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RADU STANCA'S OEDIPUS SAVED: REDEMPTION, AESTHETIC SOVEREIGNTY, AND THE END OF TRAGEDY

Abstract: The article examines Radu Stanca's *Oedipus Saved* as a radical modernist reconfiguration of the Oedipal myth and a deliberate interruption of the classical tragic paradigm. Rejecting the fatalistic logic that defines Sophoclean and post-Sophoclean versions of the myth, Stanca imagines an Oedipus who is redeemed rather than destroyed, shifting the emphasis from divine determinism to human agency, solidarity, and ethical self-understanding. Drawing on the conceptual framework of Franco Moretti's theory of "tragic sovereignty," the study situates *Oedipus Saved* within the Sibiu Literary Circle's aesthetic ideology, arguing that Stanca's play replaces the traditional deconsecration of sovereignty with its aesthetic transfiguration. Through extensive intertextual engagement and mythopoetic innovation, Stanca re-opens the tragic form to the possibility of metaphysical survival, rather than inevitable catastrophe. The article demonstrates that *Oedipus Saved* marks both a continuation and a rupture within European tragic discourse: it revives myth only to transform it into a modernist salvific narrative, where poetry and human insight triumph over the destructive logic of fate.

Keywords: Radu Stanca, Sibiu Literary Circle, modern tragedy, tragic sovereignty, deconsecration of power

Radu Stanca's *Oedip Salvat* [*Oedipus Saved*] stages one of the most striking ruptures in the long tradition of *Oedipal* tragedy: Oedipus does not fall. Instead, in a profound act of creative defiance, Stanca imagines a world in which the doomed king is redeemed—not by erasing his guilt, but by transforming it into meaning. This is not a tragedy of deconsecration, but a modernist salvific myth, where poetry

and thought intervene where gods and fate have failed. Within the broader arc of this paper, *Oedip Salvat* represents the moment where the tragic myth of sovereign collapse gives way to a metaphysical aesthetic of survival.

Written in the intellectual climate of the Sibiu Literary Circle,¹ a Romanian modernist group committed to the reinvention of cultural forms amid historical devastation, *Oedip Salvat* reflects a belief in the redemptive power of art and irony. Unlike Sophocles' or Seneca's Oedipus, who is destroyed by knowledge, or Cocteau's, who is trapped in psychoanalytic repetition, Stanca's Oedipus faces the revelation of his crimes. This moment is radical in the history of the myth: it asserts that tragedy is not fate, but a narrative structure that can be rewritten. In doing so, Stanca challenges the philosophical pessimism of tragic sovereignty as theorized by Moretti.² Rather than staging the disintegration of ethical and political order, *Oedip Salvat* offers a modernist counter-myth, in which the individual can be spared through insight, imagination, and compassion. The tragic scaffold is replaced by a poetic ascension.

For European culture, *Oedipus Rex* has represented the tragedy par excellence, profoundly shaping not only the cultural but also the spiritual history of humanity, through its deeply metaphorical insights into the human condition—as only the Greek tragedians were able to express. Tudor Vianu saw in Oedipus a clear embodiment of the myth of knowledge, especially emphasizing the character's ethical and intellectual value. He observed the distance between the works of the ancient Greeks and those of other civilizations of Antiquity, which tended to venerate either heroic men of action or major moral and religious figures, whereas the Greeks, "praised in Oedipus the power of genius, the solver of the Sphinx's riddles—that is, of the obscure questions nature poses to humankind."³

The complexity of the hero, the profound meaning of his struggle, the impossibility of escaping one's destiny, the fragility of the human being, and the unshakable resolve of the tragic protagonist have inspired numerous writers from Antiquity to the modern age. All major

1. On the Sibiu Literary Circle, see Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu and Klaus Heitmann, *Cercul Literar de la Sibiu*. Editura Universală, 2000; on Sibiu Literary Circle, and especially on Radu Stanca's place in the group, see Nicolae Balotă, *Arte poetice ale secolului XX* (Editura Minerva, 1976), 195–213.

2. See Franco Moretti, "A Huge Eclipse: Tragic Form and the Deconsecration of Sovereignty," *Genre Norman N.Y.* 15, no. 1–2 (1982): 7–40.

3. Tudor Vianu, *Studii de literatură universală și comparată* (Editura Academiei, 1963), 92, my translation. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

Greek tragedians engaged with the myth (though little is known about Aeschylus' version of Oedipus, except what can be inferred from *Seven Against Thebes*, which suggests that the original fault lay with Laius, who had violated the oracle's command; in Euripides' tragedy, Oedipus is blinded not by himself, but by Laius's companions, possibly during the skirmish in which he killed his father).

Seneca's version, although closely following Sophocles' model, is generally considered inferior in tragic power. However, it adds two notable scenes: one involving necromancy and another in which Tiresias sacrifices a victim to examine its entrails. In the modern era, the myth was reinterpreted by the French Renaissance playwright Robert Garnier, by Corneille, Voltaire, André Gide, Henri Ghéon (in *Le Crépuscule des Dieux*), Jean Cocteau (*The Infernal Machine*), and, in Romanian literature, by Victor Eftimiu (*Thebaida*) and George Enescu (in his opera *Oedipe*). In Cocteau's adaptation, the myth remains close to the original in the moment of Oedipus' recognition of the truth, but the author's tone is disarmingly cynical—as already suggested in the title. Ghéon, on the other hand—well-known for his Christian dramas—layers the Oedipus myth with themes of sacrifice and Christian suffering, bringing a new spiritual and redemptive dimension to the ancient tragedy.

At the heart of this myth lies a paradox that Franco Moretti has described as “tragic sovereignty,”⁴ the notion that absolute power carries within itself the seeds of collapse. In his reading of European tragedy, Moretti argues that the tragic form functions as a deconsecration of power, revealing how figures of authority are destroyed by the very logic of their position. The tragic hero, and particularly the tragic ruler, becomes a site of contradiction: invested with supreme authority yet ultimately powerless before forces—divine, psychological, or historical—that exceed their control. In this sense, the myth of Oedipus does not merely depict personal failure or divine punishment, but dramatizes the internal breakdown of sovereignty itself.

Moretti's article “A Huge Eclipse: Tragic Form and the Deconsecration of Sovereignty” explores how modern tragedy, especially in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, contributed to the ideological dismantling of sovereign authority. His central thesis is that tragedy functions historically to “deconsecrate” kingship, stripping it of its traditional ethical and divine legitimacy.⁵ This process is not revolutionary in the political sense, but it undermines the cultural

4. Moretti, “Huge,” 9.

5. Moretti, “Huge,” 7.

foundation of monarchy, making the eventual political rejection of absolutism possible. Tragic kings, like Lear or Macbeth, are shown as isolated, self-destructive figures, whose unchecked decisions lead to chaos. As traditional structures of meaning collapse, the audience is left without moral guidance, forced to think for themselves. In this way, tragedy helps deconsecrate political authority, paving the way for modern secular and critical thought.

The return to the literary form of the tragedy was assumed by Radu Stanca not only as a way of reaching a classical value, but also in the spirit of that new humanism he was providing. In an article dedicated to “the resurrection of the tragedy,” he explains extensively his interest in rediscovering the tragic values.⁶ In fact, the polemics concerning the topical nature of tragedy have given birth to a real trial since the nineteenth century, when Nietzsche announced and established, from a philosophical point of view, the disappearance of tragedy from the contemporary world.⁷ The twentieth century continued the discussions on the tragical existence and tragedy from the new perspective opened by the secularized modern society, in which no mythology is any longer possible. On the occasion of a lecture given in Athens, in 1955, entitled “The Future of Tragedy,” Albert Camus noted that the major periods of tragic art are situated in times of crisis, when the existence of the peoples is simultaneously burdened by glory and by threats, when the future is unsafe and the present is dramatic.⁸ In contemporary history, Camus distinguished a fertile ground for the restoration of tragedy, because the interwar man is tragic by excellence, a torn and contradictory individual, fully aware of the human being’s ambiguity. At the same time, the French philosopher and writer notices the signs of this revival in the literary works of his contemporaries, Gide, Claudel, and Montherlant, instinctively attracted to the sources of the tragic eras. The dominant opinion in the twentieth century is that tragedy no longer corresponds to the modern state of mind and sensitivity, deeply affected by the disappearance of the ancient tragical values (mythological, magical, and heroidal values).

Without any doubt, although they follow the precepts of ancient tragedy, Radu Stanca’s dramatic plays could hardly be attached to the genre. In fact, the author himself does not hurry to label them as “tragedies,” even if they present enough elements to be qualified

6. Radu Stanca, *Acvariu* (Editura Dacia, 1971), 237–45.

7. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, transl. WM. A. Haussmann (The Edinburgh Press, 1923).

8. Albert Camus, *Eseuri*, transl. Modest Morariu (Editura Univers, 1975), 29.

as such: *Madonna with the Smile* is a “little drama,” *Dona Juana* is a “tragic comedy,” *King, Priest and Prophet* is just a “play in three acts,” *Oedipus Saved* is a “drama in three acts,” *The Journey of the Magi* is a “tragic popular drama.” The real target of his plays is not the tragedy, but the tragic, as an aesthetical value, as evidenced in the cases of a “tragedy with ballets” (*The Faun and the Caryatid*), a “balladesque tragedy” (*The Dance of the Princesses*), or a “tragic vision” (*The Eye*). Unlike the so-called “infra-tragedy” defined by Jean-Marie Domenach as a tragedy inspired by a trivial and ridiculous reality, conceived as a farce or a parody,⁹ Radu Stanca’s plays don’t lack the tragic solemnity or the mythological dimension.

As I have already emphasized, Radu Stanca is more attracted to the origins of literature than by its originality, practicing a lofty artistic mimicry based on more or less transparent intertextual and cultural allusions. He replaces the data of the immediate reality with the literary ones, this intertextuality leading to the consolidation of a personal strategy through which the poet dissimulates the existential trauma by overbidding the interest for a certain literary mythology. Subsequently, it is not the literary mythology that attracts the writer, but its points of convergence with his artistic personality.

Radu Stanca also brings innovation to the myth, shifting the focus away from the gods’ unlimited and oppressive power toward a human strength—superior and liberated from the grip of absurd transcendence. The action of the play unfolds along the road between Thebes and Colonus, in a mountain glade that remains unchanged from beginning to end. It is the site of a decisive confrontation and the moment of Oedipus’s complete release from the tyranny of his merciless destiny. Here, between Thebes and Colonus, Oedipus shakes off the burden of a guilt that, ultimately, is not truly his. In *Oedipus Saved*, the tragic hero becomes aware of the absurdity of his culpability and refuses the deceitful aid of the gods. Stanca’s play begins precisely where Sophocles’ tragedy ends: if in *Oedipus Rex*, the protagonist takes responsibility for crimes committed in total blindness (foreshadowing the literal blindness he inflicts upon himself), Stanca presents a tormented individual longing to escape “the webs of the curse,” yet wandering aimlessly in a desolate space. His daughter, Antigone—the one guiding this “heaven-cursed exile”—believes that as long as Oedipus refuses to love the gods again, he will not find peace or light. However, Stanca’s Oedipus no longer trusts the

9. Jean-Marie Domenach, *Întoarcerea tragicului*, transl. Alexandru Baci (Editura Meridiane, 1995), 245.

goodwill of the gods: “Who are they and who am I? They, the infernal lightning bolt that fells trees across my path. They, the slanted rock that buries my straight road...”¹⁰

Although he delays invoking the Oracle, at his daughter’s pleading, he swallows his pride and asks for divine counsel. The Oracle reveals that his inner peace now depends on the murder of a man “on the road to Thebes”—in other words, salvation through yet another crime. Hounded by a never-ending fatality, Oedipus reacts with a natural revolt when the gods demand yet another sacrifice: “Oedipus: Were the gods not satisfied with the crimes I’ve committed so far? Again they place in my hand the murderous dagger? Again they stain me with innocent blood? Who am I? The bearer of all the sins of the cosmos? Whenever the gods conceive a new sin, I am the one they use to test it. I am their indifferent instrument. Why? Because I wanted the good of man. Because I saved Thebes...”¹¹ (Act I, Scene 2).

But the same Oracle also demands from Eumet, “the one longing for happiness,” that he sacrifice Oedipus—thus foreshadowing a “horrible hunt for death.” Symmetrically, Eumet’s fate is also decided in the same mountain glade between Thebes and Colonus. Both characters stand “on the summit,” between happiness and despair, impiety and salvation. According to the gods’ will, the liberation of one requires the sacrifice of the other.

Paradoxically, the most tragic hero in literature manages to slip through the eye of the net. Oedipus hopes that, perhaps, somewhere deep down beyond the reach of the gods, there exists a path to salvation. Eumet dares, in turn, to question the Oracle: “How do you know there isn’t something else in me that only I can unlock?”¹² Both characters come to discover that the “mystical alignments from beyond” can be defeated, and that the power to overcome crisis must be found within the self—in those invisible threads that bind people together, threads (the eternal illusion suggests) more enduring than the knots by which they are bound to the gods.

By building his new destiny on rational foundations, untainted by divine implication or the crime the gods asked of him, this “new” Oedipus is driven by the voice of a man “who defies blind powers.” Instead of carrying out the divinely ordered murders, the Oedipal pair chooses redemption: “One salvation brings another, just as one crime brings another. But now, the infernal tools have been returned to the

10. Radu Stanca, *Teatru* (Editura pentru Literatură, 1968), 140.

11. Stanca, *Teatru*, 147.

12. Stanca, *Teatru*, 159.

blind powers, and we are ready to leave.”¹³ Against division, they oppose—just like in *Ostatecul* [The Hostage]—human intelligence and solidarity. According to Ion Vartic, both plays are “dramas of hard-won reciprocity”¹⁴; when each character comes to understand the meaning of solidarity and revolt, they finally begin to see clearly, overcoming the divine arrangements. Man becomes the only valid measure, and the Oracle—echoing the monologues of the monk from *The Dance of the Princesses* and Don Fernando from *Dona Juana*—admits its defeat, acknowledging that between the dark forces of destiny and the luminous forces of freedom, there is a possibility for freedom to triumph.

Oedipus Saved provides a final resolution for the most representative tragic myth, presenting an Oedipus triumphant against the irrational forces, which was a very controversial dramatic solution: for Ion Vartic, *Oedipus Saved* means “the end of the tragedy”¹⁵; even his close friends, Ștefan Aug. Doinaș and I. Negoïțescu, have objections concerning the denouement of the action; Doinaș thinks that Radu Stanca only achieves the tragic atmosphere without the insertion of the final catastrophe, a situation that determines him to appreciate the play from its very title, a *contradictio in adjecto*.

Rereading the play four years after it was written, I. Negoïțescu shared a few observations with Radu Stanca in a letter dated October 7, 1951:

...you give destiny a note of arbitrariness, replacing fatality (with all the darkness and mystery the word entails) with play. In doing so, you eliminate that enigmatic order hidden within the chaos of absurdity. Meaning disappears—and with it, so does the tragic. Destiny degenerates into a perverse farce and ceases to be a lack of meaning in the world [...], an immorality, a fundamental metaphysical Evil embedded in the universal order.¹⁶

The critic proposes an alternative scenario to support the tragic atmosphere—one that would include a final catastrophe. According to Negoïțescu, the gods’ demand that Oedipus kill someone should be justified somehow: Oedipus would act as a divine instrument chosen to punish the “tragic guilt” of a specific person—Eumet. Oedipus should revolt, refusing to carry out his destiny (as he had attempted

13. Stanca, *Teatru*, 183–4.

14. Ion Vartic, *Radu Stanca: Poezie și teatru* (Editura Albatros, 1978), 87.

15. Vartic, *Radu Stanca*, 82.

16. Ion Negoïțescu and Radu Stanca, *Un roman epistolar* (Editura Dacia, 1998), 227.

in the past), but fate should still be fulfilled, to preserve the tragic impact of the drama:

I propose, then, that Oedipus refuses, even though Antigone—who represents the blind voice of destiny—urges him on. Antigone deceives Oedipus and (by switching the water flask) gives poison to Eumet. Eumet dies, and Oedipus, believing he has accidentally poisoned him, drinks from the same flask (thinking it contains clean water) and dies as well—without knowing that he had, in fact, defeated destiny (which, formally, was still fulfilled). As Oedipus dies, the Oracle appears—just like Don Fernando in *Dona Juana*—and philosophizes on destiny and Oedipus' salvation.¹⁷

Clearly, such a modification to the plot would have significantly changed the core of the play. But the author remained faithful to what he had always intended: the illusion that, somewhere—amid the shadows of fate and death—salvation is still possible. He created only the tragic atmosphere, without including the moment of final catastrophe.

Stanca's Oedipus is no less sovereign than his classical predecessors—he is still a king, still the symbolic center of a diseased city, still the bearer of a cursed past—but his sovereignty is reimagined as ethical consciousness. He becomes a figure not of tyrannical excess or doomed knowledge, but of existential possibility. Where Sophocles stages the price of epistemic clarity, and Moretti sees tragedy as the disintegration of the ideological support for kingship, Stanca proposes a third path: sovereignty as the poetic transcendence of ruin.

This reinterpretation aligns with the Sibiu Circle's belief that modernity must engage tradition not through repetition but transformation. *Oedip Salvat* does not discard myth; it resurrects it as a space of ethical and aesthetic renewal. In this sense, Stanca performs a double reversal: he saves Oedipus and saves tragedy from itself, not by denying suffering but by allowing for the possibility of redemption beyond the structure of classical doom. Radu Stanca's *Oedip Salvat* marks a startling rupture in this lineage. By imagining that Oedipus is saved, Stanca offers not a denial of tragedy but an interruption, a poetic gesture that reopens myth to possibility. Here, sovereignty is neither divine nor despotic, but a capacity for ethical vision. Where Moretti sees tragedy as the unmasking and dismantling of ideological power, Stanca proposes a final alternative: not the collapse of sovereignty, but its transfiguration through art.

17. Negoitescu and Stanca, *Roman epistolar*, 228.

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