

Giving a Voice to Mourning

“Au deuil intériorisé, il n’y a guère de signes. C’est l’accomplissement de l’intériorité absolue. Toutes les sociétés sages, cependant, ont prescrit et codifié l’extériorisation du deuil. Malaise de la notre en ce qu’elle nie le deuil.”¹
We study the past in order to get a better grasp of the present, but sometimes the present offers unforeseen insights into the nature of past practices and events. The oral tradition of the Greek *miroloyia* (lamentations), that is still very much alive, offers insights both into the origins of Greek tragedy and into contemporary art practices of offering emotional, somatic and energetic release for the body in state of mourning.

Introductory notes on rethinking tragedy

In her collection of contemporary essays *Rethinking Tragedy*,² Rita Felski distinguishes three very different ‘clusters of meaning’ attached to tragedy/the tragic. The first, ancient Greek cluster is mainly a literary genre defined by formal and thematic criteria still used by contemporary thinkers such as George Steiner, which actually drew him to his conclusion of ‘the death of tragedy’ in our time. The second one is a philosophical view on the essential tragic nature of human existence, ‘forged in the crucible of German romanticism’. The third cluster is defined by Felski as ‘vernacular’ and refers to the everyday use of the word ‘tragic’ as a synonym for ‘very sad’, often related to unexpected sudden events (such as car accidents, the death of a child, 9/11, etc.).

Felski also distinguishes two main ‘strands’ of how contemporary scholars deal with those historical, semantic interpretations. A first strand -of which again George Steiner is the most representative scholar- tries to restore the original, ancient meaning as an ‘art form’ which was only fully realized at very specific moments in history: i. e. in ancient Athens and in sixteen/seventeenth-century Western Europe. Steiner’s defence of ‘absolute tragedy’ in his contribution to *Rethinking Tragedy* concludes with him defending his vision formulated almost half a century earlier. “As is, I see no persuasive grounds on which to retract the case put in *The Death of Tragedy*, 1961.”³

¹ R. BARTHES, *Journal de deuil*, Paris, 2009, p. 167.

² R. FELSKI (ed.), *Rethinking Tragedy*, Baltimore, 2008.

³ G. STEINER, ‘Tragedy’, *reconsidered* in R. FELSKI (ed.), *Rethinking Tragedy*, p. 44.

A second strand, of which Nietzsche was the forerunner, tries to rethink the original, limited historical definition of tragic art and questions its relevance for other literary genres such as the novel or other art forms such as opera or more recently film. Following the democratisation process of modernity and drawing on the insights of psychology, it also expands the notion of the tragic outside the exclusive domain of the ‘sacred’ or ‘tragic hero’ into the everyday life of ‘Everyman’.

In this seemingly unlimited expansion process, thus Felski, we must absolutely distinguish form from content. Hence the tragic is no longer seen as a ‘genre’ but as a ‘mode’ giving expression to the ‘shape of suffering’, rather than expressing the actual suffering itself.

In her contribution to *Rethinking Tragedy*, the feminist theologian Kathleen M. Sands explicitly links ‘the tragic’ with ‘the traumatic’ experienced in loss. Whereas traumas are ‘black holes’ which ‘manifest themselves as gaps or silence’, tragedy, as an aesthetic form, creates “a ritual space where the trauma, rather than being silently re-enacted, is solemnly voiced and lamented”.⁴ Through this voicing, which is mainly a process of re-embodiment, the seeming fatality of the experience of loss (as experienced after the death of a loved one) is transformed, i.e. it acquires a ‘form’ which can be acted upon.

Similarly, the authors of *Loss*, edited by David L. Eng and David Kazanjian,⁵ explicitly plead for a ‘politics of mourning’ in which the melancholic attachment to the things or persons lost is replaced by an active process of mourning, of coming to terms with the loss in order to let it go and actively engage with ‘what remains’.

*The practice of miroloyia*⁶

In 2000, I was invited to participate in the first Summer Academy of Theatre, organized by the National Theatre of Greece which took place in Monodendri, one of the Zagori villages, north of Ionninna in Epirus, close to the Albanian border. The overall theme of this first edition was *Ancient chorus and polyphonic expression: contemporary theatre work and folk traditions*. I was given the means to gather a team of four people: apart from myself, there were the

⁴ K. M. SANDS, *Tragedy, theology, and feminism in the time after time* in R. FELSKI (ed.), *Rethinking Tragedy*, p. 83.

⁵ D. L. ENG/D. KAZANJIAN (eds.), *Loss*, Berkeley, 2003.

⁶ Part of the following is a reworking of a text that appeared in the catalogue of the Time Festival, 2003: *Miroloyia, Zingend wenen, wenend zingen*.

Italian, Belgium based choreographer Paola Bartoletti and the Dutch-Belgian composer Dick Van Der Harst, who both –individually and together- looked into exploring a contemporary dance/music universe based on more traditional forms, as well as British theatre director David Gothard, who became well acquainted with the Albanian part of the region doing a Shakespeare play, integrating local customs into it.

Our workshop was called *Rites of separation (death and exile) and union (marriage) as a source for a theatre practice*. Using fragments of Greek tragedy (*Hippolytus* by Euripides in particular) and the choreographic, musical and theatrical knowledge of the three guest artists, we wanted to research how elements of the local, popular culture could be actualized into a contemporary performance practice. For the latter, our international group was joined by local miroloyia singer, Katerina Zakka.

Before travelling to Greece I had studied the musical, oral tradition of the miroloyia, improvised ‘songs of fate and mourning’ used to commemorate the separation from loved ones at funerals, weddings (the bride leaving her family to go and live with her in-laws also marking a separation) and in exile (*xenitia*), starting from Loring M. Danforth’s anthropological study *The death rituals of rural Greece*.⁷ Reality, however, proved much stronger than anything I had come across in my readings.

One of the ‘techniques’ of the miroloyia singer consists in linking the actual mourning process with older, personally experienced, similar ones. The music and texts are highly codified and use a standard, metaphorical language of, for instance, plants (e. g. a cypress for a deceased male, an orange or lemon tree for a woman) and birds (e. g. a partridge for a young female, an eagle for a young male), but simultaneously leave ample room for improvisation.

The miroloyia are by nature theatrical and dramatic in the way the singer addresses the absent person and temporarily lends him her voice to answer back: a widow talks to her husband, a mother to her married daughter, a corpse to its own ‘tired body’... The dialoguing, leading voice is reinforced by the other women who polyphonically hum/cry along. The individual stories are interwoven into a collective canon which again leaves room for individual experience: “These laments constitute a public language, a cultural code, for the expression of grief. They provide the bereaved with a set of shared symbols [...] which enables them not only to organize their experience of death in a culturally meaningful way but also to articulate it in a socially approved

⁷ L. M. DANFORTH, *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece*, Princeton, 1982.

manner. Women singing laments are communicating in a symbolic language and in the context of a public performance.”⁸

In her study, Danforth describes how in a small, rural village in Northern-Greece in the Seventies, all the women with a deceased in the family would visit their graves, the first five years after the funeral, every day for an hour, to musically interact with them, using the *miroloyia* form. The individual, personalized dialogues are interwoven into a chorus of mourning voices that not only commemorate the dead but also support and exchange with each other and comment on the daily events; the creating of “a particular social context that allows the bereaved to sustain a social relationship with the deceased”⁹ being the main objective of those musical dialogues with the dead.

In her more literary study, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, Margaret Alexiou in her turn offers ample proof of ancient tragedy and present-day *miroloya* being part of a single tradition by studying elements such as themes, metrical patterns, the antiphonal structure of the dialogues between living and dead. She states: “These themes and conventions are both ancient and traditional. That their survival in the Greek folk laments of today marks essentially the development of a single tradition is indicated not only by the nature of the ideas [...] but by the similarity of the formulae through which they are expressed.”¹⁰

Lamenting in contemporary art practices

It is my personal conviction that a large part of –past and present– artistic creation can be analyzed as the artist ‘dialoguing with the ghosts of the dead’, in the liminal state of an as yet unresolved mourning process which can be both individual or collective and which is often better expressed in a formal, ‘musical’ language than in a psychological one.

In the Nineties a number of remarkable theatre performances in Holland and Flanders consciously revived the musical tradition of the mourning songs: Gerardjan Rijnders staging Jeremiah’s *Klaagliederen* (*Lamentations*) with Toneelgroep Amsterdam; Johan Simons and Paul Koek bringing to life the powerful lamentations of Aeschylus’ *Persians*, the individual lamentations of the Queen and King being supported by a mixed chorus of professional opera singers and old farmers; Erik Devolder and Dick Van Der

⁸ L. M. DANFORTH, *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece*, p. 73-74.

⁹ L. M. DANFORTH, *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece*, p. 117.

¹⁰ M. ALEXIOU, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, Lanham, 2002 (2^o), p. 18.

Harst expressing the collective Belgian trauma of the Dutroux child-abuse murders through a lamenting chorus of seven women in *Diep in het bos* (*Deep in the forest*).

But the lamentation form is not only restricted to music (a huge chunk of contemporary pop music also being contemporary laments) and theatre. In literature and the visual arts too, mourning has become a central theme. I was staying in Toronto, with Jane Martin -a famous painter in the area- while (re)articulating those thoughts. Nine years ago, her husband was diagnosed with a fatal brain tumour. All through his agony, Jane took Polaroids of him and jotted down his often strange but poetic utterances. A few years later, she started to paint miniature portraits based on the Polaroids and gave them her husband's quotes as titles. Today, several years on, most of the portraits are hanging in a small private room where she retreats, 'to meditate in an ongoing dialogue with him'. Some of the portraits are part of a group exhibition in the Art Gallery of Ontario, under the title *The matter of Loss*.

Two years and a half after the original workshop, Dick Van Der Harst and I went back to Ionninna to revisit Katerina and to study her art in more detail. Being a retired school teacher Katerina had started to write down the lyrics of her mainly oral tradition and sang them to us, so that Dick could note down their complicated, freely improvised musical patterns. Out of this research sprang Dick's theatrical concert, *Dakrismena Poulia* (*Weeping Birds*), where he integrated the traditional miroloyia of Katerina with some of the stage songs he wrote for Eric De Volder's theatre production *Zwarte Vogels in de bomen* (*Black Birds in the trees*), performed by soprano Katelijne Van Laethem. The production premiered at the 2003 edition of the Time-festival, a city festival curated by the Colombian theatre director and anthropologist Enrique Vargas and fully revolving around the *Ars Moriendi*.

Researching the miroloyia has become an important part of my own work as a dance dramaturge. At least three productions I have worked on since explicitly dealt with a form of contemporary lamentation for a dead body/father: *Zero Degrees* by Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui; *Monday Mourning* by the Cypriot choreographer Lia Haraki; and *Ashes* by Koen Augustijnen/Les Ballets C de la B.

Zero Degrees, the artistic exchange between Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Akram Khan, starts out telling Akram's autobiographical narrative of the time when, as a second-generation immigrant, he went to India (Bengal) for the first time at the age of twenty and the questions the journey raised about his in-between identity. When Akram's narrative ends with the story of how he is confronted with a dead body for the first time on the train to Calcutta, the last

third of the performance becomes a long, repetitive lamentation for this body in different formal languages: Akram retelling the story in traditional abhinai (the story telling component of kathak dance); Larbi acting out the disrespectful attitude of the bystanders towards the dead person in a tragicomical theatrical interlude with the 'dummies' (the life-sized, white puppets/sculptures by Anthony Gormly, cast directly from the actual bodies of both dancers); Akram dancing a distorted, contemporary dance solo around his dummy, and Larbi holding his pieta style, lamenting.

Artistic sensibilities often tune into the unforeseen and unpredictable realities of the world before they are actually aware of them (Jung's synchronicity principle). *Zero Degrees* was ready to premiere in London on July 12th 2004 when on July 7th, the suicide bomb attacks took place in the Underground. As a result, both the performers and their first audiences experienced *Zero Degrees* as a lament for the victims, 'dead bodies on trains'. The emotional charge and release of those first performances remained very much alive all through the tour, until the very last performance in New York in the spring of 2008.

Monday Mourning by Lia Haraki, created in Cyprus in 2005, and *Ashes* by Koen Augustijnen (Les Ballets C de la B) in 2009, didn't have such a strong, immediate connection with the social and political reality, but both used the choreographer's personal mourning process of a dead father as a triggering device to create a collective, emotional experience offering both their performers and their audiences an articulated and embodied outlet for their personal memories and histories of loss and mourning, including different musical traditions of 'lamentations' - ranging from traditional Greek mirololyia over baroque music to 20th century musicals; and relying on traditional elements (e. g. the throwing out of the window of the clothes of the deceased in Korea in *Ashes*) or inventing new funeral rites (e. g. decorating little dead trees in *Monday Mourning*); and creating powerful, physical articulations and embodiments for the state of loss.

Conclusion

"With crying and singing, a knot (*komvos*) leaves one's throat, one is lightened (*elafreni*), and one feels cool (*dhrosizete*). When a woman visits the graveyard and cries, *ponos*, anxiety and poison all leave her system. A woman performs the necessary rites of passage and cares for the graves of the dead 'in order to get everything out of her system' (*ya na xespasi*). These visits to the

graveyard are one of the few opportunities for the cathartic outburst of emotion (*xespasma*) available to a woman in mourning.”¹¹

The physical exteriorisation through crying or lamenting of the emotional grief of mourning is a necessary part of the rites of separation, both allowing to stay connected with the deceased for some time and eventually allowing a reintegration of the mourner into society.

As Roland Barthes’ quote above indicates, our Western society, with some noteworthy exceptions such as the Greek example, has suppressed those external rituals and as such interiorised mourning, with the inherent risk of serious energetic, physical and psychological blockages in the body.

Art as a personal or collective ritual practice has often created a space to articulate, relive and by doing so eventually exteriorise and exorcise the resulting negative energy or energy blockages, in order to reopen specific physical areas such as the throat or the heart. As such I endorse the belief that art has a fundamental, potential cathartic quality by allowing both its creators and its audiences through a process of controlled, homeopathic ‘poisoning’ (as expressed in the ancient Greek word for medicine, *thilitirion*). The personal experiences are framed into a larger collective tradition and, as such, can become a source of a creative practice.

Guy Cools

¹¹ L. M. DANFORTH, *The Death Rituals*, p. 144.