Pain Beyond Words? The Ethics (and Limits) of the "Face-to-Face" Encounter in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

What can Sophocles' *Philoctetes* teach us about our obligations to another whom we encounter face-to-face and from whose pain we cannot easily turn? To what extent can human dialogue and attention contribute to the healing of another's psychic and bodily wounds? When is another's suffering beyond human reach? In this paper, I discuss how, as the direction of Philoctetes' discourse moves from earth (Lemnos) to man (Neoptolemus) to god (Herakles), the response (or lack thereof) of each addressee invites the audience to reflect upon the possibilities and limits of human dialogue for reconstructing a traumatized self.

From the beginning, the *Philoctetes* engages with the themes of speech and dialogue. Odysseus' opening (1-25) references Philoctetes' cries and the roles of speaker and listener, and highlights the significance of the number two – as in the two participants in a dialogue - in the description of Philoctetes' cave (two mouths, two seats, and two openings). The revelation of Neoptolemus' deception and Odysseus' presence, however, interrupt Philoctetes' progress towards healing through dialogue, at which point only something transcendent, the *deus ex machina* of Herakles, can help the wounded hero.

While the *deus ex machina* has been considered a contrived solution to an insoluble conflict, I aim to show that in the *Philoctetes*, Herakles' appearance is a necessary intervention reinforcing the idea that, although human dialogue may pave the way, sometimes only divine attention can open a soul like Philoctetes', twisted by the pain of his wound and abandonment, to the possibility of true healing. I conclude by suggesting that the questions Sophocles raises regarding dialogue and what human beings can and cannot contribute to the healing of one another has much to teach us today, in a culture bent on quick solutions and "closure," about the healing potential and limitations of a face-to-face encounter.

No audio-visual needs.

Essential Bibliography

Austin, Norman. 2011. *Sophocles' Philoctetes and the Great Soul Robbery*. Madison, Wisconsin.

Blundell, Mary Whitlock. 1991. *Helping Friends and Harming Evidence: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics*. New York.

Doerries, Bryan. 2015. *The Theater of War: What Ancient Tragedies Can Teach Us Today*. New York.

Levinas, Emmanuel. 1969. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburg, PA.

Weil, Simone. 2009. *Waiting for God*. New York.