

Plutarch's Boat – On the spiritual sense of the scenic interruption

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1. Exposition

As we discuss the phenomenon of interruption in the context of dramaturgy, we encounter it immediately in a double perspective. We may think about different ways of causing an interruption in the course of fictional action or actual performance. Our motives for doing so may be various, but often they are critical, and the interruption caused is meant to lead to an opening of a new perspective on the course of action, by stopping it, complicating it or simply showing it in a new light. But interruption may also take less deliberate and less controlled forms and be due to factors that, like uninvited guests or intruders, intervene in the system of the presentation itself, and prevent it from functioning the way it has been used to. The Covid-19 pandemic that started in 2020 has forced many theatres and performance groups to cancel their programmes and lay off their staff, either temporarily or permanently. As performing artists react to the pandemic situation by coming up with alternative modes of presentation and/or by making performances on the very topic, they aim to turn the event into a dramaturgically manageable form. But their actions also reveal something of the conditions of theatrical or performative operations in general. In a larger meta-dramaturgical perspective that I try to adopt in this article, the operations manifest our fundamental exposedness to the non-human influence that is hostile or harmful for human existence. Our performative and (re)presentational solutions may make this state more supportable, acceptable or even enjoyable, but they cannot undo it. The interruption caused by exposedness is more radical since it consists not only of an experience of interruption but also of an interruption of the experience itself, whose conditions, from there on, have to be redefined.

Dramaturgically, the idea is not new, but it may be that we have not yet understood its full sense or its ultimate consequences. Theoretically, it was articulated for the first time in Early German Romanticism, and in particular by the German poet-philosopher Friedrich Hölderlin who, in 1804, accompanied his German translations of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* and *Antigone* with complementary 'Remarks' (*Anmerkungen*) (Hölderlin 1988). Both tragedies were built upon a tragic interruption, where the spiritual content of the work, the divine abandonment of the humans, coincided with its dramaturgical structure, the rhythmic event called a 'caesura'. As later commentators of that text have pointed out (Beaufret 1983; Lacoue-Labarthe 1998), this analysis was strongly informed by Kant's transcendental philosophy. The dramaturgic disposition of the tragedy engages the experience of the spectators/readers in a particular way, leading to a collective revelation of its transcendental conditions. Eventually, these conditions, defining our relationship to the totality of what we are not—*physis*, 'nature',

‘world’ or ‘God’— turn out to be dependent on the historical modes of (re)presentation and are therefore a matter of artistic or ‘poetic’ technique.

If the equation Hölderlin establishes between human experience and dramaturgy is today taken seriously, it has significant consequences for our understanding of both. Although the disposition that in his case makes the manifestation possible is dramaturgic or theatrical, it does not imply that only a dramatic discourse or a theatrical performance can produce it. On the contrary, every time our mode of experience becomes externalized in a cognizable way, the mode of presentation is implicitly or explicitly dramatic, theatrical or as I prefer to call it, *scenic*, no matter what the medium is where that manifestation takes place. This opens a way to a scenic reading and analysis of works, documents and discourses that, at first glance, are not specifically theatrical or dramatic (Kirkkopelto 2009, 2014). My reading is meant to highlight that point, at the same time as it aims to open a scenic perspective on that state of exposedness, where humankind, as revealed by the pandemic, currently finds itself. Finally, I hope that these reflections might tell something of how the question of ‘it all’, as Samuel Beckett once formulated it, is at play at every scenic performance (1986: 403). The text that serves these purposes, and to the study of which this article is devoted, is Plutarch’s *De defectu oraculorum* (*The Obsolescence of Oracles*), dating back to the end of the first century AD (Plutarch 1936, 1974).

2. Death Of A Demon

Plutarch’s text, included in a collection of treatises titled *Moralia*—belonging to a series of writings called *Pythian Dialogues*—is particularly famous for its story concerning the death of ‘the Great Pan’. The story is not met anywhere else in antique literature, and probably the author himself invented it. That possibility does not compromise the story, since its function and meaning in the discourse are more philosophical and allegorical than strictly theological. The story itself, as well as its framework, which consists of a meditation on the reasons for the vanishing of the significance and power of the divinatory practices in the Greek cult,¹ has invoked numerous commentaries since early Christianity, and it has inspired several modern authors.² My reason for returning to the topic in this context derives from an association between the name of the mentioned divinity and the prefix of the term ‘pandemic’. We use the latter term to refer to infectious diseases, the expansion of which exceeds local or regional scales and measures. Etymologically, the word derives from the Greek term *pandēmos*, ‘of or belonging to the whole people’ (OED 2020). This association raises a question that, as I will indicate, is worthy of considering: *What if the ultimate victim of the pandemic were the ‘pan-’ itself, namely the sense of ‘totality’ or ‘wholeness’, and the feeling of protection and security that that sense provides?*³ What if, on every occasion when a human community or society, a *dēmos* or ‘people’, becomes interrupted by its fundamental exposedness to the disastrous effects of the non- human universe, no matter what is their cause, a certain ‘allness’ dies? Although the etymological relationship between the name of the god (*Pan*) and the pronoun (*pan*) is not fully certain (Chantraine 1999: 855), it is tempting, and several classical texts and authors also confirm it.⁴ In our case, it gives reason to interrogate the possibilities of a fictive and scenic presentation to unravel our suppositions concerning the existence or subsistence of

¹ At the time Plutarch wrote his dialogue, he probably worked as a priest at the sanctuary of Delphi (1974: 86).

² Regarding the modern reception of the story, see Meriman (1969).

³ I thank Mika Elo for drawing my attention to the prefix ‘pan-’ in the term ‘pandemic’.

⁴ See, for example, *Homeric Hymn 19 to Pan*, 45; Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 80–82; Plato, *Cratylus* 408b–c.

different kinds of all-embracing totalities or closures, and step beyond them. Before elaborating this question further, we need to read the passage in question.

The dialogue takes place at Delphi between a group of men: philosophers from different schools, a grammarian, a traveller, a historian and the brother of Plutarch, who often seems to speak with the voice of the author. The topic of their dialogue, the disappearance of oracles, is approached from different angles: the phenomenon may be due to moral corruption, depopulation, death of the demons (*daimôn*) as intermediary spirits between gods and humans or the drying up of sources of the divinatory substance (*pneuma*). The story of the Great Pan was told by Philippe, the historian, as a reply to the previous statements of the interlocutors, according to which the demons were not to be blamed for the disappearance of the oracles since the demons could be neither evil nor mortal. The narrator had heard the story from their teacher, a certain Epitherses:

He said that once upon a time in making a voyage to Italy he embarked on a ship carrying freight and many passengers. It was already evening when, near the Echinades Islands, the wind dropped, and the ship drifted near Paxi. Almost everybody was awake, and a good many had not finished their after-dinner wine. Suddenly from the island of Paxi was heard the voice of someone loudly calling Thamus, so that all were amazed. Thamus was an Egyptian pilot, not known by name even to many on board. Twice he was called and made no reply, but the third time he answered; and the caller, raising his voice, said, 'When you come opposite to Palodes, announce that Great Pan is dead'. On hearing this, all, said Epitherses, were astounded and reasoned among themselves whether it were better to carry out the order or to refuse to meddle and let the matter go. Under the circumstances Thamus made up his mind that if there should be a breeze, he would sail past and keep quiet, but with no wind and a smooth sea about the place he would announce what he had heard. So, when he came opposite Palodes, and there was neither wind nor wave, Thamus from the stern, looking toward the land, said the words as he had heard them: 'Great Pan is dead.' Even before he had finished there was a great cry of lamentation, not of one person, but of many, mingled with exclamations of amazement. As many persons were on the vessel, the story was soon spread abroad in Rome, and Thamus was sent for by Tiberius Caesar. Tiberius became so convinced of the truth of the story that he caused an inquiry and investigation to be made about Pan; and the scholars, who were numerous at his court, conjectured that he was the son born of Hermes and Penelopê. (Plutarch 1936: 419a–e)

About the sailor called Thamus nothing is known, except that his name seems to refer to the alternative name of the Egyptian god-king Amun, or Amun-Ra. This strange but deliberate reference highlights the allegorical sense of the story but does not reveal it. Following the fine analysis of Jean-Christophe Bailly (1993), the story refers to the mythical scene depicted by Plato in *Phaedrus*. According to Socrates, who in Plato's dialogue entrusts the story to his young interlocutor Phaedrus, Thamus, the solar god of the Egyptians, condemns the gift of writing invented by Teuth, the god of death, as harmful for the memory of the Egyptians (Plato 1925: 274c–275b). In contemporary philosophy, the scene has become famous through the deconstructive reading of Jacques Derrida, for whom it constituted a rhetorical starting point for a whole philosophical tradition condemning writing (1981: 84–94). In the perspective opened by the latter, Bailly understands 'The Great Pan' as the spirit of Greek religiosity, based on the oral transmission and the *phonê*, 'the voice before the signs':

In any case, it is this voice which dies alongside with Pan: *phone* or the sonic fold [*pli*] which haunts the Greek landscape, which traverses the tragedy and oracle, which disseminates itself in the pre-Socratic fragments and which returns, as concealed and already lost in Plato or the Alexandrian poets. That voice speaks in a recognizable but as if

an intact way between Paxos and Palodes, to say that it will go away, withdraw itself and leave the world to other voices. (Bailly 1993: 136–7, my translation)

According to Bailly, no matter what the truth behind the story is, it nevertheless connects certain undeniable facts, whose relationship it also unavoidably mirrors: the disappearance of Greek religiosity with the corresponding myths and cults, and the development of the modes of presentation, here in particular as opposed to the oral practices suspending that religiosity. In Plutarch's case, this reflection is anticipatory; in our case it is retrospective.

The Derridian reading of Bailly raises the question how this historical and cultural turn marking the end of the classical mode of experience and the beginning of the modern one can be presented. The event seems to take the form of an abandonment: something, whose existence was barely noticed, or that was taken so much for granted that no one needed to pay attention to it, suddenly makes itself manifest for the very last time via an announcement proclaiming its departure. This simultaneously transcendental and historical event is now fairly easy to imagine scenically and, as I proposed above, that is probably the only way of imagining it. The episode could take place on stage, in a movie or in a radio play. This time, it takes place in the scenic imagination of the reader. This easiness—we have imagined it like that before even thinking of it—is in itself significant, since it belongs to the dramaturgical structure of the story and its way of engaging the experience of its readers/spectators. The story itself contains a shift from the *narrative* mode to the *scenic* or performative mode, and this shift is linked to the spiritual contents of the dialogue.

If we try to reconstruct the scene that we just read in our mind, we can notice how its disquieting effect is significantly conditioned by the previous feeling of carelessness, whose false nature the announcement suddenly betrays. The uneasiness is related to a realization of a certain kind of *negligence*, which also constitutes the ultimate reason for the announced event.⁵ In other words, the announcement fills its addressees with a feeling of collective guilt, the transcendental nature of which corresponds to the complex temporal dramaturgical structure of the story. The strange call is heard exactly at the moment when it is least expected, by the passengers who were having drinks on deck after supper. The deity leaves at the moment when it is no longer needed or missed by anybody, at the moment when the humans, through their way of life and by their technical development, including their modes of presentation, have made the function of the deity useless. That is also why, at end of the day, the notice does not change anything in the given state of things or the surrounding landscape: *the change has already happened*, and the divinity has already left. The reason why nobody noticed it was not due to any sort of incredulity, but to the forgetfulness that is associated with the technological development. The manner of becoming familiar with the new mode of life also, secretly, brings about the death of the deity.

Let's come back once more to the transcendental scene opened by the story of Plutarch. What remains after the disappearance of the divine framework? Empirically, the landscape stays the same, but its significance has completely changed. Instead of *physis* that speaks to us and answers our questions like a superhuman being, we encounter its muteness, a 'nature' in a more modern sense. Simultaneously, the world, as an organized and established structure, governed by divine figures, changes its meaning, too. It becomes disenchanting, or prosaic, characterized by the alternation between the urge for a sense and its total loss. It is a world where the

⁵ In his reading of *Oedipus*, Hölderlin draws attention to a similar type of historical situation: the tragic *hybris* of the hero occurs 'in idle time' or 'in time of leisure' (*in müßiger Zeit*) (Hölderlin 1988: 108).

gathering and the connecting figures of mediation⁶ are now lacking and where, for the same reason, the *idea of totality* becomes our primary subject of worry. In Plutarch's dialogue, the sense of this kind of uncanny risk is palpable and, in the light of my reading, it now also constitutes the ultimate cause for his concern about the decline of the divinatory practices.

It is not an accident that at the site of the dialogue in Delphi resides also the 'omphalos', a holy stone that Plutarch mentions at the opening of the dialogue (409e) and that in classical antiquity was considered as being the centre of the world. As the author speaks about the totality of things, 'world' or 'universe' (*kosmos*), he also uses the term *panta* ('allness') to characterize it (429d). Thus, the question of the sense of the world is central in every sense of the term, and it is raised in a critical confrontation with the concurring Stoic or Epicurean ideas that threaten to deprive the cosmic order its divine sense.⁷

The term 'providence' (*pronoia*) in particular, which occurs repeatedly in the dialogue⁸, provides us with a key for understanding how the various motives in the dialogue are related to Plutarch's concern. The ultimate disaster, of which the disappearance of the oracles constitutes a signal, is the loss of fate and the possibility of divine providence. The idea goes far beyond any particular need to 'foresee' things to come (*pro-videre*); it also implies an urge towards a more reasonable world, graspable and controllable by human understanding (*pronoêsis*). For a world to be a world, it has to be predictable in one way or another, and we have to be able to speak of it in advance, no matter if we are dealing with the empirical world of science or the practical world of everyday life. A completely unpredictable world would not be a world anymore; we could not relate ourselves to it by any means. If the oracles are not reliable anymore or do not function, we need new means for creating a trustful relation to the dimension we inhabit.

This is how the dialogue ends up to present a fundamental question concerning the dependence between predictability (providence) and spirituality (demons). As Eusebius of Caesarea, the early historian of Christianity, commented on Plutarch's story at the beginning of the fourth Century AD, the death of 'the Great Pan' meant the death of *all the demons*:

But it is important to observe the time at which he says that the death of the daemon took place. For it was the time of Tiberius, in which our Saviour, making His sojourn among men, is recorded to have been ridding human life from daemons of every kind. (Eusebius 1903, Book 5, chapter 17)

According to Eusebius, when the demons as intermediary agents between the physis and humans disappear their function is filled by someone or something else, which for Christianity is the partly human partly divine human figure of 'Saviour'. For the 'new' Greek religion, philosophy, this mediation is restored through reason. As posteriority has shown, these two

⁶ The figure of Pan 'the god of flocks and herds of Greek mythology, usually represented with the horns, ears, and legs of a goat on the body of a man' (*OED* 2020) embodies that spiritual function perfectly, by mediating between the chaotic 'Arcadian' *physis* susceptible to evoke 'panic' among humans, and the civilized human culture with its serene bucolic fantasies. Concerning the multifaceted meanings and functions that Pan had in the Greek cult, see Borgeaud (1979).

⁷ Like the 'Stoic' ideas of 'conflagration' (*ekpyrôsis*, 415f), the recurrent cyclic destruction of the world, or the 'Epicurean' ideas of 'infinity' (*apeiron*, 420b) and the infinite number of parallel worlds (423c–431a). As an interlocutor notices, the hypothesis of the infinite worlds would make the work of 'God and prophecy and Providence' impossible (423c).

⁸ The same term occurs in the dialogue both as a name with a capital letter (*Pronoia*: 413a, 414f) and as a noun (*pronoia*: 420b, 423c, 435e, 436d).

modes of mediation do not exclude each other—on the contrary. In Plutarch's case, the further the dialogue advances, the more it gives space and attention to the Platonic ideas concerning the geometric and arithmetic composition of the cosmos. If the belief in the divine providence weakens, it has to be replaced by human knowledge, the 'science of nature' (*physiologia*), where Plato's works constitute the starting point (420e–f). But this does not yet suffice alone. As in Plato, the quest for knowledge has still to be framed and sustained by a metaphysical supposition concerning the twofold structure of the world that divides it into its sensible, finite and mortal part, and intelligent, infinite and immortal part, and that is governed by the idea of the supreme god Zeus (435e–f; 436d). This is necessary, not because of our curiosity, but once again for more transcendental reasons: for the sake of *panta*, the allness, the world whose existence, goodness and trustfulness cannot be derived from any particular phenomenon within the world.

Although this explanation is not presented as the final one, it is among all the proposed theories the only one capable of explaining the phenomenon under study without compromising the absolute power of gods or the relatively divine power of demons, although the sense of the latter in the Platonic universe is unavoidably more psychological. Nevertheless, the trust in the demonic function is crucial to Plutarch and explains why the questioning of the dialogue gets repeatedly linked with another, more theological question concerning the goodness of gods, *theodikea*. In a world abandoned by gods and demons, the rightfulness of gods is no longer a matter of spontaneous manifestation but an issue that humans themselves have to take care of and prove. This is what the dialogue of Plutarch tells and what it accomplishes by telling it—in other words, what it *performs*. On the transcendental scene thus reconstructed, the contents of the story eventually coincide with its performative structure. The uncanny effect of the story is based on this coincidence, through which the reader eventually finds themselves in the same scene as the passengers of Plutarch's boat.

3. Scenic Exposures

Hence, in Plutarch, as is in Hölderlin, we can with good reason speak about the *dramaturgical techniques of suspending the world*, going beyond any 'phenomenological reduction' or *epokhè*, and leading to the simultaneous and integral scenic exposure of its subjects. This exposure, and a certain desubjectification it entails, can now be interpreted at least in three interrelated ways. *Ethically*, it deprives us of our autonomous, all-knowing and self-assured attitudes by showing how every act of appearing, that is performance, takes place in a negotiation with and against our fundamental exposedness—its unpredictable and deadly nature. *Politically*, insofar as the exposedness is the only thing all beings assuredly share, it permits us to speak about 'us', about 'humankind' or in the name of it, if only we remember that the sphere of this humanity is expanding without any given limit, which also ceaselessly informs its idea (see Kirkkopelto 2017). And *transcendentally*, it finally means that the human experience is always already implicitly interrupted by an understanding concerning its exposedness, and that uncanny or cathartic moments are just occasions to rediscover this fact that we at some other level are all too aware. Every time an allness dies, it reveals the unresolved dialectics, or dilemma, between faith and knowledge. No matter how this exposure finally happens, the most wondrous thing is that the worldless world thus revealed can still appear; that the presentation continues despite us, embraces our existence, and that *there is a scene* where our subjectless bodies continue to act without anybody knowing. What sustains it if there is no one anymore? That, we barely understand. This state, that formerly might constitute the goal of scenic performances, now becomes their starting point.

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