

SUMMARY

AJAX' *TRUGREDE*: ITS MEANING AND DRAMATIC FUNCTION

Much has been written on Ajax' *Trugrede* (646-92), which comprises the whole second episode of Sophocles' *Ajax*, so much, that true progress is difficult to discern among the welter of theories. This paper is thus meant to further our understanding of the dissembling - speech of Ajax by revealing its meaning without obscuring its peculiar complexity.

Before proceeding to my analysis it is necessary to point out that I am an adherent of the view that this long speech is a deception speech in the sense that Tecmessa and the Chorus are misled about what is going to happen. On the other hand I think that, since this elusive speech contains some of the noblest poetry even Sophocles ever wrote, Ajax' words have for him an emotional meaning which is essentially true. The purpose of this magnificent passage ought not to be judged solely in the light of its dramatic effect of relaxation of tension or *retardation*. For Ajax' speech in its splendid language, which in its generalizations about human life and natural process ranges over a wide field, conveys Ajax' own tragic vision.

It is in the opening lines of his long soliloquy that Ajax is supposed to reveal his philosophic insight into reality. The speech begins with the famous statement about time, long and countless (646-52). Everything is at the mercy of time, which is a changing, accompanying presence associated with movement of the mind. Ajax' awareness of that purely human world exposed to every actuality as it arises, is important for the play. Even if Ajax is not expected to change his mind, he ought, as a genuine Sophoclean hero, to establish his quality by first examining the balancing factors in his decision to kill himself.

I consider this emphasis on change as fundamental for the play and as emerging from the realm of Ajax' recent social experiences. Ajax himself underwent the bitter experience of the unstable social reality, in which everything is in process of unending change. From his point of view the new values of adjustment and adaptation to the changing circumstances represented by Odysseus, since they may be used for dishonest purposes, are considered inconsistent with his own values of stability, permanence and single - mindedness.

Nevertheless, although Ajax realizes that in the world of flux nothing remains forever, he himself is trying to define his place in this world in terms of *ἀεί*. He is obsessed with the idea of eternity and by refusing to conform to the human mode of existence he is trying to reach a divine condition. Our reading of the speech, thus, consists in understanding the deeper meaning of Ajax' words by a close examination of lines 666-83, which seem to be inconsistent with Ajax' determination to die and with his adherence to the world of *ἀεί*.

After complaining about the ill luck that Hector's sword has brought him (661-65) Ajax speaks of yielding (*εἰκεῖν*) to the gods and venerating (*σέβειν*) the Atreidae

(666-67). The term *είκειν*, which Ajax uses of the gods, seems to be more appropriate of submission to the royal authority than of submission to gods. Nevertheless, its use must be related to the following lines where the horizons expand in the cosmic scale. The reference to the formidable forces of nature, *τὰ δεινὰ καὶ τὰ καρτερώτατα* (669) in combination with the expression *τιμαῖς ὑπέλκει* (670) provides a key to the understanding of the content of the verb *είκειν*, since it recalls lines 666-67, where Ajax, who is «dreadful and headstrong» like the forces of nature, is trying to define his place in the world. The verb *είκειν* in line 667 might in itself suggest an hierarchy which is similar to the cosmic one, implied by the expression *τιμαῖς ὑπέλκει*. To «yield to the gods», in that sense, would be merely to become part of a cosmic order, of an immutable and permanent order. When Ajax says that he will yield to the gods, he means that, by dying, he will escape the ephemeral and changing reality of human life and he will become a stable entity within cosmos.

Thus the appearance of the unexpected word *τιμαῖς* (670) does not suggest that everything, however tough, gives way to *τιμαί* but it refers to the permanent and inherent characteristics of these elemental forces. In like manner, Empedocles' frg. B17 seems to provide a similar argumentation. In lines 27-29 of the above mentioned fragment Empedocles advocates the equity of Love and Strife through the cosmic principle of cyclic change:

ταῦτα γὰρ ἰσά τε πάντα καὶ ἥλικα γένναν ἔασι,
τιμῆς δ' ἄλλης ἄλλο μέδει, πάρα δ' ἥθος ἐκάστω,
ἐν δὲ μέρει κρατέουσι περιπελομένοιο χρόνοιο.

Each element has its own *τιμῆ* and *ἥθος* which are preserved inviolate through motion and succession. Having come to understand this harmony of the universe Ajax by following the same cosmic process can give way without loss of honour. So Ajax asks himself if according to this universal law of equity may be found a useful model of social behaviour, which will enable people like him, i.e. stubborn-minded and undaptable men, to have their proper place within the whole of social structure.

We should, therefore, assume that in the case of Ajax by *ὑπεικτέον* (668) it is not meant that he will bend and give way, but it is suggested that by dying he will become part of a social and of a cosmic order as well. Furthermore, Ajax' choice of the verb *σέβειν* in reference to the political order represented by the Atreidae amounts to a new perception of supernatural and human causation. Since Athena's attitude is consistent with the political order represented by the Atreidae and Odysseus, Ajax is justified in believing that there is an essential identification between godlike and human causation. Thus in this context the verb *σέβειν* refers to a political order sanctified by god and to the way of acting demanded by the community. From Ajax' point of view *σέβειν* connotes reverence or respect by «leaving» or «abandoning» this society and does not imply acceptance of its rules.

This interpretation is supported by the etymological connection of the verb *σέβομαι* with a sanskrit root signifying «leave» or «abandon». Thus Sophocles conceived Ajax as really meaning by the words *ὑπείκτεον* and *σέβειν* that he would thenceforth «revere the Atreidae» in this sense: that transferred to a new sphere of existence through death he would not anymore offend authorities. It is conceivable, therefore, that the cosmic and social themes in the play are interconnected in a very effective way which serves also dramatic purposes.

These dramatic purposes can be better detected in the lines 670-76, which by stating the argument for change finally become a formulation of Ajax' own vision for stability. What we have before us in lines 670 -76 is the assertion that nature by providing us with the evidence of a circular process sets the pattern of a compromise between change and stability. The four pairs of opposites named here (winter - summer, night - day, storm - calmness and weaking - sleeping), represent the most typical regularities within the changing world. The idea of change, therefore, is not correlative to a respective adoption of a new role by Ajax but it is used to reconcile Ajax' own vision with the idea of change.

The kind of change involved in Ajax' idea of circularity can be better illustrated by Empedocles' frg. B17, 12-13:

ἢ δὲ διαλλάσσοντα διαμπερὲς οὐδαμὰ λήγει,
ταύτη δ' αἰὲν ἔασιν ἀκίνητοι κατὰ κύκλον.

These verses imply the notion of change from one extreme to the other and they also refer to the notion of permanence and stability. Thus *κύκλος* is a symbol of eternity as well of unending mutability. So time conceived by Ajax as a cycle becomes rather a principle of unity and permanence than a source of instability and destruction. The kind of change involved in the image of cycle is continuous and repetitive, while the idea of succession referred to in Ajax' statement is more probably to be regarded as spatial. So much is perhaps indicated by the use of the verbs *ἐκχωροῦσιν* (671) and *ἐξίσταται* (672), which imply a gradual motion rather than an immediate and sudden change. Thus circularity comes to signify «permanence in an eternally mobile identity».

The hero's understanding of the world and of himself as part of this single continuum of the cycle, which is presented as a unifying and unified whole, echoes the Heraclitean frg. B88: *ταυτό τ' ἐνὶ ζῶν καὶ τεθνηκὸς καὶ [τὸ] ἐγγρηγορὸς καὶ καθεῦδον καὶ νέον καὶ γηραιόν· τάδε γὰρ μεταπεσόντα ἐκείνῃ ἐστὶ κακείνῃ πάλιν μεταπεσόντα ταῦτα*. Valakas, in his Ph. D. *Homeric Mimesis and the Ajax of Sophocles* (Cambridge 1987) has coped with the adaptation of the Heraclitean picture of change and of the underlying unity of opposites in Ajax' soliloquy effectively. In his view the speech emphasizes «change not as a loss of power on Ajax' part, but as a universal evolution in which he can see himself as a corpse», namely dead. Thus for Ajax as for Heraclitus life and death are inextricably connected, since they are the different poles of a cycle.

The sameness of the opposites implied by the cyclical process excludes any discontinuance between life and death, since even death may be considered not as an end but as a new start. In this way death is not presented as the irreversible end of a linear process but it can be considered as a starting point in a new mode of existence.

This new mode of existence is suggested, indeed, by the word *ἀείμνηστος* used by the Chorus to describe Ajax' grave in lines 1163 -65. After death the hero is immortal in two different senses: in cult the hero can be associated with immortal existence of the gods, as it is suggested by the first component of the word *ἀείμνηστος*. But in the same time the dead hero is immortalized only in the memory of men, as it implied by the second part of the word *ἀείμνηστος*. To sum up the double function of memory above time and within it explains how eternity implied by *ἀεί* can coexist with *μνήμη* in a single word like *ἀείμνηστος*. In the world of time and change, Ajax' grave may be concerned on the one hand as the visual symbol of eternity, since veneration is to be paid everlastingly to it. On the other hand Ajax' tomb as a material object which is liable to the destructive power of time (*τάφον εὐρώεντα*, 1165) and through its function as *μνῆμα* is suggestive of human temporality.

So far our analysis shows that Ajax' speech functions as a mediation between the internal and external communication systems. The dramatic figure, namely Ajax, in communicating to the spectators his real opinion creates a mediating communication system through which the audience is informed of the ambivalence of his position. On the other hand, the dramatic illusion is not affected since Ajax in his role as a commentator never steps outside his role as a dramatic person but he merely deceives his hearers within drama.

To conclude, the essence of Ajax' *Trugrede* is to be found in the contrast between the superior awareness of the audience and the inferior awareness of the dramatic figures. Hence the deceptive aspect of Ajax' soliloquy refers exclusively to the internal communication system, whilst its true content refers to the external system.