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Teaching History with Euripides**

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Abstract

This piece discusses the use of the Greek Theatre in the education of History professionals, specifically the play *The Trojan Women*, by Euripides.

Keywords: History, Greek Theatre, Teaching

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The first decades of the twenty-first century impose to those whom go through the course of History challenges broader than those known thirty years ago; nowadays political-pedagogical demands require multiple skills during superior formation: the scientific rigor of research, the no less important crafts as teachers, and workers of *Extensão* – the effort to bring academic activities outside University walls, reaching out to the community. Such efforts link the typical scientific investigation to the *praxis* of teaching, within classroom and beyond it, producing and disseminating knowledge in its broadest possible way. This is, so, our burden.

Given the context described above, what is the role of Ancient History classes? Immense, we believe. Nevertheless, in Brazil questions about the importance/necessity of teaching such subjects is still afloat, especially for regions distant from the foremost intellectual centers (such as our own). Those questions emerge because in Brazil there are no monuments nor, in most cities, museum collections to facilitate the approach to Antiquity. So, it seems appropriate to quote the words of Professor Norberto Luiz Guarinello:

"The History of Antiquity is part of the cultural repertoire of the Brazilian. It is not only taught in schools, primary, secondary and university teaching, but also, for many Brazilians, a sort of history of our origins as culture and civilization. (...) Thus, the Ancient History plays an important part in our identity as people and as a nation. To think about the Ancient History is a way to think and rethink our place in a rapidly changing world"¹

Brazil was built as a nation during XIX century; ruled by a Portuguese-originated elite, for whom the history of Indians and Africans did not matter: if the Brazilian Empire wished to have a place among modern nations, it should learn World History such as taught in Europe, beginning with the Ancient World.

The pressing issues of the world around us – conflict and crisis, changes and permanence, identity and otherness, contacts and resistances – were relevant in Antiquity as they still are today, and the answers found by ancient peoples, rather than serving us as paradigm (as said in bygone times: he who knew the past understands better the present and predicts the future), presents a mirror to our own humanity, reflection of what we are capable in face of most diverse challenges.

The construction of historical knowledge, as we know well, requires contextualization, and for teachers/professors of Ancient History this need is, perhaps, even more pressing, given the spatial and temporal distances between their students of the topics covered; hence their efforts must be redoubled: present Antiquity in its particulars – without them it would be incomprehensible – and, at the same time, insert in the universe of their

¹Guarinello, N. L. 2013, 7,8.

students, allowing them to use it in building its analytical view of the world and the surrounding realities.

Such efforts are called by Professor Pedro Paulo Funari¹, "renewal of the teaching of Ancient History": new teaching strategies, encouraging the playful aspect of learning and research; production of historical knowledge under the hood of the spontaneity of play. As important as can be in school teaching, their introduction into Academic education enables future teachers to perform such activities with their future school classes.

It is interesting to notice the precision with which Funari addresses the challenge of double edge imposed by Brazilian ministerial directives: inserts new approaches to the teaching of Ancient History without abdicating the essential context, building bridges that reduce spatial and temporal distances, and seeking solutions to communicate values and concepts that often are present around us. Funari denounces the existence of an Antiquity "given to be memorized by the student", worked not as a possibility, as construction of various ages who pored over it, but as something that has nothing more to say, being interpreted. More than Ancient History, we say, it is old-fashioned history.

Thus, Literature emerges as a powerful element in the teaching of Ancient History, debate very well situated by Professor Selva Fonseca Guimarães: art "can tell the historian about the history of what did not happen, possibilities that never were, plans not materialize [...] more than give a testimony, it'll reveal moments of tension"².

When we observe the relevance of Ancient History for the upbringing of History professionals, those charged to analyze and explain conflicts, crises, changes, continuity, otherness, identity, contacts, resistance and so on; their reflection about those contemporary issues are lit whenever they turn to Antiquity, and, as mention before, Literature is an extremely rich place to approach such questions precisely because it can show the society that produced it against the grain, and rather than simply describing a number of facts, asks its possibilities, invites comparison with the prior knowledge and lived time.

In such a perspective, the works of Euripides are paradigmatic because the Athenian playwright, who has crafted an extremely rich literary corpus, gave voice to the defeated. Consider, as an example of this production: The Trojan Women (*Τρωάδες*, Troades), whose central figure is Hecuba, deposed queen of defeated Troy, awaiting in a camp along with other compatriots to be taken enslaved by the Greeks. In the course of such a waiting, she is confronted with all the cruelty of the oppressor winner: discovers the murder of a daughter; witnesses his grandson be slain; sees another daughter snatched. Wound from the beginning, Hecuba gradually loses the shreds of hope that she stubbornly maintained, and in the end nothing remains to her:

¹Funari, P. P. 2005, 98.

²Fonseca, S. G. 2003, 165.

“Ah! Unhappy me! Now I see the height
of my misfortune; I leave my homeland,
my whole city is engulfed in flames!
Poor old guts! In an extreme effort
say the final goodbye to this unfortunate land!
Ah! Troy, which proudly stood above
among the towns inhabited by barbarians!
You lose in a flash thy glorious name.
Destroyed you with fire, and lead me captive!
Ah! Gods! (But what is the value of invoke them ?
Already in the past have they not heard my pleas...)”¹

To the defeated nothing is left but eyes to weep. Notwithstanding, there is a dignity, an indisputable firmness of character, in each of these remarkable women that is not to be found among the conquerors, the Argives. Eventually, one of them, Talthybius, the Herald, shows some mercy, but almost every time he appears he’s never bearer of good news, like announcing to Andromache, daughter-in-law of Hecuba, the fate of her son, Astyanax:

“Talthybius: None Achaean never be lord of Astyanax...
Andromache: Will he be left here, the last of the Phrygian?
Talthybius: How to tell? It is sad to announce woes...
Andromache: Obvious is your embarrassment... What a disgrace?
Talthybius: Your son is to be dead. You hear the hard ad.
Andromache: Doom yes! Worse than my new marriage!
Talthybius: It was Odysseus who convinced the Greeks. He said...
Andromache: Immense pain! My misery has no end!
Talthybius: ... the offspring of such father should not be left alive...
Andromache: Come up against him his opinion!
Talthybius: ... but to be cast from the top of the towers of Troy”².

The conquerors, portrays the playwright, are arrogant; following that age’s costumes, they can use the lives of their prisoners as they please, without any concerns other than the satisfaction of their own desires and the term of their fears – even the most distant, as represented by the young Astyanax.

The contact with Euripides’ innovative work during their formation presents inescapable ethical issues to a History professional, and stimulates the "perception of historical conditioning and relations between ethics and cultural contexts" It is essential that such dramaturgical texts be presented from the very beginning of their education, moral and ethical challenges disguised as theatre, stimulating reflection as individuals in the world and aware of their future role as knowledge producers and trainers of people. In the words of Nelson Saldanha, the historical understanding of ethical experience:

¹Euripides. *The Trojan Women*. 879-880

²Euripides. *The Trojan Women*. 916-926.

"involving values judgments, penalties - can relate to sociological schemes or policies typologies (...) with the understanding of the forms of power and obedience, as well as beliefs and institutions. Can be connected also with psychological concepts, as in the case of traditionally called ' feelings ', which binds to the evolution of social values and patterns of each season. Thus, the love, the friendship, the 'passions', has their own stories that unfolds within each context."¹

The tragic figure of Hecuba, as noble as disgraceful, a “true pagan *mater dolorosa*”, provoke in the History professional ethical positioning, the development of sensitivity towards the loser, the other. Voice about to be silenced, pregnant with pain and desolation, the queen of Troy is reified and, along with the other women, reduced to a servile condition; their faiths and certainties are shattered, their life no longer belongs to them. Their pain, once again, resonates strong within consciences:

But our approach must be honest: such contact with Euripides provokes, rather than forces, ethical positioning. There were limits to its action span even during its own time, for the Athenians never abandoned armed struggles as means of conflict resolution, and those limits are only magnified by centuries of estrangement. The playwright denounces:

“Should all sensible mortal detest war;
if, however, it is unavoidable,
laurels should be bestowed not upon those who die in fight
for such ignoble cause in the end only brings dishonor”².

Such appeal, some believe, is more than sufficient to instill in souls in formation the dislike for violence. However, the wise placement of Susan Sontag³ is appropriate: for a long time, it was believed that if the horror could be presented in a very clear way, most people’d finally learn all the indignity and insanity of the war; today, however, even pacifists doubt its complete abolition. What matters within vocational training is precisely this contrast, a shock that may not necessarily lead to ethical and moral blossom, but at least it will provoke reflection.

Thus, that’s the role the Athenian theater of the fifth century BC can play in the teaching of History. Soon-to-be History professionals must be prepared to do so immediately, during the course of their formation, using Literature as references the way of being, living and acting persons, values and customs of a particular era. It is a source/document/evidence that assists the unveiling of reality.

¹Saldanha, N. 1998, 22.

²Euripides. *The Trojan Women*. 494-497.

³Sontag, S. 2003.

There must be masterfully dominance of the use of literature already during their professional formation, for it is the basis for a critical eye. In the words of Alfredo Bosi, Brazilian literary critic and historian:

"As a verbal adjective, *cultus* was attributed to the field that had been plowed and planted by generations of farmers. *Cultus* brings with it not only the re-proposed action of *colo*, the farming through the ages, but especially the resulting quality of this work and already incorporated into the land which was furrowed [...], something cumulative: the act itself of cultivating and the effects of countless labors, which makes the participle *cultus*, a name that is a verb, a significantly denser form [...] *Cultus* is a sign that a society that produced its food has already memory"¹.

Therefore, it is up to the History professional to explore this field, and he should not refrain from this task. He shall present his students the result of this planting, make them masters of this cultivated heritage, not as something untouchable, to be revered (and therefore inert), but rather as a living store of experiences and customs, to which they can (and ought to) interact.

During this process, the History professional is not only a plower, but also a field to be plowed. The lack of literary stuff – in other words, the lack of participation in the memory of *cultus* – it's harmful to his formation. The historian, says Hayden White², need to drink in the ballast of *mythoi* provided by the culture in order to build the facts and to set up a particular kind of story.

For this American author, as well as for us, historical knowledge is characterized primarily by dense narrative and poetic character, and it is up to the History professional to organize his narrative in the form of a plot. Woven into this fabric, one must remember to ballast symbols of its own culture – and here we return to the concept of *Cultus* proposed by Alfredo Bosi: without mastering these symbols, without allowing himself to be plowed, certainly he will not be a good plower. Be for the construction of a text or the exercise of teaching, it is essential.

This process produces a historical consciousness, built out of contact with the human heritage, its assessment and questioning. We return to Greece not like the reverent pilgrim, harnessing the hips before the worshiped idol, but as the inquisitive researcher, discoverer fatted in Humanism, knowledge producer and educator of people.

¹Portuguese original: "Como adjetivo verbal, *cultus* atribuía-se ao campo que já fora arroteado e plantado por gerações sucessivas de lavradores. *Cultus* traz em si não só a ação sempre reproposta de *colo*, o cultivar através dos séculos, mas principalmente a qualidade resultante desse trabalho e já incorporada à terra que se lavrou [...] algo de cumulativo: o ato em si de cultivar e o efeito de incontáveis tarefas, o que torna o particípio *cultus*, esse nome que é verbo, uma forma significativamente mais densa e vivida que a simples nomeação do labor presente. [...] *Cultus* é sinal de que a sociedade que produziu seu alimento já tem memória". Bosi, A. 1992, 13.

²White, H. 1978.

“The man who destroys cities is insane
as the defiler of temples and tombs,
asylums sacrosanct of dead relatives .
Who does so early is to lose oneself¹”.

Such words, placed by Euripides in the mouth of the god Poseidon, spoke to an aggressive situation in Greece of the fifth century BC: the Peloponnesian War. Nevertheless, they are more than appropriate for our world. Since the insanity of conflict, violence, looting and destruction, are our issues too, it is fitting to turn ourselves towards the Greek heritage to better understand the path we tread.

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¹Euripides. *The Trojan Women*. 127-130.