WHAT SHOULD BE SAID OF TRAGEDY TODAY?

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What conclusions can we draw? To invite the gods ruins our relationship with them but sets history in motion. A life in which the gods are not invited isn’t worth living. It will be quieter, but there won’t be any stories. And you could suppose that these dangerous invitations were in fact contrived by the gods themselves, because the gods get bored with men who have no stories.

Roberto Calasso¹

What conclusions can we draw indeed? Since Plato, philosophers have struggled with the claims of tragedy. From the outset, a sort of competition defined the relationship between philosophy and tragedy, and the effort by philosophers to take up the claims of tragedy has long been characterized more as critique than interpretation. Above all, the question of the right life—of the good life and the character of human life—has determined the stakes of this struggle between philosophy and tragedy. Since Aristotle, we have sought to gather the challenges of these claims into an idea, to account for it in a theory. But the stuff of tragedy, as philosophers repeatedly need to learn (even if only to forget once again), is complex. One might even say that it is complexity and enigma that one faces in tragedy. It will never be a simple matter or simply a matter of an idea. Yet if we want to speak to the question, a legitimate, even pressing question, of what conclusions we can draw from tragedy for philosophy, for theory, then we need to begin be speaking of its roots, of that which gives rise to the possibility, even the necessity, of tragedy. These roots of tragedy belong to each of us from birth.

Each of us is assigned a riddle. It belongs to the pure realm of the idiom and is not translatable. I cannot answer the final questions that you must put to yourself. And yet we are not on this account isolated

from one another, we do not forfeit our chance to trade stories simply by virtue of this being in the singular. Quite the contrary. Paradoxically, human solidarity seems to find one of its deepest and sturdiest roots precisely in this singular experience. Solitude and solidarity are not mutually exclusive even if they move us in opposing directions. Torn by these twin impulses—on the one hand a fidelity to singularity, on the other to a solidarity—we find ourselves committed not simply to the idiom of a singular life, but equally, even by virtue of this singularity, to the ideality of a genuine solidarity with what exceeds that life. We live then as this unsettled idiom of the ideal. And so paradox compounds riddle. We confront a puzzle that will not remain stable, no rules are given in advance but what rules we learn get answered as an element of the riddle itself. This is just the beginning.

Oedipus was said to have stood before the Sphinx, riddle confronting riddle, and there he gave the answer to one riddle, in one word, “man,” and with this answer he simultaneously saved the city and set himself on the path to his own destruction. The crossroads at which he confronted his father, Laius, only to kill him, was not the only, nor even the decisive crossroads at which he stood. The second crossroads came in the form of the riddle put to him. It was a riddle that he answered in general and in the abstract, but the other riddle, the riddle of his own identity, would be the one he would fail to understand until it was too late to bear its truth. Hölderlin charts the trajectory of this “deranged seeking for a consciousness” that defines Oedipus as precisely this failure to grasp the idiom of his own being which strangely we can see from the outset.

Antigone, Oedipus’s daughter/sister, was wed so completely to the ideal of the idiom that she herself dies on behalf of a corpse, which is the emblem of the human idiom in its purest form. Appropriately, she will be the one who gently leads Oedipus to the place of his own death. Seemingly sure of herself, of who she is and of what she must do to honor that truth of herself, Antigone becomes the greater riddle for us. Inscrutable in so many ways, even to her sister, her reasons—her readiness to die to honor a corpse but to concede that she would not do this for any other love in her life not even for her own children or husband if she had those—are opaque to us. She remains a mystery to us, but becomes very much an ideal by virtue of her steadfast commitment to her own nature.

We find ourselves always between the abstract and the particular, the universal and the unique, the idiom and the ideal, solitude and