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**FOR THE INTERRELATION OF PLATO'S *PHAEDO*  
AND ANCIENT GREEK TRAGEDY**

The interrelation of Plato and the Greek tragedy is rather complex, heterogeneous, and even contradictory issue, but to my mind, some aspects of ancient tragedy can be observed in *Phaedo*. On the one hand, the philosopher is shown as an opponent of poetry generally and namely, of drama, but on the other hand, in Plato's works there are some details that are characteristic of the genre unacceptable to him. The complex and dilemmatic side of the problem is the ambivalence of the material found in Plato's dialogues.

One should note that some paradoxes are familiar to Plato's works. 'Plato is seen as the maker of paradoxes: he condemns writing but composes written works of supreme sophistication and suggestiveness; he condemns art and rhetoric, yet he himself is a supreme artist and the ultimate rhetorician; he expounds the plan for an ideal state, yet admits it can never be brought in practice; he declares that the soul, or the maker of the universe, are inaccessible to the human mind, and can only be described in similes or images, and yet his images are so compelling and memorable as to have influenced generations of subsequent thinkers.'<sup>1</sup>

The dramatic qualities of Plato's works were noticed even in ancient times. Plutarch wrote: 'The simplest dialogues of Plato were studied by children; they even recited them and performed the characters, voices and poses of the parsonages.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rutherford R. B., *The Art of Plato, Ten Essays in Platonic Interpretation*, Harvard, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1995, 25.

<sup>2</sup> Миллер Т. А., Мефодий Олимпийский и традиция платоновского диалога, в кн.: *Античность и Византия*, Москва 1975, 194.

The contradictory relation of Plato to drama is inexplicable because the researchers either have ignored it or have not explained it convincingly.

J. Arieti, one of the researchers, tries to illustrate the interrelation of Plato's dialogues with drama in a little exaggerated form but vividly. He says: 'If we like to classify Plato's dialogues we will be able to see *Protagoras* as a comedy, *Euthidemos* and *Cratylus* as a farce. *Phaedo* is a tragedy and the Greek poets could create nothing more heart-rending. *Republic* more resembles the philosophic novels of our times, for example, Tomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* and Goethe's *Faustus* (92.127).<sup>3</sup> L. Cooper evaluates *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo* as a tragic trilogy.<sup>4</sup>

What can be said more specifically and seriously about the interrelation between *Phaedo* and tragedy? By what external (formal) and internal (ideological) features are they connected and contradicted?

I have tried to determine the features of tragedy in *Phaedo* on the bases of other researchers' opinions and our observations as well, proceeding from the principles given in Aristotle's *Poetics*.

L. Cooper singles out four elements that poetry, drama and Plato's philosophical dialogue have in common. They are: 1) plot; 2) character; 3) reasoning; 4) method. We can see that L. Cooper's criterion of research is the four basic elements of tragedy singled out by Aristotle (μυθος, ηθος, διανοία, λέξις) (*Poetics*, 6).<sup>5</sup>

L. Cooper explains that one of the constituents of drama, i.e. mythos (μῦθος) or plot, which is the soul of a play according to Aristotle, corresponds to logos (λόγος) of the philosophical dialogue.<sup>6</sup> It means that the function of *mythos* in drama and epic literature is the same as the function of *logos* in the philosophical dialogue. In fact, it conditions the action (judgment) in the work.

L. Cooper formally explains the interrelation between Plato and the Greek drama. The four elements named by the researcher can be found not only in *Phaedo* but in any other Plato's dialogues as well. Thus, the question is: Why is *Phaedo* a tragedy?

Some researchers have tried to find the elements of tragedy in *Phaedo* by means of singling out some specific details of similarity. Here, we

<sup>3</sup> Arieti J. A., *Interpreting Plato, The Dialogues as a Drama*, Rowman, Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1991, 127.

<sup>4</sup> Cooper L., *Plato, On the Trial and Death of Socrates*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Cooper L., *op. cit.*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Cooper L., *op. cit.*, 7.

should mention that tragedians as well as the author of *Phaedo* do not participate in their works. 'In this respect a dialogue of Plato is like a drama; the author does not appear in it as a speaker.'<sup>7</sup>

The only explanation of such artistic peculiarity is the author's desire. 'He prefers to remain behind the scenes, a dramatist rather than a character or even a commentator.'<sup>8</sup> The author's stepping aside and almost visual-scenic picture of Socrates' death arouses sympathy of everybody who takes an interest in *Phaedo*.<sup>9</sup>

*Phaedo* resembles tragedy because of some other elements too.

In Socrates' words and actions one can notice all the signs that Aristotle thinks the tragic character must have. He is a very generous, consistent and brave person. At the same time such bravery 'is a match' for him because he is a philosopher (comp. *Poetics*, 15). Plato gives the description of Socrates' personality a little hyperbolized and it also matches up Aristotle's requirements. 'Since tragedy is the representation of the better people than we are, we must imitate good portraitists; they give each of them their own form, depict them as they are in reality, but at the same time give more beautiful picture of them' (*Poetics*, 15).

In *Phaedo* besides the main character (so-called protagonist), some minor personages take part in action (and reasoning). Several of them are so called deuteragonists (e.g. Simmias, Cebes) and the rest have the function of chorus (e.g. Phaedo, Echecrates...).

When we read *Phaedo* the scene of Socrates' last hours without fail appears in front of our eyes. The first dialogue between Phaedo and Echecrates can be compared with Parodos – appearance of chorus and the first song. The philosophical dialogue of Socrates and his friends can be imagined as Episodions; twice entry of Phaedo and Echecrates (or chorus) can be seen as Stasimons. In one of the Episodions there is a dialogue between the main character (Socrates) and the so-called coryphaeus of chorus (Phaedo). The episode of Socrates' death can be compared with Eksoodos, where a kind of Komos, the mourning of Socrates' friends over his impending death, is included (comp. *Poetics*, 12).

From the structural point of view, we can see, there is an evident typological similarity between *Phaedo* and tragedy.

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<sup>7</sup> Cooper L., op. cit., 3.

<sup>8</sup> Rutherford R. B., op. cit., 7; see also Rowe C. J. (ed.), Plato, *Phaedo*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, 2-3; Лосев А. Ф., Тахо-Годи А. А., Платон, Жизнеописание, Москва 1977, 127.

<sup>9</sup> Лосев А. Ф., Тахо-Годи А. А., op. cit., 127.

C. Rowe notes that 'there are indeed features which the dialogue shares with tragedy, for example the chorus-like presence of Phaedo and Echecrates, and an Aristotelian-type περιπέτεια or reversal of fortune.'<sup>10</sup>

According to C. Rowe, the introduction of the theory *soul as a harmony* by Simmias and Cebes, contrary to the argumentation of Socrates, can be regarded as the culmination point of reasoning. The researcher explains that at the beginning Socrates' friends had been competing with him from the position of the ordinary man (see esp. *Phaedo*, 70a; 77c-e), but later 'they posed a more philosophical, and accordingly more serious, challenge – the equivalent of a reversal of fortune, or peripeteia' (comp. *Poetics*, 6).<sup>11</sup>

It is worth attention that in tragedy peripeteia is an unexpected reversal of fortune, the act of transforming from happiness into unhappiness (comp. *Poetics*, 13), but in *Phaedo* it is a kind of a sudden change in the process of reasoning. Since reasoning, not action, is determinative in the work, it is natural that peripeteia as well shows up in the process of discussion.

Let us remember again the features of tragedy that are found in *Phaedo* too.

The author is not a character of the work.

The work is based on the dialogues among the characters.

Here we can observe four main elements of tragedy: μῦθος, ἦθος, διανοία, λέξις.

The main character is generous, consistent and brave.

The protagonist is hyperbolized.

The composition consists of Parodos, Episodions, Stasimons, Eksodos and Comos.

In the plot (more precisely, in the process of reasoning) one can observe peripeteia, i.e. the culmination of discussion.

When we study the interrelation between *Phaedo* and tragedy we have to take into consideration the features of the latter that do not exist in the dialogue.

In *Phaedo* one cannot find any artistic devices characteristic of tragedy: (comp. *Poetics*, 6, 11, 16).

It is very interesting to see how much the elements of tragic action δέσις and λύσις are given in *Phaedo* (*Poetics*, 18). Plato does not tell us about the facts that called forth a sudden change of the main character's fate, i.e. how Socrates went to law and was put in prison. He only describes the

<sup>10</sup> Rowe C. J., op. cit., 1.

<sup>11</sup> Rowe C. J., op. cit., 200.

actions proceeded from the conflict up to their end. He only gives the pictures of Socrates' last hours as the result of certain, non-concretized events. The plot is implied; it does not exist in the work. Correspondingly, the whole work is the denouement of the implied plot.

We can see that there are not all characteristic features of tragedy in *Phaedo* and it is quite natural; it is impossible for a philosophical dialogue, whatever associations it produces, to have the typical scheme of tragedy.

When we discuss the interrelation between *Phaedo* and tragedy we should take into consideration not only some formal features, but some internal relation as well. It is rather interesting to see how much tragic the inspiration of the dialogue is.

*Phaedo* was considered as one of the exciting and moving works of literature. On the face of it *Phaedo* is thought to be a tragedy because it is an extremely emotional story of the unjust death of the generous hero.

Though, having the features named above, *Phaedo* produces the impression of tragedy we think that the dialogue by its essence is only to a degree a tragedy.

A small note made by H. Kuhn incited me to make such interpretation. He says that *Phaedo* is a Platonic anti-tragedy... something that gives rise to fear in a tragedy loses its meaning in philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

Such observation seems rather acceptable to me, but at the same time, it contradicts another suggestion that *Phaedo* by its some features has something in common with tragedy. These two differing, but at the same time, remarkable ideas gave me an opportunity to notice that the interrelation between *Phaedo* and tragedy, as well as Plato and drama, is heterogeneous; it cannot be interpreted straightforwardly and must be analyzed carefully.

Aristotle singles out three types of the tragic conflict derived from three kinds of relations of the heroes: hostile, friendly and indifferent (see *Poetics*, 14). The conflict existing in *Phaedo* is conditioned not by the relations of the characters but by the disagreement between the main character and the society. Is such conflict tragic or not?

Aristotle explains that one of the factors that conditions tragedy is the 'transition' of a kind and just person 'from happiness into unhappiness' (*Poetics*, 13). One can ask whether Socrates punishment is a misfortune, and whether his life is tragic.

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<sup>12</sup> Kuhn H., The True Tragedy, On the Relationship between Greek Tragedy and Plato, in: H. S. C., vol. VI, 1941, 25-26.

*Phaedo* cannot give the straightforward answer because Socrates' and the rest characters' attitudes are not homogeneous in this connection.

From the empiric point of view Socrates' fate is tragic but his supreme goal is to stand above physical reality and gain infinity. Hence in the light of eternity the end of Socrates can not be considered as tragic.

As Shelling explains: 'the essence of tragedy is in the struggle between the freedom of a person and the objective necessity',<sup>13</sup> but in *Phaedo* Socrates does not struggle against the objective necessity. Cherishing hopes for the future life he is not afraid of the impending death. It is not a tragedy for him. Contrary to Socrates, the disposition of his spouse and friends is dramatic (see *Phaedo*, 59a1-9, 60a3-b1, 116d1-2, 117c7-d6).

The dual attitude, tragic and anti-tragic, towards death is better seen in Socrates' words to his friends: 'What a way to behave, my strange friends! Why, it was mainly for this reason that I sent the woman away, so that they shouldn't make this sort of trouble' ('οἷα ποιεῖτε, ὦ θαυμάσιοι. ἐγὼ μέντοι οὐχ ἤκιστα τούτου ἕνεκα τὰς γυναῖκας ἀπέπεμψα, ἵνα μὴ τοιαῦτα πλημμελοῖεν' *Phaedo*, 117d7-9).

Death means tragedy for Xanthippe and Socrates' friends, but it is the guarantee of the future happiness for Socrates. He says: 'I don't regard my present lot as a misfortune' ('ὡς οὐ συμφαρὰν ἠγοῦμαι τὴν παρούσαν τυχήν', *Phaedo*, 84e1-2).

Thus, there is not one of the essential elements of tragedy in *Phaedo*; it is the πάθος ('suffering') (comp. *Poetics*, 11) of the main character without which a real tragedy is impossible.

Socrates' image personifies the anti-tragic ideal of Plato. The author describes the objective reality seen by the mortal people as tragedy, and his ideal, Socrates, is an anti-tragic hero. On the one hand, *Phaedo* is close to tragedy, but on the other hand, it struggles against the tragic enthusiasm and esthetics. The anti-tragedy is introduced into the tragedy. The tragedy loses against itself.

The anti-tragic enthusiasm of *Phaedo* is conditioned by Plato's and tragedians' different outlook but, how can be explained the existence of the features of tragedy in the dialogue? Does Plato apply them consciously or unconsciously? Is it accidental or is it the author's intention?

To my mind, it is less likely that the features of tragedy could have appeared accidentally in such a systematic way. It must have been the result of Plato's infrequent gift for writing.

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<sup>13</sup> Шеллинг Ф. В., *Философия Искусства*, Москва 1966, 400.

In one of the final passages of *Phaedo* Socrates, the anti-tragic image, ironically calls himself the hero of a tragedy and appeals to his friends with the words taken from the tragedy: 'but for myself, 'e'en now', as a tragic hero might say, 'destiny doth summon me'; and it's just about time I made for the bath' (ἔμὲ δὲ νῦν ἤδη καλεῖ, φαίη ἄν ἀνὴρ τραγικός, ἢ εἰμαρμένη, καὶ - σχεδόντι μοι ὦρα τραπέσθαι πρὸς τὸ λουτρόν', *Phaedo*, 115a5-6).<sup>14</sup> The theme of a tragic hero is 'run' by Plato once again in the same passage. Before taking the poison he addresses Crito with the reminiscences of Homer whom he thinks to be a tragedian poet:<sup>15</sup> 'ἀλλ' ἄγε δὴ ὦ Κρίτων, πειθώμεθα αὐτῷ' ('But come on, Crito, let's obey him', *Phaedo*, 116d7-8).

To my mind, the same irony is used by Plato in the whole dialogue. He borrows a number of formal features of tragedy and embodies by them the anti-tragic ideals. The accent is put on anti-tragic by means of tragic.

*Phaedo* is the dramatization of the philosophical dialogue. The action is localized in prison. The external static character is compensated by the current of ideas and emotions, therefore, by internal dynamism. Simmias and Cebes stay physically in prison but they spiritually are on their way to Truth. *Phaedo* is an Odyssey of soul and mind of Socrates' listeners, his friends and, at the same time, of us, Plato's present readers.

On the one hand, the formal, and partially, inner features of tragedy found in *Phaedo*, and on the other hand, the anti-tragic enthusiasm of the work once more illuminated Plato's philosophical and literary peculiarities, paradoxicality and large range that in the present case are conditioned by the ambiguous vision of the world. An event is interpreted both as passing and as eternal; thus, it obtains double image.

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<sup>14</sup> Com. Sophocles, *Ajax*, 654-6.

<sup>15</sup> See *Republic*, 595b-c.