Classical Greek consciousness: Ruth Padel on minds and madness in Greek tragedy

Review Article

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Ruth Padel, *In and Out of the Mind: Greek Images of the Tragic Self.* Princeton University Press 1990; reprinted in paperback 1995.

Ruth Padel, *Whom Gods Destroy: Elements of Greek and Tragic Madness.* Princeton University Press 1995; reprinted in paperback 1996.

It seems obvious, on even minimal reflection, that the ancient Greeks cannot have thought and felt exactly as we do (whoever the 'we' may be who are making the comparison). We know very well from material remains that they had a different world to think and feel in and about, and it seems an eminently reasonable supposition that this different world did something to condition not just individual thoughts and emotions, but whole modes of thinking and feeling, perhaps even their whole sense of what it was to think and feel at all. When we then examine the written documents that the ancient Greeks left behind them – verbal precipitates of thought and feeling, whatever the slipperiness of the relationship between words and conscious experience – the supposition seems amply confirmed. We find ourselves confronted by a sometimes bizarrely unfamiliar vocabulary for the mind and the emotions, manipulated in disconcertingly unfamiliar ways. But just *how* great is the extent and the style of the difference thus signified? And how – from what evidence in what terms – can we now measure it, from vantage points so far removed in time and circumstance?

These questions have already a rich history in twentieth-century scholarship. The territory was marked out by Erwin Rohde in *Psyche* (1894), and then, more particularly, by Bruno Snell and R.B. Onians. The first chapter of Snell's *Die*

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Entdeckung des Geistes, published initially as an article in 1939, famously argued that Homeric language and usage proved the archaic Greeks to have lacked a concept of the self as a single, unified entity: the inner complex of intellectual and emotional faculties that Plato was later to theoretize as the *psuchê* could only be described in Homeric Greek as a plurality (in fact a trio) of autonomous organs, *noos* and *thumos* as well as *psuchê*; inner conflict, of thought with thought, or of thought with emotion, had to be described as conflict between these independent actors, with no sense of a single self being divided in the process. In Snell's account, *thumos*, *noos* and *psuchê* are 'quasi-organs', conceived on the *analogy* of physical organs, but neither fully abstract nor fully concrete; he confines himself, moreover to just those three, as if they were the only relevant terms in Homeric Greek, and adequate to express all that the Homeric poems could say and wanted to say about the inner lives of their characters. The issue was differently handled in Onians's *The Origins of European Thought*, which was finally published in 1951 but relied in most respects on work done in the 1920s. Onians investigated a far wider range of 'consciousness-words' – *menos*, *phrenes*, *êtor*, *kradiê*, *cholê*, and *cholos*, for instance, in addition to Snell's trio – and he did so in the light of a conviction that all such terms started with a strongly physical reference, to distinct and particular bodily organs and substances, and only gradually developed abstract, non-physical senses.

Rohde, Snell and Onians remain important points of reference in discussions of Greek concepts of the self and the phenomena of consciousness – as witness such diverse subsequent contributions as David Claus's careful reconsideration in *Towards the Soul* (1981), Julian Jaynes's eccentric *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1976), chapter two of Norman Austin's *Archery at the Dark of the Moon* (1975), chapter two of Bernard Williams' *Shame and Necessity* (1993), and most recently, Christopher Gill's *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy and Philosophy: the Self in Dialogue* (1996). Ruth Padel engages with the whole of this tradition of enquiry (less, of course, the last two items, which appeared too late to be taken into consideration in her first volume), but with a breadth of sympathy, an imagination, and an awareness of the methodological complexity of the task that are distinctively her own.

At the same time, her attention to the particular state of the self called 'madness', which predominates in her second volume but features also in the first, takes her into the territory of another seminal work of mid-twentieth century classical scholarship, E.R. Dodds's *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951). Here

too Padel engages not only with the foundational study but with the subsequent reactions and extensions provoked by it, such as Bennett Simon's *Mind and Madness in Ancient Greece* (1978) and R.S. Caldwell's *The Origin of the Gods* (1989). In both volumes, she brings to established patterns of classical scholarship the added sophistication that comes from her familiarity with recent work in anthropology, social history, and psychoanalysis, which enriches her sense both of questions to be asked, and of the difficulties that attach to answering them. Feminist perspectives are also brought into play, though only briefly and sporadically; they are perhaps being reserved for a further volume, which is announced under the title *Mad, Possessed, and Female.*

Equally distinctive of Padel's work is her choice of fifth-century tragedy as the centre of gravity of her discussion of mind and the emotions in ancient Greek culture. The subtitle of each volume is carefully restrictive (though, interestingly, less so in the second than the first): 'Greek images of the *tragic* self', and 'Elements of Greek *and tragic* madness'. She does not of course intend that her results should be valid only within the field of tragedy, conceived as some kind of distinct and autonomous realm (though I shall suggest below that there is still a serious question about the scope of her results). Tragedy is rightly seen as one particularly rich source of raw materials for the discussion, but one that (Padel argues) conforms to more widespread patterns of ancient Greek thinking. This concentration of focus on one limited period within ancient Greek culture allows her to make telling points against the penchant of earlier scholars for crudely developmental accounts of Greek thinking. It also makes her two volumes a distinguished contribution to the appreciation of tragedy itself. She has some finely weighted things to say about fragility, damage and loss as central to tragic experience, and some immensely acute and rewarding readings to offer of individual plays and scenes. Indeed, the quality of these occasional readings is so high that one is left wishing that both books had contained more of them. Not every reader will, however, want to follow her in the enthusiastic thoroughness with which she appropriates tragedy to her own projects, arguing in both books for the centrality of the depiction of mind and self to tragedy, and the centrality of madness to that depiction. Madness as the distinctive preoccupation of the poetry of the mad god, Dionysus, is an attractive piece of pattern-making, but it is also in the end too reductive.

In rough summary (I stress 'rough': to summarize is to lose a great deal of the distinctive flavour and virtues of these books), the argument of *In and Out of the*

Mind may be divided into two parts. In the first, the focus is biological, and the argument builds unmistakably on Snell and Onians. Fifth-century thinking is argued to conceive of the workings of intellect and the emotions (which intertwine, rather than being sharply separate) as the workings of inner organs and processes of a strongly physical, corporeal kind. This same sense is found, looking back from tragedy, in the consciousness-language of epic and lyric poetry, which tragedy of course inherited; and, looking outwards to other contemporary discourses, in Presocratic natural science and Hippocratic physiology. Running through all these texts Padel detects a shared sense, not only of the corporeality of the inner life, but also of the consequent affinities of inner experience with external physical processes, and of the possibilities of flow *between* outer and inner. This in turn provides the cue for the second main part of the book, in which Padel explores the conceptualization of thought and emotion as the invasive work of divine forces – *daimones* – envisaged as physical assault, with natural, military, or bestial weapons. Here too the evidence of tragic texts is integrated into a broader picture of fifth-century senses of divinity and its dealings with human beings, and once again she has much of value to say that is quite independent of the core concern with mind, thought and emotion.

In and Out of the Mind ends with a chapter on madness, which is taken up and expanded in *Whom Gods Destroy*. In this second volume, the fifth-century understanding of derangement is examined from a series of different viewpoints. Part I deals with the basic vocabulary, and argues that the dominant ancient model was of madness as a temporary seizure rather than a chronic condition of the self. Part II examines 'mad seeing', ideas of the mad as in differing respects seeing more and less truly than the sane. Part III explores ideas of madness as isolation: wandering, as both external, physical state, and inner condition; expulsion from the community; connections between the isolation of the mad and that of the polluted and the disfigured. In all this, there is both continuity with the project in *In and Out of the Mind*, and difference. The theme of homologies and interplay between inner and outer, which was so important in *In and Out of the Mind*, is kept in view. But there is now also an additional interest in the ways in which fifth-century perceptions have inspired, and been transformed by, later developments in western European thinking. This is explored with particular richness in the case of melancholy. In Parts IV and V, the focus shifts more firmly onto tragedy, for a discussion of the role of madness as a replacement for Homeric *atê* in the causation and explanation of tragic error and disaster (another acute and informative

section), and for the argument for the centrality of madness to tragedy already commented on.

Perhaps the most important thing to go missing from a summary of the kind just given is a sense of the subtlety, imagination and sheer excitement of the way Padel embeds her version of the fifth-century model of consciousness in a broader understanding of fifth-century thought and experience, by drawing a cat's-cradle of associations into and out of her central territory. Thus, for example, thoughts about the 'innards' (*splanchna*) as involved in thought and emotion are connected to understandings of the role of innards in divination – the sending and receiving of messages from the gods, who themselves operate daemonically both on the animal entrails of divination and the human innards of thought and emotion. Or again, the sense of the innards as dark territory, in which emotions slop and churn in the guise of unruly liquids, is linked with perceptions of the dark of the Underworld, where rivers named not only for disorderly nature but also human pain similarly churn and flow. And, in the treatment of madness, stoning is explored not solely as a practical method of exclusion, but also for its symbolic appropriateness, using stone to put the mad beyond the stone perimeter of the *polis*. This gift for illuminating associations is one of the most striking ways in which Padel improves on the work of her predecessors. Inevitably, not every attempted connection will strike every reader as equally plausible. Such sequences as can be found at the end of chapter 2 of *IOM*, where one is spun from the multiplicity of human innards, to the multiplicity of the external divinities who operate on them, to madness, to Presocratic cosmology, to Thales on the omnipresence of the gods, leave one giddy. And there are passages of what seems like pure fabrication, as on the appropriateness of the word *aïdêla* to the female genitals (p. 100), or the alleged origin of the language of logical necessity in ideas of daemonic binding (p. 128). But this is no more than the over-enthusiastic fringe of what is, for most of the time, one of the most exciting features of both books.

It will readily be seen that Padel is a determined alienator, concerned to stress the otherness of classical Greek experience, and to resist lazy and unthinking assimilations of 'them' to 'us'. In a characteristic remark, made at a strategically early point, she wonders 'how many of us hold a calf's entrails in our hands, realize the liver lobe is missing or how markings vary on the "portal vein", believe this matters, and apply words for what we are holding to the inner equipment with which we imagine we feel and think?' (*IOM*, p. 18) At other telling moments, she conjures up a vision of the world of fifth-century Greeks crackling with *daimones*

as ours crackles with electricity, or radio-waves, and exemplifies the Greek sense of the dangerous unpredictably of divine forces as 'the possibility of car crash or plane crash . . . personified as a whimsical, amoral, easily angered nonhuman being, invisible and loose beside us on the road' and 'impossible cruelty . . . incarnate in the family dog who suddenly – no one knows why – bites a child' (*IOM*, pp. 114, 138, 140). At the same time, she is well aware of the limitations of such a project, the impossibility of complete detachment of the Greek 'other' from 'us'. *IOM* is firm and explicit that 'our' view of the foreignness of Greek thinking will always remain ours, inextricably bound up with our own vocabulary and terms of reference (e.g. p. 36); and, from a different starting-point, *WGD* engages repeatedly with the influence of Greek conceptualizations of madness on the whole of Western tradition.

There is one respect, however, in which the quest for otherness is taken too far: too far to be plausible, but fortunately also, I think, further than Padel's general argument in fact requires. In her accounts of the fifth-century Greek perception of the innards, and of the workings of daemonic powers, Padel insists repeatedly that we cannot and should not try to soften and familiarize the picture that emerges by interpreting the strongly physical language of inner organs and processes, of (for instance) storms, assaults, biting, stabbing, and laceration, as *metaphor*. For, she argues, the very distinction between 'literal' and 'metaphoric' diction is an invention of the middle of the fourth century (above all, of Aristotle). Since the distinction was not available to fifth-century Greeks, it is illegitimate for us even to ask whether a given usage may be metaphorical, still less to assume that it must be. They simply did not draw that kind of distinction between the nature of events in the externally observable world and events within, or come to that between natural and supernatural modes of operation. This insistence echoes a stance already taken, but much less aggressively, by Snell. To me it smacks of overkill. It is surely possible to keep the perception that Greek thinking about inner processes had a physicality that 'ours' lacks without also claiming that they could register no difference at all between what is said in 'Achilles stabs (*paiei*) Hector' and what in 'grief stabs (*paiei*) me in the liver', or between 'confidence does not sit firm on the seat of my *phrên*' (*Agamemnon* 983) and 'Pontonous put a silver-studded seat in place for him' (*Odyssey*, 8. 65). Padel appeals for support to G.E.R. Lloyd's discussion in *Demystifying Mentalities* (1990), but Lloyd is not there concerned to argue that Greeks before Aristotle lacked *all* awareness of a distinction between literal and figurative usage. His interest is rather in the

polemical context within which the most lastingly influential way of articulating that distinction was invented, and his point is that before the moment of invention certain sorts of argumentative challenge could not be levelled on behalf of 'reason' or 'science' against 'magic', or 'superstition', or 'poetry'. This is a claim about quite tightly limited contexts for clashes between rival claims to knowledge, not an attempt to offer the kind of picture of 'pre-metaphorical' sensibility that Padel is after. Furthermore, irrespective of the legitimacy of the appeal to Lloyd's argument, Padel lays herself open to the charge of committing a version of the 'intentional fallacy'. Even if it is granted that her Greeks had no conscious awareness of the metaphorical/literal distinction, and thus no intention ever to 'use metaphor', it does not follow that they never used metaphor – any more than the lack of a concept of 'epic formulae' prevented early Greek poets from using epic formulae.

In that respect, therefore, Padel's Greeks are made out to be stranger (and simpler) than the evidence warrants. But overarching this question there is a further and larger one, at which I have already hinted. Precisely who are these 'Greeks' whose different modes of thought Padel works so hard and so stimulatingly to disentangle? The problem in this regard is partly the product of the choice of tragedy as the central point of reference. As a number of reviewers have already observed, if only in passing, what tragedy gives access to in the first instance is not some universal Greek, or generally fifth-century viewpoint, but much more narrowly that of male Athenians of (predominantly) the second half of the century. Furthermore, tragedy derives its identity from adopting a viewpoint and a vocabulary that are not those of the day-to-day. A long stride (often made, but none the less conjectural for that) is needed to conjure general conclusions about 'the Greeks' from this evidential base. Padel is aware of this potential objection, and bases her response to it on the other pieces of evidence she brings into play: epic and lyric, Presocratic and Hippocratic treatises. These clearly widen the scope of her conclusions both beyond the discourse of high poetry (into proto-scientific discourse), and beyond the confines of Attica (into Ionia and Magna Graecia). But the hard historical questions cannot be banished so quickly: whose perceptions are these that Padel finds across this range of texts? what sort of conclusions does this sort of raw material and these starting-points warrant? 'The Greeks' still seems too optimistically broad. Even the full range of texts deployed by Padel cannot take us beyond male Greeks and the intellectual élite, and the intellectual élite in full creative and speculative mode at that. Presocratic and

Hippocratic treatises, quite as much as epic, lyric and tragic poetry, push at boundaries and risk the odd and the idiosyncratic, rather than neutrally reflecting general consensus. Any construction derived from them must similarly be under suspicion of lying at some remove from a now inaccessible norm. The kind of understanding that might be reached by a time-travelling anthropologist, able to conduct first-hand fieldwork in the agoras of Athens, Thebes, and Corinth, cannot begin to be constructed from the evidence now available to us. Padel's regular habit of referring to 'the Greeks' and 'Greek mentality' obscures this unwelcome but unavoidable constraint on the scope of her project.

The first, hardback printing of *IOM*, in the normal North American way, carries a selection of 'Advance Praise' on the dust jacket – the great and the good lining up dutifully to pay a graceful compliment or two to a friend and colleague. The last and most arresting of these is by John Berger, who speaks of 'itinerant words of twenty-five centuries ago', which Ruth Padel 'invites in and [to which she] offers . . . refreshment'. 'You overhear their talk,' he continues, 'and dream of accompanying them when they leave to take the road again.' *IOM* and *WGD* in the end leave one in two minds about the appositeness of Berger's imagery. The two books develop an enthralling series of pictures of a convincingly alien mode of expression, offering a host of new and stimulating insights into coherences and cross-currents within the body of surviving artefacts that we know as classical Greek culture. But can it ever be more than a dream that any such construct, however sophisticated, can give us what 'the ancient Greeks' thought and felt about thought and feeling?