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A cult without God
or the unfreedom of freedom in Seneca Tragicus

A CULT WITHOUT GOD
OR THE UNFREEDOM OF FREEDOM IN SENECA TRAGICUS*

According to Cicero no people is so over- or undercivilized that it would not think it must have some sort of God, even when it did not know what sort. *Nulla gens est neque tam mansueta neque tam fera, quae non, etiamsi ignoret qualem haberi deum deceat, tamen habendum sciat.*¹ So also according to the conception of the Stoics, the world is so penetrated by divinity, that nothing takes place without it, either in heaven or on earth or under the sea. As Cleanthes' Hymn to Zeus expressed it:²

οὐδέ τι γίνεται ἔργον ἐπὶ χθονὶ σοῦ δίχλα, δαῖμον,
οὔτε κατ' αἰθέριον θείον πόλον οὔτ' ἐνὶ πόντῳ.

Accordingly one trained in Stoic philosophy entrusted himself to the divinity and recognized in the turnings of the world a providence which ruled everything. Cleanthes prayed: 'Zeus and you, O Fate, lead me as you have ordained. I follow without hesitation':³

ἄγον δέ μ', ὦ Ζεῦ, καὶ σύ γ', ἡ Πεπρωμένη,
ὅποι ποθ' ὑμῖν εἰμὶ διατεταγμένος·
ὥς ἔψομαί γ' ἄοκνος.

Although there is a divine providence, it is true that the wise man encounters misfortune in this world. That is the theme of Seneca's tract *De providentia*: *quare aliqua incommoda bonis viris accidunt cum providentia sit*. But the good man knows that divinity means well with him and does not want him to relax his effort. Divinity gives him unceasingly the chance to prove himself: *omnia adversa exercitationes putat*.⁴ The good man does not obey God, but freely concurs with him: *non pareo deo sed adsentior; ex animo illum, non quia necesse est, sequor*.⁵

In such situations a human being can assume heroic proportions. Of course this theme could be handled by Seneca in a more concrete way in the tragedies⁶ than in the philosophical works. Greek tragedy offered him an unlimited supply of situations in which a human being had to prove himself against an unexpected or even adverse fate. But in his own work a vague and flexible conception of *fortuna* appears which matched neither that of Greek tragedy nor

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¹leg. 1, 24.

²SVF I 537.

³SVF I 527.

⁴prov. 2,2.

⁵ep. 96,2.

⁶CP 71 (1976) 27.

that of the Stoic tradition. This concept of *fortuna* can of course not be interpreted as Seneca's *Weltanschauung*. Its function can only be understood either as a counterpart to human willing or as a popular belief.⁷ A human being's proving of himself as portrayed in Attic tragedy was regarded in the Stoic tradition as providing *exempla*. That may be shown by the fact that Cleanthes in Frag. 527, which we have just considered, takes up the words with which Polyxena in Euripides' *Hecuba* voluntarily submits to her fate: 'I will follow because it is necessary and because I want to die. If I did not want to, I would appear to be a woman who is weak and loves life too much' (346-348):

ὥς ἔψομαί γε τοῦ τ' ἀναγκαίου χάριν
θανεῖν τε χρήζουσ'· εἰ δέ μὴ βουλήσομαι,
κακὴ φανοῦμαι καὶ φιλόψυχος γυνή.

Cleanthes: 'I will follow without delay. If I did not want to, I would appear weak and still have to follow':

ὥς ἔψομαί γ' ἄοκνος· ἦν δέ γε μὴ θέλω,
κακὸς γενόμενος οὐδέν ἤττον ἐψομαι.

Seneca loved such figures who willingly accept their fate. A human being is most free when he has least to lose. In the face of external compulsion Cassandra says: *libertas adest* (Ag. 796); for as William Calder III has stressed, the paradox is that only the slave is free. Indeed Calder takes as a motto for his interpretation of the figure of Cassandra a line of Janis Joplin: "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose".⁸

However, Seneca paid even more attention to persons who have abandoned the meaningful order of the world and for whom moral values and the divine power have lost their validity. For them the word of the chorus from the *Thyestes* applies that divine right is of no avail, *fas valuit nihil* (138). Or *Thyestes*' insight: 'The gods have fled', *fugere superi* (1021).⁹ Throughout many long passages Seneca's tragedies reflect a world without God.

It is no doubt the height of cynicism when the actions of such persons take the form of cultic acts. Their own self-image reflects the ultimate exaggeration of a world-view. 'I dismiss the gods', *dimitto superos* (888), says Atreus and himself takes their place. In the *Troades* Seneca presents the sacrifices of Polyxena and Astyanax as cultic acts, although he leaves no doubt that they are supremely godless actions. The decisive distinction between the treatment of the sacrifice of Polyxena in Seneca and that of Euripides' *Hecuba*¹⁰ is that in the latter even Hecuba shows understanding for the decision of the Greeks and thinks that they did not act out of cruelty, but under constraint.¹¹ In Seneca the godlessness and the criminality of the actions of the Greeks are stressed. Just as

⁷On the political aspect of Seneca's tragedies see my article "The Political Meaning of Roman Tragedy and Seneca's *Oedipus*", coming out in *Phoenix* in 1982.

⁸E.g. HF 524ff.

⁹Cf. *Med.* 1026-1027.

¹⁰W.M. Calder III has argued that Sophocles' *Polyxena* was the model for Seneca's *Troades*: "Originality in Seneca's *Troades*", CP 65 (1970) 75-82. See also his study *Senecas Troerinnen*, *Wiss. Zeitschrift Rostock*, Ges. und Sprachwiss. Reihe 15 (1966) 551-559.

¹¹M. Pohlenz, *Die griechische Tragödie*, 2 vol. (Göttingen ²1954) I, 281.

Priam's death was *nefas* (44, 48), so also was the sacrifice of Polyxena cruel murder, *caedes dira* (255), a *scelus* (1129). Because Euripides does not discuss¹² the justification of the sacrifice, the sacrifice is accepted as a cultic act. Because Seneca contests the sacrifice's justification, it is rejected as a godless deed. The glaring cynicism in Seneca's conception consists in the fact that nevertheless the cultic forms are retained: a Cult without God.

In contrast to Euripides we find in Seneca the emphasis that it is as bride that Polyxena is sacrificed to the dead Achilles and that the marriage rituals are adhered to. Pyrrhus should lead his father's bride to him in the garb in which Thessalian, Ionian or Mycenaean brides are wed, *quo iugari Thessalae cultu solent/Ionidesve vel Mycenaeae nurus, /Pyrrhus parenti coniugem tradat suo* (362-364). The wedding — that is, the murder — is carried out *rite* (365). Agamemnon will not bear that men should call foul murder marriage, *facinus atrox caedis ut thalamos vocent* (289), but his protest is in vain. The slaughter proceeds as does an actual wedding. Torches are carried in procession and Helen acts as bridesmaid *pronuba* (1133) — a high-point of studied malice.¹³ The murder has its ceremonial, *hic ordo sacri* (1162). Seneca's treatment differs radically from that of Euripides. Whereas in the Greek version Neoptolemus carries out the sacrifice of Polyxena as priest, *ιερεύς* (224), in the Roman form it is 'the very contriver of fraud and cunning master of crime', *machinator fraudis* and *scelerum artifex* (750), Ulysses, who assumes the role of the priest in the sacrifice of Hector's son Astyanax. 'He rehearses the words and the prayers of the prophetic priest and summons the cruel gods to the sacrifice', *verba fatidici et preces/ concipit Ulixes vatis et saevos ciet/ ad sacra superos* (1100-1102). Even Nicholas Trevet in the 14th century observed the hollowness of the formulation and commented: "'ad sacra 'id est execrabilia' ".¹⁴ For we are dealing with the words of the very one whom Andromache reproaches with hiding behind seer and 'blameless gods' even in his crime, *vatem et insontes deos/praetendis, hoc est pectoris facinus tui* (753-754). This is no doubt also Seneca's own interpretation.¹⁵

In the same way it is clear from the beginning of the *Thyestes* that Atreus' slaughter of Thyestes' children is the supreme offence. He banishes from his world all feeling for divine and human law when he cries, *excede, Pietas!* (249). And yet his revenge is so sacred to him that he performs the slaughter in accordance with the strictest forms of sacrificial ritual. Again a cult without a God. Even the exterior framework serves the same effect. Atreus' palace is described with literal allusions to the palace of Vergil's Latinus. Both are temples (*Aen.* 7, 170ff.). In Vergil it is truly a sacred building which occasions pious awe because of the ancestral religion, *horrendum* [. . .] *religione parentum* (172), a temple in which the *sacrae epulae* took place (175),

¹²Pohlenz, 1.c.282.

¹³O. Ribbeck, *Geschichte der römischen Dichtung*, III (Stuttgart 1892) 62.

¹⁴N. Trevet, *Commento alle Troades di Seneca*, ed. M. Palma (Roma 1977) 77.

¹⁵For the *fatum* cf. W. Schetter, in: *Senecas Tragödien* (Wege der Forschung) (Darmstadt 1972) 250 n. 30.

modelled on the Jupiter-temple on the Capitol,¹⁶ the religious heart of the Roman Empire. And it is in precisely this scenery, in the *arcana regio* (650), that Seneca — with biting irony — has Atreus, the ‘Titan of evil’, act.¹⁷ Significantly he adds to the ‘Vergilian’ description yet another comparison of the grove with the underworld (666ff.), but then immediately abandons the comparison and states directly: ‘The grove is a night unto itself and the horror of the underworld reigns even at midday’, *nox propria luco est et superstitio inferum / in luce media regnat* (678-679). There can be no doubt: This place is hell itself, the gods are only metaphors.

The gods have abandoned this world, but their representatives continue to act as if they were still here. Where in Vergil the ivory-statues of the gods weep at the murder of Caesar, *maestum inlacrimat templis ebur*,¹⁸ this very image is adopted by Seneca for Atreus’ crime, *flevit in templis ebur* (702). What a perversion of Vergil’s world! Atreus himself is priest. He himself with strident voice sings the death-song, *ipse est sacerdos, ipse funesta prece / letale carmen ore violento canit* (691-692). At the slaughter the sacrificial rites are scrupulously observed, *nulla pars sacri perit* (695). The accustomed ceremonies are all observed, lest so great a crime be not duly wrought, *servatur omnis ordo, ne tantum nefas / non rite fiat* (689-690). The absurd contrast between crime and cult, *nefas* and *rite* join in an unholy alliance. It is explicitly stated that the cultic act is meaningless and that it is rather the gloating over the ‘ordering’ of this savage deed that counts, *nec interest, sed [. . .] saevum scelus / iuvat ordinare* (715-716). That is the estheticism of terror, the seeming bestowal of significance on the meaningless.

Although it is not said explicitly, there can be no doubt that Atreus offers the sacrifice to himself, even — as we may conjecture — to his *dolor* or his *ira*. Certainly that is true of Medea who portrays the murder of her sons as a sacrifice to her *dolor*. In an apostrophe to her grief after the killing of her second son she says, she has no more that she can offer, *plura non habui, dolor, / quae tibi litarem* (1019-1020). This is not a casual remark, but rather in the truest sense a significant statement made from the Stoic perspective. A comparison of the ending of the *Aeneid* with that of the *Medea* shows again the extent to which the Vergilian world is turned upside-down by Seneca. Aeneas ‘sacrifices’ Turnus to Pallas killed by Turnus, *Pallas te hoc vulnere, Pallas / immolat* (12,948-949). The killing is thus situated within the ‘sphere of the sacred’. ‘To a certain extent Aeneas acts only as representative, as ‘priest’ ’.¹⁹ Both Aeneas and Medea sacrifice to a higher power, but in Seneca the distinction between the sacral and the private sphere is abandoned. If the children are the offering, *dolor* is the god which dwells in the hearts of men.

It is precisely at this point that we see the extent to which the Stoic philosophy

¹⁶P. Vergili Maronis *Aeneidos libri VII-VIII*, with a comm. by C.J. Fordyce (Oxford 1977) ad 170ff.

¹⁷U. Knoche, *Die Antike* 17 (1941) 69.

¹⁸*georg.* 1, 480.

¹⁹M.v. Albrecht, *Zur Tragik von Vergils Turnusgestalt: Aristotelisches in der Schlußszene der Aeneis, Silvae*, Festschr. E. Zinn (Tübingen 1970) 1ff., esp. 4.

is perverted. In Stoicism it is the divine λόγος which dwells in the human being. The human person is set apart from other natures by his intercourse with God through the λόγος: ἡ συναναστροφή κατὰ τὸν λόγον.²⁰ That is what Seneca himself wrote to Lucilius: 'God is near you, is with you, dwells in you', *prope est a te deus, tecum est, intus est*.²¹ 'The wise man lives on the same level as the gods', *cum dis ex pari vivit*.²² But Medea's god is *dolor*, her guide *ira*: 'O Wrath, I follow wherever you lead', *ira, qua ducis, sequor* (953). She is subject to the psychological constants of her character. But one does not have the impression that these are in conflict with *ratio*. Rather her emotions have made themselves independent and dominate the whole person. In his helplessness the human being has nothing to oppose to the emotions. It was for this reason that Seneca's characters appeared to August Wilhelm von Schlegel as 'gigantic but amorphous marionettes'.²³

Here we encounter a double paradox: On the one hand, the paradox of Seneca's philosophy: That man is free who recognizes God and submits to his will. On the other, the paradox of Seneca's tragedies: That man is truly unfree who does not recognize God and makes himself a god—a living example of the unfreedom of freedom. To him apply the lines of Goethe: what man worships as God is a projection of his inner self:

Was der Mensch als Gott verehrt,
Ist sein eigenstes Innere herausgekehrt.²⁴

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²⁰Epikt., *diatr.* 1, 9.

²¹*ep.* 41, 1.

²²*ep.* 59, 14.

²³15. *Vorlesung über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*, 1809.

²⁴*Zahme Xenien*, 4. Buch, 1827.