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REPRESENTATIONS OF TYRANNY IN PLATO'S REPUBLIC AND IN MODERN GREEK POETRY

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Acclaimed Greek poet and Nobel laureate Giorgos Seferis is a man with a deep sense of history. He is deeply aware of both the significance of historical past, and the demands that the historical present makes on us. His poem 'Epi Aspalathon' is a clear example of this, featuring different levels of Greek history along with philosophical thinking.

On Aspalathoi [On the Thorny Bushes]

Sounion was lovely that spring day -
the Feast of the Annunciation.
Sparse green leaves around rust-coloured stone,
red earth, and aspalathoi
with their huge thorns and their yellow flowers
already out.
In the distance the ancient columns, strings of a harp still
vibrating. . .

Peace.

- What could have made me think of Ardiaios?

Possibly a word in Plato, buried in the mind's furrows:

the name of the yellow bush

hasn't changed since his time.

That evening I found the passage:

'They bound him hand and foot,' it says,

'they flung him down and flayed him,

they dragged him along

gashing his flesh on thorny aspalathoi,

and they went and threw him into Tartarus, torn to shreds.'

In this way Ardiaios, the terrible Pamphylian tyrant, aid for his crimes in the nether world.¹

31 March 1971

For Seferis the story of Ardiaios in 615- 616 of Plato's *Republic* is not simply another Platonic myth, but too close to heart in real time. In the poem, dated March 31st 1971, he articulates two narrations in different but intersecting narrative times: the story of Ardiaios in some primordial Platonic time, and Seferis's own personal anguish in Athens on Annunciation Day in 1971.

That evening' is the evening of March 25th, the day the Greeks celebrate both the Orthodox festival of the Annunciation and the Greek National Day marking the beginning of the Greek War of Independence. In the poem the two distinct times –the mythical and the historical–, converge at the temporal point of that evening, through reflection on and engagement with the reality of tyranny. In mythical times Ardiaios was a tyrant in Pamphylia in the south western region of Asia Minor. In 1971 Seferis was struggling with his own demons of tyranny, the military dictatorship of the colonels which had seized power in Athens four years before. Seferis abhors the kitschy celebrations the junta had organized for the national day; for, in his eye, the deeds and virtues the Greeks have held dear for centuries are defiled if celebrated by those who annulled the constitutional freedoms in the land. He leaves the city of Athens and takes refuge at Sounion. There he spends the day among "the ancient columns", where the land is bursting with a bush with big thorns and yellow flowers, the aspalathoi.

At this point a clear similarity comes into mind. There is the case of the poet leaving the city of Athens for the seashore, on the day of a religious celebration. There is also that of the philosopher who also leaves Athens for the day and goes down the harbour of Piraeus where religious festivities in honour of goddess Bendis are being held (*Rep.* 327a). Both Seferis in 'Epi Aspalathon' and Socrates in book I of the *Republic* perform a kind of spiritual pilgrimage outside the city and then by sunset they take the road back to the city.

But where exactly does Seferis find himself on the Feast of the Annunciation, the day the modern 'politeia' reflects on the foundations of its own existence? The place is Sounion, the promontory at the southernmost part of Attica, where the temple of the sea god Poseidon still stands. This is also the place from which the mythical king Aegeus threw himself off the cliff into the water, thus giving to the Aegean Sea the names it carries to this day. Sounion is the place of a

¹ 'On Aspalathoi', ['Epi Aspalathon'] George Seferis Collected Poems, Translated, edited, and introduced by Edmund Keely and Philip Sherrard *Revised Edition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton New Jersey, 1995, p.223.

symbolic act of desperation. After having sent his son, Theseus, to Crete to kill the monster Minotaur and save Athens from the heavy tax in blood she has to pay to Crete, Aegeas asks him to change the sails of his ship from black to white. White sails will mean that Theseus has succeeded in his mission and he is returning home safe. Hurrying up to escape from Crete, Theseus forgets to change the black sails; Aegeus sees the ship from Sounion and loses all hope to see his son alive. He thus kills himself.

The place is sacred- it is where the king's prayers for the deliverance of the city is granted: Theseus is successful in killing the Minotaur and liberating the city, but at the same time the prayer of the abandoned Ariadne is also heard. Poseidon strikes Theseus with the death of his father upon his triumphant return home.

This is the place where the poet seeks solace and distance, a place where the old harp is said to vibrate still. Its vibration is the story of Poseidon's justice.

This subdued invocation to the divine, though, is kept at a safe distance from the core part of the poem. He whose memory is retrieved from the poet's mind is not Poseidon, but Ardiaios. As Plato's symbol of tyrant, Ardiaios is part of the philosophical conception of justice that Plato attempts in the *Republic*. He also constitutes the point of the poem through which the two temporality, the ancient and the modern, are connected.

The definition and analysis of justice in the individual and justice in the city is the theme running through the *Republic's* ten books. Socrates makes a long and arduous effort to refute Thrasymachus's notorious statement in 338c that 'justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger.'² His ultimate aim is to discredit Thrasymachus's claim in 359a that the best position is that of a person who is unjust without having to pay any penalty. He is well aware that Thrasymachus is very hard to refute at his own terrain of eristic debates. So he tries to draw a picture embodying Thrasymachus's ideal of life to its ultimate consequences, as vividly as possible. This brings him to the point of arguing for an essential symmetry between soul and city in book IV.

This unique platonic psychology argues that there is a symmetry between the order of the soul and that of the city, with their respective motivations, challenges, appetites, instinctive aggression, and sense of honour, as well as their rational parts. What's more, what makes the one a just order, holds also for the other. The just soul is a soul whose rational part manages to have control over the other two, and the just city is a city who brings people with a predominantly rational soul to its ruling elite. In *Rep.* 433 a-b justice is defined as all parts of the city should doing their own job and not meddling with the affairs of the others. This is the basis on which Socrates makes a sketch of the ideal constitution, for the ideal city, the kallipolis. At the antipodes of the ideal constitution embodying Socrates's definition of justice are the corrupted constitutions: timocracy, oligarchy, democracy and finally tyranny, along with the characteristic human types the generate. (*Rep.* 547c-569c). Tyranny and the tyrannical man then are the very end of this spectrum of degeneration. Plato dedicates book IX to an insightful analysis of the tyrannical man.

One may perhaps wonder why the main emphasis is not on the tyrannical city- especially given that the *Republic*, as its subtitle informs us- is a political work. After all, in book II (368e-369a) Socrates and his interlocutors agree that the best way to go is first to look for justice in the city, which is a larger domain than the individual person. Then, they claim, it will then be possible to define justice in the soul by analogy to that.

² See Plato, (1997). "Republic", trans. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve. In J.M. Cooper, D.S. Hutchinson (eds.), *Plato Complete Works*. Hackett Pub. Co., p. 983.

As the *Republic* draws gradually to its close, the initial question of whether it is worth being just- even if one can get away with injustice in wearing the ring of Gyges,³ gets an answer: the most unjust among men, the tyrant, is the most wretched of human beings. His life is bound to end up in misery and desolation. Plato's long and realistic depiction of the tyrannical man conveys that the latter is not a master of himself, but being led to wherever his appetites and passions take him. Ultimately he is deprived of all resources, human connections, dignity, and sense of self. Scholarship debates whether, for example, the soul of the tyrannical man is dominated by sexual appetite or appetite for bodily pleasure of all sorts.⁴ No matter what the answer to this may be, the tyrannical man, as Plato describes him in book IX, is not in a position to *enjoy* even the various kinds of lowly pleasure. For Plato this may be possible in the beginning of the tyrannical person's adult life, but appetite breeds more and more needs, into which the tyrannical man is finely drowned, much more addicted than joyful.

Plato completes his account with an eschatological myth, within which the depiction of the tyrant becomes even more striking. In book X, he presents the myth of Er, the soldier from Pamphylia, who was killed in war, but came back to life twelve days later to narrate to the people back home all he had experienced in the afterlife.⁵ A very vivid part of the narrative is the description of the souls who have struggled to purify themselves from their crimes for a thousand years. When their time of trials and suffering is completed and they have reformed themselves sufficiently, they can advance through an underground path all the way to an opening bringing them to the surface of the earth.

The re-surfacing of the souls upon the earth is Plato's mythical means to talk about repentance and redemption. It is at this very point that Plato expresses his view that the tyrant's soul is incurable and his destiny irredeemable. and cannot follow the other souls, with their own burden of lesser or greater crimes. Ardiaios's turn comes but, unlike the other souls, he is not allowed to make the transition from the underworld to the light of the day. The earth does not accept him. Plato's description in *Rep.* 615-616 is awe-inspiring.

For example, he said he was there when someone asked another where the great Ardiaeus was. **(This Ardiaeus was said to have been tyrant in some city in Pamphylia a thousand years before and to have killed his aged father and older brother and committed many other impious deeds as well.)** And he said that the one who was asked responded: "He hasn't arrived here yet and never will, for this too was one of the terrible sights we saw. When we came near the opening on our way out, after all our sufferings were over, we suddenly saw him together with some others, pretty well all **of whom were tyrants (although there were also some private individuals among them who had committed great crimes)**. They thought that they were ready to go up, but the opening wouldn't let them through, for it roared whenever one of **these incurably wicked people or** anyone else who hadn't paid a sufficient penalty tried to go up. And there were savage men, all fiery to look at, who were standing by, and when they heard the roar, they grabbed some of these criminals and led them away, but they bound the feet, hands, and head of Ardiaeus and the others, threw them down, and flayed them. Then they dragged them out of the way, lacerating them on thorn bushes, and telling every passer-by that they were to be thrown into Tartarus, and explaining why they were being treated in this way."

³ Plato, op. cit., 359d, p. 1000

⁴ See Johnstone, M. (2015) "Tyrannized Souls: Plato's Depiction of the 'Tyrannical Man'". *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 23:3, 423-437

⁵ Plato, op. cit., 614 b-c, p. 1218

[...] such, then, were the penalties and punishments and the rewards corresponding to them.⁶ (My emphasis)

The chilling story of Ardiaios cannot fail to impress Plato's point even on the most unreceptive reader. Ardiaios's soul cannot aspire to purification; it is so severely tainted that he cannot aspire to any new life; in fact the story of Ardiaios being flayed upon the thorny bushes, as a last torment, underlines how injustice has so much destroyed Ardiaios's soul that he is condemned to Tartarus (the ancient Greek hell) for ever.

Socrates has argued all along that the tyrannical man is the most unjust. In no other human soul is the relation of its three parts so radically flawed as to totally prevent any kind of order and unity. Ardiaios is a powerful example of the tyrannical person's fragmented soul. He presents a limit case of the human experience, as he is violently separated from the other souls, deprived of agency, and prevented from continuing into the circle of re-embodiments in search for purification and atonement.

We do not know anything about Ardiaios, apart from what Plato tells us in *Republic* as part of the eschatological myth of Er. In Rep. 615 Plato clarifies that Ardiaios had killed both his father and brother, heinous crimes, expressions of his tyrannical soul. At the same time, we are told that he was a tyrant in a city in Pamphylia a thousand years before Er witnessed his punishment on the aspalathoi.

That Ardiaios was a tyrant leader in his city is a significant piece of information, related to Plato's intention to address the political significance of justice. A city deprived of justice, as we are to assume Ardiaios's city is, is as deprived of unity as the tyrant's own soul. It rather resembles a gang which holds together only as long as its members pursue their criminal interests in common. For Plato, there is no worse soul than that of a tyrannical man. But there is also no worse city than the one ruled by a man with a tyrannical soul. Tyranny as the peak of injustice, is the negation of the city's own existence- the moral and political analogue of non- being.

These were probably the thoughts that went through Seferis's mind that day of March in 1971. Two years earlier, in his famous *Declaration* he had written:

'Everyone has been taught and knows by now that in the case of dictatorial regimes the beginning may seem easy, but tragedy awaits, inevitably, in the end. The drama of this ending torments us consciously or unconsciously-as in the immemorial choruses of Aeschylus. The longer the anomaly remains, the more the evil grows.'⁷

The tragedy which awaits, inevitably, is what Seferis predicted for the tyrannical regime of the 'Colonels' Junta.' His prediction turned out true a few years later. For Seferis reader of Plato, though, this is less of a prediction and more a remark on the nature of justice: it is the primordial political virtue. Its absence does not simply deprive the city from a desirable but dispensable quality. Its absence, rather, cancels the nature of a city as an organized constitution and gnaws at its very existence. Its end, just like that of a tyrant ruler, cannot but be tragic. Painful and tormented just like the torment of Ardiaeus upon the thorny aspalathoi.

⁶ Plato, op. cit., 359d, p. 1000

⁷ G. Seferis, *Declaration*, translated by Edmund Keeley
<https://aphelis.net/anomaly-stop-george-seferis-declaration-march-28-1969/>
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