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Abstract:

Fragment of the human condition, the ephemeral which lives within us. Trying to see how much the ephemeral 'topos' can be transfered to the performance level, particularly in the staging of the ancient tragedy. An intrusion in the history of this cause gives us the possibility to review in raccourcis its multiple semnifications. The second part of the article draws Hecuba's portrait into a double mirror, the story of the Troy queen represents the myth of unstable happiness of the ancient world. Ambivalent picture of the character-ephemeris is built between the text of Euripides and modern performances on the stages of English, American, Australian and Romanian theatres.

We also analyzed a few texts less approached from the directorial point of view, one the one hand in order to nuance the ephemerality topos and, on the other hand, in order to let them out of their shadow corner. The Aeschylian writings, The Seven against Thebes, The Persians and Euripides' two tragedies Phoenician Women and The Suppliants have been our fundament to discovering new valences of the perishable and to showing the way that this motif can take from reading to scenic practice.

Keywords:
ephemeral, topos, theater, tragedy, directing

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MOTTO: *We are living on the ruins of a declined world and we mourn all our heritages.* [...] *I am writing the chronicle of the irreparable in endless melancholy.*

*(Denis Tillinac, *The Masks of the Ephemeral)*

In the tragedy with the same name, the old queen of Troy confesses she had a dream under the walls of the besieged city: by her knees, a wolf shredded the puny body of a medley roe. “And this too filled me with affright; o’er the summit of his tomb appeared Achilles’ phantom, and for his guerdon he would have one of the luckless maids of Troy”². Hecuba’s dream, an allegoric persistence from an unknown world, is the symbol announcing the misfortune that descends upon her entire family. No one from the house of pyramids lived. All of them seem butterflies that shone and died in one day. The queen is damned and becomes a bitch that will throw herself in the sea from Ulysses’ ship. Polydorus is sacrificed — he is the roe —, and Polyxena let herself be sacrificed. Cassandra and Andromache become war prays, having double status — of slaves and secret fiancés — finding their end short after their departure to foreign land. Paris dies pierced by Philoctetes, and Priam is strangled by Pyrrhus. Something passes and yet something stays. Before the portly walls that fall, be they of the legendary Troy or of Mycenae, of Athens, either in the Persian or in the Peloponnesian wars, the Greek poet gathers in himself all the crumbs of the declined horizon, all the faces that disappeared. A few topoi define ephemerality in ancient times, of which the topos of the volatile fate is utterly important. The Heraclitean motif acquired through empiric observation sees the world as ever changing and the divine — in turn — goes through changes, this vision being contrary to Xenophon’s, who asserts that the sacred is subject to immutability. Phrases such as “The sun is new every day” (Fragment 6), “on those who enter the same rivers, different waters flow” (Fragment 12), “Everything flows and nothing lasts”³ are among the first slices of human thoughts that focus on the transmutation phenomenon. In literature, the philosophers’ conception is transferred either at the level of the language formula (it is a component of the figure of speech), or at factual level, often with an apparently moralizing purpose. To Aeschylus, the Persians are signs of destruction, not only losers, they are remains of an irretrievable past. To Euripides, the captive women from Troy are not mere mortals fallen to their destiny, they are the insects that crash against the incandescent glass of misfortune, that try to fight in different ways, but that crush themselves in their ceaseless flop. Oedipus, on the way from Colonos is to Sophocles the image of

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³ Heraclitus, *Thoughts about the World and Life*, translation by Haralambie Mihăescu, Iaşi, Brawo Publishing House, 1940
the lost world, he is a tousled character lacking the power to search within himself, to rebel, like in past times. Antigone is a sort of innocent child who follows the path that only she sees – the path of the ephemeral, the path of disappearance.

“Things of a day we are. What are we? What are we not? The dream of a shadow, that is Man …”⁴ – this is the end of the Pythian 8. Together with the Greek poet, we are able to run back – in a simple analogy – over the existence of so many passers through history and this also reflects our own being subject to the day. By uniting the small universe (man) to the big universe (the shadow), merging them in one formula, Pindar submits everything to change. What is (reality) submits to what is not (unreal), and the crumbled walls of Troy, Byzantium or Berlin are mere traveling images from an enormous dream of the universe. Furthermore, we notice the etymological origin of the term “ephemeral”, which is made of the Greek particles epi and hemera (ephemeros) designating “what lasts for one day only”. The time and history are offered as faces of ephemerality, but each of them from a different perspective. In a Baroque sculpture resembling a dramatic scene, dating back to 1744, made by D. H. Herberger, from the Winblingen Monastery Library, Time tears out the leaves of a book one by one, and History – in an upper position – topples a horn of plenty that spills the richness of gold, which are signs of instability, gestures according to which we realize that we merely float in our own dream, in our own shadow, a sort of deceit suggested by the invisible forces. The more aware we are of this, the more fiercely does Time rips away the leaves and the more severe is the look of History.

I. Tyche and her multiple embodiments

The avatars of ephemerality – increase and decrease, changing fate, vanity of vanities – are related to temporality rather than space, which, in its turn, is under the influence of time. According to the Greek mythology, the goddess Tyche is the daughter of Okeanos and Tethyis governing destiny, hazard and fortune. She ranks with the three Moirae, often mentioned in old texts, the sprites that see to the life thread that they spin (Klotho), reel off (Lachesis) and cut (Atropos). According to Ramiro Ortiz⁵, the Etruscans’ sovereign of destiny could be older than Tyche from Greece. True or not, the affirmation can refer to another observation as regards the priority of the two hypostases: if the Greek embodiment of destiny is worshiped in a few temples dedicated to Thebes, her cult reaching Tomis, Fortuna is recognized in more spaces and

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historical periods. If the Greeks’ mistress of destiny appears as a strong woman, with firm features, resting on people’s shoulders, who dip into the ground under her weight, Fortuna appears as more feminine, going a long way in the history of her representations, actually being the merger of two opposites: Bona Fortuna (Good fate) and Mala Fortuna (Bad fate).

The impersonations of destiny evolve from the mere reproduction in words or drawings of the symbols inculcated through mythology, to complex images, in which the secondary meanings enchain arousing meditation on the human condition. In the first stage, the Wheel of fate, the same as the Moirae’s (the spinning wheel), is the defining symbol in the Latin imaginary. The blindfold goddess, suggesting blind decisions, spins as she wishes the wheel on which there are four “figurines”: the young man in ascension, the king on the throne, the king with a slipping crown, as he is upside down in the third position, and in the fourth, the poor king is crushed. In one of the variants of the Tarot game, the destiny wheel has only three stages, lacking Inferno. In this case, the characters that rotate on the volatility tool are also interesting; they are composite beings with monkey head, lion tail, bird paws, dressed in human clothes. Roger Caillois noticed the synonymy between the Moirae and Fortuna, as all of them are perceived as keepers of the impersonal, blind laws, in which one may recognize the passive element of the sacred clashing to the active element represented by the heroes or gods’ will that can correct fate. The image equals the time wheel with the four ages of man, or the wheel of the evolution of the animal kingdoms. To Gilbert Durand, the wheel and the weft (referring directly to the lunar goddesses, the Moirae) are a universal symbol of becoming. Furthermore, it is remarkable that the term destiny translated to old German by wurt, to old Norwegian by urdb, to Anglo-Saxon by wyrd, derives from the Indo-European word vert, which means to spin. The relation between wheel and thread is also reflected on etymological level. The rotary gesture of the Moirae is taken by Pindar, even though in some lines the symbol is replaced by figurative phrases: “While he who has gained aught of recent glory, through the joy that succeeds his mighty hope, flies on winged valour, possessing the noblest pursuit of wealth-. But in brief time does the joy of mortals increase;

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6 Eutychides’ sculpture, 3rd century BC
7 Codex Burana, in Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (c. 1230), illustration for the song O fortuna!
8 The Tarot cards from Marseilles, one of the best known examples of this game, dating back to 1743. in Visconti-Sforza Tarot, Fortuna’s Wheel is a typical reproduction of increase and decrease, describing the four stages that represent man’s ages; old age is the lowest, as man crawls like a uniped and bearing the entire burden above (ascension, greatness and fall). Thus, the cards painted around the year 1450 bring temporality and destiny to the same level.
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alike also does it fall to earth, shaken by the unpropitious decree of fate-.)\(^{11}\)

Literature takes over faithfully elements of miniatures and lithographies. The entry to Dante’s Inferno is the keeper of the dictum according to which those who go beyond must leave all hope. In this variant, the victims that reach that place are in the lowest part of the wheel: “Her permutations have not any truce;/ Necessity makes her precipitate,/ So often cometh who his turn obtains./ [...] But she is blissful, and she hears it not;/ Among the other primal creatures gladsome/ She turns her sphere, and blissful she rejoices.”\(^{12}\) From the random, somewhat chaotic movement of the Renaissance poet’s vision, the keeper of the human destiny changes her “measuring instrument” from wheel to balance. Passing from cecity to rational vision: “I see before me spirits, who, still and thoughtful, weigh in ebon scales the doom of princes and of many thousands. Slowly the beam moves up and down; deeply the judges appear to ponder; at length one scale sinks, the other rises, breathed on by the caprice of destiny, and all is decided.”\(^{13}\).

The Aristotelian definition regarding tragedy contains two essential coordinates: compassion and fright. But the changing fate thus becomes an eminently tragic topos. A direct connection between the motif and the literary genre is enunciated in the Prologue to the Monk’s Tale\(^{14}\), where the following is mentioned: “Tragedy is to say a certain story from ancient books which have preserved the glory of one that stood in great prosperity and is now fallen out of high degree in misery, where he ends wretchedly”. To Ancient Times, and especially to the Middle Ages, royalty is the rank most exposed to the game between the triumph-decline contraries. Hecuba, Pentheus, Oedipus as well as Arthur\(^ {15} \) or Edward II are the best known examples in this matter.

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\(^{11}\) Pindar, Pythian 8, Quoted work, p. 48

\(^{12}\) Dante Alighieri, Divine Comedy, Inferno, translation by Eta Boieriu, introductive study, chronologic table, notes and comments by Alexandru Balaci, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, 1982, pp. 53-54

\(^{13}\) J. W. Goethe, Egmont, translation by Al. Philippide, Bucharest, Tineretului Publishing House, 1946, p. 74

\(^{14}\) Geoffrey Chaucer, Canterbury Tales, translation by Dan Duțescu, preface by Zoe-Dumitrescu Bușulenga, Chișinău, Hyperion Publishing House, 1993

\(^{15}\) King Arthur reaches an unreal world in which he can see what otherwise would have been hidden in the invisible. The allegory of Fortuna is one of the most suggestive dedicated passages in the medieval literature: ”The king hit his chest with his fists several times, then he started to tear his hair and beard white as snow, crying: - Oh, helpless and unfortunate king (…) Oh, hostile and changing Fate, once you were my mother and now you are my eldmother: you, who raised me by spinning your wheel, how can you decline me in a second by letting it descend now? – Arthur, said that Lady, know that you are now on the Fate wheel. What do you see? – Madam, I feel like I am discovering the whole world. – Look at it! You were one of the forces of this world. But anyone, no matter high they are, goes down one day.” (Jacques Boulenger, Novels of the Round Table, preface of Irina Bâdescu, translation by Aurel Tita, Bucharest, Univers Publishing House, 1976, p. 447)
In time, Fortuna changes, and her representations go from the mere reproduction of words to secondary meanings and combinatorial reformulations. Being included in allegories (the Allegory of Inconsistency by Giovanni Bellini, 1490-1500; Fortuna and Justice, a fresco by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, la Scuola Grande dei Carmini, 1739) or slipping in compositional studies (Vanitas by Jacob de Gheyn II, 1603; Self-portrait with Vanitas Symbols by David Bailly, 1651), the recurrent motif is strongly related to the ontological issue. “Who am I and where do I come from?” is the question that persists in man’s mind. In a painting from 1689, the Dutch painter Edwart Collier reproduces in mannerist style a composition under the title Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas. On a table corner, covered with a heavy piece of velvet, few objects are gathered: an old book, opened, with flanged sheets, a guitar, a map of the world, a telescope, a sculpted candlestick. Secondarily there is a clepsydra in which the sand has already passed to the “dead” half. Old Chronos waits for the clepsydra to be turned upside-down, as if along with it the entire universe would reverse itself and start to live again. And him – ever different. The voracious time will swallow everything, as aforetime Saturn devoured his children16, the past becoming partly incomprehensible. A hieroglyph of the hidden uneasiness remains behind. Humanity is ephemeral, but the celestial world cannot get away from the age wheel or Fortuna’s wheel either. Hesiod in Theogonia describes the four stages of becoming as a gradual degradation of the sacred17; gods and people grow apart more and more, and both spaces are under the sign of versatility. When Zeus usurps upon his father, he usurps upon the entire celestial order (and at the time Uranos, the first parent come from Chaos); when Prometheus spreads fire among mortals, the clepsydra spins again and another face of Chronos appears. In a lithographic work from the 18th century belonging to the English painter William Hogarth, Time destroys a painting: death’s scythe tears the right part of the canvas, while the smoke that Time exhales shades the colours, wipes off the drawing. Two plans can be distinguished: a reality plan and a pseudo-reality plan, subsumed to the first, designated by the panting inside. The two plans communicate incredibly well, being united by the universal principle of the unforgiving fate. Forgetfulness (Amnesia) burns the human traces.

The fight with time becomes a fight with the self, with the personal interior analyzed as if under an over-sized lense. The Belgian painter Pieter

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16 E. R. Curtis’ interpretation of the Saturn myth is that the god’s anthropophagous gesture represents the hypostasis of time that engorges everything, then letting the universe revive (European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, translation by Adolf Armbruster, introduction by Alexandru Duțu, Bucharest, Univers Publishing House, 1970, p. 512)

17 The four ages are the golden age, the silver age, the bronze age and the iron age, Hesiod, Works, translation, introductive study and notes by Dumitru T. Burtea, Bucharest, Univers Publishing House, 1973
Claesz, in a baroque painting titled *Still Nature*, brings to the eyes of the observer, besides elements that became common, such as the skull, the book, the object designating art (this time a violin) a few inedited items: a pocketwatch facing down, with the lid opened and with the entire fine mechanism at sight; a water glass upside-down, reflecting a window; a globe-shaped mirror reflecting in a deformed manner the room with everything in it. This sphere, unnaturally stabilized on the flat surface, reflects the window of the workshop, part of the objects on the table and the “observation point” – the painter and his easel. The room is enclosed in the sphere and, together with it, life – man. The framework doubles by revealing the unseen part and including a miniature self-portrait. But the entire room reduced to minuscule sizes and at the same time deformed because of the reflection on the round surface is actually the room of the ephemeral, in which time will slowly melt, will wipe, will burn the objects as well as the only man living among them.

Examples of modern art are on the same line of the confrontation with the ephemeral turning into a confrontation with the self. Paul Cézanne’s *Jeune homme à la tête de mort/ Young Man Next to A Skull* (made between 1896 and 1898) identifies the face of a man with a nob in a similar position on a pile of books. The lost look of the anonymous man does not express anything before the blind destiny that empties the being of freedom. The skull is no longer the symbol of death, but the symbol of impossibility, of the frightening immense emptiness inside the being. We can already foresee the corresponding thread between the ephemeral and the modern disturbance that was maybe known to Oedipus, Xerxes, Cassandra or so many other characters of the old drama that faced a blocked path, a dead end – a path on which it was ascertained that there was nothing beyond the crust of the body.

In the vast scope of culture, drama has a dual statute. It is a depository of the past, of the mental of civilizations (both as a text and as performability), nevertheless at the same time it is maybe most of all subject to the ephemeral. Putting aside the writing, the literary confession of an age, the stage is dominated by the *hic et nunc* principle. Every night, Hamlet dies in a different way. With every curtain descent, Don Juan puts on a different mask. When the theatre doors are closed, the actor leaves behind him the character, like a worn-out and a little dusted piece of clothing, and returns maybe the next day in order to revive him slightly changed. Besides, if we were to analyze the modern term of ephemeral art, we could see that it refers both to the sculptures subject to climatic changes (ice or sand sculptures, drawing on asphalt), and to the art born from the interaction (often even dramatic or dramatizing) with the human and with the hazard. In this case, we are thinking of happening, performance and impromptu. Time in drama is defined on two levels: one of representation and

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18 A performance from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, *Fischerspooner* (2009), directed by the artists Casey Spooner and Warren Fischer, brings to the attention of the spectators a
one of the represented action. The action of the text could be, up to a certain point, the fixed structure. When the director and the actor interfere in the text, a series of changes are made, the time of the performance (a sum of changes) representing the structure of “instability”. The time of the receptor may reveal actions from the performance that were either avoided, or left in the extrascenic space, the phenomenon being observed especially in the modern staging. The text becomes ephemeral before the uncountable directorial eyes that change it up to excess, until it becomes unrecognizable. Furthermore, there is a time of the receptor, which can remember or forget – depending on his informational or affective side – elements of the performance.

From a different perspective, the critic George Banu approached the paradoxical aspect of drama as regards the fight with ephemerality: “[...] we can say that the alliances that the stage achieves are fugitive. Ephemeral. They disintegrate and leave few traces: apart from the places and texts, the sea of forgetfulness swallows the act that reached for a moment the updating of the words written aforetime [...] for the consciousness regarding the ephemeral invites the acting being or the watching being to become beings of memory”19. Chronos is the master of Mnemosyne. The daughter of the Sky and Earth20 gives birth to the nine muses and this is not merely a happening, as Melpomene and her sisters will be places that will gather many signs of the past – from the stone chiseled masks to the blank verses and Satie’s scores. From its paradoxical hypostasis, it is highly unlikely that drama may resuscitate what it was. Reactivation on the stage is carried out through metaphor and analogy, namely through that universal message that makes the person from the audience a traveler to old realms.
II. The decline of the citadels – human alienations

- Hecuba, Women of Troy, Persians, The Seven Against Thebes, Phoenician Women, The Suppliants –

When Yvon Garlan asserts that the Greek was “an individual used to the war, even bellicose”\(^ {21} \), he is not far from the truth. If we think of how many confrontations there were in the ancient world, either starting from Xenophanes’ Histories and from Thucydides’ notes, or starting from Homer’s poems, we could observe that they are not few and the consequences are always detrimental. The evolution of the Olympian universe takes place also under the impulse of the riots of gods from different generations, Hesiod seeing the creation of the world as being achieved in four stages: the golden age, the silver age, the bronze age and the iron age. History follows a descendent slope, from order to chaos, as Hesiod’s cosmos is one of change, both on macro and micro level. But coming back to the human area, we can observe that wars are started for ever more varied reasons, territorial aggression, the breach of the citadel laws, pride, the appointment of unwanted despotic or inexperienced governments, and often only pretexts are used to hide much deeper causes: intrigues, fits of madness. Detaching ourselves from the historicity field, we can see that, in literature, war is used more in opposition to peace. As a matter of fact, the intention is merely to show where misfortunes can lead, and theatre is the place where moralizing ideas can be exposed directly and are rapidly absorbed by the audience. Thus the war topic is approached, on the one hand, because the event in itself is one of the realities of the society, and on the other hand out of a clear necessity of showing how life in quiet times is preferable. Moreover, “war literature” is not a strictly moralizing one, but it represents a vast area in which the individual’s soul can be analyzed in extreme situations, the memory being offered, at the same time, miniature faces, paper faces remembered in hard times.

II. 1. Hecuba – recomposed portrait

The story of Troy, as seen by Euripides, is an opportunity for the author to study the inner side of the character and the connections between characters. While Aeschylus focused on action and moral, he who will have taken his place in Hades\(^ {22} \), that prefers to deepen maybe precisely in what is more ephemeral – the human body and soul. Mother of Priam’s fifty children, Hecuba, witnesses


\(^{22}\) We refer to the situation imagined by Euripides’ vehement critique, Aristofan, in his comedy, *The Frogs*
gradually her own destruction: a dream reveals to her that the baby she has in
her womb, Paris, is the one who will bring disaster to the city. Nonetheless the
queen does not kill her baby, as she was advised to do, but she protects him, by
sending him to Mount Ida, where the young man becomes the hansom
shepherd, later tempted by Hera, Athens and Kypris. And as time goes by, Troy
becomes more and more phantasmal. When the prophecy comes true, all that is
left is the vestiges of a world. The tragedies Hecuba and The Trojan Women turn
the ephemeral motif into a dominating topos: “Foolish mortal he! who thinks
his luck secure and so rejoices; for fortune, like a madman in her moods, springs
towards this man, then towards that; and none ever experiences the same
unchanging luck.”23. These are the whispers of the mistress-slave who prepares
for the funeral of her grandson, Astyanax, Andromache’s son, pushed from the
defense walls. In her monologue, the heroine tries to revive to her memory
(pseudo-presence) the life that died out. The child’s words, now said by the old
woman, survive the perishable: “Ah, mother mine, many a lock of my hair will I
cut off for thee, and to thy tomb will lead my troops of friends, taking a fond
farewell of thee”24. Critics talk about Hecuba as of a play in which the
protagonist’s evolution is descendent, we seem to witness her psychological
degradation. The increasing number of corpses around her lead her to a ruthless
revenge on the one who erred the most, the Thracian king Polymestor, who
killed her youngest son, Polydor, left under the protection of Priam’s old friend.
The final plan of the former queen is diabolic: Polymestor is allured to the
Trojan slaves’ tent, and his children follow him; the hopeless women kill his
children and stick hairpins into his eyes, blinding him. Hecuba’s world is full of
corpses, dummies that come from the past and are a sort of shadows on the
walls in the twilight: Ulysses pulls his daughter out of his arms for sacrifice
remorselessly, with sadistic cruelty; Polymestor is dead before going blind, for
his crimes and endless greediness; Agamemnon submits to his army’s wish and
only partially do the grieving woman’s begging words soften him. In fact,
Agamemnon’ chameleonic character proves itself once more. Hecuba’s end has
two variants. One of the legends says that her foolish deed is confessed by
Mycenae’s master in front of the Thracians, who kill her by throwing rocks at
her, and a fire eyed bitch springs from the pile under which she dies; another
legend fulfills Plymestor’s prophecy according to which the childless mother
throws herself from the Odyssean ship deck to the sea, with the same delirious
flame in her eyes. Nevertheless Hecuba’s degradation and the already decayed
bodies of the people surrounding her are but the image of human frailty. The
state of old age that burdens the heroine’s body is described in words25 and

23 Euripides quoted work, p. 999
24 Ibidem
25 “Hecuba: Guide these aged steps, my servants, forth before the house; support your fellow-
slave, your queen of yore, ye maids of Troy. Take hold upon my aged hand, support me, guide
suggested by the physical positions. Nonetheless this state is merely a face of grief, a face of the decayed mind, of the present in which the remains of the past were disturbed. The corpses are to the playwright, according to researcher Rush Rehm, limits of the human and physical form of the rod in the play.

Whether madness intruded itself upon the heroine’s brain could be a question of interest; and in this case, the massacre of the Thracian king would be no more than an effect of bringing in violence in collectivity. “Hecuba sad, disconsolate, and captive, / When lifeless she beheld Polyxena, / And of her Polydorus on the shore/ Of ocean was the dolorous one aware,/ Out of her senses like a dog she barked,/ So much the anguish had her mind distorted;” Dante quoted the legend among the examples of extreme actions, neighbouring madness. The Italian poet's words also reveal a logical explanation to the variant of the myth according to which the queen turns into a bitch; her desperate cries resembled the wolves’, which would not have been surprising for a person with a clouded mind. As for the extreme action of the Trojan women of killing mercilessly and remorselessly, a relevant vision on this line would be the one of Mihalis Kakogiannis, the director of the movie *Women of Troy* (1971), where these women resemble a flock of black birds that follow their mistress’ every move. They hawk, scream and hit, sometimes only in order to intimidate, other times even to harm and avenge. It seems that a Hecuba hid in every woman, as otherwise the words of their sovereign, who is not at all a tyrant, would not have such a strong echo in their souls. As regards the staging of *Women of Troy*, the emphasis is on the mixture of insanity and perfect lucidity. Cassandra, for instance, as interpreted by the Canadian actress Geneviève Bujold, is a strange appearance. At first, her being is entirely lost, submitting herself only to her mother’s caresses. Nevertheless, she makes the decision to leave in Agamemnon’s cart with a serene and clear look. Hecuba, interpreted by Katharine Hepburn, starts with the unnatural force of anger, her stature becoming ever gamier, and her mind ever more rational.

A recurrent element in the studied Euripidean tragedy is the aquatic symbol – the sea wave. The slave women brought in Agamemnon and Ulysses’ watercrafts sing the immensity of the surrounding water as if the waves could swallow them on the spot, cutting the frail thread of their lives. The avenging water that should drown all the sorrow in its storm (and Helena at the same time) has something of the deceiving swirl that attracts Ophelia in the river of

me, lift me up; and I will lean upon your bended arm as on a staff and quicken my halting footsteps onwards. O dazzling light of Zeus! O gloom of night! why am I thus scared by fearful visions of the night?” (Euripides, quoted work, pp. 342-343)

26 “In this bleak tragedy, the living body provides the space from suffering to adhere, where pain is measured and meted out, and untimely death offers the only release”, extract from Rush Rehm, *The Play of Space. Spatial Transformation in Greek Tragedy*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2002, p. 187

27 Dante Alighieri, Quoted work, pp. 210-211
death, something of the strange dizziness felt by Mélisande in front of the fountain over which he leans, a fountain so deep that it can reach the other end of the Earth, as Péléas says, a fountain so quiet that the sleep of the water – death – can be heard. The water is matter – symbol of the ephemeral. The corpse of young Polydor is thrown to the water and brought to the shore by the passing wave (“Maid: The waves had washed him ashore”). The evil deed was discovered, and what is more, the wave brings the sign of nothingness and sadness as effect before the fate (of the uncomprehended) that changes everything.

Generally, the directorial tendency in achieving the queen’s destiny is a mark of gravity and grandeur. Linda Quibell, interpreter of Hecuba in a staging from Vancouvert East Cultural Center in 200729 has the silhouette of a statue walking restrainedly. Vanessa Redgrave in the same role, in the performance staged by Tony Harrison30, is the embodiment of absolute burst. Melania Ursu, in the performance directed by Cristian Nedea31, offers a vast score of experiences, outlining a complex character in which contrary feelings strike each other. Ephemerality is conceived on a space level, maybe because here the traces of the past are among the most visible, while the changes in people are somewhat more hidden. In the central area of Cluj, among the scaffolds of Saint Joseph catholic chapel, Nedea imagines a universe of alienation. It is a continuous search of the self between the unfinished walls, beyond the reinforcements rising absurdly towards the sky – a form of the human crushed by the blurred height. Imagined as an ancient amphitheatre, the austere precincts of the cathedral that is being built describes that outline of a circle representing at the same time the impossibility of escaping and the infinity of the world beyond. Melania’s position united with the earth, on the small circular platform, resembles the ancient ritual beings. With her eyes dried out, she seems blind in the delirium mist. Both hallucinatory and imposing delirium. The other characters float like flying shadows, shaded on the vertical plans, on the concrete platforms. Some seem to poke, maintaining themselves hidden, others make their presence felt through shadow. The heroes come, embody the lights, then they die in the realm of shadows, even if this realm is Hades’, or the changeful mist in each of them. Outside the cathedral walls, busy boulevards, lit buildings, small and noisy streets lay; outside the walls solitary trees grow. Euripides’ scenery (the Thracian shore in a pale ray of the dawn, the heavy mist)

28 Euripides, *Quoted work*, p. 363
29 *Hecuba*, director John Wright, Vancouvert East Cultural Center, 2007, Lighting Design de John Webber, Projections by Tim Matheson
30 *Hecuba*, director Tony Harrison, Royal Shakespeare Company, 2005, Vanessa Redgrave (Hecuba)
31 *Hecuba*, directed by Cristian Nedea, „Lucian Blaga” National Theatre from Cluj, 2009, with Melania Ursu (Hecuba), Ramona Dumitrean (Polyxena), Ovidiu Crișan (Polymestor)
was metamorphosed into the semi-urban grey, the round space at the conjunction between sacred and profane. The performance from Vancouver East Cultural Center uses a classic stage this time, which works, nevertheless, like a vivid system, like an embodiment of Mnemosyne. The projects that take place on a huge background are traces of declined ages. A parallel world, which pulses like an unseen heart, gathers in itself abstracts ruins, silhouettes of women burying their children, brave men like Achilles that look portly at the devastated battlefields. All the images are symbols of loss, of destruction and human suffering, the same during any age. The palette of the projects is limited but suggestive: white and black or chthonian blue mark once more the fact that the images belong to a remote inner world. And this world is visible through a lens implanted deep in the mortal beings.

The devastation scenery from *Women of Troy* reminds in a staging from Malthouse Theatre of the problems of the modern individual, subject to the perishable, to evil and misfortune, like the ancient. With grotesque accents (women with their heads shaved, almost masculinized, fleshless bodies), the scenography focuses on a central motif: Hecuba and the Trojan women chorus go out and into niches resembling train wagons destined to concentration camps, other times they are mere slots to which fear pushes the character. Suffocating boxes, miserable coffins, corner of punishment and of protection. Huddled in these “compartments”, the protagonists relate visually what humanity has lived and what it is steel living. Music intertwines itself like a shudder of freight, like a disturbing riot, like a wing of the time that devours and burns: Bizet, Mozart, popular Slovene songs and cabaret songs. A decrepit time that tries in vain to save itself is the over-topic according to the Euripidean text from National Theatre. To Katies Michell’s Hecuba, the theatre is almost empty; there are only a few thin pillars, resembling bars of slender columns rising towards no place. Its reality is the same as the reality of velvet dresses, of the perfect outlines in a weak light, of decaying elegance. The elements of luxury in austere scenery contrast to and involve the same feeling of irrevocable loss. If the war disappeared (the director does not leave on the stage any object that

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32 *Women of Troy*, directed by Barrie Kosky, Sydney Theatre Company, Australia, 2008, Lighting Designer de Damien Cooper, with Robyn Nevin (Hecuba)

33 Euripides writes *Women of Troy* during the Peloponnesian War that had already destroyed the Greek society physically and morally. The songs of the chorus and the central protagonist’s monologues transmit pacifist desiderata. The solution of the text from the political point of view is one of the variants approached by the modern directors as well. Jacqueline Moati stages *Women of Troy* during the war in Algeria, moving all the action to the new territory and the characters in the black people’s shoes. Tadashi Suzuki evokes in his adaptation the launching of the atomic bomb from Hiroshima (1945). Troy re-embodies itself every time among the smoky ruins of the modern iron citadels.

34 *Women of Troy*, directed by Katie Mitchell, National Theatre, London, 2008, Kate Duchene (Hecuba)
Ancient Troy may recover), it is paradoxically present. It can be felt in the closed atmosphere, in the serious looks, in the dramatic rhythm of replies. The women in the chorus waltz with men dressed in tail coat on an empty platform, under a remote reflector. They are no longer more than fantastic projects in a deserted universe, puppets that go round in a mechanic game. The modern man turns the clepsydra around, but the sand does not flow any more.

Euripide’s play *Helena* controversial to the exegetes, charming though to the less learned audience brings forward another variant of the legend of “the most beautiful of mortals”. Inspired from Menelaus and Helena’s Egyptian adventure narrated in Odyssey, the text reminds of a wreck of Paris’ ship, when the heroine escapes being kidnapped by king Proteus, who keeps her pure for her husband. Then, when she was with Paris, it seems that she only sent an *eidolon*, her stand-in – an image -, and she never saw Troy. Thus the reason for which the war could have burst out would have been based on an illusion. The decay of the pyramid house is maybe caused by a ghost. The game of fate is maybe the game of irony.

II.2. Declining Kings

Being under the same force of the devouring time, the ancient Greek literature maintains only traces of a whole once known. Sometimes, it feels that the remaining texts build an immense gallery in which sculptures were collected: Victoria from Samothrace whose arms and head are missing, Aphrodite from Milos, whose arms are missing, Diadumenos with no hands, Praxyles’ Aphrodite, whose legs are missing, the statue of Zeus and Ganymedes broken at the level of the heart and full of cracks. Such a room would be a good place also for the tragedies that were preserved, which represented complete cycles, together with the other plays from the tetralogies. If in *The Suppliants* the action from the lost tetralogy (also containing *The Egyptians*, *The Danaides* and the comedy *Amymone*) can be reconstructed quite accurately, the history of the Persian war seen through Aeschylus’ eyes narrated in the tetralogy made of *The Persians* (the only part known up to the date), *Phineus, Glaucus from Potniai* and the comedy *Prometheus the Fire-Bringer* is hardly present. Beyond the patriotism that the critics detected in the writer, what is interesting is his vision on the declining worlds, either in the defeat of king Xerxes, or the siege state of Thebes in the confrontation between Oedipus’ sons. They contradict partly Ion Zamfirescu’s assertion in the chapter reserved for the play *The Persians*, according to which “Generally considered, the drama represents an anthem dedicated to the victorious solders from Salamis”\(^{35}\). Our reading of the tragedy reveals rather a burdensome state of defeat and even though it is among the few writings

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inspired from historic reality, the emphasis is on the decay of the exterior worlds (the loss of territories and goods, the banning of men from the city of Susa, who were heroes fallen in the waters of Salamis) and inner worlds (the shattering of Xerxes’ mind). As a matter of fact we could add that by comparing the number of heroes in the Persian army and the number of those of the Greek army, we may say that the first is indeed larger. It is also worth mentioning that in recent stagings, the issue of the alienation becomes a super-topic of the performances achieved according to this text, the space and temporal localization being much too little present if not even canceled by the non-temporal and non-spatial effect (patriotism would arise even less from such modern stagings). In the performance “Poes” from Teatro, for instance, in the staging of the young director Lucas Thanos, the scenery is very simple, nothing on the stage reminds of any place in which the action takes place. The same phenomenon happens as regards the costumes that retouch features of the ancient costume, but define themselves in a present outside chronological limits. The performance focuses nevertheless on rhythm, drawing the attention onto the choreography and the “melody” of the chorus. The most important characters – queen Atossa, Darius, resurrected from Hades’ realm and Xerxes – are symbols of alienation. Darius’ aged face, the desperation of the queen half naked and bursting in frightful grievance, as Thanos sees her, are only a few signs of the loss of being, of insanity or of death. Therefore, before being an “anthem”, The Persians is a play of the human force that destroys and destroys itself.

The action is poor, the stage is a space of meeting and of recounting events. The most dramatic part already happened, following the custom of the writing, in the extra-scenic area. The present of the text offers only psychological embryonic portraits: the mother’s torments under the dark premonition of dreams, the sturdiness of the former king come from death, Xerxes’s desperation. The prologue – the Coryphaeus’ narration – on the one hand, plays a formal role of informing the spectator on the pulse of the war with the Greeks, and, on the other hand, a substratum role: the evocation of the names of the fallen heroes brings forward a series of absent characters that the memory must remember. Victorious or defeated, those who participated in the massacre represent but dots in the history of peoples. The same type of “list” is resumed in the summary of the battle from Salamis reported by the Herald to the queen. The names, in their Greek form, remind indeed this time of the way in which they died; they bear in themselves a story of each person who perished for the intemperate dream of their sovereign. The image outlined by the Messenger is an enormous sign of the ephemeral: “Artembares, the potent chief that led ten thousand horses, lies slaughtered on the rocks of rough Sileniae. […] Tenagon, bravest of the Bactrians, lies roll’d on the wave-worn beach of Ajax’ isle. Lilaeus, Arsames, Argestes, dash with violence in death against the
rocks where nest the silver doves.” Aeschylus, *The Suppliants, The Persians, The Seven against Thebes, Prometheus Bound*, translation by Alexandru Miran, Bucharest, Univers Publishing House, 1982, p. 99. And the character’s memory is lacunal as he adds that “These chieftains to my sad remembrance rise, relating but a few of many ills” Aeschylus, *Quoted work*, p. 100. In ancient mythology there are a few bodies that float above waters: Polydor’s corpse, Absyrtus – Medea’s brother torn to pieces and thrown by his sister into the sea -, Myrtilus killed by Pelops, Orpheus’ head – the singer shredded by the Thracian women -, Asteria who kills herself in the sea. The image of the corpses that wash against the island shores reminds remotely, of course, of the beginning of the movie *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), in which, coming out of the sea on the land of Normandy, the protagonist crosses a red beach, full of the fallen corpses that are now being born by the waves in a peaceful swing. The horrors of war are also the horrors of the time that destroys, be it time of history, or human time. In the Aeschylean text, the grotesque and freight are concentrated in one phrase: “The dead lie in piles, on shores, on rock backs” Idem, p. 103. The sea (water) – the element of stability – bears slowly the lifeless bodies of Arktéus, Adeues, Phramucos, Amestris or of unknown soldiers, heroes for a day – a sort of breathless fish with shiny stomach. This structure is maybe an incipient topos *ubi sunt* in which brave men from other times are evoked, who, even though they fell defending themselves, represent glorious moments. In the staging from Shakespeare Theatre Company The Persians after Aeschylus, Shakespeare Theatre Company, 2006, director Etghan McSweeny, Erin Gann (Xerxes), Helen Carey (Atosa), Ted van Griethuysen (Darius) the stage is covered by red sand that Xerxes spreads on his fingers incessantly while he speaks his last words, under the tearful look of his mother. As a sign of the disaster produced by his pride (the unforgivable hybris, which both his father and the survivors of the confrontation seem to reproach to him) and as a sign of the human nothingness, the sand surface is doubled in an immense mirror made of pieces that deform the image, covering the entire front wall of the stage. The entire cosmos seems to have become a red sphere in which the human remains move (most of the actors are dressed in black, so a strong contrast is obtained between lurid and black). Herodotus reminds of the fact that it seems that Xerxes sat during the entire confrontation on an imposing throne on the sea shore. Seeing that his troups are strongly threatened, he is frightened because of the possibility of defeat and the fact that he could be captures, he leaves for his country. But the “picture” of the king looking at the havoc of his army destroyed by the enemies, whose remains float at the water surface is suggestive for the same topos of the merciless and changing fate.

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37 Aeschylus, *Quoted work*, p. 100  
38 Idem, p. 103  
39 The Persians after Aeschylus, Shakespeare Theatre Company, 2006, director Etghan McSweeny, Erin Gann (Xerxes), Helen Carey (Atosa), Ted van Griethuysen (Darius)  
Lexically, in order to designate the ones who were destroyed, on any of the sides of troupes, the term *mortals* is used: “Inflicted by the gods, must mortal man constrain’d by hard necessity endure” 41, “For be assured that not one day could close the ruin of so vast a host,” 42, “And swell'd with thoughts presumptuous, deem'd, vain mortal! that his power should rise above the gods” 43. The term is in tight relation to another symbol – the sun. For this text, the semantic sphere of the symbol goes from the powerful, inspiring, divine light bringing glory to the semantics of the perishable. The world under the sun is subject to time and destruction. When Darius’ ghost arises from the tomb, it is like it left an eternal place to return to a land in which everything is changing – this is the land under the sun. “Hearing your weep, I rose again under the sun” 44, said the king’s apparition. Being alive means, according to the Messenger, living under the sun (“Xerxes himself lives, and beholds the light” 45). The Persian army is dressed in gold, the solar syllogism being thus visible. But the gold on their armour will be covered in blood and will be born by the waves along with the breathless bodies. Mythology maintains in the Persian symbolism the gold element as founder of the people. The mythical great-grandfather of Persians, Perseus, was born by Danae onto whom Zeus had brought down a golden rain; from the touch of this rain, the divine child came into being. Despite all this, only one man manages to throw all this gold into a terrible battle and lose it.

Darius’ shadow is invoked to come and give advice to the queen and a few subjects that remained in the city of Susa. If, in general, the shadow is considered the contrast of light and the entity of the double, to Persians, it represents a symbol of the ephemeral as well 46. The former leader is the character that would represent the balance in the disoriented world of losers, as he is the one trying to reestablish order in the troubled minds of his subjects and wife. Moreover, the illusory form in which he shows himself retains the notion according to which the king must not die 47, especially as he was a wise king. The shadow of he who was the most beloved of Persia’s lords is the trace coming from a past that cannot be forgotten, it is a pseudo-presence of the one who is no more, of a mortal among other mortals. Darius is contrasted to his son, out of

41 Aeschylus, *Quoted work*, p. 99
42 *Ibidem*, p. 103
43 *Ibidem*, p. 117
44 *Ibidem*, p. 113
45 *Ibidem*, p. 99
46 According to the *Dictionary of Symbols*, the shadow may belong to the register of the passing and devouring time: The shadow is itself the image of passing, unreal and changing things” (Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, vol. III, Bucharest, Artemis Publishing House, 1993, p. 403)
the desire of emphasizing the greatness of the former and the conceit that annihilates the latter. The ghost’s speech combines fragments of the Pindaric sayings that saw measure as the only saving solution before the cruel fate with those who wanted too much. And measure, to Greeks, equals reason. As if trying to find extenuating circumstances for his descendant, the former sovereign suspects him of insanity, because he dared conquer Greece, approaching even places inappropriate for attack. The old rich empire from Darius’ time is threatened by the infamous thoughts of new counselors, too young and perfidious to be entitled to govern such a powerful state. The ghost complains that if the power is in the hands of greedy people that do not treasure reason and that influence his son negatively, all he gathered in life is lost. Glorifying the name of Greece and the victorious history of Persia, the father gives only one piece of advice: measure should govern any action for what is to come. His utterance is decisive: “Henceforth let not pride, her present state disdaining, strive to grasp another’s, and her treasured happiness shed on the ground […] But you, whose age demands more temperate thoughts, with words of well-placed counsel teach his youth to curb that pride, which from the gods calls down destruction on his head”. Persians’ empire is, according to the text, between the past and the present like in double hypostasis, of magnification and of decay.

The space is, as for the legends about Troy, made of the architectonic beauty of the city of Susa. When in 1961 Jean Prat directed the movie *The Persians*, he tried to remain faithful to the text, using costumes and masks resembling those used in ancient theatres, refusing to interfere with Aeschylus’ text by cutting out or making changes. In order to render as faithfully as possible the ancient atmosphere, the scenography imitates in a stylized manner the city of Persepolis. However, the immense scenery is successful, the interventions of the chorus and its moves following the space rhythm. The greatness of the walls from Prat’s movie tries to preserve what the flow of époques eroded. Furthermore, symmetry as well as geometrical harmony underlines once more Darius’ words regarding the balance and reason in relation to space. But sceneries are so ephemeral…

The play is full of formulas that bring to the light the issue of the burdening destiny that cannot be changed, but that changes the face of the world in a permanent game of the wheel that rises and lowers people. Moira is seen as being just when she punishes the reckless or deceiving, like a biblical temptation that bans the man and woman from Paradise (“Inflicted by the gods, 48 “Wealth adorned with virtues, fulgent star, true light to man”, Pindar, Pythian II, *Quoted work*, p. 13
49 Aeschylus, *Quoted work*, p. 120
50 *Les Perses*, 1961, French production, directed by Jean Prat, with Claude Martin (Xerxes), Maria Meriko (Atossa), René Arrieu (Darius)
must mortal man constrain'd by hard necessity endure\(^{51}\). The gods use the dice of fate, the decisive objects to the evolution of individuals, who, according to Darius, must be accepted, and the line of life must be followed reasonably, no matter how sinuous it is. The Aeschylean spirit and together with it the spirit of ancient times assert their presence through a phrase that seems to dominate the play. Built by contrast, the frightening picture of a universe dominated by death and insanity (sign of the ephemeral) reveals the bright face of Greece: “That the high mounds, piled o'er the dead, to late posterity shall give this silent record to men's eyes, that proud aspiring thoughts but ill beseem weak mortals […] Behold this vengeance, and remember Greece, remember Athens”\(^{52}\). In the quoted formula, Ancient Greece equals a stable point, an effigy in the quick sands of Time.

Resembling The Persian from the point of view of the dramatic structure, The Seven against Thebes is a play in which the dynamic action takes place behind the stage, while the facts of the war are only narrated to the spectator, who witnesses the arrival and departure of characters that announce what is going on “outside” and the frightening song of the chorus. The poetic constituent is not at all negligible. Still, the text – relatively avoided by directors nowadays – does not resume only to this linearity. Even though it is apparently static, the scenic action is rich in inner emotions, sometimes repressed, other times told directly without considering the effects that open thoughts might have. In these circumstances, can we talk about Aeschylus’ writing as about an incipient construction that would be called later a psychological drama\(^{53}\).

The name Eteocles is the center of attention, this character being presented from three perspectives: lord of the city, brother and fighter. Even if he apparently lacks a complicated outline, Eteocles is a hero under the lens; his reservation, his uncontrolled outbursts, his contradiction between fighting against his brother and obeying a destiny already made are visible. The Seven against Thebes is, as the critics received it, the play of the siege state, belonging, together with Rhesos, The Persian, The Heracleidae, Philoctetes, to the war topic – human destruction of the human itself. Considered one of the most fecund ancient stories\(^{53}\), the history of Labdacids’ house starts from Laois’ disobedience and dies out in the fourth generation, unless we could talk about Alcmeon’s legend\(^{54}\) as part of the same line. Laois’s murder is a justice action, only that Oedipus’ sin devours him as well, therefore, persuaded on the one hand by his

\(^{51}\) Aeschylus, Quoted work, p. 89

\(^{52}\) Idem, p. 120

\(^{53}\) Alexandru Miran, preface from Phoenician Women, in Euripides, Quoted work, p. 595

\(^{54}\) Son of Amphiaras, Alcmeon, in order to avenge his father, commits matricide against Eriphyla, who had constrained her father to go to war together with Polynikes and the rest of the heroes that had sworn for the attack of Thebes. The legend is known from the cycle Thebaide, Latin epical poem belonging to Publius Papinius Statius
sons’ life style after his departure from Thebes, and on the other hand, persuaded by the initial curse in his unconsciousness, wishes them to die by each other’s hand. This actually happens, when Polynices attacks her brother, not managing to conquer Thebes, but managing to fulfill the father’s “wish”. Nevertheless, the bloody deeds do not end here, as during the following years, the Epigones – sons of the seven leaders – attack the same place and destroy the city to the ground. Thus we have before our eyes a Thebes of magnification, led by Oedipus immediately after elucidating the enigma of the Sphinx, and then we have a Thebes of disaster, troubled by illness, war and eventually destroyed. Tyche rises and then lowers people and places, and Chronos makes the human world bright and then wipes it off until almost nothing can be recognized.

_The Seven against Thebes_ outlines a polyphonic character, as Eteocles has to cope with the hatred of his brother Polynices, who had in fact received his father’s curse, when he departed for Colon to ask in different ways for it in his city, being aware of the prophecy that whoever has Oedipus’ body in his kingdom will have wealth and good health eternally. Eteocles must organize his defense, must appease the people left in the city (who are mostly women that make up the chorus) and last but not least he must decide whether to fight in order to let loose the paternal curse. Max Pohlez and Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff see the hero as a sacrificial being because he does nothing to stop the fight and confronts his brother before the gates of Thebes with the purpose of ending the fate destined by their father, which strikes not only his children, but also other inhabitants or people close to them. He does not make the decision without analyzing it beforehand, even if the text does not leave direct clues to this purpose, however the character experiences emotions and reactions that make us believe that the inner process is strong. In a way, as Kurt von Fritz observed, through this central face, Aeschylus passes to the much more studied characters of Sophocles: „Eteocles is however the first example of a great tragic character who is entirely individualized; and it is doubtless not without interest to observe that Aeschylus took this step towards a new dramatic form in the process to handling material which by its nature was especially appropriate to Sophocles’ style of tragedy“.

In comparison to _The Persians_, the studied writing does not emphasize so much the fate issue, but the unforgiving destiny influences the entire action. Two sacred figures stand out in the misty scene of the siege: Zeus, the supreme

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55 Both Apollodorus and Pausanias (Greek, edition attended to and with texts translate by James George Frazer, London, William Heinemann, 1918) talk about the Epigones’ war. In Pausanias’ variant, Thersander takes over the control of Thebes, only that his end is caused by Agamemnon’s army, which had joined himm against Troy.

56 Max Pohlenz, _Die Griechische Tragödie_, Leipzig, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1956

57 Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, _Aischylus: Interpretationen_, Berlin, Weidmann, 1914

lord, who looks down impassibly and Ares, the god of war, a sort of supreme headman, depending on whose movements the victory is for the one side or the other. Beyond these unseen entities who nevertheless participate effectively in the events, another Shadow is loomed remotely. The past, as we have already seen, burdens the history of the present: Oedipus’ name is often mentioned, being condemned by the evil that descended upon his descendents. The dead father is assigned by the speakers as mad when he cursed his sons. It seems that no one forgives him, this attitude being due probably to the state of tension that seized the city inhabitants; nonetheless there are also real fundaments, if we think of the foolish gestures of the former king: the violent blame assigned to Creon, Tiresias’ brutal disparagement, the desperation he shows when talking to the shepherd, the tearing out of the eyes – a type of gradual self-destruction that goes on as a curse on something his love created. The face of an aged Oedipus, with blurred eye shells flies over the sieged Thebes: “Hath ta’en up his rest to wreak upon the sons of Oedipus/ their grandsire’s wilfulness of long ago.”\(^{59}\) Along with the father’s madness, the entire people pay the same tribute: “Ah me, the madman, and the curse of Heaven/ and woe for us, the lamentable line of Oedipus”, Eteocles exclaims reaching paroxysm when he finds out he has to fight Polynices. The character identifies himself with his ill-fated genealogy, but his cry is also a revolt, otherwise he would have hidden it as until now within himself. The father’s shadow is an element of stability within the war scene in which Thebes is threatened to be affected by ephemerality.

A few suggestive elements as regards the ephemerality of the earthly things are recurrent in the text. Dust is often mentioned, imagining in the beginning, though in a whole different context, (“The dust rises up to the sky, / A signal, though speechless, of doom”\(^^{60}\)), the horrible image of a war that turns the green fields into dry surfaces or the vigorous bodies into unrecognizable corpses (“And, as their father’s imprecation bade, / shall have their due of land, a twofold grave. / So is the city saved; the earth has drunk / blood of twin princes, by each other slain.”\(^^{61}\)). The chorus in which the women and maidens left at home plain is possessed by panic both because of the culminating moment of the situation and even more because of the effects that might be triggered by a possible defeat. Their words – prayers to the gods, replies given to the main protagonist, worship to Eteocles – include beautiful poetic phrases, generally nuanced by the contrast between sensitivity and violence. Imagining how their city would look like defeated, the vocabulary of the chorus includes only apocalyptic terms, which reveal the distance between the harmony of stability and the disorder of fall: “For pity and sorrow it were that this immemorial

\(^{59}\) Aeschylus, Quoted work., p. 167  
\(^{60}\) Idem, p. 142  
\(^{61}\) Idem, p. 168

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town/ should *sink* to be slave of the spear, to dust and to *ashes gone down,/* by the
gods of Achaean worship and arms of Achaean might/ sacked and defiled and
dishonoured". The decline of the universe ends with the fire: "The dark smoke
broods over all"62. This brooding refers to the sin that the brothers kept in
themselves, which has been floating for generations in their family and that
spread everywhere.

Thebes remains victorious though, even if the king died and – together
with him – his brother; the Argeans disappear and Creon announces his second
reign here. The enthusiasm with which the Herald announces the victory of the
city revives the people within its walls. The resemblance of Thebes with a ship
on a clear sky floating on the ephemeral waves relates to the motif of the
changing fate. However, is it a day of glory the one announced after the battle
from the seven gates? The chorus does not exalt any song of glory, but raise
their voices in a funeral sob and Antigone and Ismena make a sad entrance and
are left alone, listening to the frightening new laws given by Creon. Deep inside,
Thebes is defeated and has been defeated for a long time, actually. The lofty
walls in the scenery from *Antigone* turned into the souls of Thebans in smoky
remains that they carry inside, like burdens given by the fate.

Euripides, more of a poet than of history, more innovating than
Aeschylus, resumes the topic of *The Seven against Thebes* in the tragedy *Phoenician
Women*. However, he makes some important changes in the house of Labdacids:
Jocasta did not kill herself, but she lives in the darkness of the palace recovered
by Eteocles, and Oedipus that deprives himself of his sight lives in the same
darkness of the walls; as for Antigone, she has not become a wanderer together
with her father yet. At the same time, some elements are the same: the
remembrance of all those who fought in front of the gates of the city (Tydeus,
Capaneus, Amphiarao, Eteocles, Parthenopeus, Hippomedon and Polynices),
described with the same defining details as Euripides’ antecessor; the motif of
the changing fate, outlined in different situations remains as visible.

Jocasta’s portrait resembles Hecuba’s, only that if the mistress of Troy
was defeated by an army and indirectly by the gods, the mistress of Thebes
seems to have chosen the hermit life herself, seems to have dethroned herself,
as a reaction to the heavy blows of the destiny. While the mother of Priam’s
fifty children fights to keep her last children, Jocasta makes a shy attempt of
conciliating the bitter brothers, and for the rest of the time she undergoes the
adversities that descend upon her “former” house. The queen’s head is shaved,
which means the denial of the self and the ugliness provoked by the inner
suffering reflected to the outside. Her mourning clothes make her body seem
smaller. Even at the beginning of the play (Jocasta utters the prologue) she looks
like a lost woman, a sort of a living-dead. The time drained all that was in the

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The Topos of the Ephemeral in the Ancient Greek Tragedy
Ph.D. Candidate Ioana PETCU

former queen. The old age she tells Polynices about is a physical age, but most of all is a psychological age. Old age has become the queen’s inner covering. Her wrinkled hands and her poor clothing describe a soul shriveled and impoverished before its time.

The space itself reflects the state of the people that inhabit it. When the Fisher King (li riche pescheour), who knows where the Grail is, gets ill, his entire kingdom is affected by an illness that wear the walls of the castle. The time that flows in expectation of salvation is a time of death that affects both man and cosmos. The Thebes in which Jocasta lives is a house of phantoms, an unreal place, in which shadows wander at times. As regards the scenographic depiction of the setting in the performance directed by Karin Coonrod at Columbia University, the action takes place within the walls of a basement affected by infiltrations and broken by underground ducts. Consequently, a lugubrious atmosphere is outlined. The staging from Epidaurus in 1962 presents the chorus as made up of women dressed in long and dark coloured clothes; they surround the stage every time they enter and, through the text they utter (funeral songs, lamentations, prayers to the divinities), they seem to be embodiments of the destiny itself. Their circular movement evokes the unforgiving time that flows and burns. In the same staging, a few of the theatre sings reveal the ephemerality of beings of objects: Eteocles and Polynices turn into straw-filled puppets, brought in front of the spectators on grey stretchers. Their flesh bodies turned – from the scenic point of view – in rag corpses that could disintegrate any time. Now seen as deformed puppets lacking tonicity and a puppeteer, the two brothers were never more than that. Choleric and avenging, obedient to their father’s curse, cruel and with no sense of measure, they have always been patches with straws. Being deaf and blind, they cast aside the wise words their mother tries to work in the opacity of her sons: “What’s superfluous wealth/

63 “Fisher King’s illness triggered the sterilization of the entire life around the castle in which the mysterious sovereign agonized. The waters stopped flowing in their beds, the trees would not sprout, the soil was not fertile any more, the flowers would not bloom. They say that this nonsensical curse was so terrible that not even the birds would fall in love and doves faded alone among the ruins, until they fell swamped by the wing of death. Even the castle became desolate. The walls fell slowly like worn by an unseen power: the wooden attics rotted, the stones fell from the battlement and turned to ashes as if decades had passed like seconds”, Mircea Eliade, *Insula lui Euthanasius (Euthanasius’ Island)*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 1993, p. 163-164. When the master recovers, after the appearance of Percival, who asks the saving question, the space is revived, along with the soul and body recovery of the character. But if for the castle of the medieval King there was a Percival and a question that could restore beauty around, for Thebes the burdening state and sadness will reign for a long time and after the Labdacids dynasty. From the inside or from the outside, Oedipus’ figure will dominate the history of the Greek city.

64 *Phoenician Women* by Euripides, director Karin Coonrod, scenography by Riccardo Hernandez, Columbia University, MFA Class, 2009

65 *Phoenician Women* by Euripides, director Alexis Mnotis, Epidaurus, Greece, 1962
But a mere name? Sufficient to the wise/ Is competence: for man possesses naught/ Which he can call his own. Though for a time/ What bounty the indulgent gods bestow/ We manage, they resume it at their will:/ Unstable riches vanish in a day66.

As we have seen in the previous plays, the symbol of dust is the final image that sets after a catastrophe. Oedipus’ disunited family has no other chance but to witness its own ruin; even want it. When Eteocles cries in front of his mother and brother that his rival “He can wallop this house”, we could deduce simply that the current master does not even think of what he says and that in the nebula that descended upon him, he does nothing else but cast a curse in his turn. But this cry might also have a different answer. Renunciation. Euripides contrasts the two, apparently rising Polynices this time higher than Eteocles, endowing him with more calm and even a little conciliatory spirit. Despite all these, Eteocles says wise words full of essence when he tries to explain his refusal to receive the other one beside him: “If the same thing were good and beautiful for all, people would not know what misunderstandings and disputes are, but mortals do not find anything similar or the same, apart from words, reality is different”67. With these words, the protagonist reveals part of the human inconstant character, and, on the other hand, he discovers what we would define as relativity in modern terms. This opinion is shared by skeptical sophists, by Protagoras, for instance, who showed that man is the measure of all things, of what they are and of their nature, of what they are not and of the explaining of their non-existence. But at the same time, one can loom the profile of the modern individual, constrained in the chaos of a reality made by himself. Each of us has certain perception on the world, and the world and its reality does not represent but the sum of these visions. Before the hazard in which justice and truth lie, the ancient individual realized he cannot escape. Anyway, the brothers know their destiny and the path it follows, consequently it seems right to them to stand up to each other and sentence the city to forgetfulness and destroying dust. Oedipus’ appearance at the end is a reply to the initial image of Jocasta – in the panoptikum-house a pellucid man appears finding out that his prophecy fulfilled. There is no trace of compassion in Antigone’s voice asking: “What has become of Oidipous, the enigma solver?”. Before a war that threatened the city, in front of three corpses that lie in front of him, though his eyes cannot see them, the former king shows no regret in his answer: “He died: only for one day did he acquire kingship, and in one day he was slain”68. A sole sentence includes an entire existence, an existence that resembles by far a straw puppet. If the content is removed, there is only an indefinite shape on the floor.

66 Euripide, _Quoted work_., p. 687
67 _Idem_, p. 686
68 _Idem_, p. 727
By replacing the Phoenician mothers with the mothers of the fallen ones in the fight of Oedipus' children, Euripides makes a sequel to the previous play: The Suppliants. This play, which is truly slow, contains too many songs and monologues that, from the scenic point of view, become tiresome at a certain point. Except for the sequence in which Eudna decides to sacrifice herself out of love by throwing herself on the same stake where her husband was burning – which is a very strong dramatic moment – the rest of the action is hidden behind words. Despite all these, the text is rich in elements that refer to the motif we are interested in. The bodies of the seven lie at the gates of Thebes unhumed, which is a gesture of deep defamation of the dead. The image of the mothers who mourn their dead is part of the same framework of the disaster after the war and represents the moment in which the living try to retain whatever possible from the person who was once close to them – a hugged body, a face ingrained in the memory. In order to clear their skirts because of Creon's decision of not burying the ones killed in battle, the mothers' chorus went to Theseus's city, where, together with Adrastus, who helped Polynices to raise the army, ask for protection from him. After being convinced, the Athenian hero fights a war against Creon and obtains eventually the corpses in order to give them to the earth. Following precisely the draft specific to the hero in the ancient people's vision (balanced, courageous, good judge, optimistic), Theseus becomes the solar figure in the The Suppliants. The text is full of meditations on the human fate, all considerations being oriented towards the sole moral that concludes the whole: justice is for the ones who guide themselves according to the measure principle. But is the god really so just? Then who does Tyche press merciless on the mortal's frail bodies? If the darkness is equivalent to chaos, then why should Fortuna be blindfolded? Are the masters of Olympus as wise as people from the small world believe they are?

The topos of the changing fate and ephemerality is invoked often out of rhetoric need. In the suppliants' hopelessness, in their ceaseless cry, like a reminiscence of the human unavoidable, the motif reverts in quiet clear words: “Nothing of the mortals' fate is unaltered”69. Other times, the topos is brought on the characters' lips like a sort of avenge. “As for Kadmos' sons, too lucky in the dice games until today, I am sure their fate will change, as the god always inverts it all”70. In a dialogued sequence of the chorus, the technique of the live dialogue between the chorus members being rather rarely practiced, the women discuss once more about the same reason of the increase and decrease, toward the end mentioning frightfully and funeral-like the almightiness of the divinities: “– Anytime can Moira change the fate / Of lucky man, I know./ - You speak of gods as if they were just./ - Who else gives you chance then?/ - But their justice is not the same as the human one./ - You say that as fear haunts you./ Revenge

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69 Idem, p. 744
70 Idem, p. 746
brings revenge and blood calls for blood./ In the flow of our ills/ the gods give us respites of peace,/ but it’s always them who decide the end of all”71. Through a circular dynamics, after Creon declared having won the fight, Thebes is defeated by Theseus and justice is recovered. Adrastus is avenged, but he has the same bitter taste from the beginning; as a matter of fact, this new confrontation for the re-determination of the truth did nothing else but fills the field of new corpses. The endless sadness he feels at that time makes him say: “Oh, vane mortals! You strain your bow too tightly and thus you hit too far; that very minute a pile of ills whelms you”72.

The sensation that is created is that in The Suppliants no one and nothing survives the destiny; the more thy think and doubt the world above them, the more they sink in a sea of vanities. They are sure to drown. Beyond them, the story remains as a print of memory, as Mnemosyne will always come out bright from the waters of river Lethe.

At the opening ceremony of the Olympics in 2004, the director Dimitris Papaioannou put on a synthetic show in which choreography, scenography and the game of lights depicted a theatric universe of everything that means the history of Greece. From the moment when Prometheus shares fire to people and until the imposition of arts, education, orthodoxy and modern social structures, Greece is seen as an immense stage on which gods, fantastic beings and people succeed. It is a multiform stage, in which a tear trickled on a cheek, a smile arose – passing moments of eternal beauty though. It is the stage of a “baroque” spectacle where, after the lights went out and after the innumerable characters suddenly disappeared in the backstage, phantomatic outlines can still be loomed, retained by the spectator-retina.

72 *Idem*, p. 758
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**DICTIONARIES**


