her, to find a manner of expressing pain that accurately articulates its severity. As Scarry puts it: “physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.”<sup>17</sup> Where pain makes an apparition in Greek tragedy, language is used only to suggest, but neither words, nor metre, nor any other mimetic mode get to the core of the experience. Scarry ascribes this mode of experience to an “absolute split between one’s sense of one’s own reality and the reality of other persons.”<sup>18</sup> She continues by contending that it is exactly through this divide between language and reality that pain attains the suggestion of the experience’s force: “Thus, pain comes

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<sup>17</sup> Elaine Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed. Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language.”<sup>19</sup> As immanent and inexorable the experience of pain is, the expression of it is fundamentally contaminated by its essential ineffability. It follows that, where pain is expressed in tragedy, words are often replaced by cries and shrieks, thus language, instead of articulating, is broken down, but still, as I will show in the third chapter of this thesis, manages to perform. There is, then, in the expression of pain, simultaneously the destruction and creation of language, as Scarry goes on to argue.

*Philoctetes*, one of the plays that constitute the focus of the third chapter, is worthy of attention here because it explores physical pain methodically and meticulously, while also placing the suffering subject in an environment and situation that reflect his pain. The context of this play proves that Sophocles was well aware of the potency of pain: all action and the Trojan War itself are halted in order to deal with the agony of a disposed man. The hero, Philoctetes, unlike other heroes in Greek epic and tragedy, such as Odysseus, his antagonist in this play, is neither influential, nor virile, but a frail, suffering man, isolated on the deserted island of Lemnos. When examining the core of this tragedy, one cannot make valid claims about the usage of language with pleasurable

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<sup>19</sup> Elaine Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 4.

accessories. This following exchange between Philoctetes and Neoptolemus, at the end of a long scene of agony, conveys the nauseating disintegration of language and, I think, the point of such a passage in a play is to illustrate the failure of language and the necessity to go beyond it:

**Neoptolemus:** Yes, terrible is the burden of the disease.

**Philoctetes:** Terrible that cannot be spoken! Oh, have pity upon me!<sup>20</sup>

What else can more clearly demonstrate the failure of Aristotle's mimetic model of expression through language than this last line uttered by the suffering hero: "δεινὸν γὰρ οὐδὲ ῥητόν" (terrible that cannot be spoken)? Philoctetes experiences a complete disconnection from any cognitive process that could help him explain or narrate his experience. The young Neoptolemus is forced, thus, to remain outside of the suffering, in spite of trying to access it through understanding, and that causes an extreme alienation between the sufferer and anyone who could offer compassion (which means, literally, to suffer with). In *Philoctetes*, the episodes in which Philoctetes is in extreme pain are most vivid, but they do not advance the plot in any way. A limit of both language and sentience is reached here, through the gradual intensification of pain, the breakdown of language into cries and groans and, finally, as Philoctetes faints, the cessation of sentience and language. I return to the analysis of the whole scene of which

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<sup>20</sup> This fragment from *Philoctetes* is in my own translation, but the subsequent ones are from Aeschylus, *The Women of Trachis and Philoctetes*, trans. Robert Torrance. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin), 1966. 754-756.

the above-quoted lines are part of in the third chapter, when I investigate pain in light of the experience of limit. For the time being, it has been established that Aristotle's concept of mimesis does not stand its ground in what concerns the means of representation when faced with the occurrence of pain. The following axis of investigation follows Aristotle's next piece in the construction of a concept of mimesis, namely the things that are being represented.

### 1.1.2 Objects of Representation: Actions and Characters.

Since the things being represented by the imitators are actions, it is necessary for the agents to be either good men or inferior, since, nearly always, characters are made unique, for all differ in character through vice and virtue, therefore they are either better than us or inferior in such wise. It is the same with painters.<sup>21</sup>

Praxis appears as the first element of the definition of tragedy and here, in this more general account of mimetic arts, it seems to be the precursor of plot or, as Ricœur calls it, the *definiens* Aristotle substitutes for the *definiendum*.<sup>22</sup> This element is of great importance for Aristotle, since he focuses on it almost exclusively from section seven until the twenty-sixth. Ricoeur goes as much as to advance the idea that *muthos* is the core of tragedy and of mimesis:

This quasi-identification is warranted first by placing the six parts into a hierarchy that gives priority to the what or object of representation (plot, characters, thought) in relation to the by which or means (language and melody) and the how or mode (the spectacle); then by a second

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<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448a 1-5.

<sup>22</sup> Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, 34.

hierarchization internal to the what that sets the action above the characters and the thought. (...) At the conclusion of this double hierarchization, the plot appears as the first principle, the end, the purpose, and, if we may say so, the soul of tragedy.<sup>23</sup>

He further argues that the contention that mimesis is first and foremost defined through *muthos*, as persuasive as it may seem, is not to be taken too far and he is right in noting that in the *Poetics* there is no evidence that would support this claim, in spite of the length of Aristotle's commentary on plot and its elements. Praxis, when looked at through the lens of emplotment in tragedy, is a construct of an action. As Kosman articulates it, "the medium of the mimesis of action is itself an action"<sup>24</sup>—so an action twice removed. Dramatic art, then, is defined through the construct of the mimesis of action. The kind of action that is represented in drama (serious and complete) is secondary to this claim. From here follows that to talk about pain in dramatic form is to talk about an unrepresentable non-action, which somehow still makes its way in Greek tragedy. This—Aristotle does not take into account. Representing pain in the mimetic way that Aristotle proposes, as the action of an action—therefore acting what pain looks like, through actions, shrieks, words, etc., is at least unsatisfactory. Rather, what happens in a theatrical production is the recreation *in the moment*, with the help of a construct, of a particular instant. Inserting pain into this section of Aristotle's model is again problematic because

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<sup>23</sup> Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Aryeh Kosman, "Acting: Drama as the Mimesis of Praxis," in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. Amélie Rort (Chichester : Princeton University Press, 1992), 58.



to represent pain on Aristotle's terms can be read as an attempt at taming pain. Reliance on mimetic mechanics to give pain shape in tragedy would result in plotting the actions that are projected onto pain—so we are thrice removed from the pain itself: by the fact that pain happens to someone who is a character written by a poet and acted by an actor, but also through language and the medium. Rather, after an examination of pain in tragedy, it appears that when pain is not performed, it is approximated, either by the employment of images, such as the objects that represent agents of pain. For example, the chains in *Prometheus Bound*, the cloak in *Trachiniae* or even the wound or body part itself in *Philoctetes* are good examples of approximation in relation to external objects. This can also be done through the temporal, spatial, sensory or affective dimensions. These terms, however, only approximate, through a process that Scarry calls analogical substantiation<sup>25</sup>, where the pain felt by the sufferer is projected onto something else—an object external to the sensation itself. An example that is easy to comprehend is that of the knife cutting through the skin: the pain is attributed to the object that inflicts it, but pain is in the body, not in the knife.

The process of mimesis through action is removed from the core of pain also because the characters are the ones doing the action that gets represented in drama. However, as in the above-quoted excerpt from *Philoctetes*, it is clear

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<sup>25</sup> Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 14.

that the main character is in no capacity to participate in a praxis of any kind—he is completely devoid of agency when he is immersed in suffering. What is relevant and what tragic poets seem to have understood is not the construct of plot that traps action as in a mesh, in order to represent it, after steamrolling it, on stage, for a public that is waiting to feel the emotions and go through a process of purgation, but rather the immediacy of being immersed in a state and the incapacitating intensity of that state. Pain in tragedy has the opposite effect of the positivist mimetic action, build through action, plot and pleasant language, as Aristotle’s definition premises.

Aristotle’s insistence on good versus inferior character demonstrates that there are, in fact, traces of Plato’s influence in his theory of poetic arts. In tragedy, in the presence of pain, the good/bad dichotomy is obliterated and the characters’ bearings are consistent and independent of the nature of his character or of his previous actions. It is the case, for example, of proud and revengeful Ajax, whose misfortune is as actual as that of a worthier hero would have been.

The remaining constituent of Aristotle’s system of mimesis, namely manner, is subordinated to and contingent on the previous elements, language and action.

### **1.1.3 Manner of Representation**

A third difference in these arts is the manner in which one may represent each of these objects. For in representing the same objects by the same

means it is possible to report at one moment by narrative and at another by assuming a character, as Homer does, or by executing things as they are throughout, without change, or else the imitators may act out all things as though they were executing them.<sup>26</sup>

The important notion here is that the focus is shifted from the representation itself to the things doing the representing; the kind of mimetic art used for this purpose is not specified, so it follows that this can be applied to all poetic arts. The author, then, can either narrate the action, or use indirect speech, or he can act out the characters himself. This mode of mimesis is relevant for the problematisation of pain because it takes into consideration the relation between author and character, although, as Ricœur notes, since for Aristotle character is subordinated to action<sup>27</sup>, mimesis is a representation of the action of characters. This idea is at the core of many attempts to argue that Aristotle aims, by looking at mimesis as pure imitation, to develop a theory of realism. The work of the author is to represent by reporting (ἀπαγγέλλοντα), regardless of whether this act is carried out in dramatic or epic form. Although pain resists language and accurate representation, it still does appear in tragedy and in literature, which shows that its fictionalisation is significant. By metaphoric approximation, pain is nevertheless represented outside of the body; the purpose that it serves in tragedy is still to be discussed, but this last mode of mimesis in the *Poetics* is, I think, one that does not collapse when put to trial.

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<sup>26</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448a 20-25.

<sup>27</sup> Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, 37.

The author is the agent of mimesis and it is through him that one can have access to the fictional world of the characters and, consequently, to their pain. It is important to remember this when attempting to analyze such concepts as suffering and physical pain since, in the larger context of these plays, there is a possibility that the author is manipulating a character's suffering in order to serve a different purpose other than an internal one.

## 1.2 Emotions and Catharsis

In Aristotle's definition of tragedy, emotions must be induced in a safe way (through mimesis rather than through real experience) and, because of this, the cathartic relief might make the spectators into better people. The discussion, then, moves from action, characters and the author to the spectator:

However, since (tragedy is the) mimesis not only of a complete action but also (of incidents arousing) fear and pity, and these have the greatest effect on the mind when they happen without control and in consequence of one other (as an effect); for there is more marvel in them than if they happened by accident or by chance...<sup>28</sup>

The mimesis of action is responsible for catharsis (whether Aristotle means by this term "purgation" or something else is not clear, but the literature on it does tend to imply a purification of some type). The terms *ἔλεος* and *φόβος* appear in the definition of tragedy as well and they have been translated as pity and, respectively, fear or terror. It is not clear how exactly pity and fear would

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<sup>28</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452a 1-5.

bring about catharsis, but it seems that Aristotle knows in detail the workings of the spectators' minds, although these mechanisms are not linked with the emotions themselves, but, once again, with the plot.

The idea of a pleasurable catharsis is an unlikely one, while catharsis as education through exposure to tragic events that arouse pity and fear in the spectators is also problematic, for what would the audience gain in education by being, for instance, exposed to the sufferings of a man whose disease is contacted by mischance and who is being manipulated by a cunning politician who is trying to steal his only possession of value, his bow? Jacob Bernays, for example, in his famous nineteenth century work *Fundamentals of Aristotle's Lost Essay on the "Effect of Tragedy"* explains catharsis either as a religious purification, resulting in an extatic state, or as medical purgation.<sup>29</sup> Martha Nussbaum advances another influential (and cognitivist) interpretation of catharsis, arguing that catharsis, although it involves emotion, is in fact part of a process of "ethical investigation"<sup>30</sup>. Cynthia Freeland explains this cognitive process that applies to the spectator: "when the audience responds to the depicted events of a play with the emotions of pity and fear, they think and learn, and they come to draw appropriate judgements concerning the moral

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<sup>29</sup> Jacob Bernays, "On Catharsis," from 'Fundamentals of Aristotle's Lost Essay on the "Effect of Tragedy",' in *American Images*, vol. 61, no. 3 (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 319-341.

<sup>30</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, "Tragedy and Self-Sufficiency: Plato and Aristotle on Fear and Pity," in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. Amélie Rorty, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 261-290.

issues and and problems represented in the play.”<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Lear, on the other hand, provides the following alternative of interpretation:

It is this experience of the tragic emotions in an appropriately inappropriate environment which, I think, helps to explain out the experience of relief in the theatre. We imaginatively live life to the full, but we risk nothing. The relief is thus not that of releasing pent-up emotions *per se*, it is the relief of releasing these emotions in a safe environment.<sup>32</sup>

It is not certain whether the Greeks thought of tragedy in these terms or if they felt the relief that Lear is writing about. It can be argued that the experience of the religious festivals, Lenaia and Dionysia, during which the plays were performed, created a certain kind of euphoria and it seems that all actions around the plays and the performances themselves were highly ritualized. Pity and fear by themselves do not seem to constitute the pent-up emotions that need to be released in a controlled environment. Pity is a tame, processed emotion, while fear can be of many kinds and Aristotle does not specify which one he refers to here. What is clear, however, is that Aristotle does not believe in the immediacy of the actions that arouse emotions; for him, emotions are contingent on surprise and sequencing. This is once more problematic when looking at the occurrence of pain. In the excerpt from *Philoctetes* that I used as

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<sup>31</sup> Cynthia A. Freeland, “Plot Immitates Action: Aesthetic Evaluation and Moral Realism in Aristotle’s *Poetics*,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*, ed. Amélie Rorthy, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 111-132.

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Lear, “Katharsis,” in in *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*, ed. Amélie Rort (Princeton : Princeston University Press, 1992), 334.

an example above, pain comes and goes unexpectedly, but in no specific order or sequence. It is also impossible to know what exactly a spectator feels when exposed to an enactment of a crisis such as Philoctetes'. It is reasonable, therefore, to postulate that explaining the presence of pain in tragedy through catharsis as purgation, relief or education is an attempt to medicate or hide it, which is to do injustice to the author, the play and to the spectator as well.

### 1.3. Mimesis as the Analgesic Principle

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle's work is that of classifying, explaining, taming through logic and the victim is, in the extant part of the tract, tragedy; comedy did not escape his scrutiny either, but the section dedicated to it has vanished. For Aristotle, mimesis is what happens naturally and it is what differentiates men from animals. Before the categorization of poetic mimesis, he explains:

People have an innate aptitude for representation from childhood, and in this respect, they differ from other animals in being much more able to imitate and learn from the first experiences by representing things and also to find pleasure in the representations all things.<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, mimesis is Aristotle's representational lens—that through which men must pass in order to attain their place in the hierarchy of nature. Not only is mimesis necessary and inherent, since men are born with the instinct of representing, but everything in nature can be represented, since (here) it is a learning tool for children. So the spectrum of representation is limitless, but the

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<sup>33</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448b 6-9.

genre does impose certain constraints (such as the ones mentioned in the definition of tragedy and discussed above—objects, manner and means of representation). Since all arts are mimetic in nature, it follows that everything can be represented in art through mimesis. It follows that, with this concept applied onto the dramatic genre, mimesis becomes a screen between world and stage. If this idea is linked to the one discussed in the beginning of this chapter, where I was arguing that mimesis can be seen as a corrective principle, through which Aristotle tries to remedy that which is anomalous in nature, the consequence is that mimesis becomes the screen through which nature gets distilled, purified or adjusted when represented on stage. In the case of pain in tragedy, then, mimesis acts like an analgesic principle, since, according to Aristotle's argument, pain has to go through a filter that tames it through logical subjugation and shows it in such a way as to serve a chosen aesthetic, ethical and pedagogic purpose. But in the moments of pain representation has already been shifted through pain's externalization and its projection onto an object (Scarry's analogical substantiation) through a compensation that is necessary due to pain's incommunicability. Just as discussed above at **1.1.3**, in the case of action and plot where, according to Aristotle's system, it follows that the action represented is doubly removed from its immediacy; here, when discussing the effect that mimesis has when applied to pain, the cogent case can be made that tragedy's pain is twofold removed, once through substantiation and one more time through the mimesis of the substantiation. The effect is that,



through this double removal from pain by means of an artificial process of mimesis, which gives tragic suffering a purpose in relation to the public, whatever tragedy stirs, is alleviated; it is, therefore, safe for the spectator to be affected by tragic pathos, since it is morally justified and intelligible from a logical standpoint. Aristotle uses his system, in a way, to save himself and the spectators of tragedy the uneasiness of being confronted with instances of pain that cannot be accounted for directly. This logical explanation is compelling and certainly does its job well as an analgesic, but it is artificial and contrived because it is not found inside the tragic system, as Aristotle never looks at tragedy other than to draw, out of context, examples that illustrate his system. It is, instead, a system that is imposed from the outside with the purpose of alleviating and offsetting the impact of being exposed to pain and suffering on stage. The indignation that results from being confronted with suffering that does not have a clear cause or meaning can be, as Nietzsche also notes in the *Genealogy of Morals*, exasperating and can aggravate the impact of exposure:

What truly enrages people about suffering is not the suffering itself, but the meaninglessness of suffering. But neither for the Christian, who has interpreted into suffering an entire secret machinery for salvation, nor for the naïve men of older times, who understood how to interpret all suffering in relation to the spectator or to the person inflicting the suffering, was there generally any such meaningless suffering. In order for the hidden, undiscovered, unwitnessed suffering to be removed from the world and for people to be able to deny it honestly, they were then almost compelled to invent gods and intermediate beings at all levels, high and low—briefly put, something that also roamed in hidden places,

that also looked into the darkness, and that would not readily permit an interesting painful spectacle to escape its attention.<sup>34</sup>

If meaningless suffering is what truly scares people, as Nietzsche argues, Aristotle seems to come up with a system that integrates and explains suffering, giving it a purpose and, thus, subduing it. However, Aristotle does not achieve what he sets out to do because a logical system can only act as an analgesic for a small kind of pain; when confronted with tragic pain, a logical mimetic system is annihilated forthwith. Nietzsche correctly identifies here that “suffering in relation to the spectator or to the person inflicting the suffering” may actually be integrated into a system that gives it meaning, which is key in relation to Aristotle’s system as well. But when taking into account the sufferer himself—Philoctetes, Prometheus or Hercules—it is not a valid system anymore. Pain in tragedy is unbearable; it completely dominates and subdues the character, whose agency is taken away. Logical meaning, ideas or systems do not have the capacity to remove one from the experience of extreme physical pain because they cannot remove the sufferer from his world, as Nietzsche suggests in his own attempt at integrating suffering. One may wonder if it is possible to do so at all, even with the invention of gods that govern the world in its entirety, for it seems that no matter what system is chosen to make sense of the physical realm and impose order in the sufferer’s world, when pain is very intense, any

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<sup>34</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Guilt,” “Bad Conscience,” and Related Matters in the Genealogy of Morals,’ in *On the Genealogy of Morals, A Polemical Tract*, trans. Ian Johnston (Arlington: Richer Resources Publications, 2009), 52.

such structure fails to intervene at the concrete level. However, although a system may fail when the severity of the suffering is extreme, it could work in other cases, when the sufferer is able to project himself outside of his immediate surroundings and the suffering can be integrated as part of an assignment that the subject can accept. Then it is possible, through equanimity and non-identification with the physical body, to alleviate pain somewhat, but this is not the case with the characters that experience pain in the tragedies that I am discussing here. However, an alternative system to Aristotle's mimetic model can make sense and I will briefly discuss it below because it is consistent with the Greek tragic context.

#### 1.4. *Ananke*

When looking at the prevalence of ἀνάγκη<sup>35</sup> in tragedy, especially in the plays that constitute the corpus of this thesis, there are two main issues: one relating to scope and one to rendering. Martin Ostwald opens his analysis of the concept in Thucydides by giving a general account of the term and the complications that arise in its discussion:

...to substitute “necessity” or a cognate term for every occurrence of an ἀνάγκη word will not do, since we cannot assume that the range of the English term is coextensive with the Greek. English “necessity”, its lexical definitions apart, has a number of different connotations. It may be something foreordained by a divinity or predetermined by some

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<sup>35</sup> I will use the transcribed version, *ananke*, of the term from here on.

transcendental and inscrutable force which man is powerless to resist. It may be inherent in our human condition, such as the necessity to breathe, eat, sleep, and eventually die; it may be thought of as inhering in the laws of the physical universe, such as gravity or the motion of the earth and the celestial bodies. It is usually regarded as inescapable, but there are also instances in which it is—or can be—avoided. For example, the payment of taxes is almost universally necessary; but what if a person forgets to pay or pays less than his share? Nothing may happen if the neglect remains undiscovered; much may happen if one is found out.<sup>36</sup>

Whether *ananke* is abstract divine authority exercising autonomy over the human sphere, personal compulsion, metaphysical necessity, natural order or moral duty, it can be seen, especially in tragedy, as one of the main driving forces of the plot. Out of the four moral norms, all personified into goddesses in Greek mythology (Δίκη, the goddess of justice, Τύχη, goddess of chance, Ανάγκη, goddess of necessity and Μοίρα, goddess of fate), *ananke* probably gets the least attention in critical theory and it is often generalized as a metaphysical necessity that relates, somehow, to the divine. Northrop Frye, who, other than making the mistake of equating *ananke* with *moira*, provides a compelling explanation for the internal workings of tragedy: “The Greek *ananke* or *moira* is in its normal or pre-tragic form the internal balancing condition of life. It appears as an external or antithetical necessity only after it has been violated as a condition of life.”<sup>37</sup> Frye looks at *ananke* as a force external to man and to the tragic characters, which is only awakened and turned into a negative force

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<sup>36</sup> Martin Ostwald, *Ananke in Thucydides* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 6.

<sup>37</sup> Cited in: Rebecca Bushnell, *Tragedy, a Short Introduction* (Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 54.

that affects humans after the balance is disturbed. This, in turn, given the lack of a clear context of reference for the term, can result in an *a posteriori* application of the concept by critics. Nonetheless, there always remains in tragedy a certain dynamic between choice and *ananke*, as agency is not ever totally subdued other than, in fact, when dealing with pain. In one chapter entitled *Freedom, Fate and Justice* from his excellent work *Sweet Violence, the Idea of the Tragic*, Terry Eagleton underlines the constant pull between freedom and predestined doom. He also brings up the Aristotelian ἀμαρτία, the error that, in the *Poetics*, is linked with the concept of *ananke*:

Aristotle seems to contrast not freedom and necessity, but inner and outer necessities. There is a dash of psychological determinism about his thought. Indeed, if the hamartia or moral flaw which supposedly causes tragedy is built into our temperament, and is less sin than innocent error, how can we be held responsible for it?<sup>38</sup>

But the tragic character is held responsible for his own errors and, many times, also for the errors of his ancestors, such as in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. The discussion of *ananke* in Greek tragedy is a complex one and it would be a compelling subject of an extended analysis. Here, I am using it as an example of another concept whose workings apply to tragedy's structure much better than Aristotle's mimesis. When looking at pain, *ananke* can certainly explain the context of the characters' sufferings and can also provide the meaning that

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<sup>38</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Freedom, Fate," in *Sweet Violence, The Idea of the Tragic* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2002), 118.

could help the spectator make sense of the suffering. However, in the Greek world it does not seem that a sort of transcendental contingency can elucidate or give a coherent frame of reference that would assuage the suffering. Rather, one can intuit an ambiguous system based on the dynamic between the human and the divine, whose logistics are not always apparent and which cannot extricate the sufferer from his physical world, where his pain takes place and precedence. Such is the case in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, where the workings of *ananke* are conspicuous. However, *ananke* cannot and does not act as an analgesic; nor is the hero's pain lessened in any way by the necessity of his punishment. Rather, one can argue that it is exactly the opposite: his suffering is worsened by the despotism of his torturer, Zeus, and by the obscure dynamic between human justice and divine will.

Therefore, if one takes an honest look at tragedy, it is apparent that the concepts Aristotle builds his conceptual system on, such as mimesis, hamartia, plot and catharsis, only touch the surface of what tragedy really is. Pain in all its forms, but especially in its very intense moments, still remains outside of the perimeters of different systems that may try to explain it, give it meaning and alleviate it. If, however, one is looking for a system that could incorporate it, this is not to be found in Aristotle's categorizations. Rather, a frame of reference, such as *ananke*, is more appropriate. Pain seems to resist integration in any such system and it is conceivable, in fact, that this is its main role in tragedy: to go beyond elucidation, to be that which cannot be tamed.

In this chapter I examined Aristotle's systematic analysis of what he renders as significant in tragic poetry and, most importantly, I investigated whether his conceptual device, mimesis, has any relevance in what concerns pain in tragedy. I found that Aristotle's approach seems to be rather the work of a pharmacologist, who tries to explain the symptoms, taken out of their poetic context, then applies the logical bandage of his system of categorization. He is not ever truthfully looking at tragedy as a medium that could have another impact on one beyond a didactic and emotionally-spewing one. However, the concept of *ananke* does advance several ideas, which help in the development of the analysis of pain in the following chapters. First of all, it is apparent now that an intricate network of forces, related to both the human and the divine, determines the *modus operandi* in tragedy. Secondly, there is a question of what forces are internal and external to the characters, especially to the ones suffering pain and if this is at all relevant in the moment of intense pain. Thirdly, and most importantly, is the question of the body, both the human and the divine body and whether the pangs of pain and the workings of *ananke* pertain to both categories. For now, however, it is safe to claim that, while Aristotle does not benefit an analysis of pain in tragedy, engaging with his categorical thought critically facilitates the subsequent investigation, since his system is still greatly influential in the theory of tragedy.

## Chapter 2

### The Body: Excretions and Extentions

*If body is always deep but deepest at its surface.*

*Anne Carson*

Since this thesis is an exploration of pain, I shall, in what follows, determine what the confines of this experience are as it relates to the body. Pain can have different facets and be intertwined with many things, such as disease, emotional and mental suffering, insanity and a myriad of afflictions that throw one out of the normal—a normal that is mostly a construct and highly customizable, according to culture, nationality, sex, gender, age, social context and so on. But the notion is usually applied to designate experiences pertaining to one thing in particular: the body. This thesis looks specifically at physical pain, namely pain experienced in the body; whether this pain is the projection of another kind of suffering is a secondary issue in what concerns the analysis that I am undertaking in this second chapter. Since the way tragedy is read nowadays is highly influenced by the dualistic split between the body and soul, I will look at the two dualist traditions that are most significant in how we frame the body: the Platonic and the Cartesian one. Then I will compare these two ways of rendering the body to what transpires from the Greek tradition surrounding Greek tragedy, which is not rooted in the aforementioned split. This account of reference frames pertaining to the body is by no means



pretending to be an exhaustive one. In critical theory, the body is an object of study on its own, especially given the relatively recent stream of gender theory. For the purpose of this study, though, it is important to at least try to comprehend the body in the context of Greek tragedy, in spite of the lack of a clear framework that would ascertain the conjectures. Tragedy, through the centuries, has been passed down, rewritten and recontextualized multiple times after its emergence in classical antiquity, and a current reading of tragedy cannot happen in a void of knowledge. Nor is it entirely possible to reclaim the Greeks' perspective on the body without making sweeping generalizations based on speculative assumptions, but some useful notions do, nevertheless, come to light during the analysis, which will aid the advancement of the analysis in the following chapter and in a future project. The attempt in this chapter, then, is to be thorough in the study of pain in tragedy, while dealing with the impossibility of giving an in-depth account of the history of the body in one chapter of a thesis.

I found Jean Luc Nancy's work entitled, quite adequately, *Corpus*, in which he affixes the physical body to its extensions, while also bringing up the important idea of the creation of the world through the articulation of what happens in the body, which echoes Elaine Scarry's last section of *The Body in Pain*, a great starting point and guide through my abridged research while trying to frame pain in relation to the body. At the centre of this work is the idea of a body of God, which informs the tradition of discourse most employed in

Western scholarship. Starting from the phrase *hoc est enim corpus meus*, uttered by priests before the body and blood of Christ is imparted unto his followers, his exploration forks out, at times only proposing complex arguments related to aspects of the body in the world, at other times excogitating notions that have a profound impact on long-established models. In this following fragment, with the help of which I will start my inquiry, Nancy challenges the notion of the body as object and as other, and deals specifically with the subject at hand, the body touched by pain:

Thus the body in pain has its own portion of clarity, equal to everyone else's, and distinct. The limits of suffering provide intense evidence that a body in pain, far from becoming an object, is an absolutely exposed "subject." Anyone who murders a body, relentlessly attacking the obvious, cannot know, or wishes not to know, that he only renders the "subject" – this *hoc*—more clear, more unmercifully clear, with each blow.<sup>39</sup>

By looking at the effect that pain has on the body, Nancy goes beyond the division that renders the body as a closed, far-away entity; rather, he looks at the body in pain as something that is undeniably real and present. The body, for Nancy, is not a closed, finite thing, which collapses unto itself, but an opening which is contingent on closure. Thus, the body is proven, manifestly, to be an explicit element that, through its exposure to pain, which is a limit of sentience, affirms itself in space; in fact, it becomes space (*hoc*). This fragment holds the nucleus of a crucial idea for this thesis, namely that pain, instead of weakening

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<sup>39</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand, ed. John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 49.

and obscuring the suffering character and his extension, the text, exposes him, asservating his rootedness in reality. It does so, however, only as an effect of being exposed to its own limit and that of the character's suffering. A limit, moreover, is not a terminus point, although it does necessitate a certain kind of demarcation against which it can be construed. Rather, it is a sort of rupture in both reality and representation. An exposure to the limit is also an exposure to the demarcation. Here, this exposure is useful in tracing back the steps that lead, from a contemporarily-contextualized reading of tragedy, to a more truthful experience of examination. This means that, instead of arguing against the dualist tradition, it would be more valuable to use it in order to disclose the limit in the body and text that pain exposes. Nancy also argues that this is a necessary process in order to guard against the common mistake of artificially treating the body as a unity:

We have to do justice to the ugly Cartesian dualism, Platonic and Christian in origin, that opposes the soul to the body, because we won't respond to the injunction that comes to us in the form of a body if, as contraband and in the name of a "unity" of soul and body, we put the soul back in the place of the body. At any rate, when we speak about the body, we are soon all too ready to reject, to "excrete" something (bad, "material"...), by denouncing, for example, the "objectified body." (...) Machines are reputed to be inhuman, soulless, and bad for the body, even though at the same time we're quite content to use them. In wanting to keep a "good," "signifying" body, we reproduce the same schema of the exclusion of the body by the soul. Through the appeal or injunction of what falls under the name of body, we must first of all (...) restore something of the dualism, in the precise sense that we have to think that the body is not a monist unity (as opposed to the dualist vision), having

the immediacy and self-immanence with which we earlier endowed the soul.<sup>40</sup>

While in the first-quoted passage Nancy argues that the body, when exposed to pain, is asserted as real and affirmed as a subject rather than as an object, he subsequently warns against the deceitful attempt to replace the body with something else (here: a soul), in order to keep it whole. Nancy takes the clue from the dualist tradition, which I will look at in what follows, in order to create space for the body itself, rather than erase it by replacing it with another, righteous notion. He writes about the body as opposed to mass, which would be impenetrable, but this is how the notion of body emerges when it is opposed to a soul. Mass, for the discussion of which Nancy takes the clue from Aristotle's ὑποκείμενον (substance), is a thing that collapses unto itself, rather than the body, which is affirmed and opens up when it is touched from outside of its confines. The body, then, is articulated from the outside rather than delineated and contained in the opposition with a notion of soul. Although Nancy does not encourage staying within a tradition of dualism, he does take the clue from Plato and Descartes (mainly) when he talks about different aspects of the body and especially, he integrates the language that is used traditionally to talk about the body in order to expose another notion, one that is not dogmatic. Since flesh and skin are both parts of the body itself and its extensions, it follows that the body is enunciated especially at its limit and the limit is touched through

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<sup>40</sup> Nancy, *Corpus*, 133.

exposure to exteriority. The contention between interior-exterior is one that I will come back to when discussing the ermitic space of Philoctetes, the wounded hero. But for now, it is important to dab into the tradition that sustains the notions of duality, particularly the body-soul dualism, in order to be able to articulate what follows after—the Greek body that is full of hidden corners and integrated in its context because of its own resistance to being framed by notions that are imposed on it. In what follows, I will critically consider both the Platonic and Cartesian dualist notions, since the two inform each other in critical theory and the writing of the physical body. In addition to this, I will be looking, throughout this chapter, at how pain informs and breaks these notions, as well as briefly discussing the notion of the divine body and how this relates to tragedy.

## **2.1 Dualism: Descartes**

Thus, a proper investigation of the frame of reference concerning the body within the context of ancient tragedy must compare the Greeks' notion of the body—both human and divine with both the Cartesian and Platonic ideas. In his work on mind-body relationships (which is to say mainly in the *Meditations*), Descartes suggests a dualistic solution. According to him, although the mind and body are joined within the same person, they are treated as separate and often divergent entities in reference to one another. In the *Sixth Meditation*, Descartes argues that the body and mind are composed of essentially different substances and, while the mind is what constitutes being, the body is merely an

extension of it. Having build, during the first five *Meditations*, the idea that one cannot be sure of the existence of physical extensions of the mind, such as things that pertain to the senses, which can easily trick one into assessing objects one way or another, in the *Sixth Meditation* he concludes that the mind is the sole indivisible substance, through which he can penetrate the body:

For this reason, from the fact that I know that I exist and that at the same time I judge that obviously nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence consists entirely in my being a thinking thing. And although perhaps (or rather, as I shall soon say, assuredly) I have a body that is very closely joined to me, nevertheless, because on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, insofar as I am merely a thinking thing and not an extended thing, and because on the other hand I have a distinct idea of a body, insofar as it is merely an extended thing and not a thinking thing, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and can exist without it.<sup>41</sup>

Descartes, then, sees the body and mind as a unit, although the mind itself can exist on its own and is given higher status in the system than its extension in the physical world. The body, however, is separate from what constitutes the being, which is just a “thinking thing.” In this division, it becomes apparent that the mind is constructed in opposition to the body, although the two are joined.

Moreover, for Descartes, thinking (as in “understanding”) is also different from “imagining,” and it seems that the latter is associated with things experienced through the senses, which get imprinted in the imagination by

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<sup>41</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations, Objections, and Replies*, ed. and trans by Roger Ariew and Donald Cress (Cambridge, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 44.

means of memory.<sup>42</sup> The continuation of the argument in the *Sixth Meditation* is important because it addresses exactly the issue of the sensations and particularly that of pain, so the following account of it is relevant here. The first part of his inquiry deals with assessing the things that previously he took for granted because he had experienced them through his senses. Such is the belief that the body with its parts defines his being, as well as being directed to act or behave a certain way by sensations and the needs based on those sensations, which Descartes calls “appetites,” as well as emotions. He makes a difference between the things he experiences internally, such as the ones mentioned before, and what he experiences externally, such as: “light, colors, odors, tastes, and sounds, on the basis of whose variety [he] distinguished the sky, the earth, the seas, and the other bodies, one from the other.”<sup>43</sup> Moreover, he makes an important distinction between the external things in themselves and the qualities that he senses based on his interaction with the different objects, pointing out that he “could not sense any object unless it was present to a sense organ.”<sup>44</sup> This is relevant because he explains that he is tricked to believe that the external objects are real, since what he perceives when he is exposed to the empirical existence of the world is more vivid than what he can imagine (as if this imagining can happen in a vacuum). He goes on to argue that experiencing

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<sup>42</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, 41.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

things thus made him believe that his thoughts developed afterwards, based on sensations, since he experienced them first. His sensations also made him develop the belief that he was rooted in his own body, since he reacted to his sensations and had grown accustomed to it. By comparison, the objects external to his body were not sending him any such signals. Descartes further postulates that the reason for his reaction to different sensations, such as pain and hunger, is directed by nature and habit. In the second part of the argument, he explains how he came to question all these convictions he previously held. Invoking the laws of optics (further away objects seem smaller than they actually are), he comes to realize that the “external senses” are not to be trusted. The “internal sensations”, although experienced very intensely (“For what can be more intimate than pain?”<sup>45</sup>) are harder for Descartes to dismiss, although he does so by the end of the section. After invoking the phenomenon of nervous shadowing (illustrated with the example of the sensation that is felt in a severed limb), he goes on to argue:

The first was that everything I ever thought I sensed while awake I could believe I also sometimes sensed while asleep, and since I do not believe that what I seem to sense in my dreams comes to me from things external to me, I saw no reason why I should hold this belief about those things I seem to be sensing while awake. The second was that, since I was still ignorant of the author of my origin (or at least pretended to be ignorant of it), I saw nothing to prevent my having been so constituted by nature that I should be mistaken even about what seemed to me most true.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, 43.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*



Therefore, because he experiences sensations in his sleep as well, he concludes that he cannot trust his senses when away, since they “trick” him into believing that what produces sensations in his sleep is as real as concrete physical reality. Moreover, he does not find a counterargument to his dismissal of the world of senses as a false one, although he talks about a past when he did not completely acknowledge the presence of God and His reason for making Descartes believe falsely in a reality that might not be reliable. When he brings God into the argument, the whole discussion changes since, instead of having a polemical inquiry between Descartes and his own body, a third entity that has dominance over both is brought into the investigation. Thus he postulates that he is defined by his faculty of thinking and, continuing from this, that his mind and the qualities of the objects he perceives are made of a different “substance,” with the one in which his body exists being a “corporeal and extended substance,”<sup>47</sup> from which he infers that, since God, who has dominance over the world, could not simply deceive him into believing that the corporeal things exist, therefore they do, indeed, exist. The extension of this argument is advanced in what follows:

There is nothing that this nature teaches me more explicitly than that I have a body that is ill disposed when I feel pain, that needs food and drink when I suffer hunger or thirst, and the like. Therefore, I should not doubt that there is some truth in this. By means of these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, and so on, nature also teaches that I am present in my body not merely in the way a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am most tightly joined and, so to speak, commingled with it, so much so that

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<sup>47</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, 44.

I and the body constitute one single thing. For if this were not the case, then I, who am only a thinking thing, would not sense pain when the body is injured; rather, I would perceive the wound by means of the pure intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight whether anything in his ship is broken.<sup>48</sup>

So, since nature is an extension of God, sensations are a way of guiding the thinker as to what he (both mind and body) needs in order to survive (although the survival part is never discussed, but only hinted at, in the *Meditations*).

This teleological argument addresses the union of the body and mind/soul and developing a notion of being, of ego. What Descartes seems to be doing here is, as I've stated previously, to reach the physical body through the mind; however, he relates to the physical body in a similar way than he does to outside objects.

The only means of differentiation seem to be the senses. The perception of things (especially that of pain) is what is of interest for this study, but before looking at this, it is important to delve into what constitutes the ego for Descartes. Nancy has a different approach, expounded below, to the issue, which I find worth quoting and discussing, since his conclusion in the following excerpt advances the same exterior-interior dialectic that I was discussing previously:

For Descartes himself, the famous ego (which I'm now using in place of the soul) is only ego by virtue of being outside itself, by touching the wax. And therefore, to put it in an arrogant way, I'm claiming to show that, for Descartes, the *res cogitans* is a body. Descartes knows this very well. At this point, we should develop everything he says about the union of the

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<sup>48</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, 45.

soul and the body, which is evidence as strong as that of the ego sum itself. Ego is being outside with reference to the ego. Ego is also being a body. A body is sensing, but sensing such that there's no sensing that wouldn't be a "sensing one's self."

To sense, we have to sense ourselves sensing-this is also a proposition of Aristotle that we find in the *On the Soul*. Body means very precisely the soul that feels it's a body. Or: the soul is the name of the sensing of the body. We could say it with other pairs of terms: the body is the ego that senses itself to be other than ego. (...) The formula that sums up this thought would be: the inside, which senses it is outside.<sup>49</sup>

The ego, as Nancy argues, is the projection of the body, which is reached through its opposition to the soul. The difference between Descartes' mind and soul is another discussion that exceeds the purpose of this study; from here on, I will use the term "soul," since this ties into the next conceptual system that will be examined in this chapter, namely Plato's. Although the body and soul are in a relation of duality, they are joined, forming the ego, which, according to Nancy, is also a projection of the body. The physical body itself is reached through the soul by means of the senses. Therefore, only by means of an exterior projection is the body able to reach itself. To bring pain into this equation would mean to discuss how the body would be reached through its projection, the soul, by means of pain. However, intense pain would mean, most of the time, the dissolution of the opposition, as the cognitive act would be annulled. If pain is the limit of sensing, then the touching of the physical self, which is done at the edge between the body and its extension, is either obstructed or reinforced. It is

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<sup>49</sup> Nancy, *Corpus*, 131.

obstructed in the case of the dissolution of the ability of the body to form a projection through which it can reach itself and it is reinforced when this projection on the exterior can still be done by the intensification of the sensation and the assurance of the existence of the physical body. In either case, the body becomes, once more, exposed, while the division between the body and the soul would most likely actualize the existence of the body instead of providing an escape mechanism through which the body would be ejected. In the concrete instance of the suffering tragic characters, the body is still seen and felt from the outside for the most part, with the exception of one scene in *Philoctetes*, when the pain reaches an upper limit of sentience and the character is muted. Also, this is the case in the *Trachiniae*, when Heracles' only effort is to beg for someone to kill him, so that, through the disappearance of the body, his pain stops as well. Otherwise, in *Prometheus Bound*, for example, pain is the point of entry into the body and the awareness of the suffering body, in this case, is the main objective of Zeus' punishment.

Reexamining Descartes' solution at this point, it appears that dualism becomes problematic especially when he brings the third entity into the argument, namely God. The argument that internal and external sensations, including pain, are God's (or nature's, which is subordinated to and an extension of God) way of letting the mind know to govern the body seems to be an artificial way of accounting for the gap that was previously created, when he argued that it is difficult for the mind to account for the existence of the body.

So he is aided in the joining of the two—body and its projection—by a teleological explanation.

In his final treatise, *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes addresses the issue of the union between the body and the soul once more, by creating a system where the passions (six in number: admiration, love, hatred, desire, joy and sadness<sup>50</sup>) are the elements through which the soul and body communicate. The passions produce sensations in the body by means of which the soul gets to know how to attend to the body. Both passions and sensations are processes that are rooted in the physical body and through which the union of the soul and body is created. *The Passions of the Soul* is a continuation of the argument Descartes starts in the *Meditations* and its bulk is busy with classifying the passions. This work once more makes use of the Cartesian method of conceptualization and it does so by imposing a system that is designed to make total sense of nature. If Descartes' definition of passions as stated in art. 27 of *The Passions of the Soul* establishes that the passions also play a role of intermediation between the rational sphere and the perceptions of the soul, especially since they are also "caused, maintained and strengthened by some movements of the spirits."<sup>51</sup> Pain challenges this idea since it is immanent and it actualizes the body; Descartes' conceptual intermediation may seem convenient, but ultimately it is, in intention, a logical panacea.

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<sup>50</sup> René Descartes, *Les Passions de l'âme*, (Mozambook, 2001), Ebook edition, 41.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

In Descartes' system, the rational act (*cogito*) is posited as the central notion—the subject of the logical proposition—whereas the ego is a derivative notion, subordinate in relation to the *cogito* function. Descartes' standpoint, then, is that of the examiner of the rational process, not that of the empirical analyst. This position is fundamentally divergent from the tragic one, where the concepts neither intermediate between realms, nor between the characters and their experiences, or between the spectators and the stage. Descartes' system is, admittedly, the most distant in approach from the tragic one. However, this system is important to keep in sight, especially since it is the result of a mode of conceptualization that starts in classical antiquity in Greece, emerging only one century later than the inception of the tragic tradition. This other system of thought, which I will discuss subsequently, is the Platonic one.

## 2.2 Plato's Dualism

Within the ancient context, by fifth century BC, a new notion of the soul had been elaborated (most notably in Plato's *Phaedo* and, to a more limited extent, in the *Republic*)—that of an immortal soul, which man must, through different methods, detach from the body, which is transitory and perishable, in order to purify and attain a higher state of existence<sup>52</sup>. In the *Phaedo*, the dialogue comprising Socrates' death by hemlock, Plato sets the ground for his theory of Forms, which will be further developed in the *Phaedrus* and the

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<sup>52</sup> Vernant 20.

*Republic*. Since most of the arguments in the *Phaedo* have as starting point the discussion concerning Socrates' impending death, they are centered upon the condition of the soul. The main three arguments are all concerned with the soul's immortality, but the one I will be looking at here is the last one, the argument from affinity<sup>53</sup>, which deals directly with the soul's relation to the body through the senses. The tail of the argument holds the following discussion about the purification of the soul through the practice of philosophy:

“I will tell you,” he said. “For lovers of knowledge,” he said, “know that when philosophy takes over their soul, it is absolutely bound on all sides and glued to the body and is forced to contemplate existing things (realities) through the body as through a prison, not the things themselves as they are, and is wallowing in nothing but ignorance; and the soul, looking down, sees that the most terrible thing about the imprisonment is the fact that it springs from the lust of flesh, just so that, exceedingly, one is his own assistant in his incarceration. Then I say that the lovers of knowledge know that philosophy, when it takes over the soul when it is in this state, gently encourages it and attempts to unbind it, pointing out that perception through the eyes, as through the ears as through all other senses is full of deceit, and urging it to withdraw from these, except in so far as their use is necessary, and encouraging it to collect and gather itself within itself, and to trust nothing other than itself and its own understanding of abstract existence; and to contemplate that there is no truth other than in that which it sees otherwise and which is such that it varies according to the different things in which it appears, since everything of that kind is visible and captured by the senses, whereas the soul itself sees that which is not perceivable and apprehended by the mind. Now the soul of the philosopher truly reasons that it must not withstand this release, and as such, it stands removed

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<sup>53</sup> Plato, *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0169%3Atext%3DPhaedo%3Apage%3D5,78b-84b>.

from pleasures and lusts and griefs and fears, so much as it can do so, reckoning that whenever anyone has violent pleasures or fears or griefs or lusts he suffers from them not solely what one might suppose, such as illness or loss of money spent for his lusts, but he suffers the greatest and most extreme evil and does not take it into account.”

“What is this evil, oh Socrates?” said Cebes.

“The evil is that the soul of all man is forced, when it takes pleasure exceedingly or is grieved by anything, to believe that the thing from which the emotion came is very vivid and very real, but it is not so: these objects are mostly the visible ones, is it not so?”

“By all means.”

“And when this happens, is the soul not exceedingly tied down by the body?”

“How so?”

“Because each pleasure or pain fastens it down as with a nail to the body and fastens it on and makes it corporeal, so that it deems that the things are true which the body says are true. For because it has the same beliefs and pleasures as the body it is constrained to assume the same practices as well and a way of life, and can never leave in purity to Hades, but must always go away polluted by the body; and so it falls down right away into another body again and grows into it, just like a seed that is implanted. Therefore it has no portion in the communion with the divine and physically clean and unique.”<sup>54</sup>

Here, the opposition between ψυχή (soul) and σώμα (body) is rooted in the contention that the territory of the body is the antithesis of “the divine and pure and absolute,” which is the realm of the Forms—purified, ideal concepts. The soul, before the process of purification, exists in between these two planes and

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<sup>54</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 82e-83e.



its only chance of accessing a higher state and continuing its existence in the realm of the Forms is through the practice of philosophy—so through the mind, which trains one to be detached from the illusions created by the body, through the senses. Pleasure and pain, which are here given as examples of evils that keep the soul attached to the body, belong to the world of the corporeal (σωματοειδῆ), whereas the world of the soul, which it has to work to recognize by cutting ties with the physical realm, is one of the divine (θείου), purity, in the sense of cleanliness (καθαροῦ) and simplicity or undividedness (μονοειδοῦς). Existence in the world of the contaminated body is seen as something that one would definitely avoid (at 84b Socrates goes on to classify the animal bodies of the reincarnated souls based on their moral wrongdoings and misconducts, such as donkeys for the egregious souls and hawks for the unjust ones). What is valuable to recognize here is also that the emotions, although capable of having such a great influence on the soul, are rooted in the senses, which are deceitful inasmuch as they give the impression that the objects perceived through them are true. However, this is not the deceitfulness that Descartes mentions in the *Sixth Meditations*, when he argues that the objects perceived by the senses are smaller or larger than they appear in reality. Rather, Socrates is arguing that the things observed through the senses are not to be trusted because they are perceived through the body “as through prison bars” and they are only shadows of the realities of the realm of Forms. The soul is still immortal even if it does not go through the purification, but it does not have access to the truth and it

lives in the world of projections.

It is important to establish the similarities between the two positions, that of Descartes and that advanced by Plato, as they together lay the foundation of a position that is usually taken as *a priori* in pain studies, namely the projection of the self outside of the physical world. On this particular topic, Sarah Broadie writes:

Both philosophers argue that we consist of something incorporeal, whether one calls it ‘mind’ or ‘soul’, which for the time being is somehow united with a body that is part of the physical world. Both identify the self, the ‘I’, with the incorporeal member of this alliance. Both hold that my mind or soul will survive the demise of the body (...), which in turn is present to me through its members’ bodies. Both may be understood as holding that the mind or soul can exist altogether independently of body, though Plato may have changed position on this point. Both are concerned with the immortality of the soul.<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, both philosophers build systems that place the body in a lesser, deceitful and impure realm, while the soul’s attachment to it is assisted by the senses. The division between the body and soul is a prerequisite for both systems, but, while Descartes develops a theory of passions, using the concepts to create a unity between the body and soul, Plato regards all emotions as κακόν (evil). Plato, moreover, puts emphasis on a process of separation between soul and body, which is necessary before a definitive segregation between the two

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<sup>55</sup> Sarah Broadie, “Soul and Body in Plato and Descartes,” in *Aristotle and Beyond: Essays on Metaphysics and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 101.

can take place. The soul is, in nature, indestructible and eternal and has the aptitude of elevating itself. Thus, this system is fundamentally a transcendental one, while for Descartes, the soul's union with the body and the ego's rapport with God is established *a priori* conception. Hendrik Lorenz has it that for the Greeks, the soul is "standardly thought and spoken of (...) as the distinguishing mark of living things, as something that is the subject of emotional states and that is responsible for planning and practical thinking, and also as the bearer of such virtues as courage and justice."<sup>56</sup> It is apparent that in both systems the corporeal realm is polluted and the desirable thing for the human being is to at least be able to distinguish between what is bodily and what rational or abstract and belongs to the world of the soul and the divine.

Both philosophers use strong scornful language when describing the body (Plato more so than Descartes), so reading these theoretical texts next to the tragic ones exposes the discrepancy between the two approaches. Plato's and Descartes' theoretical systems advance concepts that put the body at a distance, so that one can mediate between different realms and entities. Thus, the body is never actualized, although, as I was arguing in the first pages of this chapter with the aid of Nancy's *Corpus*, one can meet the body at its limit between the physical realm and the *cogito* act or between the corporeal and the Ideas in

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<sup>56</sup> Hendrik Lorenz, "Ancient Theories of Soul", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (ed.), accessed July 23, 2015, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/ancient-soul/>

Plato's terms. Considering the soul-body dualism here is not meant to advance an antithetical idea of oneness because this would not necessarily help in approaching the pained body in tragedy, but because it is valuable to recognize that the manufacturing of conceptual systems is inconsistent with both the tragic sphere and with the posture that the body is in when experiencing intense pain. After dealing with Aristotle's system of classification, a look at Plato's and Descartes' synthetic schemes facilitates a process of conceptual deconstruction, and exposes the need to set these systems aside when approaching the core of the issue: pain in tragedy.

The notion of the body in tragedy does not to spring from soul-body dualism; corporeality in this context seems to be contiguous to the archaic manner of positing the body, which, as Fulton explains, is not rooted in a split:

The fact is that in the archaic period Greek "corporeity" still does not acknowledge a body/soul distinction, nor does it establish a radical break between the natural and supernatural. Man's corporeality also includes organic realities, vital forces, psychic activities, divine inspiration or influxes. The same word can refer to these various domains. On the other hand, there is no term that designates the body as an organic unity, which supports the individual in the multiplicity of his vital and mental functions.<sup>57</sup>

This view of the body can likewise be applied to how the body is represented in tragedy. Especially in the cases of the suffering heroes of the three tragedies I

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<sup>57</sup> Drew Leder, "The Experience of Pain and its Clinical Implications," *Philosophy and Medicine*, Volume 40 (1992): 97.

am discussing in the following chapter, the body is represented through its parts or extensions: in the case of Prometheus by his chains and liver, in Philoctetes' case by his foot, wound and bloody bandages and in Heracles' case by the poisoned cloak and his pained limbs. It is true that this occurs in the text also due to the characters' exposure to pain, which splits the attention and directs it to the spot in the body where it occurs or to the object that provokes it, but this would not be expressed thus in a text which belongs to a tradition rooted in the soul-body division. The prevalence of pain in tragedy signals the poets' preoccupation with the experience of pain and with what can be induced or gained by the public through the exposure to it. It is also possible that the tragic poets were aware of the ideological current that advanced the body-soul division and were addressing the issue through the representation of pain on stage. Their understanding of the mechanisms of pain, incontestable given especially its primacy in the tragedies I am commenting on in the third chapter, challenges through simple exposure any such system, for in pain, any mind-body division, no matter how firmly pre-established a Platonic or Cartesian system of conceptualization might be, is shaken, as Drew Leder also argues:

...such an account is profoundly challenged by the experience of pain. For in pain we find the unity of the mental and corporeal. The bodily sensation is intimately intertwined with an emotional and existential meaning. This unity has a linguistic representation: the word "pain" itself can be used to describe not only physical, but emotional or cognitive suffering." It is not only the unity of mind and body that pain reveals, but

also another duality: between the patient, or the one in pain, and the external world.<sup>58</sup>

Leder discusses here the effect that pain has on the body in terms of a “unity,” which is not a notion that I advance in relation to tragedy. However, the more important idea that transpires from this passage is the fact that in instances of intense pain, the mind-body or soul-body division ceases to make sense. If, then, one deems the soul as the purified extension of the body and the ideal version of man, pain reminds one that such a projection is inconsistent with the human being in its natural surroundings. Through the raw experience of pain, the body is once more actualized, it becomes real and present—a purification of the body in opposition to the soul. Ancient tragedians, it seems, are well aware of this fact and instead of employing a system that purifies the soul and does not allow it to be exposed to the pain that “nails it as with a nail to the body and rivets it on and makes it corporeal,”<sup>59</sup> they expose the body, bringing it in focus and positing it as subject through pain.

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<sup>58</sup>Leder, “The Experience of Pain,” 45.

<sup>59</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 83e.

### Chapter 3:

#### The Limits of Pain: Pain in *Prometheus Bound*, *Philoctetes* and *Trachiniae*

*Never has Zeus, the king of all things,  
granted to mortals life without pain;  
but grief and happiness come  
to every man in his turn,  
like the circling paths of the Bear.  
Sophocles, Trachiniae*

This chapter offers several interpretations of pain in the three plays of the corpus through a hermeneutical method of analysis in light of the notion of limit. These readings build on concepts that I discussed in the previous two chapters, where I showed why it is necessary to liberate oneself from the burden of a mimetic and a dualist conceptual system when approaching the ancient tragic tradition. Although the choice of a hermeneutical method of analysis may seem overly ambitious here, this approach is chosen deliberately as means of countering the above-mentioned systems of conceptualization. Tying in with a tradition of interpretation that antedates Platonic philosophy, hermeneutical analysis puts the interpreter in the position of “a translator, a mediator, who uses his linguistic knowledge to make intelligible what is not understood, what

is no longer understood.”<sup>60</sup> Peter Szondi’s *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics* outlines a tradition of literary hermeneutics in juxtaposition with philosophical hermeneutics, which gained theoretical ground in the twentieth century, under the influence of Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer, who are building on a shift in hermeneutics initiated by Romantic German philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. In his work *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, making a switch from theological hermeneutics to general textual hermeneutics, Schleiermacher lays down the rules for a modern hermeneutical method, underlying the relation between hermeneutics, criticism and grammar:

Hermeneutics and criticism, both philological disciplines, both theories, belong together, because the practice of one presupposes the other. The former is generally the art of understanding particularly the written discourse of another person correctly, the latter the art of judging correctly and establishing the authenticity of texts and parts of texts from adequate evidence and data. (...) In the same way as hermeneutics and criticism belong together, so too do they both belong together with grammar.<sup>61</sup>

This passage opens the ground for the two main axes of hermeneutical inquiry: the grammatical the psychological. The former dimension of interpretation, the grammatical one, building on the notion of the *sensus litteralis* of ancient hermeneutics, through which the hermeneutician seeks to find the meaning of the words that form the text, comprises the famous hermeneutical circle, which

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<sup>60</sup> Peter Szondi, *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Martha Woodmansee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 6.

<sup>61</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, trans. and ed. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.



Schleiermacher introduces thus: “[c]omplete knowledge is always in this apparent circle, that each particular can only be understood via the general, of which it is a part, and vice-versa. And every piece of knowledge is only scientific if it is formed in this way.”<sup>62</sup> Therefore, in order to properly understand the text according to Schleiermacher’s grammatical method, the hermeneutician must be prepared to see both the historical and cultural context of the text and its textual details at the level of the word—a move between the two is necessary for an authentic interpretation.<sup>63</sup> The psychological axis of hermeneutical interpretation, namely the psychological one, is famous for its often-criticized concept of authorial intent, which Schleiermacher explains thus:

The task is also to be expressed as follows, to understand the utterance at first just as well and then better than its author. For because we have no immediate knowledge of what is in him, we must seek to bring much to consciousness that can remain unconscious to him, except to the extent to which he himself reflectively becomes his own reader.<sup>64</sup>

This type of interpretation is an effort to understand and bring to light what the author meant, but it also a divinatory practice for the hermeneutician, meaning a method “in which one, so to speak, transforms oneself into the other person and tries to understand the individual element directly.”<sup>65</sup> I am choosing to give an account of Schleiermacher’s set of rules for hermeneutical analysis not

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<sup>62</sup> Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, 24

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-27.

<sup>64</sup> *Ib.*, 23.

<sup>65</sup> *Id.*, 92.

because I will follow them closely, but because his method ties in with the ancient one of divination—the interpretation of the Oracle’s message. This method, in turn, is also more in line with the practice of rhetoric, which Schleiermacher also links to the hermeneutical method: “The belonging together of hermeneutics and rhetoric consists in the fact that every act of understanding is the inversion of a speech-act, during which the thought which was the basis of the speech must become conscious.”<sup>66</sup> The rhetorical tradition, which Plato slanders in his dialogues, is, therefore, rooted in the speech act and grants the space necessary for an interpretation of the hermeneutical type, as opposed to Plato’s system, which does not. I choose to align myself, then, to this tradition when exercising a hermeneutical methodology not in its strictly Schleiermachian sense, but rather in its original denotation, indicated by the word’s etymological root: ἐρμηνεύς—interpreter, expounder.

Interpreting texts “in their totality” and doing so in relation to only one instance or concept, such as pain, is different in what concerns the hermeneutical process—there is, simultaneously, a process of contextualization of the moment itself in the play, the play in the cultural and historical circumstance, but also constantly connecting the pain in the text to human pain in general. Because pain is universal, the last part of the task is made easier; it is, in fact, one of the main reasons for its inclusion in tragedy and for the

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<sup>66</sup> Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, 7.

attention granted it in the three plays that I am analyzing. There is, in tragedy and elsewhere, a singular pain—it differs in causes and effects, but the core is always the same.

Not only is this hermeneutical analysis focused on the notion of pain, but, in what follows, I will be framing the notion of pain in relation to that of the limit. This notion was already discussed to some extent in the second chapter, in relation to Nancy's contention that through pain, a limit is reached which exposes the body as a subject. Besides discussing the concrete limits of space, sentience and language in relation to pain, I am also exposing the ways in which pain in tragedy tests various limits and constitutes a point of entry into the body, through which another dimension is accessed. There is, indeed, an esoteric implication in this contention, which cannot be avoided when talking about a tradition such as the tragic one after connecting it to pre-Socratic thought. Although one cannot establish with certainty what the relationship between the public, stage and the spiritual message of the tragedies was in fifth century BC, a hermeneutic understanding, while keeping track of the context of the plays, is certainly more valuable than a purely historical or philological reading, which would align the tragic tradition to a Platonic and Aristotelian one, draining it of all intensity.

I also want to advance the idea of pain as the limit of life—the moment when the sufferer can come as close as possible to death while still alive. This type of exposure would be, for the Greeks, both a moment of purification and

one of illumination. About purification in relation to the fire element, Peter Kingsley writes in his book *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic*, which had significant influence on this project in its developing stages, writes: “[t]he idea of fire as purifying—and immortalizing—became so deeply imbedded in the consciousness of the Greeks that even at their most facetious they were unable to escape it.”<sup>67</sup> I am using the same idea in my analysis, while replacing fire with pain. Seeing pain as the purifying element would take the physical body out of the action-object relationship it is in Plato’s system, when the argument of the purification of the body and the detachment of the soul from the body is advanced, such as in *Phaedo*. Instead, pain in tragedy is imminent, while its circumstances and consequences cannot be controlled or organized into a set of rules. With these ideas in the background, I will start the foray into the texts of the three plays of the corpus.

### ***3.1 Prometheus Bound***

One play where fire and pain are connected in a rapport of cause-and-effect is Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, where the pro-Olympian god is tied to a rock in distant land, in Scythia, Central Asia, a land of the ξένοι (foreigners) as Kratos’ opening lines describe:

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<sup>67</sup> Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic* (Oxford: Clarendon Paperbacks, 1995), 253.

To<sup>68</sup> earth's remotest part we come, to the Scythian land, an untrodden solitude.<sup>69</sup>

Here, since the play is with and about immortals, the limit is defined through space and the space is an extension of Prometheus' situation and suffering. I will discuss the relevance of a space of isolation in relation to pain as it appears in *Philoctetes*, but it is important to note that, since this is the opening to *Prometheus Bound*, the entrance into the situation of pain is done through space, by carrying out Prometheus' bounding outside the city, in a deserted place where the sufferer cannot exercise agency or relate to anything of importance in a social context. The space of solitude, untrodden and desolate (ἄβατον) is a reflection of the hero's suffering, but also, in the case of Prometheus, the place of torture.

### 3.1.1 Godly Bodies

The story of Prometheus' wrongdoings is told in reverse: in the opening scene the hero is already being punished by Zeus' intermediants, Bia and Kratos (Force and Power) for crimes that have been committed previously. Before advancing, it is important to note that, while until now I discussed the human body in the thought of Plato, Descartes and the pre-Socratics, here the punished one is a god—immortal, but still vulnerable—hero. In his essay *Dim*

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<sup>68</sup> I am using Smyth's translation.

<sup>69</sup> Aeschylus. *Prometheus Bound*, trans. Herbert Weir Smyth (Cambridge. Harvard University Press, 1962), 1-2.

*Body, Dazzling Body*, Jean-Pierre Vernant poses an important question: “The body of gods. How does this expression pose a problem for us? Can gods who have two bodies—antropomorphic gods like those of the ancient Greeks—really be considered gods?”<sup>70</sup> In the case of *Prometheus Bound*, this is an essential question, since Prometheus is a powerful god, yet susceptible to punishment and torture by Zeus, the newly appointed ruler of Olympus. Prometheus’ myth is given a lot of importance and lines in Hesiod’s *Theogony* as well (almost one hundred lines), where he is responsible for both bestowing fire on the mortals and for their misfortunes, sent to them as punishment by Zeus through the deceptive and unfortunate Pandora. Prometheus is, in Hesiod, in between the two worlds (the human and the divine) and between two roles (that of benefactor and wrongdoer), but in *Prometheus Bound*, he is not associated with Pandora, so he is a lawbreaker only according to Zeus’ system of justice. This god-human duality in terms of the body seems to resemble the body-soul one in Plato and Descartes, but when considered in light of the pre-Socratics, such as Xenophanes, whose take on the matter Vernant discusses in his essay, the distinction is defined in other terms than the dualist ones:

In order to traverse the gulf separating god and man, Xenophanes is not led to oppose the corporeal to the noncorporeal, to an immateriality, a pure Spirit; for him, it is enough to acknowledge the contrast between the constant and the changing, the immutable and the mutable, the

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<sup>70</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Dim Body, Dazzling Body,” in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, ed. Michel Feher et al. (New York, NY: Provincial Graphics, 1989): 19.

perfection of that which remains eternally accomplished in the plenitude of itself, and the incompleteness and imperfection of that which is divided, dispersed, partial, transitory, perishable.<sup>71</sup>

If the fundamental difference between the divine and human body is immortality and permanence on the divine side, then Prometheus' position as victim of Zeus' unrelenting retribution in *Prometheus Bound* addresses exactly this issue: the suffering of an immortal god, who is not in danger of dying, but is still exposed to pain. Prometheus' pain does not seem to be alleviated in any way by the fact that he is a god. In fact, he repeatedly refers, complaining about his treatment by Zeus and the abuse that he, himself a god, is subjected to for a deed that, to him, seems perfectly ethical. Moreover, he expresses that his immortality is amplifying his pain (by the thought of an eternal pain, that cannot be ended by death) when he is confronted with Io, who is a mortal:

**Io**

What gain have I then in life? Why did I not hurl myself straightaway from this rugged rock, so that I was dashed to earth and freed from all my sufferings? It is better to die once and for all than linger out all my days in misery.

**Prometheus**

Ah, you would hardly bear my agonies to whom it is not foredoomed to die; for death would have freed me from my sufferings. But now no limit to my tribulations has been appointed until Zeus is hurled from his sovereignty.<sup>72</sup>

For Io, there is still the option of death, which she can choose, so her agency is

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<sup>71</sup> Vernant, *Dim Body*, 21.

<sup>72</sup> Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 747-756.

not completely severed. Prometheus, however, does not have such a luxury. He is thus in a position which demands the tragic spectator's attention, who can empathize with his suffering, which makes him more pitiful than a human. But still, the question remains of Zeus' authority, who makes a point by punishing Prometheus in order to assert his power. The play seems to have an implicit subversive thread running through it, but in terms of the notion of pain, it appears that there is a process that Prometheus has to go through in order to authenticate Zeus' system of law in the two worlds, which he has disturbed, but also to expose the fact that inexhaustible vital energy, atemporality and sacred existence are not tested by death, but by pain. The limit that exposes the body, human or divine, is not that of life, but that of pain—here inflicted through torture, isolation, oppression and the removal of agency.

### **3.1.2 Torture**

Thus, the imposition of order, substantiated through torture, is what makes pain for Prometheus undeniably concrete. This is also made clear from the beginning of the play, in Kratos' order to Hephaestus:

And now, Hephaestus, yours is the charge to observe the mandates laid upon you by the Father—to clamp this miscreant upon the high craggy rocks in shackles of binding adamant that cannot be broken. For your own flower, flashing fire, source of all arts, he has purloined and bestowed upon mortal creatures. Such is his offence; for this he is bound to make requital to the gods, so that he may learn to bear with the



sovereignty of Zeus and cease his man-loving ways.<sup>73</sup>

Zeus' punishment is carried through Kratos, Bia and Hephaestus, all immortals, and, while the first two are willing participants in the torture, Hephaestus is reluctant and fearful. The language used by Kratos to describe Prometheus, especially the pejorative *λεωργόν* (a villain) establishes the structure of torture from the first lines. As Elaine Scarry notes, there are two aspects of torture, both of which are exemplified here, in Kratos' command, namely a physical act and a verbal one.<sup>74</sup> In this example, the action of inflicting pain is expressed through the verb *ὀχμάσαι* (infinitive aorist of *ὀχμάζω*—to grip, bind; also used in relation to binding animals in Euripides) and through the emphatic description of the instrument of torture: *ἀδαμαντίνων δεσμῶν ἐν ἀρρήκτοις πέδαις*<sup>75</sup> (unbroken fetters of adamant chains). The verbal part of torture is carried out through the reiteration of the reason for the torture and the reinforcement of Zeus' authority. Prometheus, who is silent throughout the first part, where a reluctant Hephaestus is binding him, is subjected to the torture without being interrogated directly. This annuls his voice, but also implies his lack of direct interaction with the agents of power—he is not allowed to appeal his treatment. After the binding is completed and Kratos and Bia are not on stage, Prometheus is given a voice and he can narrate his own story,

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<sup>73</sup> Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 2-11.

<sup>74</sup> Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 28.

<sup>75</sup> Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 6.

which he does twice—fonce or the Oceanids and once for Io. His story and interactions with the Chorus, Ocean and Io expose an organization of powers which justifies his actions, but also depict him as a vulnerable, suffering victim of a new, power-hungry ruler:

As soon as he had seated himself upon his father's throne, he immediately assigned to the deities their several privileges and apportioned to them their proper powers. But of wretched mortals he took no notice, desiring to bring the whole race to an end and create a new one in its place. Against this purpose none dared make stand except me— I only had the courage; I saved mortals so that they did not descend, blasted utterly, to the house of Hades. This is why I am bent by such grievous tortures, painful to suffer, piteous to behold. I who gave mortals first place in my pity, I am deemed unworthy to win this pity for myself, but am in this way mercilessly disciplined, a spectacle that shames the glory of Zeus.<sup>76</sup>

While in Hesiod's *Works and Days* Prometheus' punishment is depicted in order to show how a mighty Zeus punishes his unruly subordinates, here he is the new despot, who abuses his powers in order to impose his new rule. The central element in Prometheus' story is pity, by means of which he differentiates himself from Zeus. Scarry argues that it is precisely in the case of unstable, new power that acts of cruelty such as torture are most prevalent:

The physical pain is so incontestably real that it seems to confer its quality of "incontestable reality" on that power that has brought it into being. It is, of course, precisely because the reality of that power is so highly contestable, the regime so unstable, that torture is being used.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Aescylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 230-243.

<sup>77</sup> Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 27.

When a regime is new (and, thus, unstable), torture is inflicted not on random citizens, but to those who constitute a danger for the regime. Prometheus' story in *Prometheus Bound* differs from the one told by Hesiod, although Aeschylus takes his inspiration from Hesiod's account. Prometheus is a Titan here, the son of Ge. Why would Prometheus, through granting humans fire, be a danger to Zeus is difficult to answer directly, but Mark Griffith tries an explanation that is consistent with the play:

Along with P.'s new parentage come two major innovations, both involving P.'s knowledge of the future. First, the dramatist has transferred to P. the role performed by Ge in Hesiod's *Titanomachy*, that of providing the crucial advice which enabled Zeus and the Olympians to defeat the Titans (...). Secondly, P. is now endowed with a further piece of knowledge upon which the survival of Zeus' rule depends. The origin of this motif may lie in Hesiod's account of Zeus' marriage with Metis, and the birth of Athena, in which Ge again provided vital advice (Th. 886-900); but the more immediate source appears to be Pind. I. 8. 27ff (...) where Themis saves Zeus and Poseidon from trying to marry Thetis, by telling them of the prophecy that Thetis will bear a son mightier than his father (so the gods marry her off to Peleus). In combining this motif with the story of P., the author of *Prom.* has added a new dimension to the struggle between P. and Zeus: indeed, P.'s foreknowledge becomes the key to the resolution of the whole drama.<sup>78</sup>

Griffith alludes to the fact that Prometheus' stealing of the fire is not the sole reason for Zeus' wrath. Whatever his motives are, there is definitely not much said in *Prometheus Bound* by any of the characters to project a benevolent image of Zeus. He is depicted as a severe and cruel ruler, especially after Io's

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<sup>78</sup> Mark Griffith, "Introduction" to *Prometheus Bound*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 5-6.

account of her misfortunes, at 640-686, where Zeus' lust is the cause of all her suffering. But in Aeschylus' play, all gods are compassionate to Prometheus' fate, which raises several questions. There is no account in the whole play, other than in the beginning, in Kratos' orders, where Zeus' actions are condoned. All characters who come in contact with Prometheus are sympathetic to the hero and, while fearful, they never explicitly agree with Zeus' punishment. In fact the Chorus, comprised of Oceanus' daughters, uses harsh words to condemn Zeus' behaviour and the way in which he exercises his power:

**Chorus**

Who of the gods is so hard of heart as to exult in this? Who does not sympathize with your woes—save only Zeus? But he in malice, has set his soul inflexibly and keeps in subjection the race sprung from Uranus; nor will he stop, until he has satiated his soul or another seizes his impregnable empire by some device of guile.<sup>79</sup>

By emphasizing the harshness of Zeus' rule, the effect obtained is that Prometheus, and along with him the whole human race (whose well-being is the reasons for the hero's suffering, so the public, in connecting with Prometheus, is "bound" to feel some guilt), is subjected to Zeus' harsh rule and is in danger of suffering the same as the hero. Although Prometheus' suffering is intense and his indignation even more so, the narration of his story seems to alleviate some of the pain, for he is convinced that what he has done to save the human race is justified. Moreover, since he can foresee the future, he is even alluding to a future clemency act towards Zeus. Prometheus' sufferings and Zeus' torture all

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<sup>79</sup> Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 160-167.

function within a system, which they both know well. It seems that in this system Zeus is not the all-powerful ruler that Hesiod portrays.

### **3.1.3 *Ananke***

As I was discussing in the second chapter of this thesis, one notion that binds many of the tragic elements together is that of *ananke*—necessity. The gods are also subjected to this system and Prometheus, who has the gift of foresight, knows well that there is an end to his ordeal and that Zeus is not completely in charge of Prometheus' fate. Although Prometheus is bound to suffer in space, in his present, he is still able to come out of the moment of his suffering and project himself to a future where the situation is changed and he is no longer in a vulnerable position, tied to a rock. Such moments, contrasted with those moments during which he is completely subjected to the now of the pain, contextualize and explain a world where things are everchanging, even for gods. Several narratives are used to explain and alleviate pain. Such is this account, which, through a projection in the future, Prometheus counters the harshness of a despotic Zeus in the present with a wiser, more humane ruler:

#### **Prometheus**

I know that Zeus is harsh and keeps justice in his own hands; but nevertheless one day his judgement will soften, when he has been crushed in the way that I know. Then, calming down his stubborn wrath,

he shall at last bond with me in union and friendship, as eager as I am to welcome him.<sup>80</sup>

According to this, Zeus himself, through the necessity of suffering, will be transformed and will create a bond with the Titan whom he is now torturing. Since foresight allows Prometheus to access whichever point he chooses on the time axis, his pain is also put in perspective. However, pain, when it is intense, binds one fully to the present moment, so the fact that Prometheus is able to look into the future means that he is either not in intense physical pain or that he has passed a limit of pain through which he is able to function in a liminal space and time. In Prometheus' case, I would argue that the former is the case, since his pain, although hard to endure and extended throughout a long period of time is never expressed as intensely as Io's pain.

While on the subject of *ananke*, one may wonder whether there is such an idea in tragedy as a necessity of pain. In Prometheus' case, his suffering is not contextualized in order to explain such a necessity, but he does give an account of his reasons for the crime that put him in chains:

**Prometheus**

No, do not think it is from pride or even from wilfulness that I am silent. Painful thoughts devour my heart as I behold myself maltreated in this way. And yet who else but I definitely assigned their prerogatives to these upstart gods? But I do not speak of this; for my tale would tell you nothing except what you know. Still, listen to the miseries that beset mankind—how they were witless before and I made them have sense and

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<sup>80</sup> Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 189-195.

endowed them with reason. I will not speak to upbraid mankind but to set forth the friendly purpose that inspired my blessing.

First of all, though they had eyes to see, they saw to no avail; they had ears, but they did not understand; but, just as shapes in dreams, throughout their length of days, without purpose they wrought all things in confusion. They had neither knowledge of houses built of bricks and turned to face the sun nor yet of work in wood; but dwelt beneath the ground like swarming ants, in sunless caves. They had no sign either of winter or of flowery spring or of fruitful summer, on which they could depend but managed everything without judgment, until I taught them to discern the risings of the stars and their settings, which are difficult to distinguish.

Yes, and numbers, too, chiefest of sciences, I invented for them, and the combining of letters, creative mother of the Muses' arts, with which to hold all things in memory. I, too, first brought brute beasts beneath the yoke to be subject to the collar and the pack-saddle, so that they might bear in men's stead their heaviest burdens; and to the chariot I harnessed horses and made them obedient to the rein, to be an image of wealth and luxury. It was I and no one else who invented the mariner's flaxen-winged car that roams the sea.

Wretched that I am—such are the arts I devised for mankind, yet have myself no cunning means to rid me of my present suffering.<sup>81</sup>

Prometheus is the intermediary between the heaven and earth; he is also the patron of the arts on Earth—he creates, in human physical terms, a world that did not exist and for this he must suffer. However, while he has the power to help the human race and create a new world, which, depicted in these verses resembles a utopia, he is not capable of liberating himself from a breaking-down of his own world through pain. The world that Prometheus is proud to have created is developed in corporeal terms first, then in the extensions of the bodies. The human world is an undefined mass that Prometheus shapes into an

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<sup>81</sup> Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 436-471.

orderly universe, but he must suffer for his creation. He appears, here, as a self-effacing humanitarian. However, as he is in great suffering because of his actions, he is also, so to speak, the sufferer of those actions. While he is telling his story, Zeus' rule is gradually left in the background and another narrative emerges: that of the necessity of suffering. To suffer as an effect of an action is to be objected to that action. Pain, however, brings actuality and presence back, taking the sufferer out of the equation. After exercising his power and creating a world, setting this newly-created world to be the object that is being constructed and organized, Prometheus is himself objectified by Zeus through torture. Prometheus recognizes that *ananke* is such that gods and humans alike must abide by its rules, as he explains bellow:

**Chorus**

Do not benefit mortals beyond reason and disregard your own distress; although, I am confident that you will be freed from these bonds and will have power in no way inferior to Zeus.

**Prometheus**

Not in this way is Fate, who brings all to fulfillment, destined to complete this course. Only when I have been bent by pangs and tortures infinite am I to escape my bondage. Skill is weaker by far than Necessity.

**Chorus**

Who then is the helmsman of Necessity?

**Prometheus**

The three-shaped Fates and mindful Furies.

**Chorus**

Can it be that Zeus has less power than they do?



**Prometheus**

Yes, in that even he cannot escape what is foretold.

**Chorus**

Why, what is fated for Zeus except to hold eternal sway?

**Prometheus**

This you must not learn yet; do not be over-eager.

**Chorus**

It is some solemn secret, surely, that you enshroud in mystery.

**Prometheus**

Think of some other subject, for it is not the proper time to speak of this. No matter what, this must be kept concealed; for it is by safeguarding it that I am to escape my dishonorable bonds and outrage.<sup>82</sup>

Zeus, Prometheus, Io, all mortals and everyone else are subjected to *ananke*, but as I was explaining in the first chapter, necessity does not have a set of clear rules; nor do we, readers, have enough information to build a system of necessity in tragedy. Moreover, *ananke* is not a concept that intermediates, that gives access to an abstract notion or space. Here, it seems that necessity is used to expose the vulnerability, or even finiteness of both gods and humans—it is a mysterious entity that does not allow aggrandizing self-projections, nor inflated egos, such as Zeus', to rule in confidence for too long. It is a concept that, together with pain, transcends extensions, bringing back the concrete, the real.

**3.1.4 *Pathei Mathos***

Another idea in light of which Prometheus' and Io's sufferings can be

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<sup>82</sup> Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 507-525.

interpreted is *πάθει μάθος*, or learning through suffering. This following passage in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* illustrates the concept, but he applies it to mortals only:

Zeus, who sets mortals on the path to understanding, Zeus, who has established as a fixed law that “wisdom comes by suffering.” But even as trouble, bringing memory of pain, drips over the mind in sleep, so wisdom comes to men, whether they want it or not.<sup>83</sup>

Here, Zeus is the one who imparts the suffering through which understanding is achieved—so a process of exposure to suffering that leads to wisdom. In Prometheus' case, his pain does not lead to understanding—there is no process through which he achieves greater wisdom. Nor is there such a process of suffering through which higher understanding and, perhaps, the alleviation of pain could be achieved, in the case of Io. In fact, Io's final lines express the pinnacle of pain in the whole play. As she goes off to continue her wanderings, she wails:

**Io**

Oh! Oh! Alas! Once again convulsive pain and frenzy, striking my brain, inflame me. I am stung by the gadfly's barb, unforged by fire. My heart knocks at my ribs in terror; my eyeballs roll wildly round and round. I am carried out of my course by a fierce blast of madness; I've lost all mastery over my tongue, and a stream of turbid words beats recklessly against the billows of wretched doom.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, trans. Herbert Weir Smyth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), 176-181.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 877-886.

Io's character in *Prometheus Bound* has been discussed widely<sup>85</sup> and her role in the play is not the focus of this discussion, but her pain does bring up several important points. Since, as I noted above, her pain seems to be more intense than Prometheus', but she does have the alternative of death, she is, in a grotesque shape and state, the epiphany of suffering in the three plays I am analyzing. However, her condition is such that she cannot learn from it; there is no *pathei mathos*, no positivist notion of suffering to be brought forth here. I conclude, in relation to the much-vehiculated notion of learning through adversity in Greek tragedy that Aeschylus did not mean to depict pain as a process of understanding. It is possible, however, that both he and Sophocles saw pain as an element of purification from ambition or projection outside of the body. Io, for instance, is a beautiful maiden, on the brink of sexual maturation, who is metamorphosed into a cow and subjected to constant pain and endless wanderings: a most cruel punishment. But through her pain, she is able to access the στρυγνῆς κύμασιν ἄτης (the billows of wretched doom), which seems to refer to Hades or to death. Io's pain can be seen as purifying by touching the limits of everything that is corporeal function. However, this fragment comes after Prometheus' account of her future, which gives hope—so her pain is contextualized differently, although she is constantly testing the limits of life in her condition.

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<sup>85</sup> For example in Stephen White, "Io's World: Intimations of Theodicy in *Prometheus Bound*," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 121 (2001): 107-140.

### **3.2 *Philoctetes***

*Philoctetes* is Sophocles' play that focuses on the main character's pain. Philoctetes is not a Greek hero in the traditional sense. In this play, he is defined against Odysseus, who plays the role of a cunning diplomat, sending Neoptolemus to steal the bow from its rightful owner. The explanation is that the greater cause, the state of a nation, is more important than Philoctetes' fate. Adamantly, the hero refuses to join Odysseus, whom he has a great deal of enmity towards, after he had been abandoned on a deserted island, with a puss-infected wound on his foot, by the Homeric hero. Philoctetes is the suffering hero par excellence, but there is nothing majestic or heroic in his pain. However, because he is none of these things (a warrior, conqueror, diplomat, etc.), he is the personification of the humbled hero; pain has taught him the opposite of the narcissistic grandeur of the epic hero. He is always about to have an attack of pain, so he does not spend more energy than he must in order to feed himself and survive. He is stuck on the island of Lemnos, forlorn at the end of the world.

#### **3.2.1 The Eremitic Space**

In the opening lines of *Philoctetes*, when Odysseus introduces the suffering body of the hero and makes very clear his strangeness, by placing him in the deserted land of Lemnos, he says, speaking to Neoptolemus:

This<sup>86</sup> is the coast of the land of sea-girt Lemnos, a land untrodden by men and uninhabited. Here, oh Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, one brought up by the man who is mightiest among Greeks, that I exposed at some time Poeas' son, from Malis, being appointed to do so by the rulers, because his foot was dripping with the disease that was eating through it. We could attempt neither libation nor burnt sacrifice without hindrance, but he was continually filling the camp with his savage curses, shrieking, moaning.<sup>87</sup>

Philoctetes is defined here as an other—a man who has become a strange, unruly and bothersome beast. Expressed by Sophocles directly from the first lines, his alienation is represented through an analogy with the desolate surroundings of the exposed sick man. The reason for his desolation is the fact that Philoctetes does not allow the others to carry on with their usual activities: “ὅτ’ οὔτε λοιβῆς ἡμῖν οὔτε θυμάτων παρῆν ἐκίλοις προσθιγεῖν”<sup>88</sup> (“we could not attempt neither libation nor burnt sacrifice without hindrance”). Disease takes over the whole life of the hero, his behavior is transformed, as he is reduced to a shrieking, irritating being who gets in the way of others. In fact, there is a synecdochic relationship between pain and man: his usual surroundings, actions, his range of motion and most importantly, his agency, are all reduced to here and now, by pain and the inarticulate expression of it.

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<sup>86</sup> As noted in the first chapter, the translations used here for the *Philoctetes* sections are from: Aeschylus, *The Women of Trachis and Philoctetes*, trans. Robert Torrance. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin), 1966.

<sup>87</sup> Sophocles, *Philoctetes*, ed. Sir Richard Jebb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898), 1-11.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

Philoctetes' isolation on Lemnos as Rush Rehm shows in his essay *The Play of Space: Spatial Transformation in Greek tragedy*, is similar to the experience of a patient who is hospitalized, an experience that amplifies isolation. The hospitalized person, just like Philoctetes, is removed from the community; his clothes, through which he is connected to society, are taken away. To come back to the aforementioned mind-body opposition which ceases to exist when pain takes over: Philoctetes is not capable of transcending his body, even when he wants to do so; he cannot control or contain the suffering. His whole being becomes an expression of pain. It is almost as if pain were an entity that takes over the hero's body, a demon that possesses it. In these opening lines, the vulnerability of the sufferer becomes apparent: the others cannot and do not empathize with Philoctetes because firstly—it is not possible to truly understand another's suffering and secondly—because they can no longer participate in life; and life must keep unfolding. The verbs that describe Philoctetes' behavior (βοῶν, στενάζων—shrieking, moaning), as well as the very concrete and almost shocking mention, in line seven, of the cause of pain (νόσῳ καταστάζοντα διαβόρω πόδα—his foot was dripping with the disease that was eating through it), make clear the fact that Philoctetes has stopped behaving in accordance with the laws of society because of his pain. He is entirely isolated. This is what Leder calls “an epistemic block”—a wall that is erected between sufferer and family, friends and the community, when pain intervenes. This gap created between the sufferer and the world can only be solved by someone who

takes the role of healer: someone who listens, understands and tolerates the suffering; someone who makes sense of the inaccurate language used by the sufferer to explain his disease and to express his pain.

The following passage starts at line 1081, after Philoctetes had his bow stolen. He previously refused to follow Odysseus and Neoptolemus to Troy because the one rule that Philoctetes abides by, even while suffering greatly, is the one according to which his friends are worthy of praise, while his enemies of hatred and revenge. Philoctetes addresses his place of dwelling directly, in language that seems to be consoling, while emphasizing his own desolation, through the association between the bleakness of the place, his disease and his lack of agency, resulting from the fact that his bow, his only valuable belonging, had been stolen earlier.

### **Philoctetes**

Oh, hollow in the cavernous rock, hot (in summer) and icy cold (in winter), so I was not, after all, going to leave you, never, wretch that I am, but you will be conscious of me also (as I am) dying! Ah, me, me! Oh dwelling much filled with pain, the pain coming from wretched me. What will be for me daily? What hope associated with the provisions of food, from where, will I, wretched, meet with?<sup>89</sup>

One sentence in particular stands out in the above-quoted passage: “λά μοι καὶ θνήσκοντι συνείσει” (but you will be conscious of me also (as I am) dying!). As in a hospital, where most people spend their last days, Philoctetes is assuming that

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<sup>89</sup> Aeschylus, *Philoctetes*, 1081-1091.

his end will come on the island of Lemnos, where he spent most of his sick days. The following two verses strengthen this analogy: “ὦ πληρέστατον αὔλιον λύπας τᾶς π’ ἐμοῦ τάλαν” (Oh, dwelling much filled with pain, the pain coming from wretched me). The island, Philoctetes feels, is filled with pain, which comes from himself, since his pain existed before he arrived in Lemnos. The island, however, has become like him, even part of him, through the transference of pain; now it is a place associated with disease and suffering, just like a hospital. Lemnos reflects the patient’s state of mind (and body). In the following passage, which comes at the end of the play, after Heracles has commanded him to follow Neoptolemus and Odysseus to Troy, where he will be cured of his disease, Philoctetes turns again towards Lemnos, his place of suffering and transformation:

### **Philoctetes**

Come now, let me call to this land as I depart. Farewell, oh house that shared watch with me. Farewell, nymphs living in the waters and the meadows, and the male pounding of the sea against the promontory, where often in the recess (of the cave), my head was wetted by the south wind’s blasts, and where many times Mt. Hermaion mount sent me, in my suffering, a groaning lament in response to my voice’s groaning lament. But now, oh you clear springs and Lycian water, we are leaving you, leaving you indeed, never having entered on this belief! Farewell, sea-surrounded land of Lemnos, and send me on a fair voyage without blame, send me to the destination that mighty Fate appoints and the will of my friends, and by the all-subduing god who has accomplished these things.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Aeschylus, *Philoctetes*, 1452-1468.



The imagery used to describe Lemnos this time belongs to the surrounding nature. These aspects have not been mentioned in the play until the end. Lemnos is, up to this point, a place laden with pain. The emotional farewell, emphasized by the repetition in “λείπομεν ὑμᾶς, λείπομεν ἤδη” (“we are leaving you, leaving you indeed”) shows that suffering does, in fact, help create connections. Here, Lemnos is almost anthropomorphized, or at least animated by lively nymphs, winds and waters, in constant movement, whereas before it was the place where Philoctetes dwelled in pain, barely able to provide for himself. Among the different methods of employing language in order to depict the hero’s state of pain in this play is the employment of the physical space, which changes in accordance with his suffering. Gaston Bachelard, a twentieth century French phenomenologist, writes in *The Poetics of Space*, that a place of dwelling, a home, is altered by the imagination (and in the case of Philoctetes, by his suffering) of the dweller:

All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home. In the course of this work, we shall see that the imagination functions in this direction whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter: we shall see the imagination build “walls” of improbable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection—or, just the contrary, tremble behind thick walls, mistrust the staunchest ramparts. In short, in the most interminable of dialectics, the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter. He experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams.<sup>91</sup>

Therefore, if Lemnos is the house of Philoctetes’ suffering, the reader or

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<sup>91</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992), 5.

spectator can assess the state of the hero also by paying attention to the description of his physical surroundings. From the interior of the two-mouthed cave, harsh, either too cold or too hot, where the hero is stuck most of the time when he is in intense pain, to the outside, as described in the above-quoted passage—the dialectics of inside and outside—a dichotomy inherent to phenomenology, show that pain and suffering are expressed in a multitude of ways in ancient tragedy.

### 3.2.2 The Limits of Language

Building towards a theory of pain, Elaine Scarry argues that the experience of pain escapes language, abandoning the victim confused and muted by its incommunicability. Her argument is based on the assertion that language is destroyed by pain: the experience is forceful and words fail as soon as one is exposed to that kind of experience. It is impossible, according to her, to find a manner of expressing pain that accurately articulates its severity. As Scarry puts it: “physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.” There are multiple examples of this process of reversion in *Philoctetes*, but the episode where there is both a focus on the sounds and cries starts at line 732. Scarry draws on this particular example in her book:

[T]hus Sophocles’s agonized Philoctetes utters a cascade of changing cries and shrieks that in the original Greek are accommodated by an array of

formal words (some of them twelve syllables long), but that at least one translator found could only be rendered in English by the uniform syllable “Ah” followed by variations in punctuation (Ah! Ah!!!!). But even if one were to enumerate many additional examples, such cultural differences, taken collectively, would themselves constitute only a very narrow margin of variation and would thus in the end work to expose and confirm the universal sameness of the central problem, a problem that originates much less in the inflexibility of any one language or in the shyness of any one culture than in the utter rigidity of pain itself: its resistance to language is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is.<sup>92</sup>

The passage Scarry refers to is the following one:

**Philoctetes:** Ai, ai!

**Neoptolemus:** What is it?

**Philoctetes:** Nothing terrible, but go ahead, oh child.

**Neoptolemus:** Is it pain from the disease that is (constantly) affecting you?

**Philoctetes:** No, indeed, not at all. But just now I think I feel relief. Oh, Gods!

**Neoptolemus:** Why do you call the gods, groaning thus?

**Philoctetes:** That they may come as saviours and kind towards us. Ai! Ai!

**Neoptolemus:** What is happening to you? Speak, do not keep so silent. It is evident that that you are suffering in some way.

**Philoctetes:** I am destroyed, boy, I can never conceal my suffering when you are close. Ah! Ah! It goes through me, goes through! Oh, the pain, the misery! I am destroyed, child, I am consumed! Aiaiaiaiaia! Ah, by the gods, child, I beg you, if you have a sword ready to hand, strike the top of my foot, cut it off right away! Do not spare my life! Go ahead, child!

**Neoptolemus:** What has come on you thus suddenly new in regard to which you make so much howling and groaning over yourself?

**Philoctetes:** You know, oh child.

**Neoptolemus:** What is it?

**Philoctetes:** You know, boy.

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<sup>92</sup> Scarry, *The Body of Pain*, 5.

**Neoptolemus:** What ails you? I do not know.

**Philoctetes:** How do you not know? Aiaiaiaiai!

**Neoptolemus:** Yes, terrible is the burden of the disease.

**Philoctetes:** Terrible that cannot be spoken! Oh, have pity upon me!<sup>93</sup>

Here, exposing the inexpressibility of pain is at the core of this text, since Philoctetes cannot even respond to Neoptolemus' questions, (for example: "τί τοὺς θεοὺς ᾧδ' ναστένων καλεῖς;"—"Why do you call the gods, groaning thus?"). Philoctetes experiences a complete disconnection from any cognitive process that could help him explain or narrate his experience. Neoptolemus is forced, thus, to remain outside of the suffering and that causes, again, an extreme alienation between the sufferer and anyone who could offer compassion (which means, literally, "to suffer with"). While the disease is "δεινὸν γὰρ οὐδὲ ῥητόν" ("terrible that it cannot be told"), a story of pain is still told, albeit through inarticulate shrieks and phrases that are outside of the customary realm, like Philoctetes' pleas to have his ankle cut off. A shift occurs here between spheres of language: although the language is not accurate, it does express something for the hermeneut, for the one who has the inclination, training or time to listen and make sense of it.

In *Philoctetes*, the vocabulary for pain is not extensive ("ἄλγος" is used mainly) and Sophocles uses approximations quite often (for example he uses "νόσημα", disease, to express the pain that Philoctetes feels). However, it is important to mention that in Greek, there are several words for pain, each with

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<sup>93</sup> Aeschylus, *Philoctetes*, 732-756.

a different connotation: λύπη, which is the most concrete use, meaning “pain in the body,” ἀνία, meaning “sorrow, distress, trouble” and ἄχος, “pain, distress” used to express mental anguish, but also physical suffering<sup>94</sup>. These facets of pain also have their corresponding daimons.

To make use of an analogy—deciphering the language of pain is like interpreting signs, giving sense to the incomprehensible. In the ancient Greek context, interpreting the language of pain is quite natural. The Greek vocabulary of the body is defined by multiplicity, even when expressed in its entirety. Words used for body parts (for example καρδιά - heart, πρόσωπον- face) are used with a metonymic value: a part for the whole. The close relationship of dependency between the physical and the psychological is done within an intention that absorbs the body parts within itself.<sup>95</sup> This vocabulary, then, constitutes a code that allowed the Greeks to express and think about their relationship with themselves, but also their relationship with the others. It also expresses the relationship with the divine, with the gods, the ones that Philoctetes calls to in the midst of his fits of pain, the gods who, should not be forgotten, have a physical body as well, even though it is one that does not die and does not suffer. Therefore, this symbolic system represented through language and body parts is marked by the signs of limitation, deficiency,

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<sup>94</sup> For these terms, as well as for most of the Greek words in this thesis, I am using *The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*, 8<sup>th</sup> Edition, ed. edited by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1897).

<sup>95</sup> Vernant, *Dim Body*, 23.

disease, a perishable body; one that reminds humans, especially through suffering, that they are inferior to the divine super-body.

### 3.2.4 *Trachiniae*: Pain and Death by Centaur

When pain does not close the sufferer inside his own body or in an eremitic space, when the hero in pain is not silenced by pain or reduced to a shrieking creature, he is exposed through pain with all his defining traits and passions amplified. Such is the case with Heracles in the *Trachiniae*, where he meets his end by wearing the poisoned cloak sent him by his wife, Deianira. The cloak is sent as a gift before the completion of his *nostos*, but the jealous Deianira adds onto it an ointment made from the clotted blood of Nessus, the lustful centaur killed by Heracles because, while carrying her across a stream, he made an offensive advance (“ψαύει ματαίαις χερσίν”<sup>96</sup>—“he touched her with indecent hands”). Nessus deceitfully advised Deianira to store the blood accumulating around his wound and give it to Heracles in case of urgent need of a love charm because “ἔσται φρενός σοι τοῦτο κηλητήριον/ τῆς Ἡρακλείας, ὥστε μήτιν’ εἰσιδὼν/ στέρξει γυναῖκα κείνος ἀντὶ σοῦ πλέον”<sup>97</sup> (“and this will be a love-charm for the heart of Heracles, so that he will not ever love anyone he looks on more than you”). The time has arrived when such a charm would be useful, since Heracles has fallen in love and even send home his new mistress, the beautiful Iole, before arriving back to Trachis himself. Deianira anxiously hatches a plan to get

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<sup>96</sup> Sophocles, *The Trachiniae*, ed. Sir Richard Jebb. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1892), 565.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 575-577.

the ointment, by means of a cloak, to Heracles, who is at the time on the island of Euboea, celebrating his conquest over the city Oechalia (Iole's home city). The ointment is in fact a deadly poison; Heracles is in focus as a character only after the contact with the poison. Cypris is deeply involved in all of this—she is mentioned by the Chorus several times (497-506, 860)—as this is a play of soaring passions. When pain appears in the equation, at 765, the spirits have already been lit by what has transpired in Heracles' absence. The moment of contact with the cloak is a valuable one to look at, since Heracles' first reaction when exposed to pain is significant for what follows in the play:

At first - oh wretched man! - he prayed in calm  
of mind, rejoicing in his lovely garment;  
but when the gory flame began to blaze  
up from the offerings on the sappy pine,  
sweat covered all his body, and the robe  
clung to his sides as if glued by a craftsman  
to every joint; and from his very bones  
shot up spasmodic, stinging pangs: the poison,  
like some detested, bloody snake's, devoured him.  
Then he cried out aloud for ill-starred Lichas,  
who was in no way guilty of your crime,  
to ask what treachery made him bring the robe;  
but he, unlucky man! knew not, and answered  
he had but brought the gift which you had given.  
When Heracles heard this a penetrating  
convulsive spasm clutched his lungs, and he  
seized Lichas where the ankle joins the foot  
and dashed him on a rock swept by the sea  
so that the white brain seeped among his hairs,  
and all his shattered skull was bloodied over.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae*, 763-782.

Firstly, the dramatic transition from Heracles' calm state of mind just before a sacrifice (however ironic that juxtaposition may seem) to the state of pain, with all the physical signs, seen by Hyllus, his son (the above-quoted passage is in a longer accusatory monologue that Hyllus addresses to Denaira) is remarkable style-wise. Sophocles builds up the moment of contact with pain and the impact is quite effective. The pain is announced by the “φλόξ” (flame) and the first sign of pain are “ἰδρὸς ἀνήει χρωτί” (sweat rolled over all his skin). Until here, the language describing pain is the same one used to describe love. As the poison starts to take effect, the words used by Hyllus to depict Heracles' agony stay in the same semantic field: “προσιπτύσεται πλευραῖσιν ἀρτίκολλος” (the close-fitting robe embraced his sides), he is shaken by “ἀδαγμὸς ἀντίσπαστος” (spasmodic pain), and, the cluster of images and references “εἶτα φοινίας ἐχθρᾶς ἐχίδνης ἰὸς ὡς ἐδαίνυτο” (then the poison feasted on him like that of a hated viper's). The viper reference sends to Hydra, whose killing by Heracles constitutes one of his labours. The Hydra is also referenced at 573-4, when Nessus explains that Heracles' arrow, which is killing him, is dipped in Hydra's poisonous blood. As Deianira gathers the blood around the wound, which makes its way to Heracles to poison him, it seems that the circularity of the narrative is indicating that Heracles is given his due, while Deianira is only an intermediary in a greater design. Heracles is Zeus' son, a demi-god (deified after death) and under constant watch by the gods, but here the workings of *ananke* are always in the



background of the plot. Nor is Lichas guilty of any crime, as Hyllus points out, but Heracles' pain is externalized and directed at him. Lichas' gory death foreshadows the ending of the play and the way Heracles' pain is manifested subsequently.

Heracles feels pain just like the other tragic characters—he is weakened, exposed and made vulnerable just like Philoctetes and Prometheus. In fact, his experience of pain is even more humiliating than that of Philoctetes seen in light of the heroic greatness of his past, coming after the onerous toils that he had to endure; he is reduced to a powerless, whimpering or groaning creature and, most disgracing of all, resembling a girl:

Go, child, be bold! And pity me, for I  
am pitiful indeed as I lie sobbing  
and moaning like a virgin! No one living  
has ever seen me act like this before;  
for I have never groaned at my misfortunes  
till now, when I have proved myself a woman.<sup>99</sup>

Before the moment of pain and death depicted in the *Trachiniae*, Heracles had put a lot of effort into proving himself to be a virile demi-god, the true son of Zeus. It is, therefore, ironic and not accidental that in his pain and death he would be shown in his most defenseless, weak posture, which he is, in fact, trying to counter by becoming more and more tyrannical. It is also not accidental that the first time we take account of Heracles, as he comes into the

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<sup>99</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae*, 983.

play as a character, he is unconscious, then, waking up, realizes the agony he is in, desires to die in order to end it—these are all reactions to pain that are within the range of typical behaviour. However, as the pain intensifies, Heracles shows a vicious, bestial side. Penelope Biggs argues in her essay *The Disease Theme in Sophocles* that Heracles' agony is defined by his lecherous nature, which is intensified by disease:

The disease of Heracles represents the intensification of the lust inherent in his nature; this meaning is correlated throughout with the “half-beast” imagery of the play, and shortly after this passage we have the mention of Nessus (555ff.), as if to reinforce the picture of Achelous. Nessus, who was not fighting for Deianeira on the honourable level of the marriage contest, is always *ho thēr* to her and to the chorus (556, 568, 662, 680, 707, 935); but later on we are reminded that the centaurs too are “double-natured” (1095). By the end of the play Nessus has poetically executed Heracles for the lust which had cost him his life at Heracles' hands. From victory over bull-god and centaur to hideous death in the poisoned robe is all too short a step, as short as that which in the chorus' minds separates the winning of Deianeira from the capture of Iole.<sup>100</sup>

Biggs' reading is accurate, but if we consider the other elements of the story (the fact that Heracles dies by his own poison or the reason of his death, which is his lust for Iole that prompts Deianeira to send him the toxic ointment), Heracles becomes the “half-beast,” while the cloak, an extension of his own body, turns against him. This, Heracles does not recognize, as he is blaming Deianeira for his agony, but his words describe that which inflicts pain, the poisonous cloak, as

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<sup>100</sup> Penelope Biggs, “Disease Theme in Sophocles' *Ajax*, *Philoctetes* and *Trachiniae*” *Classical Philology*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Oct., 1966), 228-9, with the mention that *ho thēr* (ὁ θήρ) is a beast of prey.

both outside and inside his body, taking over his entire organism:

Glued to my sides, it eats my flesh away  
 deep down within, and dwells inside my lungs  
 choking my breath: already it has drunk  
 my fresh warm blood and wasted my whole body,  
 binding me with unutterable chains.  
 And yet, no spearman on the battlefield,  
 no earth-born troop of Giants, no wild beast,  
 nor Greece, nor any foreign land which I  
 purged in my wanderings, could do this to me!  
 A woman - weak, not masculine by nature –  
 alone, without a sword, has vanquished me!<sup>101</sup>

That which was supposed to enflame Heracles' desire, the "κηλητήριο" (love-charm) falsely prescribed by Nessus, ends up killing him; the language used to describe it can also be, once more, the language of Eros. The great hero of the Greek world has apparently been destroyed by a woman, not in battle, as it would have been honourable. The duality is inherent in Heracles' persona, as it is in his fate and his pain. His agony exposes the contrasts represented in the last third of the play as extreme. Pain, in this case, takes the hero to the limits of his character, disclosing his egomania through a long psychosis that ends in a ritual of burning him alive—perhaps a purifying flaming, that frees Heracles of the burden of his ego.

In all three plays discussed above I have shown how pain can expose and actualize through both setting and forcing limits. Aeschylus and Sophocles were aware of the power pain held and used it to reveal that which cannot be

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<sup>101</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae*, 1044-1054.

expressed by means of the celebrated myths, which were well-known narratives in classical Greece. Rather, by using the myths everyone was familiar with and adding the testing element (the extreme contingency, the pain) and by putting emphasis, thus, on *ananke*, the poets were the emissaries of a different kind of teaching, perhaps an esoteric one. The exposure to pain is not done in tragedy, as I have emphasized before, as a manner of transcending the physical and connecting to the divine. Instead, pain in tragedy appears to work like a healing method, but not a healing in mundane terms; rather, the healing seems to be that of a spiritual type, which actualizes and sets one in the present, baring him of all extensions, pretence, covers, tricks and braveries. When confronting pain, the tragic characters are naked and the poets want the public to see their heroes in this condition.

## Conclusion and Further Considerations

I chose these three plays only for their textual treatment of pain, the palpable presentation of the circumstances of pain and the interconnectedness of the three characters in myth and tragedy. Heracles, for example, is Io's heir, the one who will eventually free Prometheus, as Prometheus himself announces in his prophecy, in a dialogue with the Chorus.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, Philoctetes carries Heracles' bow, given to him when he is the only one who accepts to light the pyre, burning and releasing Heracles from the suffering caused by the poisonous cloak, as depicted in the *Trachiniae*. One line of interpretation here, which could prove valuable in a future study, but does not fit confines of the argument in this thesis, is that pain is thus transferred from Heracles to Philoctetes through the bow—the only valuable belonging that Philoctetes has and relies on in his isolation on the island of Lemnos. These three heroes, all men, all virile warriors, have in common their exposed vulnerability. Tragedy, by using mythological variants, challenges mythological archetypes and in these three plays I am arguing that it does so by exposing the heroes to the experience of pain. There are several women figures in tragedy that I would like to look at in relation to pain in a future study, such as Cassandra in Aeschylus' *Agammemnon*, and Io in *Prometheus Bound*. Also, in Sophocles' extant plays, Antigone is a figure of suffering and anguish, who struggles against an unjust

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<sup>102</sup> Sophocles, *Prometheus Bound*, 907-927.

political authority, Jocasta in *Oedipus Rex*, as well as Electra. Although I am arguing, in the introduction to this thesis, for the exclusion of Euripides from a study of ancient pain, I do think that his plays are not utterly contaminated by Aristotle's advancement of plot and character as dominating concepts and I would like, in the future, to do a thorough analysis of several plays, such as *Medea*, *Hippolytus* and *Andromache*, where pain and suffering play a central role. In relation to this aspect, what this study lacks is a thorough textual analysis and a layer of gender theory that I am gesturing towards, but not addressing directly. As I explain in the introduction, I am choosing to focus here on discourse analysis, using this methodology to clean the slate for a fresher analysis, devoid of elements of dualism and Aristotelian categorization, which cloud a modern reception of tragedy. I am also wary of adding another layer of discourse on the ancient texts, one that is not necessarily compatible with the tragic sphere. For this reason, I am only suggesting and pointing to the gender aspects of these plays presently. I do think, however, that gender theories can add a dimension to a study of pain in tragedy that would open discourse and generate a productive discussion. Judith Butler's book *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* is a good example of how gender studies can aid a discussion of tragic figures. In my case, I would still like to focus, in any related future study, on the nucleus of pain in tragedy, as a notion of limit and on deconstructing any conceptual system before using it as lens for analysis.

Another aspect that I excluded here, one that is essential for a study of

pain, is that of the performance. This is perhaps the most problematic choice I had to make due to the space and time restriction. While many times I refer to the role of the spectator in tragedy, especially in relation to Aristotle's concepts, this is never thoroughly discussed in this thesis. One of the reasons for my choice is the fact that performance aspects in classical scholarship are mostly based on textual references and assumptive contextualization, meaning that we do not have access to concrete evidence that can ground studies of performance of Attic tragedy. However, there are many valuable studies that do explore the dynamics of performance and that advance compelling arguments. For example, David Wiles' work *Mask and Performance in Greek Tragedy: From Ancient Festival to Modern Experimentation* looks at performance in relation to ritual by considering the social and religious context of the tragedies. Wiles advances the idea that the mask is an instrument of disguising and manipulating the gaze, as well as playing an important role in the relation between actor and public. He uses, for his study, archaeological evidence, as well as anthropological assessment and textual confirmation. For a study of performance based mainly on textual evidence and, more specifically, on the analysis of prosody in Greek poetry, A. P. David's book *The Dance of the Muses: Choral Theory and Ancient Greek Poetics* is a valuable source. David develops a theory of accent, linking poetry to performance, more precisely to dance. He explains the purpose of his study thus:

[T]he phenomenon of agreement, between metrical ictus and word-level accent, leads us via a historical sourcing of this ictus, not, as in English, in an automatic linguistic pattern of prosodic alternation, but in the documented extra-linguistic phenomenon of dance, to the synthetic notion of choreia (χορεία). Analysed by Plato into its elements of ‘rhythm’ and ‘harmony’, χορεία becomes a rubric under which to contextualize and exploit the new theory of the accent. Accent corresponds to harmony and ictus to rhythm. We shall see that χορεία is a concept that opens new approaches, radically new and yet radically authentic, into the poetics of ancient poetry.<sup>103</sup>

This study is a good example of language-based scholarship that leads to performance studies related to Greek tragedy. By strengthening the link between metrics and χορεία, David advances the possibility of studying the ritualistic aspect of performance in tragedy.

Oliver Taplin’s book *Greek Tragedy in Action* provides a compelling introduction to the universe of tragic performance<sup>104</sup>. Taplin argues that, in spite of the shift of focus in the last decades from written word to the performance of Greek theatre, both of them are important. This book is written for a larger public rather than for a specialized one, so it is mostly concerned with introducing aspects of performance, while relating them to text. The author does not, however, go into much depth when introducing key concepts,

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<sup>103</sup> A. P. David, *The Dance of the Muses: Choral Theory and Ancient Greek Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1-2.

<sup>104</sup> Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (New York: Routledge, 1985).



such as emotions, representation and the chorus.

Two other studies that are worth mentioning here focus on the space of performance, which I briefly commented on in the third chapter of this thesis, in relation to the eremitic place of suffering in *Prometheus Bound* and *Philoctetes*. These two works, however, go further with their study of space in Greek tragedy, examining the space of performance and its implications. Graham Ley, in *The Theatricality of Greek Tragedy: Playing Space and Chorus* addresses the playing space “by working backwards from textual evidence, practical implications of the surviving scripts and often on those forms of research that have been conducted practically.”<sup>105</sup> He further notes that “[i]n order to appreciate the kind of theater that Greek tragedy was, we need to understand the conditions for which the scripts were composed, and (...) to do that we need to work substantially in reverse, from the scripts to the conditions for which they were composed.”<sup>106</sup> The other aspect that Ley comments on in his book is that of the chorus, although he is careful to mention that his study of the chorus is one based on different “proposals” and performance theories that have been advanced in the past “because [a study of the chorus] involves questions of music and dancing and our own cultural puzzlement over this kind of

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<sup>105</sup> Graham Ley, *The Theatricality of Greek Tragedy: Playing Space and Chorus* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), ix.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

performance for which we have no real equivalent.”<sup>107</sup>

The second work focusing on spatiality in Greek tragedy is Rush Rehm’s *The Play of Space: Spatial Transformation in Greek Tragedy*. Rehm defines his method of study as “spatial semiotics,”<sup>108</sup> defining his position against structuralist readings of space in tragedy, where binaries (such as inside/outside, masculine/feminine space distinctions) are prevalent. This is a compelling study, which brings up, from the beginning, the questions of ambiguity in interpretation, metaphoric implications of treating space as an extension of the self, essentialism and positivism. Based on my own research, this work seems to be one of the most thorough and involved studies of space in tragedy. I would like to use these works as a starting point for an analysis of pain in relation to performance in Greek tragedy in the future. One of the pressing issues that should be treated in a further study on this subject is that of representation and form in relation to pain. In deconstructing Aristotle’s mimetic system in the first chapter of this thesis, I did not advance a theory of representation of my own. Nor did I, however, discard this issue. I simply chose to focus, in this thesis, on discourse patterns that interfere with a potential analysis of pain and representation. This does not mean that I am not acknowledging that structure and form are essential components of tragedy and

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<sup>107</sup> Ley, *Theatricality*, ix.

<sup>108</sup> Rush Rehm, *The Play of Space: Spatial Transformation in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 1.

pain does split structures, but it is also contained by them. Greek tragedy relies on representation, but my study here advances solely the idea that Aristotle's mimesis does not provide the tools for analysis that would be compatible with the tragic sphere. A future analysis of representation and pain would include elements of performance, such as the stage, music, metrics, the mask, the chorus and the public, all of which play an important role in the tragic realms and, specifically, in relation to pain.

Moreover, it would be necessary to include several other approaches in order to nuance an analysis of pain and contextualize it more accurately. One such frame of reference would be that of ancient medicine, with a focus on diagnostics. The approach to pain and the body in the ancient context, as I have discussed, is fundamentally different and not affected by Plato's dualism, nor by Christianity's rendering of the body in opposition to the soul and to God. As Aristotle approaches tragedy with the intention of cleansing it of its rawness by applying the mimetic model as an analgesic formula, ancient medicine works to cure and alleviate pain, but it does so through a system that does not hide the pain and the body. This would expose a facet of the Greek culture that would reveal the way in which pain would have affected the spectator and whether catharsis was indeed a purgation of sorts or rather a different kind of experience that the Greeks were familiar with.

Another axis of analysis that was left out here due to lack of space was the connection between pain in tragedy and pleasure. Without going so far as to

adopt a psychoanalytic approach, a process of hermeneutical analysis would be useful in determining whether on the other side of the threshold of pain there is at least a hint of ecstasy. This aspect could help in testing the grounds for an interpretation of catharsis, without using it as an intermediating concept in the education of emotional purgation of the public. In relation to this and by linking tragedy, through pain, with the ritualistic context, an exploration of the possible spiritual influences in tragedies could be a compelling axis of research.

Overall, this hard-to-contain project reflects the nature of pain itself, as I see it: breaking through constructs reveals a world that, through the painful splitting of patterns, bares a profoundly human vulnerability which inheres in both life and in tragedy.

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**Curriculum Vitae**

**Name:** Anda Pleniceanu

**Post-secondary  
Education and  
Degrees:** University of Toronto  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
2008-2013 B.A.

The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2013-2015 M.A.

**Honours and  
Awards:** Province of Ontario Graduate Scholarship  
2015-2016

**Related Work  
Experience** Teaching Assistant  
The University of Western Ontario  
2013-2015