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MODERN AND CLASSICAL GREEK PERSONALITY THROUGH THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND INTELLECTUAL PRISM OF EXISTENCE

As systemic approach to the diverse and original ideas cultivated within the trends of the 20th century literary studies enables to perceive the permanent vacillation of scholars between mathematical and biological models that threads the entire history of the centuries old western civilization. Researches clearly show that literary and critical schools and trends differ from one another by their approach to these two types of theoretical concept, otherwise called scientific and anthropological concepts. Scientific-oriented are structuralism, the so-called New Criticism and some sociological schools based on neo-positivistic doctrines. As concerns the second, anthropological school, it is represented by the following institutions: hermeneutics, existentialism, phenomenology, mythological criticism and receptive aesthetics.¹

The trends and schools of the first type are distinguished by their propensity to logical precision, and disregard for *weltanschauung* and social and ideological issues.

As concerns the representatives of the second direction, their focal point was to detect the creative potential, and the moral and physiological state of a person. They believed that it was impossible to perceive a work of art empirically; on the contrary, it could be comprehended only through emotive, sensational and intuitive perception.

In my opinion, of anthropological institutions, existentialism is the closest to the moral standing of the late classical period of the ancient world. It is common knowledge that having revived the basic 17-18 cen-

¹ Современное зарубежное литературоведение, страны западной европы и США, Концепции, школы, термины, Москва 1996, 4.

tury French moralistic principles, existentialism created a tense intellectual theatre of absurd and an allegorical prose with a touch of philosophy and journalism. In literature it foregrounded the most acute spiritual collisions typical of the 20th century, which, however, were presented in a mystified way, through the prism of the tense consciousness of an intellectual split between two forces: sincere *aversion* for the existing reality and *fear* of the future. With regard to this, existentialism was labeled as the 'ailing conscience' of western intellectuals.²

The concept conveyed by the literary character of existentialism, with an intellectual artist standing behind him, is focused on the following points: 1. Human and fate and 2. A person in an extreme situation. Both points can be further subdivided. The following categories are distinguished within human and fate interrelationship. 1. Human perception of reality; 2. Realizing the 'senselessness'; Existential fear or the fear of the unknown world, fear of the future.

As concerns the extreme situation, the following categories fall under the focus: 1. Estrangement; 2. 'Eternal tragism' (destiny); 3. Reclamation (recognition) of freedom (all-willfulness); 4. 'Philosophy of existence'; 5. 'Mental torture'; 6. Free choice; 7. From 'stranger' ('outsider') to others; 8. Tragic humanism.³

The majority of these categories are reckoned among the essential traits of the classical Greek personality. To make the message clearer, i. e. to prove the hypothesis that existentialism as a philosophical and intellectual trend is the classics revived by the 20th century men of art, I will recall the tragedian of Athens' Golden Age who presented humans 'as they really are'.⁴ This tragedian is Euripides who was glorified and denounced at the same time - denounced by his contemporaries as well as by the 19 century critics. He was praised by the generations living at the end of antiquity, who appreciated his works more than the tragedies by Aeschylus and Sophocles. The modern world too showed special interest in his tragedies, some of which were recognized as the masterpieces of tragic theater.

² Фрай Н., *Анатомия критики, Зарубежная эстетика и теория литературы XIX-XX вв.*: Трактаты, статьи, эссе, Москва 1987; also, Великовский С. И., *Экзистенциализм*, в кн.: *Краткая литературная энциклопедия*, т. 8, Москва 1975.

³ Финкелстайн С., *Экзистенциализм и проблема отчуждения в амерериканской литературе*, перевод с английского, Москва 1967; Mounier E., Malraux, Camus, Sartre, Bernanos. *L' Epoir des désesperés*, Paris 1970; Великовский С. И., *Экзистенциализм*, в кн.: *Краткая литературная энциклопедия*, т. 8, Москва 1975.

⁴ Aristoteles, *Poetica*, 25.

This distinct attitude to Euripides resulted from the two-sided nature, ambivalence of his talent. Indeed, he violated the norms set for drama, made the tragedy more intellectual and philosophical (and was accordingly labeled as 'the philosopher on the stage') by presenting sophistic or ideological, sometimes rather inappropriate, debates (*The Suppliants*, 30-595), which, however, exited his epoch and dealt with personality: one's place in the society, one's so-called 'estrangement', faith, 'all-willfulness', 'mental torture', opportunity for choice, tragism labeled as humanism; one's destiny, loneliness in the world – to be short, the 'philosophy of existence'. Probably, the sensation of the epoch, reflected in the works of the genius with special intensity, compelled Euripides, unlike this preceding poets, to present the extremes of tragism, when a man, not neglecting the divine will, clearly reveals his own self, playing with the passions that possess him and, due to the weakness of his character or, probably to his defiance, break him down and even destroy him. This is revealed in the extreme situations when rationality gives way to instincts and emotions. Therefore, if Aeschylus' and Sophocles' characters are obsessed by the vitality of the world's unity and harmony, and consequently, appeal to the reader with their goodness and dignity, Euripides' characters, who are totally deprived of the heroic nature of their mythical prototypes, violate even human norms. They are pitiless, hostile, murderous – and at the same time dignified and selfless. Medea committed a terrible crime, a sin, which equals her death. However, she is not at all afraid of destiny, as this fear is overcome by the desire to enjoy revenge. That is why she accepts Aegeus' hospitable proposal. Medea herself fashions her fate. At the end of the tragedy she appears ascending in a winged chariot. Her children, dead by her own hands, lie before her, but she is calm and has transcended into another world. Having sacrificed to her victory something more precious than her own life, she is standing petrified in her terrifying triumph. 'She is no more, or if she is, she is nothing!' – This is how Sophocles would appreciate her.⁵ Medea has gone through a psychological path filled with an inhuman strain. And here is the question: where does Euripides direct this psychological existence? Who is Medea for him? Naturally all will say – a monster! She does not deserve compassion – however, all can feel within them the desire to celebrate the victory won by revenge, and to this extent she is like us. By demonstrating Medea's demonic passions, Euripides conveys a message that we belong to the same

⁵ 'I am no more or am nothing!' - This is the conclusion made by Creon of Sophocles' *Antigone* (1325).

world, which compels us to be what we are. Euripides does not reason on the nature of this demonic force, but makes us feel that it is inherent with us and is tragic because we are powerless before it and are therefore destroyed.

Euripides presented this demonic, demolishing force of existence with no less tragism in the drama *Hecuba*, in which he created psychological portraits of the victims of the Trojan War.⁶ First of all, let us recall the deheroized images of the Greek heroes: The shadow of Achilles demands the sacrifice of Polyxena, the fair daughter of King Priam of Troy. The crowd is not unanimous and victorious Odysseus has the decisive say. Possessed with the demonic force of human existence, he induces the whole army to demand sacrifice and listens indifferently to the laments of Hecuba, once the happy queen of Troy, to have mercy on her daughter.

Neoptolemus, Achilles' son, is the product of the callous and merciless world; none of his particles is moved by the words full of dignity uttered by the proud daughter of the Trojan King. Instead, the words touched Agamemnon, who fulfils the last will of the princess. However, the spectators are aware that very soon, he too will fall a victim to the ruthless fate.

The children of honorable King Priam had a truly fearsome fate: Innocent Polyxena is pitilessly killed by Neoptolemus, while Polymestor, King of Tracia, with whom Priam hid away his young son Polydoros together with plentiful riches, commits a horrible crime: obsessed with a vile desire to take possession of the riches, he insidiously murders Polydoros and throws his body into the sea. The waves cast the body ashore, and when the old servant tells this to Queen Hecuba, another, no less fearsome tragedy takes place. However, this is more of a spiritual drama. Euripides clearly shows that there is one step from honorability to madness, and the human nature is arranged so that this one step will definitely be taken, and the step is tragic. Hecuba knows that wealth, respect and power are all transient, and consequently, the worldly existence is a mere vanity (619-635). She has lost everything – what she used to have, whom she used to love and take pride in. A beast possessed by a wild passion awakens in her, and perfidiously decoys Polymestor to the tent, where the Trojan women put out his eyes and slaughter his children. It does not matter who exactly commits the hideous crime – the Trojan women or Hecuba herself. She wished so. The vengeance fills her with a victorious pride, and the

⁶ According to scholars, this tragedy must have been staged in 428-423 (or 418) BC, when Greece was gripped by a civil war that brought about many dilemmas before the Athenian thinkers.

same question comes up: Does Hecuba deserve compassion? Who is she? Is she a monster like Medea, capable of slaughtering children, even if they are not hers? The answer is the same: Euripides once again implied that Agave, Phaedra, Theseus, Medea, Hecuba, Orestes and Electra, Iphigenia, Polyxena, Menoecus and others are the creatures of the same world, and this world is extremely strained, causing destruction of values, a feeling of vanity of human existence. And here is the final cord of Euripides' 'philosophy of existence': 'mental torture', i. e. quest for an answer at a meta-physical level in the process of losing the sense of one's life, which was so impressively reflected in his last masterpiece *The Bacchae*. This is a marvelous drama, capable of moving the deepest nook of one's soul. It leads us to the secret which, evidently, tortured during his whole life and on the way of perceiving which the poet was caught between mutually contradicting ideas. This was the secret of god, of the latter's existence, righteousness or non-righteousness, of his disposition to humans, which has been devoted many a work by modern existentialists and literary men.

There is a divide in the scholarly opinion on the main concept of *The Bacchae*⁷. Some believe that trust in god prevails in the tragedy, while others regard the drama as the demonstration of Euripides' disbelief in god.

The situation becomes strained when Euripides asserts that god is more powerful than man, and is capable of making many miracles. And when we are overcome by this belief, Dionysus attempts to make us feel that he struggles for human salvation. He generously appeals to Pentheus, who, being the king, is his principal and most powerful rival, to change his mind. And exactly in this unique case when the deity shows mercy, the man, Pentheus, is having second thoughts. The passage foregrounds the 'eternal tragism' of the mortal: man and faith. To this extent, the god's benevolence recedes. Although the deity showed compassion for the man, the latter failed to perceive it. Now Dionysus will make it the other way, and this time his way will be merciless: he offers Pentheus to dress up as a woman and see what is happening on Mount Cytheron. Pentheus agrees with pleasure, as he has long been willing to get acquainted with the religion which he so sturdily opposes. Dionysus triumphs as he knows what is bound to happen. Chorus sings a joyful tune. The scene that follows this general festivity is extremely distressing due to the *irony*: the king, overwhelmed with thrilling exhilaration comes out of palace. He has a vision of two suns and two Thebes, and even sees bull horns on the head of his companion; he is delighted with his woman's garment and is showing it

⁷ Gordeziani R., *Greek Literature*, Tbilisi 2009, 436 ff (in Georgian).

off; the king has lost his dignity. Dionysus adds the final touches to this image – readjusts his disarranged curl and peplos. Now Pentheus has become a puppet in the divine hands, funny and miserable.

Dionysus knows, while Pentheus does not, how his meeting with his mother will end. The finale of the drama is shocking: the deity knows that Pentheus will be torn apart by the maddened Bacchantes. Mother Agave will be the first to assault him and possessed by an extraordinary power, will 'put her leg against his ribs and tear out his arm'. Then other Maenads will follow her and 'tear into pieces' the denier of their deity, whom they will fancy as a lion. However, the final scene will exceed all by its unheard wildness – the scene of Mother Agave perching on a thyrsus her son's bloody head and, afterwards looking for the victorious god, delighted.

Euripides wishes that Agave came to her senses, and she does so. Now it is the spectator, or the reader, who looks forward to Dionysus' appearance. He appears in his glory. Agave regrets, but the god is merciless. Here is his answer: 'You have learned it too late; you did not know it when you should have!' (1345). The human appeals for pardon, but all in vain: such is the answer: 'That is me, a god by birth!' (1347). Desperate Agave utters timid words of reproach: 'Is such callousness appropriate of gods?' (1348). This, I believe must be the crucial question of the drama, and stirring reflections over must have been the main motivation to compose this heart-stilling tragedy. Likewise must have sounded the 'so-called 'cursed question', quest for which gave birth to the existential philosophy at the outset of the 20th century.