

Death as an ideological stimulant: *Epitaphios* and *logos hegemonikos* through Nicole Loraux's *The Invention of Athens*

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For the bow (βίος), the name is life (βίος),
but its work is death (θάνατος).
Heraclitus

The function of the funeral orations within Athenian ideological struggle

The followers of Zeus desire that the soul of the beloved be the same; so they seek for a nature that is philosophic and lordly [*philosophoste kai hegemonikos*]
Plato, *Phaedrus* (252d6-e6)

In this paper, I will first discuss how funeral orations (*epitaphioi*) in Nicole Loraux's *The Invention of Athens*¹ are read as part of the Athenian ideological struggle against internal and external conflicts. Loraux's book is by far the most influential study of the Greek *epitaphios*. Further, I will focus on the rhetorical strategies that allow the funeral orations to transform death into an ideological tool to strengthen Athenian hegemony during its classical phase (fifth and fourth centuries BC). Lastly, drawing on Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Paul Sartre, I shall briefly examine some philosophical implications about death and its ideological function when collectively implemented in an *epitaphios*.

Funeral orations, a public institution created and implemented by Athens to celebrate her citizens died at war, are a highly elaborated "national" ceremony. Traditionally, *epitaphioi* are understood as part of epideictic rhetoric, in which both praising and blaming inform its *topoi* to foster and promote collective identification and shared unity – I am following here Aristotle's theory of *epideixis*. Only few *canonical* funeral orations from classical Athens survived: we are left with six *epitaphioi*

¹ Nicole Loraux, *The Inventions of Athens. The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*, (trans from French by Alan Sheridan, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). The book was originally published in 1981.

either written or delivered by Thucydides, Gorgias, Lysias, Plato, Demosthenes and Hyperides, in a time span that goes from 464 to 322BC. As soon as Athens became a democracy at the end of the sixth century BC, the lyric lament (*threnos*) as a praxis was rejected and reformed into the *epitaphios logos*. The shift from aristocracy to democracy marked the foreclosing of an archaic, feminine and poetic relation to the dead which became incapable to add civic triumph to prescribed mourning. In short, there was a shift from families and tribes to soldiers and politicians.

Funeral orations were usually held once a year in classical Athens to commemorate and celebrate her war dead. But, first, the funeral oration did not come alone as several ritual practices accompanied it: a procession took place, followed to a public burial in a common grave located in the finest suburb, as well as official laments for the dead who were exposed for two days. Secondly, funeral orations as civic eulogies were also part of a much larger social landscape where war difficulties, political deliberation and geopolitical struggle informed their *rhetorical exigencies*, that is funeral orations' *kairos* with their underlying hegemonic motivations. This becomes clear when we list the most recurring *topoi* of the classical *epitaphios logos*: primacy of public values over the individual, idealisation of the city, military tradition, contrast between Athenians and non-Athenians, and heroization of the (noble) dead in battle. Moreover, funeral orations constantly implement these *topoi* through their five main rhetorical structures: introduction, praise, lament, consolation and conclusion.² What needs to be stressed here is how the classical funeral orations are read by Loraux in her book as a powerful ideological tool in democratic Athens to achieve, mainly, two aims: to silence internal conflicts (*stasis*) and to counter-balance Spartan hegemony in the rest of Greece (*Hellas*). In this sense, the *epitaphios logos* is a two-fold *logos*, a political and military *logos* that attempts to work through collective mourning while at the same time exalting both Athenian *nomos* and hegemonic *paideia* of its citizen-soldiers: "out of this decisive confrontation between the city and death, the eulogy must emerge the victor, for the greater glory of the dead and of the city."³ In short, through the praxis of the funeral orations, democratic Athens *reinvents* herself in a powerful discourse that celebrates its new major role during and after the Persian Wars – a time in which the city enjoyed economic growth as well as colonial power. It is as if a new ideological narrative needed to be

²See for instance Paul Hunter, "Waiting for an Aristotle: A Moment in the History of the Basic Writing Movement", in *College English* (vol 54, no 8, Dec 1992), 914-927; John E Ziolkowski, *Thucydides and the Tradition of Funeral Speeches at Athens* (New York: Arno, 1981).

³Loraux, *The Invention of Athens*: 50.

collectively organised and publicly replicated. In fact, this move could only be undertaken through a massive process of secularisation as the new democratic hegemony, its national ceremonies and human community had no space for mythical cults, their religious epic and aristocratic leaders.

So far, this is how rhetorical scholarship has traditionally discussed the *epitaphios logos*. But things are far more complex. In fact, Loraux patiently shows throughout *The Invention of Athens* how each funeral oration is, amid Athenian internal/external ideological struggle, modulated on conscious/unconscious acts of denial in which, for instance, slaves, women, metics, barbarians, the young, the elderly, the enemy or imperialism in Athens are constantly silenced to construct and promote a hegemonic paradigm (*logos hegemonikos*). More specifically, being a “politicomilitary practice of the city,” *epitaphioi* have a “triple destination”: the dead (past), the living (present) and posterity (future).⁴ The source of glory comes from dying in battle for Athens; the source of consolation comes from either protecting or making Athens greater; and the source of valour and courage comes from being an Athenian citizen who should be *always-already* faithful to his noble ancestors. The origin of political legitimacy comes only from one single model: the democratic city of Athens and her community of citizen-soldiers, the hoplites. It is here that Athenian hegemony gets its secularising power over Attica. Glorious autochthony, anonymous democratic equivalence and oratorical prose support each other to foster the Athenian *logos hegemonikos* and its PanHellenic vocation:

The funeral oration is animated by (...) and organised around [these] themes (...): exaltation of the eternal memory of valour; contrast between perishable life and immortal courage; refusal to accept the possibility that Athenians could ever be defeated; increasing importance of the theme of ancestors, even if this theme was not always a traditional one; a representation of time in which myth is fulfilled in ‘history’; last, and above all, the democratic desire for anonymity that excludes any special mention of the *strategoï*.⁵

The funeral orations celebrate a city that always acts on generosity (a recurring *topos*) when another Greek *polis* has been conquered. In fact, military exploits in an *epitaphios*, which is also a military speech, are the

⁴*Ivi*, 14.

⁵*Ivi*, 55.

other side of “Athens’ interventionist policy.”⁶ And this is where civic *arete* meets geopolitics in shaping the *topoi* of the Athenian exceptionality: even the enemies in funeral orations ought to recognise the valour of Athens in “international affairs”. Athens is always portrayed as the potential saviour of a land, Attica, irremediably fractured by antagonistic relations, by *agon*. As such, Loraux is adamant when it comes to explain “the real function” of the funeral orations: internally, they help to foster social cohesion with their equalising tropes, *topoi* and tactics; externally, they rationalise the way in which Athens opportunistically acts on other *poleis* or, put differently, an *epitaphios* “was similar to a speech justifying the right of Athenians to hegemony.”⁷ As such, the relation between *epitaphioi* and Athenian domination is structural, even though the other/the enemy is never mentioned explicitly but always summoned *in absentia* in its role of foe, inferior, subordinate, spectator or colonist who has to constantly recognise Athens’ superiority.

Of course, drawing on Freud, Loraux aptly describes this levelling of any independent alterity in terms of “imaginary satisfactions (...). The city invents perfect enemies and allies who are always content (...) as the purest expression of Athenian narcissism.”⁸ In fact, the relations of power between Sparta and Athens, or between Athens and other Greek cities, were obviously quite different from those implicitly portrayed in funeral orations. Nonetheless, I want to focus here on the rhetorical aspects of the funeral orations when they shape, model and channel hegemony. And, in this sense, when Loraux discusses Pericles’ funeral oration—the one reported by Thucydides—she argues that *epitaphioi* have “the profound nature of the hegemonic oration, a *speech without reply*, intended to arouse in its listeners both submission and respect.” Then, in the same page she fleshes out the two general strategies that inform the hegemonic oration: “the coexistence of justification and threat within the same speech (...) which is inherent in the very notion of hegemony—superiority exerted over equals.”⁹

Through the *epitaphios logos*, (Athenian) democracy finds its symbolic self on a hegemonic imaginary that *always-already* excludes any symmetrical negotiation with the real. It is through an act of denial (*Verneinung*) which refuses to take into account both material conditions and relations of power within and outside the city that Athenian

⁶*Ivi*, 69.

⁷*Ivi*, 79.

⁸*Ivi*, 83.

⁹*Ivi*, 90, for the last two quotes.

hegemony is performed by the orator before his fellow citizens. Geopolitical struggle, oratorical patriotism and collective narcissism shape the ideological foundation of a democratic city that has decided to hegemonise *Hellas* through its paradigmatic *logos*. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, I understand ideology functioning on both the individual and the collective as replacing representations of exploitative material conditions with conscious/unconscious imaginary relations that deny, silence and make us forget class subjugation, power relations and economic inequality. In fact, Loraux also understands ideology in the same terms, and she focuses in her book on the imaginary (*imaginaire*) continuity the funeral orations made possible for almost two centuries in Athens. As such, it is not surprising that *The Invention of Athens* shows the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis and the historian Georges Duby consistently operating in the thick footnote apparatus when, outside her disciplinary knowledge, Loraux needs to ground her claims on *la long durée* of the ideological formations: “the official oration is for us the irreplaceable vehicle of the Athenian imaginary of the city.”¹⁰

But when the *logos hegemonikos* and its rhetorical imaginary does not function properly, the democratic citizen-soldiers of Athens resort to violent domination. This is how Thucydides, in one of his chronicles, reminds us the nexus between hegemony and violent repression of local *nomoi* operates within Athenian imperialism:

Athenians: Since you know as well as we do that, when these matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept. [...] *Melians*: And how could it be just as good for us to be the slaves as for you to be the masters? *Athenians*: You, by giving in, would save yourself from disaster; we, by not destroying you, would be able to profit from you. [...] It is not so much your hostility that injures us; it is rather the case that, if we were on friendly terms with you, our subjects would regard that as a sign of weakness in us, whereas your hatred is evidence of our power. *Melians*: Is that your subjects’ idea of fair play – that no distinction should be made between people who are quite unconnected with you and people who are mostly your own colonists or else rebels whom you have conquered? [...] *Athenians*: You will see that there is nothing disgraceful in giving way to greatest city in *Hellas* when she is offering you such reasonable

¹⁰*Ivi*, 329.

terms (...). This is the safe rule – to stand up to one’s equal, to behave with deference towards one’s superiors, and to treat one’s inferiors with moderation.¹¹

Logos hegemonikos facing thanatos: fine death and collective dialectics

In mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish—that everything is somehow preserved and that in suitable circumstances (...) it can once more be brought to light.

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

In terms of rhetorical identification, the classical funeral orations achieve their aims using the dead in battle as a vessel to produce a general subjectivity that *always-already* encapsulates both the present and future generations of Athenians. The *topoi* employed to enable such identification are always arranged around *arete*, autochthony and *demokratia*. Abstraction, that is the main device that every orator uses, is grounded on a specific *topos* that connects each Athenian to the same geometrical space and ideal history: “fine death” (*belle mort*).

The funeral orations celebrate only those Athenians who died in battle and because of this, they are worthy of honor, glory and praise. In each *epitaphios*, the source of what made Athens great is the military valour of those citizen-soldiers who took *arete* to its most extreme terms, that is, they accepted to sacrifice their own lives for the city’s benefit. The democratic city allows and praise aristocratic virtue (*arete*) only when it is performed for her own glory. In turn, the citizen who dies in battle becomes immortal as *thanatos* is transfigured into civic *exempla* to be celebrated publicly. “Fine death” becomes part of the civic values Athens annually celebrates through the *epitaphios logos*, during a time in which her citizens are constantly reminded that being an Athenian means to be ready to die for the city because what made Athens the center of *Hellas* is the same rational readiness to die of their own ancestors:

a choice of consent against inclination, of the will of reason against the will of impulse—involving a whole conception of the actual share the subject assumes in his decision. The lesson is clear: at this crucial moment of the *krisis* in which the Athenian renounces life, it is the city that decides through him.¹²

¹¹Thucydides, *The Melian Dialogue*,
<http://lygdamus.com/resources/New%20PDFS/Melian.pdf>

¹²*Ivi*, 103.

It is this individual decision, to be always made before each battle, that adds greatness to *thanatos*, that makes death just or, more specifically, death a “fine death”. A whole sense of community is infused in every citizen through the extreme ideal of self-commitment. Becoming part of the eternal glory of Athens, death is re-inscribed into the city’s life, the real subject of any *epitaphios*. It is for this reason that the funeral orations focus only on past war exploits and do not ever mention events or biographical details of living citizens. The proper way of life (“fine life”) finds in democratic Athens its culmination in the proper way of dying (“fine death”) – and this can only take place through an act that merges autochthony, civic devotion and military bravery. It is as if the (transitory) private may only achieve its ultimate aim when becomes part of the (eternal) public. Thus, consolation in an *epitaphios* is centred on how grief and mourning must be worked through pride and glory as the only death that can be celebrated is “fine death.”

Death, mourning and mortality adopt a new political meaning when they are being reinvented by the *logos hegemonikos* of the classical funeral oration: death becomes fine death, individual mourning turns into collective pride and mortality is just the first stage of a greater civic immortality. Death, individual mourning and mortality serve now the aims of a new paradigmatic order, a new ideological imperative: Athens’ narcissistic domination over time and space. Therefore, death and its destructive drives (*thanatos*) are employed in the classical funeral orations as ideological stimulant by Athenian life and its hegemonic drives (*eroshegemonikos*).

What the funeral orations create through the “fine death” is a dialectical machinery that masters time, space and alterity to display Athens as the centre of a glorious *kosmos*. In its mastery over the real, Athens’ narcissistic satisfaction transforms the city into a self-sufficient circularity in which each citizen (the oratorical ‘we/us’) finds his true expression only when he becomes part of a civic community (Athens) that justifies its hegemony by the glorious acts of its past citizens: history is just “the repetitive and exemplary enactment of a single *arete*.”¹³ We never know who is the real subject in a classical funeral oration, who the orator is really praising – the dead, the living or the city. The equivalence between the collective ‘we/us’ and ‘the city’ serves to hide and suppress internal political conflicts (*stasis*) through synecdochical immunization. In fact, this immunization is based on an anonymous, interchangeable model, that is the dead (citizen-soldiers) who are *always-already* understood as harmonious subjects serving the same values. Jean-Paul Sartre explains

¹³*Ivi*, 134.

such dialectical move in clear terms:

‘The terrible thing about Death,’ said Malraux, ‘is that it transforms life into Destiny.’ By this we must understand that death reduces the for-itself-for-others to the state of simple for-others. Today I alone am responsible for the being of the dead Pierre, in my freedom. Those dead who have not been able to be saved and transported to the boundaries of the concrete past of a survivor are not *past*; they along with their pasts are annihilated. [...] There is a past only for a present which cannot exist without being its past-back there, behind itself; that is, only those beings have a past which are such that in their being, their past being is in question, those beings who *have to be* their past. [...] Death reunites us with ourselves. Eternity has changed us into ourselves. At the moment of death we are; that is, we are defenceless before the judgments of others. They can decide *in truth* what we are (...). A last hour repentance is desperate effort to crack all this being which has slowly congealed and solidified *around us*, a final leap to dissociate ourselves from what we are. In vain. Death fixes this leap along with the rest; it does no more than to enter into combination with what preceded it, as one factor among others, as one particular determination which is understood only in terms of the totality. By death the for-itself is changed forever into an in-itself in that it has slipped entirely into the past.¹⁴

The funeral orations capitalise the dead and their defenceless in making “one particular determination” (citizens-soldier) the mark of (their) eternity, of the city’s hegemonic temporality. It is for this reason that Loraux writes that “in an *epitaphios* there is no praise of the lives of the citizen; what is praised in them is always the *proairesis*, that is, ultimately, the fine death.”¹⁵ The ruling group decides to use the dead for their political aims, that is Athenian hegemony, and the orator persuades the audience creating one single spatio-temporal continuum. In this continuum made of citizen-soldiers who share the same imaginary, the orator’s audience is formed one ideological community with the dead, with those citizen-soldiers who made Athens glorious. Sartre explains how it is up to the living to decide “*in truth*” how the dead will be remembered, and in the case of classical Athens, there is only one possible collective identity made available by the *logos hegemonikos* of the

¹⁴Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London: Routledge 1958): 112, 114 and 115.

¹⁵Loraux, *The Invention of Athens*: 105.

funeral orations. Again, Loraux: “so we can now understand the importance the eulogy had in the city: the dead had no other life than that of Athens. (...) *There is no life but that of the city.*”¹⁶

Moreover, everything has been made easier for the orator as the dead share the same (collective) proper name with the living, they are all Athenians. Discussing similar topics, Jean-François Lyotard analyses the commutative power of proper names:

One escapes death by the only means known – the perpetuation of the proper name. This proper name must be proper not only to the interested party, but also to the collectivity (through patronym, eponym, or nationality), since the collective name is what assures the perennality within itself of individual proper names. Such is the Athenian “fine death,” the exchange of the finite for the infinite, of the *eschaton* for the *telos*: the *Die in order not to die.*¹⁷

But, Lyotard, within his *phrasistics*, tries to contain and stop the orator’s dialectical machinery from creating the spatio-temporal continuum the Athenian *logos hegemonikos* needs in order to produce the same ideological community for both her dead and living. Once there is only one single ideological community, the personal decision (*proairesis*) to die for Athens can easily be grounded on the certainty of its civic iterability – the present self accepts to forever disappear into the future we. Those who are ready to die in battle know that their proper names will merge in the collective proper name (Athenians), the name for which they died. This is what Lyotard warns us against:

A single proper name, whether singular or collective, designates an entity astride two heterogeneous situations. It is the property of proper names to receive such heterogeneities. But it is not legitimate, it is even illusory, in the Kantian sense of a transcendental illusion, to suppose a subject-substance that would be both a “subject of the uttering” (even though it is not the addressor in the prescriptive) and the permanence of a self (even though from one phrase to the next it leaps from one instance situation to another). Its proper name allows it to be pinpointed within a world of names, but not within a linking together of phrases coming from heterogeneous regimens and whose universes and the tensions exerted upon them are

¹⁶*Ivi*, 105-106.

¹⁷Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1988):100.

incommensurable with each other. The we would be the vehicle of this transcendental illusion. Halfway between the rigid (constant) designator that the name is and the “current” designator that the singular pronoun is. It is not surprising that in the “currentness” or “actuality” of obligation, the we that reputedly unites obligee and legislator is threatened with being split.¹⁸

What Lyotard cannot accept is how the finite gets under the spell of the infinite in the *epitaphios logos*. In Lyotard’s *phrasistics*, the finite must always be addressed as finite, the ethical as ethical, the cognitive phrase *qua* cognitive phrase and so on – this is his philosophical imperative which he constantly repeats throughout his work. But the other side of his philosophical imperative is a constant delegitimation of both politics and the political. This act of delegitimation in Lyotard rests on the assumption that the *logos hegemonikos* surreptitiously privileges actuality over potentiality when a phrase is linked to another. As we saw, the funeral orations’ strategy is hegemonic and the *logos hegemonikos* deals with *thanatos*, the imaginary and ideology in order to extend the power of his community – precisely what Lyotard cannot allow within his ethics of phrases. But the *logos hegemonikos* knows no other imperative than making the (Athenian) community larger and stronger. And for this purpose, the funeral orations transcend and break, as Sartre made evident, any past rule, determination and value in order to produce new prescriptions, actualities and truths. Athenian hegemony uses oratorical persuasion to achieve its political aims and (fine) death is just another tool to defeat every possible internal and external enemy in her permanent state of (ideological) struggle.

¹⁸Lyotard, *The Differend*: 99.