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Greek by Steven Berkoff (1980)*:
*the risky transformation of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex
into a love story*

To Salvador Oliva and Xabier Sánchez

Abstract

Can Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* really be transformed into a love story, as in Steven Berkoff's drama entitled *Greek*? This article will show that, although *Greek* may be viewed by some critics as simply a provocative drama by no means intended to justify incest, directors, actors and critics in the end become enthralled by the powerful love story that ensues between Eddy and his wife and mother. This perspective reveals that Berkoff's adaptation, intended to portray the social degradation of 1980s Great Britain, is in reality a quite risky proposition since it represents a flat denial of the tragic awareness of contemporary men and women. However, if this is the case, the audience, apart from enjoying the performance of Berkoff's drama, might question, even from a non-fundamentalist perspective within the classical tradition, to what degree it makes sense to take inspiration from a text by Sophocles that precisely illustrates the great tragic awareness of the ancient Greeks.

L'Edipo re di Sofocle può davvero trasformarsi in una storia d'amore, come in *Greek*, il film drammatico di Steven Berkoff? Anche se *Greek* può essere considerato da alcuni critici come un semplice dramma provocatorio, in nessun modo destinato a giustificare l'incesto, registi, attori e critici, alla fine, restano affascinati dalla grande storia d'amore tra Eddy con la moglie e madre. Questa prospettiva rivela come l'adattamento di Berkoff, che intende rappresentare il degrado sociale anglosassone degli anni '80, sia in realtà una proposta molto rischiosa perché rappresenta una negazione della tragica consapevolezza di uomini e donne contemporanei. Tuttavia, se è così, il pubblico, oltre a godere del film di Berkoff, potrebbe mettere in discussione - anche in una prospettiva non condizionata dalla tradizione classica - fino a che punto abbia senso prendere ispirazione da un testo di Sofocle che illustra proprio la grande consapevolezza tragica degli antichi greci.

It is a great source of pride to all those who teach and love the classical tradition that the sensibility of contemporary men and women continues to be touched by Greek tragedies. However, there is no unanimous view on the appropriateness of reflecting the ethical weaknesses of contemporary society – or any other society – by performing an ancient drama with the perhaps unjustified expectation that the audience will apply the implied lesson to their own situation. The curtailment of freedom under many contemporary political regimes explains and justifies such scepticism just as it would be

* *Greek* was first performed at the Half Moon Theatre (London, 11 February 1980) and directed by Berkoff; the production later moved to the Arts Theatre Club (London, September 1980). A new production was staged at Wyndham's Theatre (London, 29 June 1988).

superfluous if individual liberty prevailed. A playwright such as Berkoff – candid and unconstrained – may change the names of the characters and present us with an altered historical and social setting¹, but if in this drama he chooses to essentially reproduce Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* while offering a new perspective – the sort of exercise at which the Greeks excelled – he should in my view also be aware of the obligations imposed on an author treating such a text, an undisputed classic of Western literature. In other words, although Berkoff's dramas aspire to elevate ethical values in a particular political and social context, we should not reject the possibility – both genuine and paradoxical in this case – of his causing the opposite effect by overestimating the hermeneutic powers of the audience. Or what is even more unsettling, since Berkoff is the provocative and seductive “enfant terrible” of British drama, he may in the end open certain minds, more of them than we might expect, to a broad-minded and “tolerant” view of a centuries-old taboo: incest.

Without further ado, then, here follows the plot of Berkoff's *Greek*. Eddy is a young man who was raised in Tufnell Park, «[...] a land more fantasized than real, being an amalgam of the deadening war zones that some areas of London had become» (p. 97)². His real parents lost him when he was just a baby as they were making a journey on the Thames when the boat struck an abandoned mine from the Second World War. However, the baby was rescued from the remains of the wreck by a childless couple, who fell in love with him and decided to keep him. After all «[...] his mum will think he'd died anyway» (p. 136). Tufnell Park was a reflection of Great Britain under Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990), which had become «[...] a gradually decaying island, preyed upon by the wandering hordes who saw no future for themselves in a society which had few ideals or messages to offer them. The violence that streamed the streets [...] a society in which an emotional plague had taken root [...] a cold place in my recollection, lit up from time to time by the roar of the beast –the beast of frustration and anger» (p. 97). Thus Eddy eventually abandoned his new parents' home, leaving behind a completely deteriorated, rat-infested world³, to the relief of his surrogate

¹ «Berkoff domesticates and urbanizes the source text through setting, characterization and language to invite us not only to reassess it through modern eyes but also to consider the effects of the intratext for the present and for our present reception to the source text» (FORSYTH 2002, 175). «In Greek, he draws from the Oedipus story for the central plot (the plague, the prophecy, the sphinx, killing his father, and marrying his mother), borrowed from his own experiences growing up in East London for the details, and made a political statement about Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister» (GREEN 2003, 3).

² The passages in quotes correspond to BERKOFF's *author's note* (1994, 97f.). All quotations from *Greek* refer to this edition, with page numbers shown in brackets.

³ «The country's in a state of plague / while parties of all shades battle for power to sort the shit from the shinola / the Marxists and the Worker's party call for violence to put an end to violence and likewise the wankers suggest hard solutions like thick chains and metal toecaps / poisoned darts half-inched from local taverns / anyone who wants to kill, maim and destroy / arson, murder and hack are being recruited for the

father, to whom a fairground gypsy once foretold that his son would kill him and marry his wife. One day, Eddy killed his true father, a publican, in a pub brawl. Then, after falling desperately in love with the pub owner's widow, he finally married her. She welcomed him into her home⁴ and one day recounted how she had lost her baby⁵. The couple prospered, contributing as well to the city's prosperity by opening a chain of pubs. However, there is still a malignant cancer in the city to be extirpated, the Sphinx; Eddy faces her and emerges victorious. The happy couple now invite Eddy's parents to visit and, when the parents finally reveal their great secret⁶ by telling how and when they met the foundering baby, tragedy seems inevitable.

Well then, transforming the plot of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* into a love story involves distancing Eddy's awareness precisely from what Berkoff calls «the Greek style», which compels the Greek Oedipus to discover himself as a monstrous stink and, therefore, to painfully atone for it⁷:

My dearest wife and now my mum, it seems [...] So the man I verballed to death
was my real pop / the man to whom my words like hard-edged shrapnel razed his
brain / was the source of me, oh stink / warlock and eyes break shatter, cracker and
splatter [...]! Me who wants to clean up the city / stop the plague destroy the sphinx
/ me was the source of all the stink / the man of principle is a mother fucker / oh no
more will I taste the sweetness of my dear wife's pillow [...] foul incest and babies
on the way which if they come will no doubt turn into six-fingered horrors with
two heads / poor Eddy [...] hold on to me / hold on to me and I will hold on to you
and I'll never let you go, hold on to me, does it matter that you are my mother, I'll
love you even if I am your son / do we cause each other pain, do we kill each other,
do we maim and kill, do we inflict vicious wounds on each other? We only love so

new revolutionary party / the fag libs are holding violent demos to be able to give head in the public park
when the garbage strike is over and not to be persecuted for screwing on the top deck of buses» (p. 109).

⁴ After Eddy's singular declaration of love: «Look no further mam than this / your spirits won me / cast
thy gaze to me / my face / and let thine eyes crawl slowly down / that's not a kosher salami I'm carrying /
I'm just pleased to see you / sure I can do like him / polish my knuckleduster / clean my pants / I'll give
you a kicking with the best if that's what you really want [...] I'll not defile your pillow, but spread violets
beneath your feet / I'll squeeze your toes at night if they grow cold and when we through rose gardens
walk I'll blow the aphids from your hair / I'll come straight home from work at night not idle for a pint
and all my spunk I'll keep for thee to lash you with at night as soft and warm as summer showers [...] I'll
heave my sceptre into thee / your thighs I'll prise apart and sink like hot stone into butter / into an ocean
of ecstasy for that's what you are to me / an ecstasy of flesh and blood [...] I'm mad for you / you luscious
brat and madam, girl and woman turned into one / I'll take you love for what you are!» (pp. 117f.).

⁵ Eddy listens to his wife and recognizes the whips of fate but, as we shall see later, he was born to face it:
«[...] that's a sad tale / and I feel grieved for you my dear that woe should strike at one who was so young
and fair / and let the others more deserving of fate's lash to get away with murder» (p. 119).

⁶ *Eddy*: «I'm your flesh and blood». *Father and mother*: «But you're not our son» (p. 134). *Eddy*: «So
what if I'm adopted / who gives a monkey's tit» (p. 135). *The wife*: «Oh shit and piss and fuck. I just
pissed in my pants» (p. 137).

⁷ *Oedipus*: «With the god's good help / Success is sure; 'tis ruin if we fail», translated by STORR (1912 ...
ὡς πᾶν ἐμοῦ δράσοντος. ἢ γὰρ εὐτυχεῖς / σὺν τῷ θεῷ φανούμεθ', ἢ πεπτωκότες – vv. 145f.).

it doesn't matter, mother, mother it doesn't matter. Why should I tear my eyes out Greek style, why should you hang yourself / have you seen a child from a mother and son / no. Have I? No. Then how do we know that it's bad / should I be so mortified? Who me. With my nails and fingers plunge in and scoop out those warm and tender balls of jelly quivering dipped in blood. Oedipus how could you have done it, never to see your wife's golden face again, never again to cast your eyes on her and hers on your eyes. What a foul thing I have done, I am the rotten plague, tear them out Eddy, rip them out, scoop them out like ice-cream, just push the thumb behind the orb and push, pull them out and stretch them to the end of the strings and then snap! Darkness falls. Bollocks to all that. I'd rather run all the way back and pull back the sheets, witness my golden-bodied wife and climb into her sanctuary, climb all the way in right up to my head and hide away there and be safe and comforted. Yeh I wanna climb back inside my mum. What's wrong with that? It's better than shoving a stick of dynamite up someone's ass and getting a medal for it. So I run back. I run and run and pulse hard and feet pound, it's love I feel it's love, what matter what form it takes, it's love I feel for your breast, for your nipple twice sucked / for your belly twice known / for your hands twice caressed / for your breath twice smelt, for your thighs, for your cunt twice known, one head first once cock first, loving cunt holy mother wife / loving source of your being / exit from paradise / entrance to heaven (137-39).

For a few brief moments, Eddy as he is seen in the “dénouement” of Berkoff's drama, is a reflection of the Greek Oedipus and thus is aware that he symbolizes plague and horror, that he is the source of what is infecting the city, that he is a man devoid of principles as well as incestuous, and the putative future father of monstrous sons and daughters; he should consequently atone for this by tearing out his eyeballs. Nevertheless, this very same Eddy removes himself immediately from the *ptôsis* or free fall that hurls Sophocles' Oedipus into the abyss, having been unbearably wounded by what those other eyes have seen – the eyes of the *anagnôrisis* – those made of knowledge, not the «warm and tender balls of jelly quivering dipped in blood». In effect, Berkoff's protagonist rejects the “Greek style”, suggesting that the sort of awareness it implies is peculiar to those addicted to mortification. He respects and preserves instead the eyes of beauty and does not hesitate to brand the Greek Oedipus as incomprehensible *stricto sensu*. Furthermore, if the fruit of a mother-son relationship is unknown to us, why should we not appeal to the clarifying test of experience? And above all, if before birth we have all rested safe in our mother's womb, why should not adult men want to climb back inside it, returning to the most sensual heaven – the holy wife – and compensating themselves for the unfair expulsion from paradise – the holy mother? In sum: love, no matter what form it takes – including incest – is beyond any ethical condemnation, and its empire is based upon the natural human fear – *physikòs phóbos* – of the pain of renunciation and the no less natural human search for personal benefit and pleasure.

Berkoff is inspired by Sophocles – «Greek came to me via Sophocles» (p. 97) – but he cannot or does not want to follow him to the end. But how will his audience react? Evidently they will be familiar with the Greek text to quite varying degrees. Some of them may recall Jocasta's words: «This wedlock with thy mother fear not thou. / How of it chanceth that in dreams a man / Has wed his mother! He who least regards / Such brainsick phantasies lives most at ease»⁸. These viewers are unlikely to be swayed by Berkoff's bold portrayal although, as Eddy's incestuous behaviour is no dream, they may try putting themselves in his place to understand his actions. In the end, however, if we heed the most pessimistic views of contemporary Western men and women, most – although Aristotle would have strongly disapproved – have neither been educated by their culture to appreciate the usefulness of fear nor have any awareness of how to feel or receive compassion⁹. They do not like being submerged in serious thought, and they aspire to achieving a comfortable life as quickly as possible; and if they should recall from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*¹⁰ that «wisdom cometh by suffering» (*toi páthei máthos*), they may well think that this refers to a pathological sort of heroism. The horrified coryphaeus of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* asks: «O doer of dread deeds, how couldst thou mar / Thy vision thus? What demon goaded thee?»¹¹. Eddy asks the same question in *Greek*, but the answer cannot be that of Sophocles' drama: «How could I longer see when sight / brought no delight? [...] Say, friends, can any look or voice / Or touch of love henceforth my heart rejoice?»¹². And this is so because, unlike the ancient Greeks, most contemporary men and women reject seeing themselves as beings subjected to the ever possible overturning of their tranquil, comfortable and pleasant lives¹³. However, if

⁸ ... σὺ δ' ἐς τὰ μητρὸς μὴ φοβοῦ νυμφεύματα· / πολλοὶ γὰρ ἤδη κὰν ὀνείρασι βροτῶν / μητρὶ ξυνηυνάσθησαν. ἀλλὰ ταῦθ' ὄτω / παρ' οὐδέν ἐστι, ῥᾶστα τὸν βίον φέρει (vv. 980-84).

⁹ Note, for example, *Poetics* VI: VI, 2f., translated by HAMILTON FYFE (1965): «Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of certain magnitude [...] it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions» (... ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐχούσης... δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι' ἀπαγγελίας, δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν).

¹⁰ V. 177 translated by SMYTH (1930).

¹¹ Ὡ δεινὰ δράσας, πῶς ἔτλης τοιαῦτα σὰς / ὄψεις μαρᾶναι; (vv. 1327f.).

¹² Τί γὰρ ἔδει μ' ὄραν, / ὄτω γ' ὀρώντι μηδὲν ἦν ἰδεῖν γλυκύ; ... τί δῆτ' ἐμοὶ βλεπτὸν ἦν / στερκτόν, ἢ προσήγορον (vv. 1334-38).

¹³ Note, for instance, this chorus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*: «Races of mortal man / Whose life is but a span, / I count ye but the shadow of a shade! / For he who most doth know / Of bliss, hath but the show; / A moment, and the visions pale and fade. / Thy fall, o Oedipus, thy piteous fall / Warns me none born of woman blest to call [...]Who now more desolate, / Whose tale mores ad than thine, whose lot more dire?» (ἰὼ γενεαὶ βροτῶν, / ὡς ὑμᾶς ἴσα καὶ τὸ μη- / δὲν ζώσας ἐναριθμῶ. / τίς γὰρ, τίς ἀνήρ πλεόν / τᾶς εὐδαιμονίας φέρει / ἢ τοσοῦτον ὅσον δοκεῖν / καὶ δόξαντ' ἀποκλίνειν; / τὸν σὸν τοὶ παρὰδειγμ' ἔξων, / τὸν σὸν δαίμονα, τὸν σὸν, ᾧ / τλᾶμον Οἰδιπόδα, βροτῶν / οὐδὲν

tragedy finally should touch their lives, and if its unexpected transformation into pleasure should depend only on a conscious act of affirmation or rebellion, then they would welcome it. The lucid warning with which Sophocles concludes his tragedy retains its force: «Therefore wait to see life's ending ere thou count one mortal blest; / Wait till free from pain and sorrow he has gained his final rest»¹⁴, but contemporary sensibility will emphasize the probably foolish but captivating boldness of the challenge, whatever the obstacle to be overcome.

Have we now arrived at what I referred to earlier as a tolerant view of a centuries-old taboo? It might seem so, but if we examine Jorge Dubatti's introduction to Rafael Spregelburd's Spanish translation of *Greek*, we shall see that we are completely mistaken:

Berkoff discovers that in order to preserve the original political impact of the Greek tragedy – in Aristotle's words, to trigger the emotions of tragic catharsis: horror and pity – Oedipus must not be blinded but sink irresponsibly and freely into incest, without regret or repression. Is it still horrifying to see Oedipus punishing himself, or is it not more appalling seeing him living with impunity? An unpunished Oedipus who is a rampant incestuous parricidal murderer brings contemporary viewers back to the tragic sensibility: the essence of horror [today] is neither *hamartía* (tragic error) nor *hýbris* (to persist in error) nor the pathetic event; it is rather the lack of any law that demands a remedy. An Oedipus without poetic justice, an intolerable reversal of the moralizing patterns of Western theatre: could there be any greater symbolic violence? Berkoff's Oedipus transgresses the two fundamental prohibitions on which our civilization is based: incest, and murder within the clan; and he is unrepentant. Thus he blurs the line separating human beings from animals, according to the astute assertion of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. A sense of what it is to be human has disappeared from Eddie's world, a brave new world in which human degradation no longer allows us to differentiate ourselves from animals, a plague that “grows and grows” where “there is something rotten that refuses to die”. A final apocalypse, during which every night “the moon becomes blood red”¹⁵.

μακαρίζω... τίς ἄταις ἀγρίαις, τίς ἐν πόνοις / ξύνουκος ἀλλαγᾶ βίου; vv. 1186-1206). Or the messenger referring to Oedipus: «Was fortunate indeed; but from this day / Woe, lamentation, ruin, death, disgrace, / All ills that can be named, all, all are theirs» (ὁ πρὶν παλαιὸς δ' ὄλβος ἦν πάροισθε μὲν / ὄλβος δικαίως, νῦν δὲ τῆδε θῆμέρα / στεναγμός, ἄτη, θάνατος, αἰσχύνη, κακῶν / ὅσ' ἐστὶ πάντων ὀνόματ', οὐδὲν ἐστ' ἄπόν, vv. 1282-85).

¹⁴ Ὡστε θνητὸν ὄντ' ἐκείνην τὴν τελευταίαν ἰδεῖν / ἡμέραν ἐπισκοποῦντα μηδέν' ὀλβίζειν, πρὶν ἂν / τέραμα τοῦ βίου περάσῃ μηδὲν ἀλγεινὸν παθῶν (vv. 1528-30).

¹⁵ BERKOFF (2005, 14): «Berkoff descubre que para preservar el impacto político originario de la tragedia griega –en términos de Aristóteles, producir las emociones de la catarsis trágica: el horror i la piedad-, Edipo no debe cegarse sino hundirse irresponsable y libremente en el incesto, sin remordimiento ni represión. ¿Sigue siendo horroroso ver a Edipo autocastigarse, o acaso no es más horripilante verlo vivir impunemente? Un Edipo sin castigo, ilimitadamente parricida e incestuoso, devuelve al espectador contemporáneo al sentimiento de la tragedia: el horror no radica en la *hamartía* (error trágico) ni en la

After reading such a thesis, I cannot help asking myself – and Dubatti – an important question. In effect, even allowing that Berkoff may have experienced a true *anagnórisis* or discovery regarding how to maximize the viewers' horror by having them see Eddy's mind reject any remorse or self-repression, any "moralizing pattern", ethical limit or law, and thus also see him reject self-punishment, living with impunity, and embarking on a process of rapid animalisation, should we really believe that in this way contemporary viewers can be made to experience the ancient tragic sensibility? If the ultimate awareness of error and consequent self-punishment peculiar to the Greek style no longer moves anyone, if nowadays neither fear nor compassion can be stirred in this way, is it logical to think that we might succeed by means of the *poiesis* or literary design of a "hero", who excels precisely in overcoming any limit at the core of a society that idolizes both triumphs and winners?¹⁶ In my opinion, Dubatti's analysis becomes in fact a clear warning about how Berkoff's drama must be understood, thus revealing, consciously or not, real problems of interpretation. One must admit that the playwright obliges us to clearly observe Eddy's fascistic attitudes¹⁷, so that we all know that we cannot expect much from him. We must also admit that he has designed a contemporary Jocasta so submissive, alienated and absurd¹⁸ that no one will believe that Eddy wants

hýbris (el empecinamiento en el error) ni en el acontecimiento patético, sino en la ausencia de la ley correctora. Un Edipo sin justicia poética, reversión intolerable de las matrices moralizantes del teatro occidental: ¿puede concebirse mayor violencia simbólica? El Edipo de Berkoff transgrede las dos grandes prohibiciones sobre las que se funda la civilización: el incesto y el crimen dentro del clan de sangre, y no se rectifica. En consecuencia, borra el límite que separa a los hombres de los animales, según la acertada afirmación del antropólogo Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lo humano ha desaparecido en el mundo de Eddy, nuevo mundo en el que la degradación de los hombres ya no permite diferenciarlos de los animales, peste "que sigue floreciendo", donde "hay algo podrido que se niega a morir". Un Apocalipsis permanente en el que todas las noches "la luna vira al rojo sangre". Compare this, for example, with Aguilar's views (AGUILAR 2006, 384): «Eddy's rational mentality prevents him from renouncing what he has gained through his own efforts on account of having committed an act of incest that the author has portrayed so lyrically throughout the play, particularly in the ending, so that it is seen as one of the least cruel and degrading events enacted in the drama» («La mentalitat racional d'Eddy li impedeix deixar allò que ha aconseguit per a ell amb el seu propi esforç per haver comés un incest que, a més, l'autor ens ha estat mostrand durant l'obra, i sobretot al final, d'una manera tan lírica que es converteix en un dels esdeveniments menys cruels o degradants dels que s'han descrit durant l'obra»).

¹⁶ Here are, for instance, Eddy's wife words after his triumph over the Sphinx: «Well done my sweet, now all will be well / my hero [...] my brave and shining knight / my lion» (p. 128).

¹⁷ «OH, MAGGOT SCRATCHER HANG THE CUNTS / HANG THEM SLOW AND LET ME TAKE A SKEWER AND JAB THEIR EYES OUT / LOVELY / GREEK STYLE» (p. 112). Fascist and Nazi sympathies he inherited from his adopted father: «Send the darkies back to the jungle [...] Hitler got the trains running on time» (pp. 103f.).

¹⁸ Indeed, she regrets this way his husband's death: «He was a good man, solid except in his cock but he was good to me, and now I am alone / who will I have to care for now. Who to wait at night while he cleans up our café or while he's at the sauna getting relief / who to cook for or brush the dandruff from his coat and the grease from his hat or the tramlines from his knickers / who to comfort in the long nights / as he worries about me / who will put the kids to bed with a gentle cuff as he frolics after coming home all pissed from the pub and smashes me jokingly on the mouth / whose vomit will I clean up from the

from her anything but complete sexual satisfaction. But we must be careful. If Dubatti's interpretation of the text is correct, then turning the "dénouement" of *Greek* (seen, furthermore, as a contemporary reading of *Oedipus Rex*) into a love story is truly a risky literary choice. Bearing in mind the universal belief that love justifies anything, Berkoff's drama might arouse comprehension and empathy rather than horrifying the audience – Dubatti *dicit*. Moreover, I would dare to maintain, as I stated earlier, that his introduction reveals *de facto* a genuine risk, not a theoretical one.

On the other hand, any such judgement needs to be based on prudence and fairness, but I do not think it unfair to consider that in his author's note Berkoff hardly helps his readers construct an interpretation in line with Dubatti's thought; on the contrary, I believe he actually influences them precisely in the sense that I have already suggested. Let us read Berkoff's own words:

Oedipus found a city in the grip of a plague and sought to rid the city of its evil centre represented by the Sphinx. Eddy seeks to reaffirm his beliefs and inculcate a new order of things with his vision and life-affirming energy. His passion for life is inspired by the love he feels for his woman, and his detestation of the degrading environment he inherited. If Eddy is a warrior who holds up the smoking sword as he goes in, attacking all that he finds polluted, at the same time he is at heart an ordinary young man with whom many I know will find identification. The play is also a love story (p. 97).

The Creator, then – the playwright – reveals to us that his creature is not a young man devoid of ideals and principles¹⁹; he believes in a new order²⁰ and has the energy

pillow as he heaves up all over my face on Friday nights after his binge. Whose black uniform will I press in readiness for his marches down Brixton with the other so noble men of England / whose photos will I dust in the living room of his heroes, Hitler, Goebbels, Enoch, Paisley and Maggot not forgetting our dear royals. Is it worth it any more? / I married a good Englishman / where will I find another like that?» (p. 117). And so she welcomes her new husband: «You've ceased my pain you sweet and lovely boy / I thought I'd miss him desperately but now I can when looking at you hardly remember what he looks like. You look so familiar to me though we have never met / so strange perhaps the true feeling love brings to your heart. The familiar twang» (p. 118).

¹⁹ He does not want, for instance, to leave his country: «[...] I decided to stay and see my own sweet land / amend the woes of my own fair state / why split and scarper like ships leaving a sinking rat / I saw myself as king of the western world» (p. 114).

²⁰ Eddy: «Ten years have come and gone... toughened my sinews to combat the world. I improved the lot of our fair café by my intense efforts, aided of course by my sweet mate / got rid of sloth and stale achievement... I made the city golden era time» (p. 121). «We cured the plague by giving inspiration to our plates / came rich by giving more and taking less [...] we put the meat back into the sausage mate / now once more the world will taste good / no more the sawdust and preservative colouring and cat shit that you could better use to fill your walls than line your stomachs [...] but now in our great chain we energize the people, give soul food... it's us that has to do it / rid the world of half-assed bastards clinging to their dark domain and keeping talent out by filling the entrances with their swollen carcasses and sagging mediocrity / let's blow them all sky high, or let us see them simply waste away as the millions come to us» (p. 122).

and passion to take a stance in defence of human life²¹. He also feels hatred, but he clings to it to be able to face the degraded world he has inherited. Thus, we may not rule out the notion that many other young people – *ipse Berkoff dicit* – might be able to identify with this “ordinary young man”. However, the most astonishing aspect of Berkoff’s characterization – I say this after reading Dubatti’s analysis since previously I would have said “the most logical” – is that this identification has a further basis, and I think this cannot be viewed in other way; that is, the play is also a love story. Consequently, as love is something any young man wants to experience, this love story, undeniably another facet of *Greek*, may save the audience from the horror just described or protect them against it. And there one further point in the author’s note to bear in mind:

In writing my ‘modern’ Oedipus it wasn’t too difficult to find contemporary parallels, but when I came to the ‘blinding’ I paused, since in my version it wouldn’t have made sense, given Eddy’s non-fatalistic disposition, to have him embark on such an act of self-hatred – unless I slavishly aped the original. One day a friend gave me a book to read which provided an illumination to my problem in an almost identical situation. The book is called *Seven Arrows* by Hyemeyohsts Storm (p. 98).

This story has to do with another case of incestuous mother-son love and the consequent fear of having monstrous children. Someone is listening to the terrified lover and asks him if he has ever seen such a child; lover’s answer is “no”, and the interlocutor concludes:

Then it is like everything else [...] It seems an easy thing to hear when a son kills someone, even his mother, but it is hard on people’s ears when they hear of a son loving his mother (p. 98).

Berkoff does not specify what contemporary parallels were not difficult for him to find, nor whether they conform to the Greek pattern, but he does point out that Eddy does not display any inclination towards fatalism or self-hatred. *Greek* came to him via Sophocles, but Berkoff claims his right to not be an imitator. As a dramatist free of all constraint, he has an undeniable right to make his own choices and to be inspired by the perhaps too simplistic “dénouement” of Storm’s play. Thus he sidesteps the *aporía* into which he had sunk at the end his work; but by the same token, despite his having

²¹ And so does his wife, having the courage to denounce a case of abortion: «[...] the country’s awash in spunk not threshing and sweetening the wombs of lovers but crushed in Kleenex and dead in cubicles with red lights. Meanwhile men in white masks are penetrating the holy crucible where life may have slipped in, and armed with scalpels and suction pumps tear out the living fruit and sluice it down the river of sewage, the future Einsteins, Michelangelos and future Eddys» (p. 123).

virtually copied the ancient plot, *Greek* cannot be a contemporary rendering of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* but rather a drama of a false 20th century British Oedipus. Indeed, the author openly contradicts the tragic nature of the ancient hero, almost as if a clever student in a contemporary sophist school had crafted his *antilogía*, an Oedipus without remorse or self-punishment, who has become his mother's lover with joy and pleasure and will continue to do so.

We noted above that Oedipus arrives at a plague scourged city with an evil centre that he faces bravely. Well then, with regard to the Sphinx, Berkoff, unlike Sophocles, creates a convincing character endowed with a great dramatic power. She is responsible for spreading «the canker and the rot» (p. 123) in an already ailing society, and Eddy seeks her out: «I'll go and sort her out» (p. 123). When they eventually meet, the young hero has already managed to love and be loved by a wife whom later he will discover to be his mother. In contrast, he characterizes the Sphinx as being susceptible to neither.

[...] you can't love / loveless you can only terrify man no one could love you / who could even kiss that mouth of yours when your very breath stinks like a Hong Kong whorehouse when the fleet's in (p. 124).

However, from the stinking mouth of this monster not only issue a remarkable series of insults and threats:

Who are you, little man / pip squeak scum / drip off the prick / mistake in the middle of the night [...] / fuck off you maggot before I tear your head off / rip your eyes out of your head and roast your tongue / you nothing, you man / you insult of nature (p. 124).

She also makes a brilliant speech, on this occasion meant to cause misogynistic Western men to experience a painful *anagnórisis* by bringing to light centuries of malicious folly:

[...] the crops are dying from the plague that is man / you are the plague / where are you looking when you should be looking at the ghastly vision in the mirror / the plague is inside you. You make your weapons to give you the strength that you lack / you enslave whip beat and oppress use your guns, chains, bombs, jets, napalm, you are so alone and pathetic, love from you means enslavement, giving means taking, love is fucking, helping is exploiting, you need your mothers you mother fucker, to love is to enslave a woman to turn her into a bearing cow to produce cannon fodder to go on killing [...] Women are all sphinx. I have taken the power for all [...] when women were women, androgynous and whole and could reproduce themselves but somewhere and some time a reptile left our bodies, it crawled away and became a man [...] us nine months we create build nourish care for, grow bigger and fat and after we suckle and provide. While you dig in the earth for treasure, play your stupid male games... woman was Adam / she was the earth,

woman is the tide / woman is in movement of the universe / our bodies obey the phases of the moon and our rich blood surges forth to tell us we are part of the movement of nature unable to create you must destroy / I am the earth / I am the movement of the universe / I am liquid, fire and all elements (pp. 124-26).

We are all well aware that this feminist accusation has been countered and ridiculed by skilful upholders of the status quo and by men of power through the ages, frequently on grounds of simplistic and exaggerated claims. Nevertheless, such a defence can no longer obviate a general awareness of a historical dual patrimony bequeathed to men and women: one part involving arms, power, economic and sexual exploitation, enslavement, oppression and ultimately death; the other, creation, nourishment, care, elements of nature and, in essence, life. Furthermore, if we bear in mind that *Greek* is set in the period when the Iron Lady, Margaret Thatcher, acceded to the seat of government of Great Britain, we can infer that Berkoff laments the obtuse, disappointing, ultimately tragic feminine impersonation of archaic ruthless masculine behaviour²². It is thus quite clear that, if the Prime Minister's consciousness is unable to experience the sort of *anagnórisis* the Sphinx refers to, Eddy's intellectual darkness must be even greater. Indeed, Berkoff, in accordance with the plot of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, portrays the protagonist reflecting on a slightly altered version of the riddle posed by the monster: «What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon and three legs in the evening?» (p. 126), but the answer is not the one given by Oedipus' but a different one proposed by Berkoff's arrogant protagonist, whose swaggering masculine posturing brands him as an "ordinary young man":

Man! In the morning of his life he is on all fours, in the afternoon when he is young he is on two legs and in the evenings when he is erect for his women he sprouts the third leg (p. 126).

On the whole, epic achievements cannot be expected from such a person, but the risk entailed in his portrayal is once again the one previously mentioned: if Eddy can be taken to faithfully represent the mainstream consciousness of the young people in the world he lives in, it is reasonable to think that they would identify with him – Berkoff *dixit* – and even accompany him, at least mentally, in contemplating boldly violating an ancient taboo, since «The play is also a love story» in the end.

In any case, here below I cite a few other reflections on *Greek* apart from Berkoff's – it would be churlish not to do so – which in my view tend to cast doubt on rather than affirm the sense of horror that Dubatti attributed to the entire human race, who he affirms do not want to march passively towards their own animalization.

²² This, for instance, is what Eddy's false mother thinks of her: «Maggot is our only hope, love», and his false father: «If we only had more maggots to eat through the stinking woodpile [...]» (p. 110).

An interview with Analía García (director of *Greek* as performed in the *Centro Cultural de la Cooperación* in Buenos Aires):

Question: What do you like best about *Greek*? Answer: That it is a love story, that transcends form. I very much like the ups and downs in it. On stage I tried to provoke these sensations and make the audience think. The play slaps you, caresses you, loves you, shakes you up, shouts out to you: 'wake up!'; it questions and is provocative in a very particular way²³.

Martín Urbaneja (actor playing the role of Eddy in the same performance):

I am interested in the sort of theatre that poses questions rather than giving you answers [...] Eddy, a tireless warrior, fights in order to destroy the plague. His life force comes from the love he feels for his beloved woman. The play is a love story that raises questions about the essence of love again and again [...] and about its power [...] I became fond of these characters [...] with their constant voracious need find a way out²⁴.

Teresa Gatto (author of the review of the same performance):

Greek reveals a new dimension of Greek tragedy and makes it absolutely modern and even hilarious; it strains to the limit Aristotle's notion of catharsis²⁵.

Marcos Rosenzvaig (author of a review of another performance of *Greek*):

Greek does not exalt the sons and daughters of Oedipus' incest although it does emphasize the possibility of this faultless love, while not portraying the son's blindness and the mother's suicide²⁶.

Christian Barclay (author of a review of another performance of *Greek*):

In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the befallen Greek king contemplates self-mutilation as atonement for his sins. It's a rather dramatic gesture, but considering the

²³ GARCÍA (2012) P: «¿Qué es lo que más te gusta de *Greek*?». R: «Que es una historia de amor, trascendiendo la forma. Me gustan mucho las fluctuaciones que se plantean en ella. En escena traté de generar en el espectador esas sensaciones-pensamientos. La obra te pega, te acaricia, te ama, te sacude, te grita: '¡despertate!'; te cuestiona y provoca de un modo bastante particular».

²⁴ URBANEJA (2012): «Me interesa el teatro que formula interrogantes, no el que da respuestas [...] Eddy, un guerrero incansable, pelea para destruir la peste. Su fuerza vital nace del amor que siente por su amada. La obra es una historia de amor que nos interroga una y otra vez sobre la esencia del amor [...] y su potencia [...] he ido desarrollando un gusto por esos personajes [...] con una necesidad voraz de encontrar siempre una salida».

²⁵ GATTO (2012): «*Greek* redimensiona la tragedia griega y la vuelve absolutamente moderna y hasta hilarante, mortifica al límite la noción de catarsis aristotélica».

²⁶ ROSENZVAIG (2012): «A *la griega* no exalta los hijos del incesto, lo que sí pone de relieve es la posibilidad de este amor sin culpa, sin la ceguera del hijo, ni el estrangulamiento de la madre».

circumstances, severe punishment seems all but necessary. The lead in Steven Berkoff's adaptation, *Greek*, sees the matter somewhat differently. Societal norms aside – what's wrong with a little filial affection?²⁷.

Jordi Godall (director, in association with Alberto Bokos, of *Greecs*, which was performed in the theatre Adrià Gual (Barcelona) from November 8th to the 26th 1995):

Berkoff confronts the limits of myth in order to overcome it. His goal is the reestablishment of a new model of behaviour based on the individual's ability to respond to his or her desires beyond a blind obedience to an externally imposed archaic order²⁸.

Steven Berkoff:

Greek was also in part inspired by the pain of a bitter relationship I was going through [...] The agony of it left me raw enough to use myself as the guinea pig for the play [...] I reneged on casting myself in the role of Eddy. I particularly like that part since it was modelled around me and expressed what I had felt at the time and drew deeply on the experience I was having with a difficult but passionate relationship. Greek exuded love, sexual and otherwise, and it was [...] a play drawing its nourishment from the London I saw in the seventies... in my plot Eddy became the man to rid London of the sphinx, of the plague, by being better, fitter, more idealistic, a warrior, plus a lover. A modern samurai. Yet simple, honest, an everyman hero. I idealized myself into Eddy [...] Greek is not just a wailing symphony of the depredations of London life, it is also a hymn to the joys of sexual love and my favourite speech is Eddy's: 'I love a woman / I love her / I just love and love and love her'²⁹.

An actor, director, playwright, adapter of scripts, researcher and lecturer as well as director since 1968 of the London Theatre Group, who also played various roles in films such as Stanley Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange* and *Barry Lyndon*, Berkoff has been one of the great figures of British Drama for the last fifty years³⁰. No one can deny him credit for having been a pioneer in politically motivated critical resistance by means of theatre and art itself, abandoning the scenic image and narrative structure of traditional realism. He always demanded from his actors exacting work in the use of diction,

²⁷ BARCLAY (2012).

²⁸ GODALL (1996): «Berkoff s'enfronta als límits del mite per desfer-lo. L'objectiu és la refundació d'un nou model de comportament que es fonamenta en la capacitat de l'individu de respondre als seus desitjos més enllà de la obediència a un ordenament arcaic imposat externament».

²⁹ See BERKOFF (1989, 4, 339 and 342). Compare this with Eddy's words: «I love a woman / I love her / I just love and love and love her [...] and love her for taking me in / and giving me a home for my searing agonies / my lusts / my love / my dreams / my sweetness / my honey / my peace of mind [...] and love her waiting for me and love her soothing me as I tell her about my day's battles in the world – and love and love her and her and!» (p. 127).

³⁰ See e.g. Berkoff himself, BERKOFF (1992).

elocution and corporal expression, working on nearly empty stages where objects are almost superfluous³¹. He opted for the use of an unrestrained language in which «words could kill»³², eschewing characteristic British phlegm and unmasking a xenophobic and oligarchic society. It is his undeniable right to rewrite the Oedipus myth – especially after Freud – in order to portray the British plague, the «cesspit» (p. 101) that he felt Great Britain became under Margaret Thatcher³³. Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of a scholar of the Classical Tradition who has never aimed to be fundamentalist – certainly my case – I am able to take great pleasure in the performance of *Greek*, and have done so, greatly impressed by its immense force, revealed in the many aspects commented on above. Still, I cannot be in agreement with a provocative approach born of personal circumstances and admitted self-idealization that in fact denies the tragic awareness of contemporary men and women³⁴ because the author believes they are no longer able to comprehend ancient Greek sensibility³⁵. From the author's point of view, such

³¹ See e.g.: SHERMAN (2010); CROSS (2004); MACINTOSH (2004); LE BEVER (2002); ROSEN (2001).

³² Eddy faces his true father this way: «Hit hurt crunch pain stab jab [...] Numb jagged glass gouge out [...] Explode scream fury strength overpower overcome [...]» (p. 116), and for his mother it is a surprise: «You killed him / I never realized words can kill» (p. 117). «Berkoff's theatrical style excels in his political fierceness, his ability to express scenically the social violence and his ability to symbolically violate this violence. The playwright opts for a fierce theatre that, only through this fierceness, can perform a merciless and most aggressive world» («Si algo destaca del estilo teatral de Berkoff es su ferocidad política, su capacidad para expresar escénicamente la violencia social y para violentar simbólicamente esa violencia. El dramaturgo elige la fórmula de un teatro feroz que sólo a través de esa ferocidad puede dar cuenta de un mundo despiadado, agresivo a la enésima potencia» DUBATTI 2005, 2).

³³ «*Greek* allows modern audiences to better understand *Oedipus Rex* because contemporary society's understanding of human sexuality is better [...] Eddy refuses to suffer the same fate as Oedipus, portraying the ideals of the 1980s "Me Generation". Eddy is aware of the tale of Oedipus Rex, yet is unaware of how his parallels the tragedy. Eddy disregards the story as "that old hoary myth [...] of patricide and horrid incest / or subtitled could be called the story of a mother fucker"» (GREEN 2003, 5f.).

³⁴ «Berkoff is not interested in the tragic nature of the myth [...] but in the ascending path that an extraordinary man takes, the process of "ascension to the throne", in this case a business success associated with another one in the field of love. Eddy is reluctant to the fact that his self-made destiny suddenly change from the *anagnórisis* on and he wants to keep what he has got, thus invalidating Merope's claim in the fifth scene of the first act *Fate makes us play the roles we are cast*» («El que interessa a Berkoff no és la tragicitat del mite [...] sinó el camí d'ascens que un ésser de condició extraordinària emprèn, el procés de "pujada al tro", en aquest cas d'èxit empresarial, que va unit a l'amorós. Eddy es mostra reticent al fet que el destí que s'ha forjat sofrisca un canvi sobtat de rumb a partir del moment de reconeixement i s'aferra al que ha aconseguit, tot invalidant així l'afirmació de Mèrope a l'escena 5 de l'acte I *Fate makes us play the roles we are cast*», AGUILAR 2006, 383).

³⁵ That awareness that makes Sophocles' Oedipus speak that way: «The monstrous offspring of a womb defiled, / Co-mate of him who gendered me, and child. / Was ever man before afflicted thus, / Like Oedipus» (νῦν δ' ἄθεος μὲν εἶμι', ἀνοσίων δὲ παῖς / ὁμογενῆς δ' ἀφ' ὧν αὐτὸς ἔφυν ... εἰ δέ τι πρῶτον ἔτι κακοῦ κακόν, / ταῦτ' ἔλαχ' Οἰδίπους – vv. 1360-66). «O fatal wedlock, thou didst give me birth, / And, having borne me, sowed again my seed, / Mingling the blood of fathers, brothers, children, Brides, wives and mothers, an incestuous brood, All horrors that are wrought beneath the sun [...]» (... ὦ γάμοι γάμοι, / ἐφύσαθ' ἡμᾶς, καὶ φυτεύσαντες πάλιν / ἀνεῖτε ταῦτον

awareness does not survive today as a form wisdom that must be preserved. Instead, in line with the pessimistic analysis noted above, he induces his audience to view this tragic sensibility as a sort of pathological masochism of humans who refuse to leave behind centuries-old self-limitations. Incest is used as an example in an exercise of deliberately provocative hyperbole. In brief, this is in my opinion a too simplistic and facile theoretical exercise not entirely worthy of the author's demonstrated theatrical talent. Needless to say, his audience will return their own verdict and may not share mine. However, in light of Dubatti's interpretation, I would venture to say that it may be well to avoid raising the playwright and his drama to ethical heights which there may have been no intention to reach³⁶.

σπέρμα, κάπεδείξατε / πατέρα, ἀδελφούς, παῖδας, αἴμ' ἐμφύλιον, / νύμφας γυναῖκας
μητέρα, τε, χῶπόσα / αἴσχιστ' ἐν ἀνθρώποισιν ἔργα γίγνεται – vv. 1403-1408).

³⁶ In any case, it seems evident that, with regard to the ethical evaluation of the message of *Greek*, it is quite easy to incur a contradiction or, at least, I reach this conclusion after reading Green's last reflection (GREEN 2003, 8): «As Sophocles used his hero to teach, Berkoff used his 'protagonist' to speak against the society in which he was living. *Greek* is not a modernization of a classic tragedy, but a revisitation of it. Berkoff took another look at the ancient work and breathed a new modern life into it [...] Berkoff's play, though very different from Sophocles's, conveyed the idea that the story of *Oedipus Rex* is universal and timeless. In the end, the audience receives the best of both worlds, the classic original and a modern spin on it, as does Eddy in the end of *Greek* with both his wife and mother. Therefore, the audience, like Eddy, may "exit from paradise/ [...] [enter] to heaven».

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