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**Re-membered pain in John Jesurun’s Philoktetes**

*What I cannot see, I can touch.*

*What I cannot touch, I can see.*

*What I cannot see, I can imagine.*

*What I can   imagine is mine to keep. What I cannot imagine is not mine*

***John Jesurun, Philoktetes***

*Even in the midst of other people, everybody's locked inside his own world*

***John Jesurun***

We know that in standard theatre, language is used to advance plot, create character, provide exposition and resolve tensions. In short, language "embodies an attitude towards explanantion and truth that is not untypical of attitudes we frequently bring to bear on our own lives" (Quigley 1985: 223). This is not the case, however,
with the work of many contemporary American playwrights whose narrative structures not only avail from guaranteeing a basic explanation for dramatic situations and conflicts, but constantly refine techniques to avoid it, "ingeniously complicating the process of writing, and thus extending the Stein tradition one generation further" (Robinson 1994: 180). According to Robinson, "Stein was the first American dramatist to infuse the basic materials of dramatic art with independent life, making them noteworthy themselves. She reanimated language, letting it be heard for its own sensual qualities, no longer just serving stories but now aspiring to the same radiance as, say, a wash of paint on an abstract-expressionist canvas. She rethought the use of gesture in the theatre, devising a poetics of movement, wherein simple actions have beauty and significance apart from their functions. The rhythms of dialogue, the syntax of sentences, and the physical relationships among characters became as important as what they said" (1994: 2-3). Commenting on the term "langscape" that Bowers introduced to describe Stein's work (1991: 26), Carlson claims that Stein's plays "rarely if ever are involved as landscape would seem to be, with the verbal depiction or evocation of a scene, but that they nevertheless are involved with spatial configurations of language itself that, like landscapes, frame and freeze visual moments and alter perception" (Carlson 2002: 147. Also Fuchs 1996: 94-5).[[1]](#footnote-1)[1] If one shifts attention from Stein's langscape to more contemporary langscapes created by playwrights like Mac Wellman, Richard Foreman, Caridad Svich, Sam Shepard, Maria Irene Fornes, David Greenspan, Adrienne Kennedy, Suzan-Lori Parks, Eric Overmyer, Len Jenkin, Jeffrey Jones, Wallace Shawn and John Jesurun, among others, will see that the connotations of Bowers' interesting neologism are even more varied. As Carlson once again observes, moving "outward from Stein's spatial arrangemnets of language in general to verbal explorations of the language of space itself, of geography, of mapmaking, of travel, even of astrology" recent American dramatists create plays "for the ear and the imagination" rather than the eye (2002: 147) Released from its traditional requirement to tell a story and create psychologically developed characters, their language acquires the dynamics of performance, offering shelter to emotionally complex structures and fleeting thoughts that to be appreciated require "the multiple, moment-to-moment shifting focus of postmodern spectatorship" (Fuchs 1996: 102).

**Jesurun's playfield(s)**

John Jesurun began his artistic career at Yale where he experimented with sculptures that moved. Under the influence of Bunuel, he turned to writing and shooting short filmscripts and from there he went to La Mama and started making plays ―"pieces in spaces," he calls them in his bio note that prefaces his play *White Water* (1987: 76)― where he proposes a postmodern *poiesis* that loosens its historically representational moorings and opts for a stage world where everything is blurred, fragmented and juxtaposed, a mixture of  live and prerecorded voices, a collage of quotations, analogies and images, that needs to be contextualized with―read with and against―other cultural forms like films, television and comics in order to be fully understood and appreciated. Jesurun's theatre is not "the theatre of good intentions" that Mac Wellman talks about in his provocative essay on the present state of American theatre. Nor is it a theatre of "Eucledean characters," where "each trait must be perfectly consonant with every other play". It is a theatre where fantasy spins out in a stream of images and dreams that create an edgy, intuitive path that explores "the full damage done by the onslaught of political lies, right-wing hucksterism, and general consumer-society madness on the inner person" (Wellman 2002: 236).

In Jesurun's  halllucinogenic universe time, place and identity are in a constant flow. Each scene emphasizes the discontinuity of the mind's performance rather than its continuity, but most importantly, it emphasizes the importance of language, whose tones, cadences, pitches, volume, pacing, in short its continuous variability provides the vehicle to enter the private zones of memory and create a playfield of gaps, absences, abjections, and unexpected combinations of intense dramatic moments  that body forth "the coexistence in [a single] sentence of an infinite series of viewpoints" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 19, 167), each containing its own  intricate layering of meanings that not only erases clear cut divisions between real and imaginary, living and dead, male and female, but also keeps the reader/viewer always uncertain as to the meaning of things. Everytime a sentence (or a scene) ends, earlier conclusions no longer hold. The reader/viewer must start over. In other words, their whole is not experienced as a unit but as "moments" or "turns" (Watt 1998: 8), an accumulation of multiple engagements with the spoken and sung words whose complexity follows the disobedient instincts of the imagination rather than the orderliness of the intellect, thus adding to the readers' (or viewers') frustration, since they are always trying to figure out what the writer is trying to do and how s/he fits in with the things they know about drama in general as well as about life.

*Philoktetes*, a play Jesurun wrote specifically for Jan Ritsema's 1994 production at *Kaaitheater* in Brussels with the umbrella title *Philoktetes-Variations* ―based on three modern renderings of Sophocles' tragedy (the other two being André Gide's and Heiner Müller's, each in its original language)― is a good example of his postmodern aesthetic and ideological concern with the problematics of identity, an idea we also encounter in his earlier work (*Deep Sleep* and *White Water*, among others). *Philoktetes* is unique among Greek tragedies. For one thing, this is the only tragedy without a single female character. There are also fewer characters than in any other play of Sophocles. Its ambiguity is also remarkable. The constant interplay between truth telling and fabrication, health and disease, human and beastial, its dichotomy between signifier and signified, its complex interchange between texts and subtexts, sanity and insanity, make the spectators continually unsure of its premises, forcing them to delve below the surface of the spoken and acted word to understand what the character really feels or intends to do (Ringer 1998: 106).

This multiple layering seems to perfectly fit the writing style of artists like Gide, Müller and others who take advantage of the text's hidden performative potential, its contradictions and ambiguities, to explore new ways of presenting the subject and the subject's abject.  In Gide's reading of the story, for example, the focus is on the existentialist progression "from love of one's country, to love of another, and finally to the most valid love: love of self" (McDonald 2003: 9). In Müller's text the attention is on Philoktetes as the anti-Greek betrayer of nation and national virtues, an antisocial element which in former Eastern Bloc countries implied punishment (Philoktetes is killed by Neoptolemus: the subversive element must die) (Laermans 1994: 69-70). In Jesurun's adaptation death has actually won. Philoktetes speaks from the underworld. What we watch now is a*memento mori,* the linguistic performance of a ghostly mind haunted by memories. Jesurun draws on Sophocles' imagery of disease to highlight the isolation of his central hero by turning language into the primary site in which the effects of this isolation are detailed.

**Re-membering pain, re-enacting death**

The play opens with an actor carried to his grave, while a funeral is being performed on stage. It is Philoktetes' funeral who is now cast in the role of a "talking corpse narrating," a desiring "I" without organs, a "nomadic subjectivity"[[2]](#footnote-2)[2] whose main concern is man's quest for a healed, unified self in the age of postmodernity. Ron Vawter, the American actor who embodied Philoktetes three times in Jan Ritsema's triptych, naked and covered with purple Kaposi rash, made the connection between the performance's "here and now" and the story's "there and then" as well as between life and  death, subject and abject in his first audience address when he said that he was suffering from AIDS: "I am dying, I am on my way to the grave but am just doing this performance on the way" (Laermans 1994: 68). His confession brought together the two circumstances in which the body's material presence is undeniable, according to Forte. One is that of pain and another is that of live performance (1992: 51). As an actor Vawter made his body so manifestly and painfully there that it shaped the process of reception of the character. That is, by inserting his own narrative enclaves of loss and pain, he brought into play and into the play two aspects of himself: a) the performer who fabricates these impressions and b) the character who is the impression fabricated by an ongoing performance which entails them both. It is in cases like this that the theatrical metaphor about which Goffman talks takes hold: talk about the self is not so far removed from enactment (Goffman 1959: 252).[[3]](#footnote-3)[3] And to a certain degree, my reflections in this essay are influenced by the theatrical representation and the recovery of the body's presence in a memory play, where this presence is foregrounded and validated through a combination of Brechtian representational techniques with an Artaudian interest in bodily affliction (and abjection).

Like Mac Wellman's dead narrator Scheherazade in *The Land of Fog and Whistles*, who "every god damn night for 24.161 years [...] must tell a story and everyday the story must be different, only the story I tell is always the same" (1993: 53, 54), Philoktetes' ghostly body can be reconstituted only in the space between its disappearance and the memory of it. Everyday he has to enter acting space to re-enact events already enacted, to re-visit places and re-experience emotions, re-store, re-configure all the things that conspire to erase the traces of his personal history, that is time, lethe, absence. What he is called to do is an act of re-membering, and re-membering, as Carlson argues in his book on the haunted stage, is theatre; since the pre-existing discursive field can never be recovered, it can only recycle past perceptions and experience in imaginary configurations that, although different, are powerfully haunted by a sense of repetition (Carlson 2004: 3). Along similar lines States notes that "If something is to be remembered at all, it must be remembered not as what happened but as what has happened again in a different way and will surely happen again in the future in still another way" (States 1993: 119).[[4]](#footnote-4)[4] This process of repetition (of loss, pain, decay etc) is most useful for uprooted or variously colonized or marginalized people in the sense that it can provide a crucial discursive terrain for reconsolidating selfhood and identity. The very act itself keeps certain moments of thought alive, giving people the time to reflect on things with greater self-consiousness and if necessary take action. As Walter Benjamin points out, memory "creates a chain of tradition which passes a happening on from one generation to another" (1969: 98). Absence of memory produces feelings of anxiety and fear and fills the "idea of death [...] with profound terror" (Benjamin 1977: 139). Yet not everything is memorable, says Nietzsche; only that which never ceases to hurt stays in memory (1967: 61). And that is the case of Philoktetes who, being inside the system of pain, facilitates the memory to repeat it without fear―and that is a form of resistance.

 "Listen to me. I'm telling you something. So that you' ll learn the value of suffering, the [....] language of the dead. I'm telling you something. You tell someone else and they'll tell someone else" (1994: 71). Philoktetes's "Listen to me" alludes to Hercules' closing lines in the original text ―"Listen to my words" (l. 1420)― that tell the audience what will happen next as well as to Gertrude Stein's work *Listen to Me,* where we are invited to watch the writer-protagonist confront a fragmented world of experience and accomodate it in her life. In the place of Neoptolemus' question *ti draso* ("What shall I do?") that foregrounds the strong ethical dimension of the original tragic *agon* as well as the issues of choice, decision and action, in Jesurun it is Philoktetes' painscript  and the act of its (theatrical) repetition that take center stage and provide the play with its special rhythm. Since the original suffering and the intensity of it can never be recovered ―only "a shadow of its aversiveness can be grasped" (Scarry 1985:  215)― Philoktetes can only enter into the thoughts himself and turn his adventures into "sites of memory," that is an imitation (repetition) of the former pain of a former self, of a former life, of a former living body,[[5]](#footnote-5)[5] forcing things out of joint, out of bounds and out of time, in the sense that the memory, let alone the very "experience of pain itself, creates its own time out of interrupted time, its own coherence out of incoherence" (Frank 1997: 65).

For the performance site of this cinematographically structured twelve-scene re-telling of betrayal, pain and death, Jesurun maintains Sophocles' barren landscape of Lemnos, but not the central image of Philoktetes' primitive dwelling "with the two entrances" (l. 16-17).[[6]](#footnote-6)[6] Jesurun's Philoktetes, being kicked out "of the cripple wing because [he] was making too much trouble" (1994: 77), now lives alone in a horrible hotel, drinks marguerita and sometimes soaks his wounded leg in it.  The performance field Jesurun reconceives for his dead hero is mostly a linguistic rather than a mimetic one that yields itself to an array of interpretations, ranging from the "black hole" of discrimination (Philoktetes was thrown off board due to his bad smell and present uselessness),[[7]](#footnote-7)[7] to a prison cell, a red neon light district, a post apocalyptic no-place where meaning stubbornly refuses to arrive or arise, to a metaphor of a horrible, disintegrating world ―possibly the underside of postmodern (American) culture― and most importantly to a magical space, an extension of the human mind that reveals the creative powers of the individual soul as boundaries between subjective and objective, self and universe, life and death, theatre and reality were annihilated. Within this unspecified field, anthing goes, Philoktetes tells us.

What I cannot see, I can touch.

What I cannot touch, I can see.

What I cannot see, I can imagine.

What I can imagine is mine to keep.

What I cannot imagine is not mine. (75)

Like Beckett's *Endgame*, where the *mise en scéne* operates as the visual image of Ham's *mise en abyme, Philoktetes* is structured as a succession of present instants that "externalize an internal conflict occasioned by an event to which the mind must respond" (Andreach 1998: 154). In his isolation, cut off from the healthy human society for ten years, living with and like the beasts, Philoktetes has learned to  put up with his "impure, evil-smelling, unclean thing god has inflicted curse and malediction, contempt and abusement, infamy, ire and degradation as upon no other people" (78). In other words, he has learned what it means to live in a body as a body, a suffering body, a rejected body and gradually a degendered (a dead) body. [[8]](#footnote-8)[8] As Garner observes, in extreme situations such as exhaustion, and in the case of gravely ill patients consumed by suffering, there is a tendency to withdraw from the world and the live human body into a physical body that begins to feel like a burden, no longer "belonging" to the patient. This strong sense of the loss of self along with an awarenss of the physical body as "thing" within the lived body allow "the materiality of the body and its vulnerable articulations not only to  exemplify but constitute the semantics of performance" (Garner 1994: 109, 44).

Philoktetes' presence is first felt through his groan that establishes pain as the overwhelming image: the signifying body *in extremis.* [[9]](#footnote-9)[9] And since the language of pain has no referential content to express, one must both "objectify its felt characteristics and hold steadily visible the referent for those characteristics (Scarry 1985: 4, 9, 17). Within this context it is with special significance that the part of the body that is bleeding in both texts of *Philoktetes*  is the "harsh-devouring," "blood-drinking" (l. 694-5), "beast-infested" (l. 698) foot.

As Stallybrass argues in his informative article "Footnotes," traditionally the foot has been a sign of power. For example,  kissing the feet of the Pope was (and in many ways still is) a custom indicating submission. By  putting his feet upon his enemies, Marlowe's Tamburlaine makes them his footstool.  The poor are  "what the social body walks with and what the social body bruises [....] The foot is what is stepped on. But the head of society is never footless; the head's feet are the active instruments of subordination" (1997: 314-15). There has always been a connection between the limping of the body and the limping of the body politic. Those who are fortunate have firm and solid feet. The less fortunate, drag them like Philoktetes or limp like Falstaff or lean on a crutch like Northumberlamd in *Henry IV* or have feet of clay or "putst the wrong foote before" (Dent, in Stallybrass 1997: 315). Caliban is a "footlicker" ready to kiss Stephano's feet (2.2.149, 152) (also Stallygrass 1997: 315). Sophocles' Philoktetes calls his foot "my jailer, my executioner" (l. 785-6). His objectified foot takes on an existence independent of himself. "Pain... pain... Demon pain.../Twisting, torturing.../ My foot.../How can I bear it?/ Why can't I die?" (l. 1185-89), Sophocles writes. "My leg, the smell, the pain, the howl. My toe, my foot, my leg, my legacy," Jesurun re-writes (1994: 86). "I recognize you by your foot," Neoptolemus tells Philoktetes who answers back: "My foot is dead, kid. I was looking at it outside. It had one fly on it. Fuck my foot kid, I' m nobody. Who am I? No one" (1944: 91). The disease that pursues him also marks him as its own. "Tragic characters," Worman writes, "who come into contact with this monstrous element [of pain and frenzy] often become marked by physical excretion: froth at the mouth, excrescent diseases, or dripping gore" (1995: 6). Like Alcestis's veil in Euripides' play, appropriate to mourning, Philoktetes' bite inscribes on his body his internal disturbance, signaling his subject position as one caught between life and *thanatos* ("dead foot walking," 71), the unspeakable and the unrepresentable. Part a daemonic mass and part human, half way between one state and another, the diseased body of Philoktetes, eludes fixed categorization and defeats Odysseus's logic. Philoktetes is very accurate when he says: "[...] leave your bags of logic and order packed. They don't mean a thing here in the vicinity of my putrid leg" (86).

In similar terms, his bow, the most powerful stage object in Greek drama, as Michael Walton says (1987: 89), a divine weapon  given to him by Heracles out of gratitude for the lighting of the funeral pyre on Mount Oeta― and now used to kill animals and ensure the possessor's survival― hints at Philoktetes' hybrid status, his imaginary "other" face, the power of a powerless body whose grip on cities and nations can still be a distabilizing element. The meeting of the bleeding body and the bloody bow result in a hybrid body, present and absent at the same time, strong and weak, heroic and degraded, "less than a god, less than a man" (74), "a rotting aubergine covered in red garlic sauce," a human being and a "stinking thing" (74).[[10]](#footnote-10)[10] Philoktetes is never fully defined. As Bronfen notes, a corpse cannot be gendered; it is an "anonymous, inanimate body, pure materiality without soul or personality [....] the corspe is a figure without any distinguishing facial traits of its own [...] semiotically it serves as an arbitrary, empty, interchangeable sign, an interminable surface of projections" (1992: 64). The thingness of the dead body allows the ghostly narrator to look at it from a certain Brechtian and Artaudian perspective ―"inside out" (89). At one point Philoktetes is presented as a "goddess" (72), somewhere else as "self-born" (72),  at another point as a "woman" (73), an "animal" (75), "a ghost" (88), a fabricated absence and elsewhere as an imagined presence.

Philoktetes: This is my place. My body.

Odysseus: And we want it, dead or alive.

Philoktetes: Seeing that it's neither. You can't have it (88).

The body is projected as an arena of political contest, ontological debate and theatrical display, the interface between subject and world, the site of the abject, a thing body given its full weight and physical presence at the same time that is erased. Like Prospero, Philoktetes' ghost is conducting his own magic by rearranging the performing spaces of (dis)appearances. Look, see, here it is―now you can see it, now you cannot. He does not see Neoptolemus and Odysseus as saviors but as intrudors who "interrupt" his experience and performance of pain.

Philoktetes: You came back because you want me to wipe the disgrace off your face. [...]

My foot may be rotting but you are the rot.

 We' re a triangle and indivisible, one nation under an absent god, and you broke the triangle

and now you' ve come to put it back together.

I' m the stinking missing link you' ve been searching for these ten years.

Odysseus is so unfeeling, unscrupulous and cunning that he is ready to do anything not to fail. He is honest enough when he says: "Me in this body who would eat my own children, sleep with my mother, rape my sister, kill my father, give birth to my own brother, destroy my own family to preserve what's left of it. If that's what I have to do" (78-79). Odysseus has no personal stake, except that stake in success (Winnington-Ingram 1980: 282). He also wants to find out what Philoktetes has learned being there all alone, performing amid the sole company of animals. Can he ever go back to civilized society? To what state of mind is he brought? As mentioned earlier, Philoktetes can only share the performance of the pain but not pain itself; "I' d love to share the pain with you but it's not possible. You see, I' ve become very greedy with it. What have you learned since you left me here? (79).

As long as Philoktetes was destroying on the battlefield (an)other's body, he was unaware of pain and death, of colonizers and colonized. He was society's useful tool for manipulating power relationships and relocating subject positions. It is only upon turning to his own body position and materiality that he finally finds out things about himself, his subjecthood. Watching his body decay in total isolation, he comes to grips with his own (and others') reality, with the fact that there is nothing god-like about the observed body, particularly the body in crisis.[[11]](#footnote-11)[11] Like Hamlet, Philoktetes discovers mortality stinks, smells, suffers, bleeds, vomits, "shits in the ocean, then on the altar to the crucified, then in the temple, then on the words that tell nothing" (83). Neoptolemus and Philoktetes stichomythic exchange is revealing enough for it comes to reinforce the early connection between human and animal, inside and outside, subject and abject.

Neoptolemus: Tell me, what god's asshole have you climbed out of to have ended up in this toilet? Who excreted you, who vomited you up? What jeckyl-headed god's spleen hurled you up? What faghag goddess gave birth to you, and why?

Philoktetes: What neurotic soul dreamed you into my galaxy of pain?

Neoptolemus:  [....] What steaming pustle erupted you? [....]

Philoktetes: And what god's fart blew you here to disturb my peace and quiet? To interrupt my pain? [....]

Neoptolemus:  What satyr ejaculated you into my sphere?

What impotent ant spit you in a fit of disgust? [....}

What dying man exhaled you? What reeking hyena rejected you? [....]

What cell mutated you into existence?  (84).

In this fragmented litany of abuse, this eruptive speech bubble with the synesthetic quality, the act of speaking takes precedence over every other aspect of the story; it renews its energies as it restlessly moves from one unpredictable utterance to another, it acquires life at the moment it expends itself. And, as it does, the spectator moves along, never tired of following its nonsequential manner for there is a sense of discovery for him/her as well. No shared grand narrative holds its ground here. Along with the body's self-transcendancy, the oracle is also demythologized. We are told that it "was written by some horny, monkey-fucking monk and you know it" (Jesurun 1994: 82). The language of the classic heroes is debased and so are the origins and the act of birthing. Identity as a coherent stable whole is once again challenged and gender switched. Jesurun foregrounds the key images of physical and social decay through the various parts of the fragmented body and their function (heart, health, excretory organs, bones, joins) and watches the deepening entrapment of the subject in the sphere of materiality, of how pain objectifies the human body in its material being. The body that is mortal, "isolated within itself, subject to the annihilating force of pain, the suffering body, emblem of this condition is no longer," as Garner argues, "the seat of an externalizing productivity, the center of an individual and social *Lebenswelt*; instead, it becomes something thinglike and objectal [...] a self-enclosed point of sensation in a derealized world empty of human content" (Garner 1994: 168).

**Border aesthetics and hybridities**

The creation of boundaries through the articulation of space protects the destabilization of subjectivity, Lutterbie writes, "while allowing the subject relative freedom of movement. The negative effect of these boundaries is that they place limits on others and on their ability to experience the same freedom of self-expression" (1997: 87). By transversing cultures (ancient/modern, Greek/American), ontologies (dead/alive, male/female, theatre/life) and landscapes (real/imaginary, centre/margins), Jesurun makes all sorts of boundaries negotiable. It is clear from the way he recreates Sophocles' narrative that he is not interested simply in re-entering the well-guarded mythscape of the old text to reproduce the familiar but also to transgress it, to give his own voice to it, to accomodate his postmodern aesthetic. In many ways he does what Derrida does with words: he discovers within the meaning of things their opposite member. It is as if he is telling us that we both need the classic model in order to understand the points being made, and simultaneously should reconsider its significance. To this end he creates a polysymous no-man's land that allows Philoktetes to operate as a hybrid subjectivity that passes from one field to another, a postmodern "border creature" excluded from membership in the Greek polis (or its modern equivalents) and at the same time a crucial figure in the fight against Troy; almost dead yet in possession of a deadly weapon which can lead to more deaths; human but living on Lemnos like an animal ("you are the lowest of all animals" 75), a character in a drama and also a performer of it, extremely vulnerable and yet invincible (thanks to Heracles' bow), a man but also with the woman within. "Would you like to bleed without pain? Drink milk instead of stagnant water," the creatures of the island ask him as soon as he arrives there.

A woman holds the moon in her body [....] A woman can hold life in her body [....] A woman can bleed painlessly. A woman can produce milk [....] I believe you are soon to become a woman." [....] Several weeks later I began menstruating. (74-5)

What is forgrounded here is the idea that the biological subject is not a stable site of self-transcending subjectivity―the object-world it inhabits no longer supports its self-transcendance― but a vulnerable and ever changing "heap of assembled parts" (Braidotti 1994: 12) that is permanently degendered by the intrusion of death. This is a typical case where the body becomes the site of the abject which, as Kristeva says, generally resides at the borders of the subjective identity's existence and makes itself known by that which disrupts people's sense of propriety, aesthetics and order (Kristeva 1982: 13 and Tompkins 1997: 505). In  Sophocles the last minute intervention of Heracles, the *deus ex machina*, disempowers the abject and forces Philoktetes into compliance with the preordained pattern. The god's verbal contact drives the exiled hero away from the "uncivilized," pre-linguistic marginal space and back to the civilized and healthy society that has betrayed him. As Ian Kott points out, "healing is always payment for submission;" and Philoktetes is the "only one of Sophocles' tragic heroes who is broken" (1973: 169, 181). He quickly forgets his commitment to a heroic code of values that prohibits his return to an army that had rejected him, and bids farewell to the painful yet creative and "unruly" Lemnos/Theatre of Dionysus ―like Prospero's farewell to his island/theatron in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (Ringer 1998: 125). In more political terms, "all social systems are vulnerable at their margins, and ... all margins are accordingly considered dangerous"(Butler 990: 132), so Philoktetes' relocation minimizes his disruptive potential. The boundaries of the body are kept together, but not in Jesurun's version where Philoktetes stays on this "rock like a cold piece of meat" (90) and calmly accepts his isolation, mental and geographic. After all, the people he "could remember were dead. Or if they were alive, they probably were so old that they couldn't remember me. But there was no way I could ever get back, because you see, in time the geography between here and there had gotten farther and farther apart" (91). His experience has opened his mind to a deeper knowledge of the human condition and deeper insights into the essence of things. At first "I had wanted to tell you about my deep and unrelenting and unequivocal disbelief and unbelief in everything. But now I have changed my mind" (71). By the end of the play living with his deformed body and unbearable pain acquires nobility. All the things that have posed a threat to identity throughout the play by making the body alien, they have also conferred identity, a sense of selfhood to the individual.

His final attitude embodies a very personal, almost Dionysian response to pain and death: resistance and hope and in the end a realistic acceptance. In Sophocles, Philoktetes wants those who caused him pain to suffer: "My life is torture― but if I see them dead,/ If you punish them, I' ll think my pain is cured" (l. 1043-45). Lemnos may not have turned him from a hero into a beast, but it has intensified his hatred and resentment. We have to wait for the coming of Heracles to bring cure,  glory, and a new language (of unity). Jesurun's Philoktetes, on the other hand, finds beauty "in the center of all ugliness" (75).

I used to love my beautiful little body, my skin, my smell, my blood, my body. If no one else will love it then I will love it because it's mine and only mine. My skin, my smell, my blood, my body. Mine and only mine becasuse it's mine and beautiful because it can endure even its own ugliness. Mine and only mine. Mine by right of conquest (82-3)

Jesurun has created a character who refuses the fate assigned to him by myth and decides not to abandon his performance space and serve the group's needs.

 So I realized I just had to stay here and live with it.

 And so I'm staying here and I' m happy to stay here.

One day that door opened and it filled up with light.

 And I went outside where everyone else was.

And everything else just became memory.

And so that's it.

Good night. (91)

The journey that has begun as a perforrmative adventure in an unfriendly landscape has gradually extended into an esoteric landscape of the soul (a *mise en abyme*). By the end of the play we feel literally enveloped by a thick layer of dark, post-apocalyptic images and words that help us enter an entire field, the "total environment of the performance, as performance, and as an imaginative construct. We are no more transported to another world than we banish all other worlds" (Fuchs 1996: 106). In this sense there is involvement, but it is a disorienting one. Philoktetes' statement early in the play prepares us for this lack of closure: "I'd like to read a nice book now and then with a story in the middle that goes nowhere" (71). Robinson makes the point when he writes that "one never leaves these plays believing an idea has been definitely dissected or a passion fully spent" (1994: 182). There is always something left behind, suspended in mid air. As Philoktetes promises, he will first give us "the clue, then the story, then the real story. First, what they saw, then what was seen, then what was" (71). The only way to engage in this performative, open-ended event is not through realistic viewing but meditatively, through the eyes of the imagination, being prepared to go where an unpredictable word or image or character might wander and be able to enjoy the new places that language, the soul΄s and body's adventures open up, without the guarantee of a finale, the stillness of an exit that would resolve all tensions and lead to some kind of catharsis.

According to Andreach, Jesurun refuses to resolve the questions his play raises, because, "to resolve them is to choose one set of answers over another―to choose naturalistic humankind's determination over metaphysical humankind's hope."  Furthermore, "in terms of the theatrical self, ending the quest means settling on a permanently fixed, unitary standard, which is death. In theatre as in life, Apollonian form opposes Dionysian fluidity, which is life, the flux which generates creativity." What he finally claims is that one's wholeness contains multiplicity, which in turn contains contradictions and ambiguities. The resolution therefore lies within "the self which, containing multiplicity, can channel impulses into choices" (Andreach 1998: 157, 158). Tompkins general comments on abjected bodies apply here: "These multiply located bodies make no attempt to incorporate a whole: they express, physically as well as psychically, the multifarious manifestations of the self/identity/subject position. There are no illusions of unity: the selves remain fragmented ..." (1997: 510).

**In conclusion**

Jesurun's lang-scaped play is far from affectless or ahistorical. It confronts and reconceives the unity of the past in the hope of being able to go forward. By recapturing Sophocles' traumatic story as a re-membered moment and binding it up with the postmodern Now, Jesurun comments on the meaning of suffering and how suffering affects the (dis)unity of the (performing) body and by extension the (dis)unity of the social body of present America which, cluttered with memories of war, of "futile fightings in the Indochimney" (74), of pain, of betrayal and violence, threatens "to overwhelm its anguished inhabitants" (Carlson 2002: 152). Philoktetes' words to Odysseus sum up things for us:

[...] take the bow back to Troy and win the battle for the empire. Pile the bodies high, and when you' re done with that, prepare the next pile. Because the thought that brought you here demands ten times ten skyscrapers full [....] of beautiful bodies in sxreaming red sacks [....] all to glorify our own stupid selves; and then goes on and offers him another blood and honey sandwich (76).

The prophetic words of Georg Büchner's Danton fit quite nicely here: "These days everything is worked in human flesh. That's the curse of our times" (1977: 67). The list of lost heroes before the Trojan gates easily stands in for fallen soldiers and social outcasts in the "real" world surrounding the theatre performance (Ringer 1998: 110). There are no winners in this "battle," Jesurun concludes. "All are defeated [....] Convinced that the enemy is the dead body. Instead of screaming at each other, they scream at the body. Instead of insulting each other, they insult the body" (87).

Philoktetes: What a horrible world you must live in.

Odysseus: You live in it, too.

Philoktetes: I don't live in it. I live under it (79).

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1. [1] Stein is very precise when, talking about her play *Four Saints in Three Acts,* says that she "made the Saints the landscape [....] A landsacpe does not move nothing really moves in a landscape but things are there, and I put into the play the things that were there" ( (1988: 128-29).   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [2] Nomadic subjects, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, "pass from one field to another by crossing thresholds: we never stop migrating, we become other individuals [...] and departing becomes as easy as being born or dying" (1983: 85). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [3] As Lutterbie notes, it is also here that performativitycomes into being, that is, a series of acts that can happen only once because the state, having been brought into being, can only be reinscribed through repetitions that cannot alter the situation. In other words, if  performativity is bringing into existence a state of being through an act, whether linguistic or a subversion of gender, performance is precisely the act: the doing that enacts signification (1997: 15). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [4] This is particularly striking in postmodern theatre, Carlson argues, which has tended to favor "material haunted by memory, but in an ironic and self conscious manner quite different from classical usage [....] the postmodern theatre is almost obsessed with citation, with gestural, physical, and textual material consciously recycled, almost like pieces of a collage, into new combinations with little attempt to hide the fragmentary and 'quoted'  nature of these pieces" (2004: 14). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [5] Rimmon-Kenan talks about the "performance of the absence," in her essay on the paradoxes of repetition (1980: 156). See also Bronfen's essay on repetition and representattion (1993: 103-29). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [6] A doubleness metaphorically most fitting for the doubleness of the ensuing action and also an appropriate topos of encounter between mortals and the divine, reality and magic, life and death (Ringer 1998: 72). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [7] Odysseus comments in the original story are revealing enough: "Even at Festivals,/ We hardly dared touch the wine or meat:/ He gave us no peace; day and night, he filled/ The Whole camp with groans and cursesm cries/ Of ill omen that spoiled the sacrifice" (l. 9-12). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. [8] This Brechtian detachment from and subsequent observation of the body also echoes Heiner Müller's Hamlet in *Hamletmachine*  whose opening lines ―"I was Hamlet. I stood at the shore and talked with the surf, BLABLA, the ruins of Europe in back of me"― point, among other things, to the actor/character relationship as well as to the body's deterritorialization and dematerialization. As Peggy Phelan argues, Müller is using the performer's body "to pose a question about the inability to secure the relation between subjectivity and the body per se" (Phelan 1993: 151). He deliberately reinforces the impossibility of reconciling "who I am" with "what I am" in order to increase tension and make the spectator aware of potentials, however unrealized or unrealizable, that signal the difference between the experience of self and the limitations on representation imposed by cultural discourses (also in Lutterbie 1997: 20). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [9]            Here is how Sophocles introduces his hero:

First Sailor: Listen!

Neoptolemus: What is it?

First Sailor: I heard a groan,

The cry of a man in pain

[...]

Dragging himself along,

Moaning with pain

(l. 203-207). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [10] This is in accord with the bow image in the original, where just as language and meaning, words and actions are torn asunder by Odysseus' plotting, so too the bow suffers an analogous fate, as a prop whose proper use is subverted by the wounding of Philoktetes and his abandonment by his comrades (Ringer 1998: 118). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. [11] As Nietzsche points out: "What offends aesthetic meaning in inner man―beneath the skin; bloody masses, full intestines, viscera, all those sucking, pumping monsters―formless or ugly, or grotesque, and unpleasant to smell on top of that" (qtd in Blondel 1991: 220).  [↑](#footnote-ref-11)