Tragic Displacements in the Pursuit of a Sign: Analyzing the Discourse Produced on "Tragedy" as a Subject of Knowledge

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Abstract

This essay seeks to shed light on the process of producing knowledge on a sign in language called "tragedy." It attempts to illustrate how the knowledge produced on "tragedy" is nothing but a tragic redeployment of disparate material. Like any other sign in language, including words such as "scholar," "critic," "academy," "university," and even "knowledge," the "word" tragedy can mean whatever a community wants it to mean; it can be defined and redefined interminably. As this essay demonstrates, the narrative produced on "tragedy" under the guise of knowledge is mainly based on a sterile process of displacing formerly produced narratives, knowledge, from one cultural boundary to another. The process of displacement occurs at the level of word, paragraph, book, institution, and so on. Given this fact, the pursuit of the meaning of "tragedy" becomes ceaseless, inaccessible, and perilous, as the process may involve economic exploitation and ideological subjection. Because the totality of the existing process of displacement is not visible for the class of critics, professors, scholars, or thinkers, this essay regards them as a class of displaced monks conducting their rituals of displacing narratives on "tragedy" in the modern monasteries conservatively referred to as universities.

Keywords: tragedy, discourse analysis, literature, language

This essay seeks to shed light on the process of producing knowledge on "tragedy" as a sign in language. It attempts to illustrate how the knowledge produced on "tragedy" is nothing but a redeployment of disparate material in which critics fail to recognize that what they are pursuing as knowledge is unobtainable. Being a sign in language, the word "tragedy" can be defined interminably. The production of knowledge on tragedy, and any academic subject, is highly restricted and ritualized in such a manner that governs and determines what is sayable and acceptable as knowledge and what is not. Critics, thinkers, or university professors involved in the process of producing knowledge on "tragedy" displace stories about specific subjects from one cultural boundary to another to produce new stories under the guise of knowledge. This process of perpetual displacement keeps certain sterile processes of producing narratives, or myths, about particular cultural nodes in circulation rendering critics, thinkers, scholars, and university professors members of mythical communities.

The failure of critics to recognize that the process of producing knowledge on "tragedy," which is taken as a part standing for the whole of producing knowledge on any concept or sign in language, renders them victims to a perpetual pursuit of empty signs that can be defined and redefined endlessly. What scholars, thinkers, and critics believe to be knowledge produced on "tragedy" *is*, according to this paper, nothing but a narrative or myth that results from the temporal stabilization of the term. As Georg Lukács in his *History and Class Consciousness* points out:

> [...] if from the vantage point of a particular class, the totality of existing society is not visible; if a class thinks the thoughts imputable to it and which bear upon its interests right through to their

logical conclusion and yet fails to strike at the heart of that totality, then such a class is doomed to play only a subordinate role. (52)

Lukács' statement above is re-quoted in another text produced by David Hornbrook, as a contribution to *The Shakespeare Myth* in a chapter entitled "Go play, boy, play: Shakespeare and Educational Drama." Hornbrook's article attempts to reveal how the British educational system in general and Shakespeare in particular are nothing but ideological instruments of subjection accepted by the subordinate class of teachers, parents, and students as natural (145-159).

Reciting and re-siting Lukács is used as a point of departure for understanding how knowledge on "tragedy" is produced by displacing a cultural product from one domain to another. Bearing in mind that Lukács' quote is a message with a content sent by Lukács himself to an audience in 1971 describing the condition in which any class is doomed to endure if that class accepts its thoughts to be imputable, and bearing in mind that Lukács himself belonged to a school of thought called Marxism, which produces knowledge in the ritualized form of the principles of that school, one can assume that Hornbrook's act of re-quoting Lukács is nothing but a displacement of the context within which the message was originally produced. The quotation is a displacement of the producer, as Hornbrook is not Lukács. It is a displacement of time as Hornbrook reproduced Lukács' statement in 1988. It is a displacement in school, as the school to which Hornbrook belongs is called Cultural Materialism, which differs from Marxism proper, while being variously influenced by it. It is even a displacement at the level of narrative as the language that precedes and follows this quotation in Lukács' book is different from the one in Hornbrook. Despite all this, the practice of displacing ideas from one context to another to produce new ideas is at the heart of academic production and accepted as natural and immutable.

It is ironic that this applies to this essay as it is engaged in the same process of the linguistic manipulation in which both Lukács and Hornbrook are being displaced along with the totality of their contexts. However, the quotation tells us that Hornbrook, as a receiver of Lukács' message, identifies with that message and displaces it from its context, along with other disparate ideas, to apply it in a new one. This does not mean, of course, that Hornbrook identifies with Lukács in all other statements, or with the Marxist school. As such, it is merely an identification with one specific instance of linguistic production. By identifying with the quote in question, the statement or the message sent by Lukács becomes a truth conventionally accepted by at least two people, Lukács and Hornbrook. The process of identification can be extended to include any number of believers making Lukács more influential as the number of those who identify with his message increases. The message becomes a truth that can be generalized and applied to each situation that resembles the one within which it was originally produced. The process of identifying with the quote is important as it involves keeping Lukács' ideas and Marxist thought in circulation. In addition, this process perpetuates the practices of producing narratives in the academy, publication houses, and ideological institutions consequently leading to the ritualization, domestication, and even radicalization of Lukács' thought; therefore rendering the pilgrimage to congregations known as conferences where those who believe in Lukács' statement reproduce it in syntactically, semantically, and rhetorically different forms.

Hornbrook in his essay displaces both Lukács' quote and the meaning of the word "class" in that quote. In Lukács, the word "class" is used as a generic term that refers to any class that accepts its thoughts as immutable. Hornbrook, on the other hand, displaces it to refer to a more specific one,

a British class to whom teaching and reproducing Shakespeare in the United Kingdom, and to the more general category of education within which Shakespeare is nothing but a narrower category, or a sign. In other words, in the same statement, Lukács' general class becomes Hornbrook's British class. The process of displacing this statement can continue interminably to apply to any category or concept of language to which the word "class" can be applied. In the process of displacement, the meaning of class can be narrowed or expanded depending on the context and the class the writer intends to describe. For example, a critic can use it:

> Socially to refer the working class, the middle class, or the upper class
> Geographically to refer to a class in England, China, Jordan, India, Europe, Africa
> Ideologically to refer to Marxists, Capitalists, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, etc.
> Educationally to refer to students, teachers, thinkers, critics, scholars, philosophers, etc.

These categories can also be mixed together to produce new statements endlessly. For example, one can narrow and redefine Lukács' paragraph by saying that:

> If for
> the (tragic) working class
> the British working class
> the Muslim British working class
> the Arab scholars
> the Marxist Arab scholars
> the Althusserian Marxist Arab scholars
> the Althusserian Marxist Arab scholars of the 1990s
> the twenty first century Althusserian Marxist Iraqi Arab scholars
> the totality of existing society is not visible; if (this) class thinks the thoughts imputable to it and which bear upon its interests right through to their logical conclusion and yet fails to strike at the heart of that totality, then such a class is doomed to play only a subordinate role. (52)

Lukács' quote is nothing but a single specific example of how the process of displacement at the level of paragraph keeps a person's ideas, school of thought, institution, and discourse in circulation and power. It also reveals how ideas can be moved from "one adjacent territory to another" (Greenblatt 13). The success of the power of displacement depends merely on the process of identification, in which someone, or a group of people, accepts or rejects the language produced by that person, school, institution, and the manner in which that language is produced as true. By moving Lukacs' quote from its context to another, that quote loses its identity because the new context and interpretation are never completely Lukács' but partly the new interpreter's. This is illustrated in another quote which this essay displaces from Greenblatt's context and in which Greenblatt believes that:

> Whereas most collective expressions moved from their original setting to a new place or time are dead on arrival, the social energy encoded in certain works of art continues to generate the illusion of life for centuries. (7)

Greenblatt here provides a commentary on the practice of displacing cultural material, of which the displaced quote is an example, from one context to another. The quote can be regarded as true or false depending on whether the receiver identifies or counter-identifies with it. Once this statement is accepted by the receiver as true, it will affect the way he or she interprets each displaced cultural product or interpretation. Since it is the only way to get the article published, and the only way to

attract attention to the vanity and futility of the practice of displacing ideas, this article ironically yields to the ritualized and institutionalized processes of displacing the material in the academy. The process of displacing interpretations from their original contexts is foregrounded in this paper in an attempt to defamiliarize its naturalness for modern monks, the critics, and thinkers who are trapped in the tightly knit plot and highly ritualized form of producing knowledge. In the attempt to reveal how displacement tragically produces knowledge, the subsequent part of the essay pursues the process of displacing the word "tragedy" to see whether this process really produces real knowledge about the world or whether it produces mere mythical illusions which critics and thinkers accept as "knowledge." The word "tragedy" in the discussion should be regarded as a concept in language that can mean whatever two or more people accept it to mean.

The Tragic Displacements of Tragedy

For literary critics, the word "tragedy" as a concept in language may seem transparent and clear. However, like any concept in language, this clarity is nothing but an illusion. This word is merely a linguistic sign that leads a chameleon-like existence. It can be defined in a single sentence, paragraph, page, essay, book, and even books. Like all concepts which have been structured as cultural nodes about which knowledge is produced, this knowledge is nothing but a narrative. The knowledge produced about tragedy, or any other cultural node, is nothing but a never-ending practice of producing stories, narratives, myths, and so on. Tragically, the scholars, critics, thinkers, professors, monks, etc. who write and rewrite those stories never reach closure. The so-called intellectuals, thinkers, critics, professors, teachers, and students are subjected through the power of language and discourse to a perpetual pursuit of empty signs. By accepting this process as natural and by believing in the unitary meaning, they are doomed to occupy a subordinate position (Chaney 54).

Like any other word in language, the word "tragedy" has its roots in metaphor (Nietzsche 5). At a specific time in history, as Hellenist scholars inform us, the Greeks decided to establish an arbitrary relationship with an animal in the outside world. A sign, written and spoken, was created to refer to that animal; it was called "tragos." The word "tragos" has its counterpart in English in another arbitrary relation; it is referred to by using the spoken and written signifier which the users of that language realize as "goat." Since the language system that is used to refer to the Greek tragos is an arbitrary one, this word can be replaced by an infinite number of signs in other languages like Chinese, Arabic, Hindi, Persian, etc. In every single instance, it is convention that allows the word "tragos" and its counterparts in all the other languages to have meaning. For it is the conventional nature of language that allows the word "tragos" to have that specific meaning for the Greeks, and allows the English to use a different word, "goat," to refer to the same thing in the outside world. In other words, "tragos" and "goat" are two signs that have supposedly the same referent (Culler).

The word "tragos" was later displaced from everyday popular usage, and another connection was established with another object in the outside world. The signifier "tragos" was extended to provoke a signified within a religious and ritual practice. It was displaced to be used in another specific historical period to refer not only to the animal English communicators call "goat," but to a ritualistic village ceremony which involved the death and resurrection of a God. As Vickers indicates:

> […] tragedy originated in ritual then it continued to be influenced by ritual. Therefore we can only understand it if we approach it as ritual; and as a ritual of a peculiar type, frenzied, ecstatic, destructive, based on the 'death and rebirth' of the hero as a paradigm of the movement of the seasons or the cycle of existence. (35)

Stanley Edgar Hyman similarly indicates that:

> Tragedy as we know it had its first and greatest flowering in fifth-century Athens, in the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and its fullest theoretical formulation in the Poetics of Aristotle. The forms of Attic tragedy, as Aristotle half knew from tradition, revived from the sacrificial rites of Dionysus, in which the god in bull or goat form was annually slain, dismembered, and resurrected. (287)

The displacement of the word "tragedy" from a communicative context to a ritualistic one is the focus of the following argument. It is, however, justifiable at this moment to enquire about what enabled the word "tragos" to be displaced from its everyday communicative field in which it refers to a small animal to a ritualistic one which involves the death and resurrection of a God.

At first inspection it seems that the word "goat" does not have any relation with the death and resurrection of a God. However, the answer to this question lies deep in the mode of signification itself – a mode that involves a process called "myth-making." As it has been indicated, the word "tragedy" shifted, or displaced, its referent from an animal in the outside world to a ceremonial activity. Although there seems no connection between the animal and the ceremonial activity at first sight, on a deeper linguistic investigation the connection may be established. This connection is not established at the level of denotation but at the level of connotation. Denotation strictly refers to the thing indicated by a word. The word "tragos" or "goat" can be defined simply as "an animal that has horns on top of its head and long hair under its chin" (Longman dictionary). This definition is opposed to connotation, the associations and implications of the word. The word "goat" is generally associated with lust and fertility. It acquired these interesting connotations as a result of its history in ancient religions. The Greeks regarded the goat as the most lustful of the animals and hence the most fertile. As Western anthropological texts inform us, "animal fertility was closely connected with the fertility of the earth. The Hebrews used it, symbolically, to load a goat with their sins and drive it out into the desert; Christ is sometimes compared to this *scapegoat*" (Bergson 153).

Thus, by associating the connotations of fertility and lust of the goat with the fertility of the earth and production, the ancient Greeks succeeded in displacing the manning of "tragos" metonymically and applied it to the person who can also be associated with the fertility of the earth. At the beginning, the God Dionysus, who stood for the fertility of the earth, was regarded to be the "tragos." Later, the God was displaced and a great man or ruler standing, not only for the fertility earth but for the welfare of the society, became the "tragos." Displacing the word "tragos" and associating it with the God Dionysus and later with a great man depended mainly on the process of displacing the connotations of the word "tragedy." This displacement was facilitated by establishing connections between the qualities of the "tragos" and those of Gods or men. The man to whom the qualities of the goat were transferred was not any man; like the goat, the man stood for the fertility of the earth. As anthropologists inform us, the scapegoat was not any man but the ruler of the tribe. Again, connotations and associations played an essential role in this cultural practice.

As is well known, the word "man" denotes "an adult human male" (Longman Dictionary). However, for those tribes, one "adult human male" possessed more dignified qualities than the others. That man was the ruler of the tribe. For ancient societies, the rulers of the tribes were regarded as divine or semi-divine beings and their life was identified with the lifecycle of nature and of human existence. Because of this identification, the safety of the people, even of the

world, depended, as those people believed, on the life of the god-king. A vigorous, healthy ruler would ensure natural and human productivity. On the other hand, being associated with sterility, a sick or frail ruler would bring blight and disease to the land and its people. This "statement" is universalised as a fact by James G. Frazer who believes that:

> If the course of nature is dependent on the man-god's life, what catastrophes may not be expected from the gradual enfeeblement of his powers and their final extinction in death? There is only one way of averting these dangers. The man-god must be killed as soon as he shows symptoms that his powers are beginning to fail, and his soul must be transferred to a vigorous successor before it has been seriously impaired by threatened decay. (265)

Here Frazer exemplifies the relation between the man-god and the welfare of his tribe. He conceives of this nature in general terms. Frazer does not present a fact about a specific tribe in the past, but he makes a generalization about a supposedly human activity that prevailed among all ancient tribes. Elsewhere, Frazer gives validity to his generalization by revealing the hidden tie between specific cases and this universal practice:

> Under the names of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis, the peoples of Egypt and Western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life, especially vegetable life, which they personified as a god who annually died and rose again from the dead. In name and detail the rites varied from place to place: in substance they were the same. (325)

Frazer's theory can be interpreted in different ways depending on the schemata operating at the time of interpreting it, the intentions of the interpreter, his or her background knowledge, and the discourses which control what can be said, who can say it, and where it can be said. Frazer's interpretation of tragedy can be taken as a true statement which can be activiated by those who identify with it each time the subject is discussed (Biilg, et. al 54). However, if one asks from where Frazer received his authority as a truth generator on tragedy, the answer can be found in the power of discourse. Frazer's discussion of tragedy is sanctioned by an institution called the academy which presumably produces forms of truth we label as "knowledge." The academy itself includes within its subcategories a discipline called anthropology which presumably produces truth about people, their societies, histories, and cultures. Witihin anthropology we have a group, or category, called Cambridge Hellenists which is presumably specialized in studying and producing truth about the ancient Greeks, their arts, history society, and culture. Frazer himself is a member of this group, while "tragedy" is an object about which they produce knowledge.

Frazer's theory reveals the power of myth in shaping the collective unconscious of a group of people. Because a tribe believed in the myth that a human sacrifice may ensure fertility, it was willing to sacrifice the life of one of its members exactly as it became later willing to sacrifce a goat instead. It was, of course, the power of convention that helped perpetuate that story as truth, and once people stopped believing in the power of sacrifice, that truth became a myth. Applying our theory of displacement, one can say that a myth is a past truth which no one believes anymore.

Taking these statements as expressing truth, and identifying with them as true statements on tragedy, one can positively state that tragedy has its roots in myth. Myth, like tragedy, is also an object of study. Like the language produced on tragedy, the language produced on myth is also influenced by two distinct sciences, anthropology and psychology, respectively represented by Frazer and Freud. Another great influence on the study of myth is Carl Gustav Jung whose study of myth and its archetypes can be said to be a synthesis of psychology and anthropology (Vickers 168). In other

words, Jung used a poetic device called a collage to establish a connection between two separate fields of study, consequently producing a third field of knowledge. By espousing anthropology and psychology, an intertextual web of knowledge was established in which the texts produced in those two distinct fields supported each other and gave power to each other. Both disciplines derive their validity to some exent from each other and from the institutions which also give them power. The stories produced on tragedy by psychology, anthropology, and their synthesis can be expanded and interpreted endlessly by utilizing mere linguistic devices. For example, one can espouse the statements on tragedy produced by the previous fields with another school of thought called Marxism. Take, for example, the following paragraph from Victor Kiernan's book *Eight Tragedies of Shakespeare: A Marxist Study*, where he approaches Shakespeare's tragedies by employing Marxist tenets while spicing them with anthroplogical flavor. Kiernan believes that in those tragedies:

> The hero who 'represents' us becomes in the end our expiatory sacrifice, whom we feel with as well as condemn. Even Coriolanus, whose death is most visibly a punishment visited on the sins of his class, has been applauded by all Romans, high or low, for his brutal violence against neighbouring peoples. All this carries with it associations with the scapegoat sacrificed to rid the body politic of a taint. Hamlet has to die because Denmark is 'rotten,' and with him the whole royal family under whose auspices things have become what they are. In an age so fiercely theological as Shakespeare's, neither he nor his audience could be forgetful of the doctrine of atonement; little as he was moved by religious dogmas, this one was too deeply rooted in social consciousness to have no meaning for him as a writer of tragedies. (205)

The practice of producing knowledge about the sign we call "tragedy" has produced innumerable books discussing the mythic origins of tragedy. Students within institutions called universities, colleges, theaters, and schools, repeated the truth about tragedy given to them by their patriarchs, educators. The reproductivity of this truth, consequently, perpetuated its circulation and endowed it with more validity. However, at a specific moment in history, former knowledge on the theory of the mythic origin of tragedy lost its truth-value and itself became a myth. The relation between the fertility of the goat and the play that carries its name was challenged by a new interpretation where "a growing number of scholars believe that the derivation of tragoidia refers not to a 'goat song' but to the goat which was the prize for which tragedians competed" (Vickers 34).

If one identifies with this new interpretation, then the whole knowledge produced on tragedy and the fertility myth would prove to be mere myths. Ironically, Frazer's theory as Vickers indicates is "now utterly discredited" and this "tradition has also received some severe criticism which ought to have annihilated it completely" (38). What is also ironic about both Frazer's theory and the theory which views the origin of tragedy in the reward and not in the sacrifice is that they both find their roots in George Puttenham's sixteenth-century interpretation of the origins of tragedy:

> Matters of great Princes were played upon lofty stages, & the actors thereof ware upon their legges buskins of leather called, Cothurni, and other solemne habits, & for a speciall preheminence did walke upon those high corked shoes or pantofles, which now they call in Spaine and Italy Shoppini. And because those buskins and high shoes were commonly made of goats skinnes very finely tanned, and dyed into colours, or for that, as some say, the best players reward was a goate to be given him, or for that, as other thinke, a goate was the peculiar sacrifice of the god Pan, king of all the gods of the woodes – for as much as a goate in Greeke is called Tragos, therfore these stately playes were called Tragedies. (73)

A meticulous inspection of the quote reveals that the once institutionalized Frazerean and

Hellenist anthropological scientific interpretation of tragedy was nothing but an expansion on Puttenham's claim. What is not extended in the knowledge produced about tragedy within the ritualized paradigms of knowledge, and which is referred to in Puttenham's extract, is that tragedy may refer to the "high corked shoes" which the players of tragedy used to wear. Those "high shoes were commonly made of goats skinnes very finely tanned, and dyed into colours."

If the quotes above reveal anything it is that the so-called scientific objective interpretation of tragedy, and the tremendous knowledge produced about the subject, were nothing but extensions using linguistic techniques on Puttenham's sixteenth-century view. However, the question which remains is why the class of the so-called critics, scholars, and thinkers reproduce stories, generally referred to as knowledge, about a Greek cultural node, or subject position, known as "tragedy." Since it is impossible to reveal how the subordinate minds of the class of intellects, thinkers, scholars, and critics tragically accept the process of reproducing knowledge about a node in a gigantic game of cultural and linguistic manipulation reproduces knowledge in ritualized forms mystically planned and re-planned at a particular time and place, I would tragically conclude by identifying and displacing Lukács who believes that:

> […] if from the vantage point of a particular class, the totality of existing society is not visible; if a class thinks the thoughts imputable to it and which bear upon its interests right through to their logical conclusion and yet fails to strike at the heart of that totality, then such a class is doomed to play only a subordinate role. (52)

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