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Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Moravia's *Il dio Kurt*:
Oedipus as βᾶσαυος of a Nazi Experiment
and The Ideology of Race*

1. *Introduction*

The story of Oedipus, as recounted by Sophocles, is arguably the most influential myth to survive from antiquity. As its reception history shows, it has in fact enjoyed an impressive *Nachleben*. Among the countless adaptations and revivals Alberto Moravia's *Il dio Kurt* (God Kurt, 1968) is one of the lesser known versions and, almost certainly, the least studied. Due to its setting in a concentration camp, which clearly evokes Auschwitz, and to its plot-line, which features an experiment at the expense of some Jewish prisoners, inevitably echoing the Nazis' experimentations and ideological stands, brief references to this play have appeared in broader studies of Holocaust literature¹ and of Foucault's and Agamben's philosophy of sovereign power as applied to Hitler's politics and Nazi Germany². On the other hand, because of its explicit re-use of *Oedipus Rex*, scattered mentions of *Il dio Kurt* have occurred in some of the extensive studies devoted to the afterlife of the Sophocles' play, which, in light of their comprehensive scope, understandably fail to provide an in-depth analysis of the strategy and meaning of Moravia's modern adaptation of his Greek model³. Once *Il dio Kurt* was 'rediscovered', that is, granted the

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¹ Such is specifically the case of GOLDFARB 1980. On the Holocaust in drama and literature, see SCHUMACHER 1998; PLUNKA 2009; also below, 160-161 with nn. 32-34.

² Such is the case of DELL'AIA 2011. On the relevance of Foucault's and Agamben's philosophy to the interpretation of Moravia's play, see below, 157-158, with nn. 18, 19.

³ See, e.g., FABRIZIO 1981; PADUANO 2008, 171-175. But, for instance, it is not mentioned in the survey of the play's reception history penned by MACINTOSH 2009.

attention it deserves, it became an object of intense discussions and detailed analysis, but most often in the perspective of the ideological tenets of Moravia's theatrical poetics, a perspective which suggests a reading of the play in the context of the author's «life-long preoccupation with the ethos and the genre of tragedy»⁴. This dominant scholarly approach to *Il dio Kurt* not only tends to omit any discourse of reception, since Moravia's specific 'appropriation'⁵ of Sophocles' tragedy is given only a cursory glance, but it also tends to neglect his interest in the criticism of Nazi ideology and the *Shoah*, since the subject matter of the play is often considered secondary to, or merely instrumental in, conveying Moravia's poetic discourse⁶.

Il dio Kurt undoubtedly has a place in the 'evolution' of Moravia's poetic reflection on the theater as a genre and as an ethos. Indeed, he seems to use Sophocles' tragedy as Aristotle did in his *Poetics* (e.g., 1453a8-17, b1-7; 1454a 2-4), i.e., to speak about the nature of tragedy and of theater⁷. But the play's plotline and the strategy behind the appropriation and adaptation of the Greek model suggest that Nazi Germany and the *Shoah* are *per se* Moravia's concern, too, as the experiences of his personal life also confirm⁸.

Trying to 'fill in the blanks', the present essay intends to provide a systematic analysis of Moravia's play in terms of recep-

⁴ OTEY 2011, 209, and below, n. 6.

⁵ I use the term 'appropriation' according to HARDWICK 2003, 9-10: «[Appropriation means] taking an ancient image or text and using it to sanction subsequent ideas or practices (explicitly or implicitly)».

⁶ See, e.g., OTEY 2011, 209-210: denying that the play is about the *Shoah* in its generalities, Otey states that, through the writer's reflections on the genre, it explores «the relationship of theater to contemporary post-war-society, a society whose struggles Moravia believed were radically epitomized by the existence of Auschwitz». According to her, in Moravia's eyes tragedy is a means to surrender the wounds and mistakes of the past and overcome the shame of living in contemporary post-war society. TONIOLO 2013, 41-42, also denies any interest in the Nazi ideology and the *Shoah*, arguing that Moravia's play aims at criticizing the rising capitalistic mentality.

⁷ However, with a slight difference: Moravia not only talks about, but also realizes a specific kind of theater, by using the same ancient Greek play which Aristotle singled out in his treatise.

⁸ On Moravia's *quasi*-obsession with, and self-questioning about, the 'monstrosity' of Nazi Germany, see below, 161, 179.

tion of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* with the specific reference to Nazi ideology and the Holocaust, both of which affect the fabric of Moravia's adaptation of the Greek story. By studying this play in the context of Nazi Ideology (reflected in the ideology of the main character, Kurt), rather than in the context of Moravia's poetics, I shall prioritize a comparative reading of the Greek model and its Nazi adaptation, to show the subtle mechanisms at work in Moravia's appropriation of the ancient myth, and thus how some of the main themes of his Greek model – doubleness, fate, and family – have been re-used to convey the modern author's thoughts, along with achieving the new kind of theater he was proposing. Moravia's preference for themes such as family and incest⁹ might also have played a role in his choice of this particular Sophoclean tragedy as the hypotext of his drama, which adds to the complexity and subtlety of his adaptation.

2. *The Nazi Ideology of Race and Its Relevance to Il dio Kurt: Preliminary Observations*

Sparta must be regarded as the first Völkisch State. The exposure of the sick, weak, deformed children, in short, their destruction, was more decent and in truth a thousand times more humane than the wretched insanity of our day which preserves the most pathological subject.

(Hitler's *Second Book*, New York 1961, 17)¹⁰

Every manifestation of human culture, every product of art, science and technical skill, which we see before our eyes today, is almost exclusively the product of the Aryan creative power. This very fact fully justifies the conclusion that it was the Aryan alone who founded a superior type of humanity; therefore he represents the archetype of what we understand by the term: MAN. He is the Prometheus of mankind, from whose shining brow the divine spark of genius has at all times flashed forth, always kindling anew that fire

⁹ See below, 167 with n. 52; 173-175, with n. 64.

¹⁰ Unless noted otherwise, all translations from languages other than English are mine. The original title of the book mentioned above is *Zweites Buch*; it was conceived as a sequel to *Mein Kampf* and was written in 1928, but remained unpublished during his lifetime. As for the influence of Sparta on Hitler and Nazi ideology, see CANFORA 1992; also below, 157.

which, in the form of knowledge, illuminated the dark night [...] thus showing man how to rise and become master over all the other beings on the earth [...].

(A. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, Munich 1925, ch. XI: «Race and People»)¹¹

It is certainly well known that the claim for the superiority of the Aryan race, the ‘master race’, was the center of Nazi ideology, and that restoring the ‘purity’ of that race, which was to be traced back to the ancient Germans/Aryans, was one of the ultimate objectives of Hitler’s racial politics. National redemption through racial purification as a gateway to imperial conquest and to the establishment of the sovereignty of the master race was the core of the *Weltanschauung* of Hitler and the Nazis. This racial purification was to be pursued through racial hygiene, which resulted in *Die Endlösung der Judenfrage* (The Final Solution to the Jewish Question): the annihilation of the Jewish people, the parasite and deadly poison from which the German ‘body’ needed to be ‘disinfected’ in order to restore its pure grandeur¹².

Perhaps less well known is the ‘appropriation’ by the *Führer* of some images and cultural elements from classical antiquity to sanction his ideology¹³. Such is the case, for instance, of Prometheus and Sparta. Prometheus, the ‘culture hero’, if not – according to some versions – the creator of humankind¹⁴, becomes the counterpart of the Aryan, thus serving to illustrate the Aryan’s superiority. In his role as founder of culture, which com-

¹¹ The English translation is from James Murphy (1939), available at <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0200601.txt>.

¹² The Final Solution was thus the antidote to Germany’s ‘disease’; indeed, the extermination of the Jews was often presented as a matter of prophylaxis: see FORTI 2006, 12-13; KOENIGSBERG 2004, 1-2, and 2007. More in general, see FLEMING 1987; KERSHAW 2008.

¹³ On the Nazis’ ‘pillaging’ of the intellectual heritage of the Greco-Roman world to justify their political plans, see also CHAPOUTOT 2008.

¹⁴ In Hesiod’s *Theogony* (561-567) and, especially, in Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* (436-506), Prometheus can be identified as a ‘culture-hero’, as he brought men fire, indispensable for many technological advances of civilization, and taught metallurgy, mathematics, etc., hence becoming responsible for the ‘creation’ of culture. In some versions of the myth, already known in 5th century-Athens, Prometheus also appears as the creator of humankind itself: see, e.g., Pl. *Prt.* 320d-322d; Apollod. I 7.1; Ov. *Metam.* 1.82-87.

pletes the creation of the world by making it fit for human life, the Aryan is the prototype of man, no less. As to Sparta, with its 'eugenics policy' symbolized by the *Apothetai*¹⁵, the ancient city's customs justify, in Hitler's eyes, the racial cleansing that he perpetrated at the expense of the *Untermenschen* (Sub-humans), i.e., parasitic races, of non-Aryan origin, such as Slavs, Russians, Serbs, Poles and, above all within Germany, Jews. The latter were labelled as *Lebensunwertes Leben* (Life unworthy of life) and, as such, destined to be exterminated¹⁶. The Spartan *Apothetai* turns into the Nazi concentration camp, with the Spartan abandonment-to-death of the *Lebensunwertes Leben* resulting in the Nazi *Endlösung der Judenfrage*. Purity of race becomes the *conditio sine qua non* to settle finally *Die Neuordnung* (The New Order), i.e., the racial state, with the supremacy of the German National Socialist ideology in Germany, in Europe and, eventually, in the whole world.

Notoriously, the racial hygiene plan of the Nazi *Apothetai* entailed the infamous scientific experiments¹⁷ that degraded persons to mere biological beings over which Hitler *in primis*, and more broadly the Nazi Germans, had a sovereign power, a power that appropriated the people's right to decide on their own life or death. With the individuals being debased to a 'bare life'¹⁸, Nazi power turned into bio-power and Nazi politics into bio-politics: an extension of state power over the physical and political bodies

¹⁵ On Sparta's *Apothetai*, see Plu. *Lyc.* 16. 1-2, on which CARTLEDGE 2001, 84.

¹⁶ To achieve this goal, a radical 'racial hygiene' or 'eugenics policy' was developed, leading its promoters, among whom were several physicians, to perform deadly human experiments (see below, n.17). On the racial cleansing promoted by Hitler and Nazi Germany, see ALY 1994; MÜLLER-HILL 1998; PROCTOR 2003.

¹⁷ See, e.g., ANNAS & GRODIN 1992.

¹⁸ See AGAMBEN 1995, who, adopting the Greek distinction between ζωή (bare life/animal life) and βίος (qualified life/manner of life/political living being), defined the prisoners in the concentration camps as reduced to mere biological entities, deprived of any rights and, as such, suitable ground for an indiscriminate exercise of sovereign power. Agamben's theory of sovereign power is somewhat in debt to Foucault's bio-power theory (below, n. 19); see, e.g., BUSSOLINI 2009; SNOEK 2010. Agamben has further developed it with regard to Hitler and Nazi Germany: AGAMBEN 1998. For a reading of Moravia's *Il dio Kurt* through the lens of Agamben's theories, see DEL'AIÀ 2011. Being 'bare life', as if lacking a soul and a conscious brain, the prisoners of the concentration camps were also equated with mere objects: see below, 178, with n. 68.

of the population¹⁹. Indeed, it has been suggested that Nazism should be considered a 'bio-political' movement²⁰.

All these core features of Nazism constitute the threads which Moravia wove into the dramatic fabric of *Il dio Kurt. Tragedia in un Prologo e due Atti* (God Kurt. A Tragedy in Two Acts with a Prologue). Subtly re-elaborating Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, while intending to achieve a specific kind of theater (*il teatro della parola*)²¹, Moravia adapted the ancient play to convey, and denounce, the terrible truth of the Nazi legacy and the horrors of the Holocaust. Using the technique of metatheater and placing the story within the so-called *univers concentrationnaire*²², Moravia re-enacted the tragedy of Oedipus by turning it into a Nazi experiment, but a special one. It is not a scientific experiment of the same kind as those that were carried out by the infamous German physicians who played a major role in the racial hygiene politics promoted by Hitler. The re-enactment is instead a 'cultural experiment', the ultimate aim of which is, however, not much different from that of the scientific ones. It is meant to guarantee the supremacy of the pure Aryan race, and thus the advent of 'The New Order' and of that 'superior type of humanity' which Hitler mentioned in his writing. In Moravia, both 'The New Order' and the 'superior type of humanity' are often referred to as *nuova umanità* (new humankind: *Kurt* 440)²³. The means to achieve it is the same: the

¹⁹ Known as bio-power, this concept has been theorized by the French philosopher Michel Foucault in the '70s (see, e.g., FOUCAULT 1976; 2004). It refers to when the power of sovereignty becomes power over men's life, i.e., «acquisition of power over man insofar as man is a living being,» so that 'the biological' comes under State control: see BERTANI-FONTANA 2003, 239-240. On the relationship between bio-politics and race theory, taking Foucault as starting point, see FORTI 2006.

²⁰ AGAMBEN 1995, 142.

²¹ See below, 160.

²² The phrase was introduced by David Rousset through his book *L'Univers concentrationnaire* (Paris 1945). It is commonly used in studies of Holocaust literature to refer to the mechanisms of the concentration camps, their being a world 'set apart', 'a large scale industry for tortures and extermination.'

²³ All page numbers of Moravia's *Il dio Kurt* are from the latest edition of his theatrical production by NARI-VAZZOLER 1998, vol. II. I shall refer to the text of the play by its short title (*Kurt*), while I shall use the editors' names when referring to their introductory essay.

annihilation of the Jews.

While the scientific experiments contribute to a physical extermination, the cultural one is meant to 'exterminate' the essential tenets of the Jewish culture, which are considered as responsible for the corruption of the master race's culture. With the family being the center of Jewish culture and morality, the choice of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the *par excellence* tragedy of the laceration of the family²⁴, is further evidence of the appropriateness of Moravia's adaptation of this classical work to Nazi ideology. What is more, when, through the mouth of his main character, Kurt, an explanation for the choice of this tragedy is provided, not only is the emphasis placed on the destructive mechanisms that would nullify the notion of family itself, i.e., parricide and incest (*Kurt* 446-447), but the choice is also linked to the theory of race, as it is pointed out that Oedipus' family is an ancient one, that is, it belongs to an antiquity which has already been corrupted. The Jews were a part of this world, while the Aryans were not, since they were 'the original', the pure and limpid prototype (*Kurt* 449-450).

3. *Moravia and Il dio Kurt*

3.1. *The Cultural Context, the Structure, and Some Basic Features*

Published in 1968 and first performed in 1969²⁵, *Il dio Kurt* is one of the most mature achievements of Moravia's career as playwright²⁶, the arrival point of a long process of reflection on theater as a literary genre – the genre which he preferred and which he struggled the most to achieve²⁷. Moravia's theatrical works have so far been less studied than his novels, and, as has been pointed out above, out of his dramatic pieces, *Il dio Kurt* has been the least examined until recently. When examined, it has mostly been discussed from the viewpoint of Moravia's dramatic poet-

²⁴ On this view of Soph. *OT*, see also below, 173. About Moravia's preference for the family theme in general, see below, 167 with n. 52, 173-174.

²⁵ About the performance and the critics' and audience's reaction, see RIVIERI 2013, 131-133.

²⁶ See, e.g., NARI-VAZZOLER 1998, 11-12; 49-50.

²⁷ See, e.g., CASINI 2008; NARI-VAZZOLER 1998, 9-32; TURCHETTA 2010, 390-393.

ics. Indeed, the key structural feature of *Il dio Kurt* – that it is ‘a play within a play’ – allowed Moravia to make his main characters, Kurt and Saul, his mouthpiece, thus conveying the author’s conception of theater²⁸. Engaging in the debates about the role of literature and theater in society that were taking place throughout Europe in the 60s²⁹, Moravia ended up elaborating a specific dramatic poetics which distinguishes between two forms of theaters³⁰: *il teatro della chiacchiera* (the theater of small-talk), that is, a theater which mirrors real-life facts and ‘speaks’ colloquial language; and *il teatro della parola* (the theater of word), i.e., a theater of the dialectic confrontation of ideas, where the words serve to communicate and debate the great issues of life³¹.

Il dio Kurt is in fact a dialectical drama where word, rather than action, dominates the stage, which adds to this play, as it serves to describe what has always been felt as indescribable, i.e., the experience of the Holocaust as a result of the inner workings of Nazi ideology.

If from a strictly poetic point of view *Il dio Kurt* was conceived of as an enactment of ‘the theater of word’, the choice both of its content (Nazism and the horrors of the Holocaust) and of its medium (a modernizing use of a classical myth) suggests Moravia’s proper responsiveness to the European and, more specifically, Italian post-war cultural background in which coping with the still much too fresh memory of the wounds inflicted by Nazism posed a strong challenge. The ‘tragedy’ of Nazism *per se* was an object of broader interest in European drama, from Bertolt Brecht’s *Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reiches* (1938)³², to Peter

²⁸ See, e.g., NARI-VAZZOLER 1998, 51-55; VOZA 2006; RIVIERI 2013, 4; 83-84, and *passim*. Among the two characters, it is above all Kurt who embodies and conveys the theatrical poetics of Moravia (see, e.g., TURCHETTA 2010, 402) by also acting as dramatist and director: not only does he put on the stage the tragedy of Oedipus, but, appropriating poetic license, he also modifies the story to fit his ideological principles. For further details about this role of Kurt, see below, e.g., 164.

²⁹ See, e.g., CASINI 2008, 32.

³⁰ MORAVIA 1957, 1967, on which see also NARI-VAZZOLER 1998, 30-32; CASINI 2008, 31; TURCHETTA 2010, 391-395.

³¹ NARI-VAZZOLER 1998, 32.

³² About this tragedy, see WHITE-WHITE 2010, 70-102.

Weiss' *Die Ermittlung* (1965)³³, and to the well-known Auschwitz survivor, Charlotte Delbo, whose play *Qui rapportera ces paroles* (1974) drew on a classical figure belonging to Oedipus' family, Antigone³⁴. In mid-twentieth-century Italian dramaturgy, too, writers have frequently recourse to classical myth, as it seemed to provide them words, metaphors, and stories best suited to the expression of feelings about, emotional reactions to, and critical denunciations of the horror of the Holocaust³⁵. Apart from this cultural context, it should be noted that Moravia himself had first-hand experience of the Italian fascist state³⁶. He admitted with regret that he had known about Hitler's persecution of the Jews³⁷; and from his awareness and vivid memory of what he saw or heard, a kind of obsession with Nazism originated. In this personal experience, too, are the roots of the drama *Il dio Kurt*. In an interview conducted on the occasion of one of the first rehearsals of the play, talking of the multiple sources of inspiration for this play, Moravia significantly mentioned first of all:

l'enigma culturale mostruoso e affascinante del Nazismo. I campi di concentramento; la persecuzione razzista [...]. Tutto questo mi ha ossessionato per anni. *Il dio Kurt* nasce da questa ossessione...³⁸.
(the cultural, monstrous and yet captivating mystery of Nazism. The concentration camps; the racist persecution [...]. For years I have been obsessed by this all. *Il dio Kurt* originated from this obsession...).

As far as the basic structure of this play is concerned, scholars unanimously identify an influence from one of the greatest

³³ On this play, see COHEN 1998. For other examples of Holocaust literature, see also below, n. 34.

³⁴ See, e.g. GOLDFARB 1980; PLUNKA 2009, 76-83; FORNARO 2012, 135-140. Also inspired by the figure of Antigone and dealing with Auschwitz and World War II is Delbo's *Kalavrita des mille Antigones* (1979). On Delbo's Holocaust experience and her literary activity informed by Greek drama, see COQUIO 2009.

³⁵ For an extensive description of this literary context, see TINTERRI 1997; see also, NARI-VAZZOLER 1998, 50; RIVIERI 2013, 82-83.

³⁶ See CASINI 2007-2008.

³⁷ See ELKANN 2007, 85-86; 119.

³⁸ N. CHIAROMONTE, *Edipo tra i deportati*, «L'Espresso», 1969, quoted in RIVIERI 2003, 83 n. 242.

Italian dramatists of the previous generation, Luigi Pirandello, well known for the metatheatrical dimension of his works, which generally results in 'the play within a play' and in the author's self-referential statements about his poetics³⁹. In *Il dio Kurt*, these two basic features are comprised in the role of the main character, Kurt, after whom the play is named.

In his main role as a commander of the SS, in an anonymous concentration camp in Poland – clearly resembling Auschwitz – Kurt takes the initiative to stage the tragedy of *Oedipus Rex*⁴⁰ during the Christmas season of 1944, in front of an audience of SS officers, with a specific intention: to carry out an experiment. As a Nazi commander and promoter of the experiment, Kurt strenuously champions the Nazi ideology of race and 'The New Order' by 'playing God', i.e., by taking on the role of a superior being with the power to decide over the life and death of human beings. This superior entity with such a power is God in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and Fate/Destiny in the pagan Greek one. The title of the play seems symptomatic of a particular, programmatic meaning: on the one hand, 'God' refers to the motif of 'playing God', together with the ideological aim of restoring the master race, and with it, a new, pure humankind where every human will be a 'god-like being' (*Kurt* 402, 502); on the other hand, Kurt's choice of the pagan notion of Fate/Destiny as the mark of his own (double) identity conveys a refusal to adopt a religious label. He aligns himself instead with the most powerful, universal, and elusive force of 'Fate/Destiny', which operates mysteriously, and which was even superior to the will of the gods in the belief system of the ancients, as it was Fate that decided the course of life and death⁴¹. Kurt thus borrows this ancient notion from the

³⁹ On the metatheatrical, see ABEL 1963; TROISI 1993; with reference to the classics in particular, ROSENMEYER 2002; SLATER 2002.

⁴⁰ The tragedy that Kurt is about to stage is the result of his own reception of the original play, a reception that, passing through the 'appropriation' process (on which, see above, n. 5), results in an 'adaptation', i.e., in «a version of the source developed for a different purpose...»: HARDWICK 2003, 9.

⁴¹ See GREENE 1944; FRAENKEL 1975, 58; GIANNOPOULOU 1999-2000, 270-271. With reference to *Oedipus'* story, see LAURIOLA 2011, 47-49.

tragedy he is about to stage, and extends it to include the incontestable, superior power of Nazism over the 'fate' of the Jews:

sarò anche il Fato nella realtà della vita, in quanto sono il comandante del campo, cioè appunto, per i deportati, quella forza misteriosa che decide della loro vita e della loro morte (*Kurt* 453)⁴².

(I shall also be the Fate in the real life, given that I am the chief commander of this camp, that is, for the prisoners (I am) that mysterious power which decides their life and death).

And that's not all!

Kurt's 'playing god' might also mirror the propagandistic, deified portrayal of Hitler, which was very common⁴³. That means to say that the 'dio Kurt' is clearly the counterpart of the *Führer* and, with him, of the 'God Germany': «we do not want to have», Hitler once said, «other god than our Germany»⁴⁴, which in turn, in his plans, should have been 'The God' of all humankind. Taking over the role of a demiurge, on another occasion, Hitler stated that National-Socialism was not merely a political party; it was something more than a religion, no less⁴⁵: it was a commitment and will power to create a 'new humankind'. This specific commitment persistently resonates in Kurt's speeches, for his experiment is aligned with the scientific ones: they all are meant to create a new order by restoring the pure Aryan (*Kurt* 440). Playing god-Hitler, Kurt uses his same weapon to a lesser degree, in that he targets a small nucleus of the 'parasite' race, i.e., a family.

By 'playing god' Kurt thus assumes different identities: within the Sophoclean tragedy, which he is about to stage, he casts himself as the Greek Fate/Destiny which manoeuvres the life of the characters; within the real life – the life in the concentration

⁴² See also below, 176-177.

⁴³ See, e.g., GOLDFARB 1979.

⁴⁴ HEIDEN 1935, 100.

⁴⁵ Regarding the idea that man and, specifically in the Nazi perspective, Germany can replace God, it might be possible to detect some influence from Nietzsche's reflection about both the death of God (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 1882, 125) and Judaism morality (e.g., *Zur Genealogie der Moral: eine Streitschrift*, 1887), a morality that strongly restricted man's power and freedom, which indeed resonates with Kurt's idea of Hebrew morality. On the Nazism use of Nietzsche's theories, see, e.g., NEHAMAS 1999.

camp – he, an SS commander and *alter Hitler*, casts himself as the German Fate, the one which steers the life of the prisoners. Last but not least, as the dramatist and director of the adaptation of Sophocles' play, by way of self-referential poetic remarks on the theater Kurt also takes over the role of the mouthpiece of Moravia, the dramatist and theorist of 'the theater of word'⁴⁶.

While Kurt's role as dramatist and director is consistent with the fact that theatrical activities were a customary form of entertainment for soldiers both in military camps and in the concentration camps⁴⁷, the idea of staging a play as a cultural experiment is an original addition that gives Kurt his other identity as Moravia's mouthpiece: on the one hand, it constitutes the particular imprint of the adaptation of the Greek tragedy on the play, by making it suitable to convey Nazi ideology; on the other hand, it allows Moravia to theorize and simultaneously realize his ideal of theater.

Taking on these various identities – Greek Fate, German/Nazi Fate-*alter Hitler*, and dramatist/mouthpiece of the author – Kurt subtly sets the action, i.e., the experiment, in motion, directing and manipulating like puppets those who play the counterparts of the Sophoclean characters and are unwitting participants in the experiment⁴⁸. Their lack of awareness significantly pertains to their family ties, a point of paramount importance in the original Greek model⁴⁹. The cast that Kurt accurately puts together is, in fact, constituted not simply by Jewish prisoners. It is a Jewish family – a son, a mother, and a father – who will re-enact Oedipus' tragic story, with the cuts made by Kurt-director that are necessary to carry out the experiment. As will be gradually

⁴⁶ See, e.g., *Kurt* 479 and 490.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., GOLDFARB 1976.

⁴⁸ Saul and Myriam – the equivalents, respectively, of Oedipus and Jocasta – were both informed that they would participate in an experiment, but they did not know which kind of experiment was awaiting them. They would just expect to be cruelly used in one of the 'usual' scientific experiments: see *Kurt* 486.

⁴⁹ Myriam-Jocasta was actually aware of the identity of the man with whom she would have intercourse. She was forced into such an action by the threat her son would be killed if she were to rebel or not follow all the commands: on Myriam-Jocasta, see below, 172, 175-176, 177-178.

revealed through a long inquiry by Kurt himself⁵⁰, the experiment consists in inducing an unsuspecting son to sleep with his mother and kill his father, contravening the norms of the family but acting consistently with the laws of nature.

This is clearly explained in the prologue (*Kurt* 439-458), where Kurt gives more than the preliminary information on the content of the tragedy that the audience is about to watch. Having mentioned that the performance about to be staged is a cultural experiment, he also explains at length the purpose of this experiment: to contribute, even more than science can, to restoring the Aryan race's purity, which is a basic step for establishing 'The New Order' (*Kurt* 440), and which is possible only by erasing what has contaminated that purity, i.e., the Jewish morality centered on the family (*Kurt* 441). The re-enactment of Oedipus' tragedy is the best way to demonstrate that family is just a 'prejudice', a cultural superstructure built by the Jews, as the Jewish element in Freud has also proved. True to his partial German nature, Freud was able to disclose the artificial essence of the family: should nature be allowed to run its course freely, family members would have no reluctance to engage in sexual relationships. But the Jewish component in Freud's make-up censored this 'revelation', creating, on the contrary, the incest taboo and encouraging the repression of the 'natural' course of events (*Kurt* 447)⁵¹. Kurt means to leave Freud behind and to show by means of facts the non-existence of the family, using a Jewish family that unwittingly destroys itself merely by following natural drives.

Although the family's 'tragedy' occurs, in the same terms as in Sophocles' play, the *finale* of Kurt's drama – as will be seen – is different from the original, and the variation can only be seen as a by-product of the Moravia-Kurt's adaptation.

⁵⁰ Kurt's inquiry – which occurs throughout the drama – recalls the one that Sophocles' Oedipus carried out in his gradual process of discovering the terrible truth. Here, too, true to the basics of Oedipus' tragedy, Saul-Oedipus must discover the truth by undergoing a gradual, painful revelation. But unlike Sophocles' Oedipus, he is not the investigator who becomes the investigated; since the beginning, he is a passive subject of the agency of Fate, the German/Nazi Fate. On the passivity of the victims of the Holocaust, see below 177-178.

⁵¹ Regarding this, see also PADUANO 2008, 173.

3.2. *The Plot: Description and Commentary*

As suggested by its full title, *Il dio Kurt* consists of a prologue and two acts. The prologue provides introductory instructions about 'how' to see the story, which is about to start – i.e., with 'the right' ideological background in mind – rather than 'what' the story is about. The title of Sophocles' tragedy is mentioned, but it is not immediately revealing, as far as the particular reuse of that tragedy is concerned. The *persona prologi* is Kurt, and the metatheatrical dimension is immediately signified through the declared intention to stage a performance and to play a role in that performance, precisely, the role of a double fate, which is emblemized by a double costume. Kurt in fact manages to signify his double character as Fate through two different costumes: the real one – the SS uniform, equipped with all the medals he won – and the fictional/Greek one, a dirty sheet and wig (*Kurt* 452-453). Because of this metatheatrical dimension, the outside audience/readers are paralleled to the inside public of the SS officers, in front of whom the commander Kurt is speaking. This inside audience might be regarded, in my opinion, as the equivalent of the ancient *chorus*. In the person of three anonymous SS officers, this chorus intervenes in the prologue, questioning Kurt and commenting on his words, which already gives this initial section the dialectical tone that informs the whole play and Moravia's ideal of 'the theater of word'.

Apart from setting the ideological mindset by which the coming performance has to be seen, Kurt provides a broader premise about the characters that will perform (*Kurt* 450-451): it will be a real family, i.e., three Jewish people linked to each other as father, son, and mother. The son, i.e., the new Oedipus, once was a friend of Kurt, and, before the racial hygiene process, he was a professional actor.

After reading a telegram that Kurt, in his role of SS commander of the concentration camp, says he has received from Heinrich Himmler and which establishes the approval of Kurt's experiment by the *Führer*, Kurt announces the beginning of the tragedy, i.e., the re-enactment of Sophocles' play (*Kurt* 458).

Kurt thus reappears in what constitutes the first Act of his ad-

aptation of Sophocles' tragedy (*Kurt* 459-481). Introducing himself in the preannounced role of the Greek Fate, he now recites a monologue that works as prologue to the imminent *mise-en-scène*. Kurt first describes his conception of Greek Fate as a kind of cold-blooded demiurge who had fun in building contraptions – with a preference for the family⁵² – only to break them up just for self-amusement (*Kurt* 459). The best contraption that this demiurge had built is the one pertaining to Oedipus' family. Kurt thus introduces the character of Oedipus, or, more precisely, an Oedipus adapted to the purpose of his experiment. This Oedipus is not a hero and does not have anything extraordinary. Even his acclaimed intelligence is not a big deal; indeed, he is a mediocre man, a philistine, conformist, and a bigoted (*Kurt* 460-461). Clearly this is not Sophocles' Oedipus; it is the Nazi's image of the Jews whom the German Fate, replacing the Greek one, intends to destroy exactly as the Greek Fate has destroyed the original Oedipus. The Jewish-Oedipus, Saul, is thus brought on the stage at Kurt's signal. Saul recognizes Kurt, who explains that he will be part of an experiment by performing Oedipus. Answering Kurt's torrent of questions, Saul-Oedipus speaks of the past, of the time when they were college friends up to the moment in which they broke off their friendship. And, perhaps ironically, this breakup happened over an ideological disagreement on the

⁵² *Kurt* 459. Fate's preference for the family as a target of its 'play', while mirroring the basic content of most of the ancient myths and their related tragedies, also conveys Moravia's poetic discourse, i.e., his preference for the family as a literary, tragic theme. Perhaps following Lukács' theory on the dramatic genre (see RIVIERI 2013, 10-11 and n. 35), according to which a tragic event is more effective if it happens among persons very close to each other, such as in a family, Moravia openly considered the family as the key topic of the whole of western literature: see ELKANN 2007, 276; more in general, also OTEY 2008, 187-188 with n. 28. Family is (ironically!) where the interplay of conflicting emotions reaches its highest expression, thus producing tragedy. «Tutte le tragedie riguardano la famiglia...» («All tragedies are concerned with family») says, indeed, a minor character of *Il dio Kurt*, 'voicing' Moravia's mind (*Kurt* 446). Blood-relation would re-enforce the conflict and would make tragic a contrast that perhaps would not be tragic if it occurred in another condition than in family, which is something that Aristotle had already theorized (*Poetics* 1453b 3, 15-23). It is significant, indeed, that Moravia's first mature achievement in the theater pertains to two 'tragedies of family', i.e., *Beatrice Cenci* (for which Moravia turned to the Atreides family's tragedy: TESSARI 1977, 136-137; TURCHETTA 2010, 390-391), and *Il dio Kurt*.

significance of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, no less (*Kurt* 468-471). In their student discussions, while Saul maintained the universality of the essence of Oedipus' story, Kurt (obviously!) argued for a historicist stand, maintaining that the incest could be a trigger of tragedy for the ancient Greeks but not for modern Germans. The ideological divergence turned into the interruption of their friendship, as Saul accused Kurt to support that view only to justify his incestuous love for his own sister, Ulla. After this accusation, Kurt started manipulating Saul's life – thus acting as his fate already in the past: he arranged an encounter between Saul and Ulla, tricking Saul – who was in love with Ulla – into believing that his love was returned; then, once Ulla got pregnant with Saul's child, Kurt impeded her from engaging in a real, serious commitment with Saul, and even forced her to denounce Saul for violating the racial laws. In this way, he eventually pushed Ulla to choose death: committing suicide was the only option she had to avoid fulfilling his brother's will (*Kurt* 472-478).

The 'why' of this seeming digression that, although in the form of memory, introduces the character of Ulla is to be explained in the second Act, as Kurt, in his *alter* role of dramatist and director, states at the end of the first Act.

Recalling the events marking the youth of Saul-Oedipus seems to me to be equivalent to the Sophoclean Oedipus' reconstruction of his own youth (Soph. *OT* 774-815), with both being still partial. As Kurt just suggests by delaying the full explanation of Ulla's part to the second Act, the reconstruction of the past has reached the 'time' of the entrance of the Sphinx in the story (*Kurt* 480-481), with Ulla being the Sphinx' counterpart⁵³. In Kurt's adaptation of Sophocles' play, the first Act thus is still the prequel of the real tragedy of Oedipus, which, true to its Greek model, starts from the end, i.e., when everything has already happened but must still be uncovered⁵⁴. This prequel significantly re-states, and de-

⁵³ See below, 169-170 with n. 59.

⁵⁴ In Sophocles, Oedipus' own reconstruction of his youth actually extends to his fatal encounter with a man at a crossroad (who will be revealed to be no else than Laius), while the encounter with the Sphinx ending in her suicide is subsequent to the

velops in more depth, themes crucial to Nazi ideology: the 'prejudicial' concept of the family and the related incest-taboo.

The second Act (*Kurt* 482-511) is actually the section that, although once again with Kurt-director's cuts, corresponds more to Sophocles' play. In Sophocles, the tragic events (the parricide and the incestuous marriage/relation with the mother) that had marked the life of Oedipus up to the moment in which Thebes was afflicted by the plague⁵⁵ have already occurred: they are events of which Oedipus was not (not yet) aware. The same tragic events⁵⁶ have already happened to Saul-Oedipus who, like Sophocles' Oedipus, is still unaware. Like the original *Oedipus Rex*, Moravia-Kurt's adaptation basically consists of Oedipus' learning the true meaning of his past actions: a homicide that turns out to be a parricide, and a relationship that turns out to be an incest. Through the inquiry conducted by Kurt, Saul-Oedipus comes to know the truth of what he has unwittingly been doing while imprisoned in another concentration camp, up to moment in which he arrived on the stage in Kurt's concentration camp, i.e., up to the beginning of Kurt's 'experimental' performance.

It seems to me that Moravia-Kurt very accurately establishes this correspondence between the beginning of the original Greek play, meant as the beginning of Oedipus' investigation and learning about his identity, once he settled in Thebes, and the beginning of the second Act, similarly meant to lead Saul-Oedipus to know the truth about himself when he 'settled' in Kurt's concentration camp. The cornerstone of this correspondence is the Sphinx motif, which – as we have seen – is mentioned by Kurt at the end of the first Act and which conveniently works as transition. In Sophocles, the solution of the riddle of the Sphinx and the Sphinx's subsequent suicide were crucial to Oedipus' fulfillment

murder of Laius, where Oedipus' recalling of his past stops. In both Sophocles and Moravia, however, those reconstructions are fundamental to the 'happening' of the tragic revelation of the truth, which then serves different purposes: see below, 174-175.

⁵⁵ As is well known, the plague is what set in motion the entire action in Sophocles: see, e.g., *OT* 1-150.

⁵⁶ In Moravia they occur in a reverse order: see below, 174-175.

of his destiny⁵⁷. In Kurt's planned drama the Sphinx is embodied by Ulla, and in Kurt-Greek Fate's eyes, Oedipus-Saul is responsible for her suicide⁵⁸. Defined as an ambiguous person – thus transferring the mixed/ambiguous nature of the Greek monster into the personality of Ulla in order to turn her into the Sphinx of Oedipus' myth (*Kurt* 482-486) – Ulla is the mysterious mind (the riddle!) that Saul-Oedipus could understand. According to Kurt, at first she shared his brother's Nazi dream of contributing to 'The New Order', restoring the purity of the Aryan, and eliminating corruptive cultural prejudices, such as incest. Eventually, however, Ulla let herself be persuaded by the philistine morality of Saul, yielding to his proposal to marry him and create a family (*Kurt* 477). Kurt's prohibition led her to commit suicide. Saul-Oedipus was responsible for removing ambiguity from Ulla's mind, offering her a simple life-solution through his corruptive cultural superstructures. Hence it was he, Saul-newly Oedipus, who killed Ulla-Sphinx, by thus sealing his fate.

It now seems that the individual, private life experience of Kurt – who engaged in an incestuous relation with Ulla – overlaps his ideological goal to eliminate the family for the sake of 'The New Order'⁵⁹.

Faced by Saul's claims of innocence, Kurt finally undertakes the inquiry that leads Saul to discover his identity, i.e., that he is a true Oedipus. Kurt asks Saul to tell what has happened to him from the moment in which he has been transferred to Kurt's concentration camp, i.e., I would say, to the new Thebes. At length Saul explains that once he arrived in Kurt's camp (without knowing it was Kurt's camp), he was locked in a hut

⁵⁷ A concise overview of this point is in LAURIOLA 2011a, 162-166.

⁵⁸ The role of Ulla as Sphinx, which is the result of her adaptation to Kurt's *Oedipus Rex* is, to my eyes, quite complicated. Whether or not Moravia was aware of it, the relation between Ulla-Sphinx and Saul-Oedipus might be grounded on the *Sphinx amoureuse* theme (see, e.g., LAURIOLA 2011a, 170-173; IERANÒ 2012). On the other hand, the incestuous relationship between Ulla and Kurt – where Ulla replaces, in a way, the mother since their parents died when Kurt was a child – makes her a counterpart of Jocasta, and Kurt a true Oedipal figure. On this complicated overlapping of figures and themes, see FABRIZIO 1981, 256-260.

⁵⁹ See FABRIZIO 1981, 260-261, and below, 173-175.

and told by his guardian, named Wepke, that he was chosen to serve as a guinea pig in an experiment. He was to remain there until the day of the experiment, without having any contact with the outside world, yet having the opportunity – actually the command – to rest and well eat. One day, Wepke proposed a deal: he could manage to bring Saul some women, inmates as well from the nearby brothel, in exchange for half of his meal. Wepke specified that he had to meet with those women in the dark; and while he could speak, the women were instructed not to say a word. Saul accepted the deal and for a while he met with different women. He truly believed – and was tricked into believing – that he was being visited by different women. One day Wepke went to Saul in great fear: their deal was discovered and they needed to flee. Wepke designed the plan: he would pretend to take Saul with him for a job, but they would run away once they would reach the train tracks. He also told Saul that the road leading to the tracks was guarded by an SS soldier; Saul must first kill him, and for this reason he gave Saul a gun. Everything happened as Wepke had planned: they fled, they found the soldier guarding the road with his back to them, and Wepke commanded Saul to shoot at him. After this, suddenly, other soldiers appeared and captured them. Saul expected to be executed; instead, he was brought directly to Kurt, and precisely on that stage. This is the story of Saul.

At this point, by calling on stage a new character, Kurt lets Saul, the inner audience of SS officers, and the readers/outside audience come finally to know the mechanisms of the machinery that he, in his double role of Greek and German Fate, has built for his experiment. Everything has been orchestrated to have Saul kill his father unwittingly and thus discover, though still partially, that he is an Oedipus. This revelation comes not by words: Kurt commands the corpse of the killed soldier to be brought on stage, thus letting Saul recognize that it is his father's corpse. Wepke, summoned by Kurt as a crucial participant in his inquiry, explains all things, i.e., how, instructed by Kurt/German Fate, he had prepared everything, thus tricking Saul.

But, of course, this is not all.

«Veniamo, adesso, ... a Giocasta» (Now let us speak of ... Jocasta: *Kurt* 494), Kurt says, pleased with what he has done so far. By interrogating Wepke, Kurt arranges for the other part of the terrible truth to be revealed. It was only one woman who met every night with Saul; and it was his mother Myriam who – unlike Jocasta – knew the identity of the man with whom she was forced to have intercourse. Saul is thus found to fully be an Oedipus, for he has committed both parricide and incest (*Kurt* 500).

Kurt orders Myriam to be brought on stage and asks her and Saul to admit that they experienced their sexual encounters as ‘normal’, i.e., without feeling any difference despite the existence of blood-ties. In Kurt’s eyes, this admission would prove his thesis about the family and would lead to the success of his experiment (*Kurt* 501-502). Myriam is then forced to recognize the corpse of her husband, and the terrible truth about his murder.

The drama is now about to end. Kurt – director and double Fate – orders Saul-Oedipus and Myriam-Jocasta to perform the ‘End’ (i.e., the Sophoclean end) on the stage. A rope ready for Myriam-Jocasta’s suicide and two pins for Saul-Oedipus’ self-blinding are brought on stage. At Kurt’s request to use those tools and conclude the tragedy, none of them moves. Evidently they are not willing to follow the original play script!

Something happens, though, an *aprosdoketon* for the inside public and the readers/outside audience, but not for Kurt-director and double Fate: Saul-Oedipus reacts by drawing a gun – which Kurt wanted him to have – and shooting at Kurt. It is part of his play, Kurt states (*Kurt* 506-507; 509), and it further seals the success of the experiment: Saul-Oedipus – Kurt explains – did not shoot him for being the SS commander of the camp. Saul shot, and thus attempted to eliminate, him in his role of Greek Fate, which demanded Oedipus’ and Jocasta’s self-punishment. But the new Oedipus and Jocasta want to keep living despite the parricide and incestuous relationship. This demonstrates that family does not exist, nor does the Greek Fate. The latter is definitely replaced by the German Fate, the Nazi power over humankind’s life and death, which turns Saul and Myriam again into no more than a number,

lost in the mass of the deported, and which decides over the intimate relationship individuals should engage in, thus subverting the family institution.

And what of Kurt?

Kurt eventually dies. His is a predicted and planned death: it is his sacrifice for the sake of the third Reich's glory.

4. *Oedipus Rex and Il dio Kurt: Tragedy of Family and Tragedy of Fate*

ὦ τέκνα are the very first words of the first line of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, uttered by Oedipus himself while addressing the people of Thebes that went as suppliants to their king to ask for a remedy to the plague which is afflicting the town. Oedipus makes his first appearance speaking as a caring father to the community, showing himself both concerned for its well-being and ready to do whatever it takes to assure safety to his children-citizens (*OT* 6, 58). The metaphor of a caring *pater familias*-king significantly marks the *incipit* of a tragedy which is concerned with the subversion of the family institution and its value by the hand of Oedipus himself, the caring father who turns out to be first a parricide father⁶⁰, then the husband of his own mother, and thus father and brother of his own children.

The subversion of the family institution and its value, with its destruction being the goal, is the main concern of Kurt's adaptation of Sophocles' play. The family is not a royal one, as in the Greek model; it is an ordinary Jewish family of three members. Separated for a while because of their deportation, their reunion will be fatal to them, as it is in Sophocles' play. Both families are victims of a cruel Fate: the Greek Fate for the ancient family, and the German Fate for the modern one. In both cases the destruction of the family, while sealing the victory of their respective Fates, corroborates the respective worldview: the ineluctability of

⁶⁰ On this image of Oedipus-father, and the implied tragic irony, see LAURIOLA 2000, 35-36.

destiny, on the Greek side, and the belief in the potential establishment of a new humankind, on the modern/Nazi side. Differently from the Greek model, the modern Nazi destruction should be a harbinger of a new creation.

The choice of the family-theme is certainly in line with some poetic tenets of Moravia⁶¹, but, primarily, at least in this play, it echoes the ideology of the family in Nazism. Although it is debated whether the family was particularly important in Nazi ideology⁶², the infamous *Lebensborn* program ('Spring of life' program) comes out in favor of a gradual, systematic dismantling of the traditional family. The program consisted of creating breeding facilities meant to be literally 'Spring of life' for the Master Race. An iconic figure of the pure Aryan with specific characteristics (color of eye, hair, etc.) was created; Aryan women with those specific characteristics were recruited – and often even abducted – to be impregnated by perfect and racially pure German men, usually SS officers⁶³. The offspring did not really have a father and a mother; they were a manufactured product of the *Lebensborn*-factory, raised in accordance with Nazi ideology and meant to then attend upon the Nazi cause. Against this background, the theory of the family as a mere cultural superstructure, created by the Jews and, as such, a 'spring of corruption' for the Master Race, *a maiore* would justify Kurt's choice of the family-theme for his cultural experiment. As we have seen, Oedipus' story is adapted in such a way that it becomes the touchstone of the negation of a *naturaliter* existence of family ties and values. Kurt does not simply confine himself to driving Saul-Oedipus to have intercourse with his mother and to kill his father unwittingly, which would prove almost nothing. After the revelation of the truth, Kurt also forces him to admit that he experienced this intercourse as normal. And, as far as Myriam-Jocasta is concerned, Kurt goes even further, for he has Myriam-Jocasta commit incest knowingly and admit that she experienced it as normal.

⁶¹ See above, e.g., 167 n. 52.

⁶² See, e.g., BLACKBURN 1985, 106; PINE 1997, 179-183.

⁶³ See, e.g., THOMPSON 1971; CLAY-LEAPMAN 1995; HAMMER 2000.

In Kurt's demonstration that family does not exist, the naturalness of what is culturally referred to as incest (*Kurt* 449) is evidently given some priority compared with parricide. Indeed, in the sequence of events Kurt distances himself from the original tragedy in that he has Saul-Oedipus commit incest first and then parricide, while in reconstructing the events through the mouth of Wepke (*Kurt* 492-494), the story of the murder, with the revelation of the identity of the murdered, comes first⁶⁴. Both the priority ascribed to the incest-theme and the inversion of the order of events are the effects of Kurt's adaptation of the Greek model not only to his public campaign for the extermination of Jewish morality, centered on the family, but also to his private experience, i.e., the relationship with his sister Ulla, an incestuous relationship⁶⁵ unacceptable for the common (and Jewish) morality, that same morality which he strives to demonstrate as being what pollutes the culture of the Master Race.

Another crucial deviation from the original, which is a by-product of Kurt's adaptation, and thus instrumental to the success of the experiment, is the 'Grand Finale'. By playing the role of a double Fate (Ancient/Modern; Greek/German), and that of director/dramatist, from the beginning Kurt plans 'another' conclusion. He does not explain what the different finale will be. Kurt simply lets the inside and outside public conclude that neither Oedipus will blind himself nor Jocasta will commit suicide, as he just foreshadows the failure of the Greek Fate, according to which – as we all know – the two characters were to perform those actions (*Kurt* 453, cf. with 464). The failure of the traditional,

⁶⁴ Moravia often touched on the incest theme: see, e.g., TORRESANI 1969; GROPPALI 1979, 179-190; OTEY 2011, 180-186. It should be noted that in the period in which he was working at this play, Moravia was also reading Malinowski's studies on the incest taboo. For this information I am in debt to Prof. Casini.

⁶⁵ As hinted at above (see n. 58), Kurt is ambiguously an Oedipal figure, too. Interestingly, a recent trend in the analysis of Nazism and of the mass assent to the Master Race ideology contemplates a peculiar application of Oedipus' figure, or, better say, of Freud's Oedipus complex, with the nation Germany being identified as the 'mother' country / Goddess-Mother, while the Jews' God becomes the repository of all the negative feelings subconsciously associated with the father figure, who is thus to be eliminated: see, e.g., NIELSEN 2004.

ancient Fate is *ad hoc* pointed out since it is the *conditio sine qua non* for the success of the modern German Fate, which, in turn, means the success of the experiment, and, thus, the triumph of the Nazi program.

While it is a prerequisite of Kurt's adaptation of the Greek model, the different finale also allows Kurt to overcome a reasonable objection that, I think, could jeopardize the results of his experiment: would that Jewish family still have destroyed itself had its members known about their blood relations? The fact that Myriam-Jocasta knew the identity of the man she encountered in the darkness seems already to suggest a positive answer («yes, they would»), as does the fact that both of them eventually admit that they have experienced their sexual relations as 'normal', so that having intercourse with relatives is no different from having intercourse with strangers. But, what about Saul-Oedipus alone, who, however, did not know either the identity of the woman he met in the darkness or the identity of the man he killed because, as in Sophocles, he was an obstacle on his way? The answer, in this case, cannot be unequivocally positive. That both Saul-Oedipus and Myriam-Jocasta refuse to accept their traditional fate, once they both became fully aware of their deeds, in my opinion demonstrates Kurt's point: they now know, they cannot change the way they have felt, and they can live with that awareness, which, to Kurt's eyes, means that they have to admit and accept that family-ties are only a matter of a cultural construction. The natural drives prevailed and, at least from Kurt's perspective, would always prevail over those of the family. Being a cultural construction of the *Lebensunwertes Leben* and an obstacle to restoring the purity of the Master Race, the family can and must be eliminated. Indeed, at the end of the drama god-Kurt decrees the extermination of Saul-Myriam family, which is the fate – the German Fate – of all Jewish families.

Ecco, signori, da una parte gli ebrei con le loro casacche a righe; dall'altra il comandante del campo nella divisa delle SS. Ossia, signori, da una parte il Fato Tedesco. Dall'altra i rappresentanti di una razza che il Fato Tedesco ha condannato irrevocabilmente. Questa è la tragedia, non ce ne sono altre (*Kurt* 508).

(Here we are, Gentlemen. On one side, there are the Jews with their striped cassocks; on the other side, there is the chief commander of the lager with his SS uniform. That is to say, Gentlemen, on one side, (there is) the German Fate. On the other, (there are) the representatives of a race that the German Fate has irrevocably condemned. This is the real tragedy, there are no other tragedies).

In this way Kurt marks the end of the 'tragedy', the real one. Saul and Myriam will be forced to join again those «Jews with their striped cassocks» (*Kurt* 510).

5. *By Way of Conclusion: A Word on Myriam-Jocasta and Saul-Oedipus*

If Kurt's adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* ends with the triumph – so it seems – of the Nazi ideology as in Kurt's view the cultural experiment has demonstrated his point, Moravia's tragedy *Il dio Kurt* ends with the triumph of the brutality of that ideology and its practices. And while Kurt, with his 'divine' presumption of an absolute victory of the Nazi ideology, contemplates an experience of catharsis through the creation of 'The New Order' (*Kurt* 508-509), Moravia leaves us with no chance to experience the purifying release of emotional tensions that is expected as a cathartic effect at the end of a tragedy. We are left with the holdover from the horrors of the Holocaust, the real tragedy – as even Kurt admitted – a tragedy that is «not the tragedy of individuals, but of human beings who had become objects and numbers»⁶⁶.

Myriam and Saul are mere objects with a serial number on their arms, the only 'trait' that distinguishes them from the other objects, i.e., the other Jews in the concentration camp (*Kurt* 463-464). Through the fictional role that they are forced to take, respectively that of Jocasta and that of Oedipus, both 'objects' symbolize – and, I would think, critically denounce – the total loss of personal freedom and the passivity in front of the unthinkable

⁶⁶ GOLDFARB 1980, 8.

agency of such a cruel fate, as the German one. Myriam's forced assent to having intercourse with Saul, though aware of his identity, together with her refusal to follow *ad litteram* the original play script by not committing suicide, would represent the sense of hopelessness that the Jewish survivors have reportedly felt when they were unable to stop the abuse and the violence to which they have been subjected⁶⁷. The divergence from the Sophoclean Jocasta is an effect of the adaptation of the character to Kurt's experiment; and yet it allows the author to revive the horrors of an era that we all should not forget.

«Dolore, ecco che cos'è un deportato, dolore» (pain and suffering, this is a deportee, pain and suffering...: *Kurt* 463) Saul says when asked by Kurt if he is aware of who he is. But, as god Kurt corrects him, suffering – which we can agree can be considered the mark of the victims of the Holocaust – is not actually what typifies people like Saul: objectification is (*Kurt* 463)⁶⁸. As a result of his adaptation to Kurt's experiment, the subjugation of Sophocles' Oedipus to his fate turns into dehumanization, which is what the modern, German fate reserves for the Jews up to their

⁶⁷ There are several literary works by survivors of the Holocaust that speak of this feeling. One of the best known of those which resort to using classical myth is the novel *Meine Schwester Antigone* by the German-Jewish writer Grete Weil (1980). Survivor of the *Shoah*, by writing about Antigone Weil eventually faced the essential questions that she could no longer avoid: why she did not rebel, like Antigone, instead of aligning herself with Ismene and collaborating with the Nazis, as she became a member of a Jewish Council that helped the Germans deport Jews to the concentration camps in exchange for her own safety: see, e.g., FORNARO 2012, 151-167.

⁶⁸ Indeed, the way in which Kurt refers to Saul and to the camp's prisoners, alongside the treatment reserved for them, presents many of the features that characterize the category «objectification» as discussed by NUSSBAUM 1995, 279-283. Although the philosopher discusses it with reference to women, the traits of objectification that she outlines are universally applicable and match the Nazis' treatment of the Jewish as mirrored in Moravia's drama. On the other hand, one might remember Simone Weil's well-known criticism and denunciation of the 'objectifying' and 'dehumanizing' effects of violence in her essay *L'Illade ou le poème de la force* (1940): she states that violence turns into a 'thing' everyone who is affected by it. While the 'objectification' refers rather to the victims of violence, Weil refers to both the 'executioners' and the victims (perhaps with somewhat more emphasis on the first). This applies, in a way, to the Nazis too, as Kurt points out when he calls the audience's attention to the *indurimento* (spiritual hardening) that they have been appropriating through their violent actions, such an 'hardening' that led them to erase any scruples and any sort of pity for their victims (*Kurt* 455-456).

extermination. Likewise, the attempted rebellion against his fate by the traditional Oedipus, who did try to circumvent it by never going back to Corinth (Soph. *OT* 794-799), turns into a desperate attempt to rebel by the modern, new Oedipus, Saul, when he shot at his new Fate. Vain is the effort of both 'Oedipuses', for both rebellions were in the plan of each Fate, and did not change the course of events: in both cases Oedipus was doomed. In the end, to be born was the 'innocent-guilt' of Oedipus⁶⁹ both in Sophocles and in Moravia-Kurt's drama:

Il Fato Tedesco [...] punisce Saul non già perché ha ucciso suo padre e ingravidato sua madre; ma perché è nato (*Kurt* 507-508).
(The German Fate [...] does not punish Saul because he killed his own father and slept with his own mother; but because he was born).

So Kurt firmly states before he dies.

Although it is far away from the grandeur of Sophocles' Oedipus in the finale of his tragedy, the last gesture of Moravia's Oedipus-Saul has some greatness, too: his attack against Kurt is an attack against the German Fate, and thus against Nazi Germany. They – Kurt, German Fate, Nazi Germany – are the real violators of traditional values, such as the family itself, rather than Saul and Myriam, who have only been the means and the victims of their transgressions⁷⁰. But this greatness of Oedipus-Saul's last act is mostly overshadowed by the brutality and the sad reality of the *univers concentrationnaire* into which these modern Oedipus and Jocasta are «irrevocably» cast again.

Certo il nazismo è una mostruosità storica. Ma perché, ad un certo punto, nascono i mostri?
(Certainly Nazism is an historical monstrosity. But why, at a certain point [in the course of human history] do monsters come into the world?).

⁶⁹ The oxymoron 'innocent guilt' refers to the fact that, as is known, Oedipus could not be responsible for his birth, from which the inevitable sequence of crimes originated. If we can call someone responsible in Oedipus' story, this would be the father Laius, in turn a human agency of Fate.

⁷⁰ Regarding this, which seems a contradiction, see also PADUANO 2008, 174.

With these words Moravia once questioned himself while commenting on the 'genesis' of *Il dio Kurt*⁷¹, voicing the sense of helplessness that, together with the writer, we all can feel in the face of such a monstrosity as Nazism.

And, perhaps, the tragedy is that there is no explanation for the evil and monstrosity that repeatedly occurs in the history of humankind.

ABSTRACT

The play *Il dio Kurt* («God Kurt») written by Alberto Moravia in 1968 offers a brilliant re-elaboration of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in terms of denouncement of the terrible truth of the Nazi-legacy and the experiences of the Holocaust. Setting the story within the so-called *univers concentrationnaire*, through his titular character, Kurt, Moravia re-enacts the tragedy of Oedipus by presenting it as a Nazi 'cultural experiment', which is in line with the infamous 'scientific' experiments promoted by the *Führer* to pursue his racial 'dream', i.e., restore the purity of the Master Race, the Aryan, polluted by the Jews. This paper intends to provide a systematic analysis of Moravia's play in terms of reception of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* by offering a comparative reading of the Greek model and its Nazi adaptation. It thus explores the author's subtle mechanisms of appropriation of the Greek original within the context of Nazi ideology, to show how the modern author has re-proposed and adapted the essence of the ancient play to make it a vehicle of criticism of that ideology.

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⁷¹ This comment belongs to the interview mentioned above: see, n. 38.

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