

# INTERROGATING THE CANON, DEPOSING THE *TYRANNUS*\*

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“The Sophistic explanations of poetry foreshadow the growth of a special field of inquiry, the analysis of language; the final object is rhetorical or educational, not literary.” —R. Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship*

γνώμη δ' ἀρίστη μάντις ἢ τ' εὐβουλία.

Intelligence is the best prophet, that and sound judgment.

—Euripides, *Helen*



**[85]** It goes without saying that literary canon formation is an educational issue. That being the case, let me begin with a personal anecdote from the classroom. Whenever I teach a course in classical mythology—and that has been often over more than thirty years in the profession—I like to start by asking my students to give a justification for the eating of an animal. This is done not to proselytize vegetarianism, but rather to elucidate the way in which certain cultural practices and moral values are supported by sacred narrative. In response to the question

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<sup>1</sup> This paper in part of a longer study on the semiotics of prophecy in Greek literature. A version of it, compressed to suit the occasion, was presented as the presidential address at the 1990 annual meeting of the American Philological Association, and published under the title “Disauthorizing Prophecy: the Ideological Mapping of *Oedipus Tyrannus*” (Peradotto 1992). It was written and delivered before the publication of Frederick Ahl’s thought provoking analysis, *Sophocles’ Oedipus: Evidence and Self-Conviction* (1991) in which some of the same arguments against the traditional reading are used. However, Ahl’s study, not all of which I can espouse, has to do with the internal dynamics in which Oedipus is represented as an egocentric paranoid, “the very embodiment of Plato’s tyrannical soul” (262), tragically predisposed to trust unsubstantiated evidence of his guilt, despite weighty grounds for doubt and his own first-hand experience. Ahl thus sees the play as a tragedy of self-delusion rather than of self-discovery. The present study is more concerned with the reception of audiences also predisposed to trust that evidence, the educational and cultural implications of just such a plot, and the rationale and devices of authorial control behind its construction. Ahl is here cited wherever I have found him lending support to this inquiry.

two answers invariably prevail among all others: human beings are justified in eating animals (1) because they have a divine charter for it in the books of Genesis and Deuteronomy, or (2) because that's the way it's always been, so why question it? The second response is fairly easy to deal with. To be sure, my students may at first find it difficult to comprehend that tradition is itself a product of interpretation, and that using it as a touchstone in a matter involving interpretation must be fallacious. But they can be reminded of certain traditional social practices (generally in another place or another time) that they would readily agree are morally insufferable: slavery, for example, and cannibalism. From that observation it is a short, not so difficult step to the recognition of the need for some rational critique of tradition. However, the first response, the resort to the authority of a sacred text, is far more recalcitrant to challenge or interrogation, for many of those who use it think of it as exempt from the claims of rational [86] scrutiny, as in fact overriding those claims. The extent to which it may be our professional obligation to disabuse them of this conviction is a question that will figure largely in this inquiry.<sup>2</sup>

The problem of canonicity<sup>3</sup> is not just a matter of determining *what* we should teach. What we teach is a function of *why* we teach. And why we teach is a profoundly problematical question, one I do not intend here to probe in the kind of detail it deserves. Not least of the problems associated with this question, and perhaps the source of all the others, is the meaning of "we". Is the referent of the word "we" now only a useful fiction for those whose scholarly preoccupation is classical texts, and who teach them, but whose educational agendas are now too discordant and whose shared values, whether aesthetic, moral, or political, are too perilously minimal to connote community? Has this fragmentation gone

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<sup>2</sup> This should not be read as an attack upon religion as such. But my analysis of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* in the body of the present study will demonstrate how much I am in sympathy with an essay of Jonathan Culler's, "Political Criticism: Confronting Religion" (1988.69-82), in which he challenges the immunity religion enjoys in social, political and educational arenas. In commenting on the position of religious discourse in our culture, he makes this observation: "Although in many respects we may have a 'godless's, secular culture, as proponents of religion tirelessly tell us, religious discourse and religious belief seem to occupy a special, privileged place, as though it went without saying that any sort of challenge or critique were improper, in bad taste" (p.71). Even more strongly: "The complicity of literary studies with religion today is a subject that has scarcely been broached but cries out for attention, not least because religion provides a legitimization for many reactionary or repressive forces in the United States and is arguably a greater danger today than ideological positions critics do spend their time attacking" (p.78).

<sup>3</sup> I speak here only of classical texts and of those who teach them. Whatever generalizations may be drawn from these remarks to a larger body of literature I leave for others to draw.

so far that we share no common ground from which to designate some educational goals worth achieving and, in achieving those goals, to agree that some literary texts are not necessarily indispensable but better, and that some are worse; some are richer, some poorer; some central, some peripheral? Even those who argue that so-called “marginal authors” should be read in the interests of “the variety of kinds of literary interest their texts have” (Most 1990.58), must surely realize that that variety cannot be arbitrary or unlimited—there is not world enough or time—and so must submit to constraints shaped by what we value most, however loath we are to face the question of what that is.<sup>4</sup>

In addressing the problems of why we teach, “teach” is as troubled a word as “we”. A diminishing number of naive humanistic fundamentalists, like my students, cling to the belief that the texts should be allowed to “speak for themselves,” as if they somehow possessed both a meaning that is immediate and univocal, and an authority that is self-evident. In most cases, these true believers are honestly unaware that they are importing their own presuppositions and prejudices into the transaction of reading and teaching. On the other side, however, among classicists conversant with contemporary critical theory and presumably disabused of the myth of interpretative objectivity, there are, I would venture to say, still too many preoccupied with its technical and formal side, not with its social and ethical dimensions. These latter dimensions are felt to be discomfiting because they seem to reinstate an evaluation, a determination of *value*, and thus a subjectivity of a kind still awkward in a field that for all its disclaimers defines itself, even if perhaps unconsciously, in terms of scientific objectivity, and of an old-fashioned notion of scientific objectivity at that. On the other hand, whenever [87] it comes to *aesthetic* judgments, which of course are determinations of *value*, there are assumptions operating in the field which are for the most part unstated. I would argue that these are also obviously subjective, although their advocates might defend them, with varying degrees of clarity and consistency, by resort to mainly nineteenth-century romantic norms that sound very much like absolutes.<sup>5</sup> Adherents of these norms are in large part

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<sup>4</sup> This is no new problem. Twenty-five years ago, in a conference devoted to this very subject, Wayne Booth (1967.1) described the same phenomenon: “Though we may profess a happy relativism of goals, as if all knowledge were equally valuable, we cannot and do not run our lives or our universities on entirely relativistic assumptions. And yet we seem to be radically unwilling to discuss the ground for our choices; it is almost as if we expected that a close look would reveal a scandal at the heart of our academic endeavor.” The “scandal,” the discrepancy between the academy’s “happy relativism of goals” and the concealed power relations by which it imposes meaning is explored relentlessly by Bourdieu and Passeron 1977.

<sup>5</sup> Paul de Man (1986.25-26) alludes to these unspoken assumptions when, in urging the teaching of literature “as a rhetoric and a poetics prior to being taught as a hermeneutics and a history,” he

unprepared by their classical training to expose these absolutes to analysis, or to come to grips conceptually with a logically prior issue, namely the relationship of art to life.<sup>6</sup> Nor is it very easy to find the will to do so. In a society full of conflict, where all values are up for grabs, the lure of an authoritative absolute, lying beyond all need of justification, itself the source of justification, is overwhelming. An assault upon the sources of justification is an assault upon the objects—for our present discussion, primarily literary objects—that they justify. An assault upon these objects is read as an assault on the professional vocation that they energized. And an assault on one's vocation is read as an assault on the deep springs of one's identity and dignity, an invasion of that sense of personal continuity that we have been led to think of as the self. In the face of this, it is no wonder that so few will venture very far beyond the comfortable hearth of mainly apodictic procedures within the larger field of classical philology.

More critical than this personal and professional identity crisis is the institutional one that replicates it. What is the defining role of liberal higher education, and of classical studies within that context? Is its social role merely to state the opposition among contending world views, or is it rather to favor one or another among them? When it comes to literature, should each text taught be accompanied by its countertext? If, for example, we teach *Oedipus Tyrannus*, ought we to follow up with some text like *De Rerum Natura*? If we are to favor one or another world view over the many in contention, what are the properties of these favored views?

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concludes that this would require “a change in the rationale for the teaching of literature, away from standards of cultural excellence that, in the last analysis, are always based on some form of religious faith, to a principle of disbelief that is not so much scientific as it is critical, in the full philosophical sense of the term.”

<sup>6</sup> Ours is a critical climate that no longer permits us honestly to ignore the relationship between artistic production and its social effect or blithely to invoke the notion of so-called aesthetic distance. Among others, Platonists at one end of the spectrum and Marxists at the other are united in consistently refusing to allow the aesthetic to appropriate “a zone of pleasure divorced in principle from ethical consequences” (Ferrari 1989.138). Terry Eagleton (1990.9) propounds a Marxist version of this by arguing that the aesthetic emerged as a theoretical category when art, at an early state of bourgeois society, became autonomous of the various social functions it had traditionally served. “It is this notion of autonomy or self-referentiality,” he says, “which the new discourse of aesthetics is centrally concerned to elaborate; and it is clear enough, from a radical political viewpoint, just how disabling any such idea of aesthetic autonomy must be. It is not only ... that art is thereby conveniently sequestered from all other social practices, to become an isolated enclave within which the dominant social order can find an idealized refuge from its own actual values of competitiveness, exploitation and material possessiveness. It is also, rather subtly, that the idea of autonomy—of a mode of being which is entirely self-regulating and self-determining—provides the middle class with just the ideological model of subjectivity it requires for its material operations.”

Twenty-five years ago, in a conference devoted to these very questions, Wayne Booth gave an answer that still rings true. This is a part of his response to the question (itself the title of his essay) “Is there any knowledge that a man must have?” (1967.25- 26):<sup>7</sup>

To be a man, *I must speculate*, and I must learn how to test my speculations so that they are not simply capricious, unchecked by other men’s speculations. ... Second, the man who has not learned how to make the great human achievements in the arts his own, who does not know what it means to *earn* a great novel or symphony or painting for himself, is enslaved either to caprice or to other men’s testimony or to a life of [88] ugliness. ... I suppose I would be satisfied if all of our graduates had been ‘hooked’ by at least one art, hooked so deeply that they could never get free.

These are propositions hard to disagree with. But for all that, they still leave much to be argued over in the details. In particular, Booth’s admittedly rhetorical exuberance in characterizing art’s effect exposes one of the more difficult problems we face in designing a canon. Our increased sensitivity to literature’s ideological dimension and rhetorical effects<sup>8</sup> have made us more cautious about the extent to which Booth’s second objective might get in the way of the first, how getting hooked on art “so deeply that they could never be free” might in fact inhibit a critical and speculative habit of mind.

What follows is an investigation of this problem with respect to Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, a work much admired in the traditional literary canon not only of classicists but of devotees of the larger body of Western literature. It is offered also as a concrete example of how I believe the traditional literary canon may be questioned productively.

Our starting point is the story of how Themistocles tried, at first without success, to convince his fellow Athenians that victory against the Persians lay in sea power. In Plutarch’s life (10.1), we are told that he lost hope of bringing them over by rational arguments (ἀνθρωπίνους λογισμοῖς), and resorted to signs from heaven and prophecies (σημεῖα δαιμόνια καὶ χρησμούς), “contriving machinery as someone would in performing a tragedy” (ὥσπερ ἐν τραγωδία μηχανὴν ἄρας). The statesman, frustrated by the failure of rational discourse, finds

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<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that there is nothing unacceptable in his essay. Given the nature of the subject and the dramatic changes that have occurred since it was written, there is much that will not stand. Booth would, I am sure be among the vanguard of his own critics. (Among other things, he would now be the first to insist that for “man,” especially in his title, we must read “human being.”)

<sup>8</sup> Booth’s own *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) was, of course, a landmark in this development.

success in theatrical smoke and mirrors, Themistocles probably not the first and certainly not the last. This account illustrates the power of non-rational over rational representation and uses theater as its most apt metaphor. Imagine, if you will, a sophist—someone like Critias or Gorgias<sup>9</sup> or even, perhaps, Protagoras or Socrates—sitting in the theater of [89] Dionysus during a not altogether dissimilar representation: the enactment of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Imagine his sense of futility in the face of this powerful anti-sophist statement. Imagine his frustration at lacking the chance to respond in a social context equally inclusive, equally compelling.<sup>10</sup> I should like to take that frustrated sophist's part here, respectfully disregarding, for the while, the many other valid ways there may be to read *Oedipus Tyrannus*.<sup>11</sup> I shall, of course, be adding a particular contemporary perspective. That is inevitable. But in this case it is also deliberate. Deliberate, for two reasons. First, because when I reflect on the particular contemporary perspective I am least uncomfortable with, and look for something like it in the age of Sophocles, I find myself sitting with that frustrated sophist in the theater of Dionysus. And second, because that play is of course still read, still held in highest esteem in the courts of aesthetic judgment, still firmly fixed in the canon of those texts we wish the well-schooled to have read, and that, not as a historical museum piece merely, but because it still delivers a message we think it valuable to hear.

This then is, at least in part, a sophist reading of Sophocles. Its most fundamental assumption is that the intention of a literary text is a function of its social use. It is prompted by the desire to distinguish narratives of emancipation

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<sup>9</sup> Gorgias is reported to have called tragedy a deception, *apatê* (Plutarch, *Moralia* 348c). Can the case be made that Gorgias (especially in the *Encomium of Helen*) and Sophocles (most explicitly in the *Philoctetes*) actually share a common view of language as the instrument for profoundly affecting a malleable soul? See Segal 1962.112.

<sup>10</sup> Institutionalization of whatever kind, in this case of Athenian tragedy and tragic performance, tends to obscure the arbitrary sources of its authority. By contrast, the sophists, being, as Bourdieu and Passeron put it (1977.62), “teachers who proclaimed their educative practice as such (e.g. Protagoras saying ‘I acknowledge that I am a professional teacher—*sophistês*—an educator of men’) without being able to invoke the authority of an institution, could not entirely escape the question, endlessly posed in their very teaching, which they raised by professing to teach: whence a teaching whose themes and problematics consist essentially of an apologetic reflection on teaching.”

<sup>11</sup> So, for example, another perspective on Sophocles' play—what Borges would call the “counterbook” of the present argument—would be to show how it confirms the limitations of reason, of empiricism, of skepticism. A bibliography of conflicting interpretations of the play (up to 1977), arranged in several useful categories, can be found in Hester 1977.

from narratives of enslavement and thereby to promote the autonomy of reading subjects and their society.<sup>12</sup> If others call what I am about to do deconstruction, that is their business. I choose not to pigeonhole it with a name, especially one so drastically misused, one so likely, in some quarters at least, to raise hackles and divert attention from the substance of the argument. If pressed, I would use a different operational metaphor and call it “refraction,” a prismatic process intended to make visible the invisible medium of our vision, without destroying either vision or medium. I do share the goals of those who, whatever name they give to what they do, wish to clear away the pretensions of the old romantic view that art expresses permanent and universal human truths in monumental form through some prophetic, unscrutinizable power of the imagination. Exposing such a view involves making visible the strategies used by ideology to create the appearance of abiding and universal truth in the interests, not always deliberate, of gaining power and exercising authority over others.<sup>13</sup> What I wish to do is perpetrated in the spirit of Wittgenstein when he remarked: “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intellect by means of language” (*Philosophical Investigations*, no. 109).

Speaking of bewitchment among the Azande, the ethnologist Edward Evans-Pritchard (1935.418-19) argued that, when it comes to what science would call causal determinism, far from showing any ignorance or contempt, witchcraft actually insists upon a more exhaustive, more uncompromising resort to it than science. As a natural philosophy, he says, witchcraft reveals a genuine theory of causation. When misfortune occurs, it can be attributed to witchcraft cooperating with natural forces. If, for example, a buffalo gores someone, or if the supports of a granary are undermined by termites so that it falls on someone’s head, or if someone is infected with cerebro-spinal meningitis, the Azande say that the buffalo, the granary, and the disease are causes which combine with witchcraft to kill the victim. Witchcraft does not create the buffalo or the granary or the disease; these indeed exist in their own right. Witchcraft is rather to be

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<sup>12</sup> See Godzich 1989.xiv.

<sup>13</sup> I am compelled to cite Bourdieu and Passeron (1977.x) to express my own sense of frustration over how some readers may misconstrue my remarks: “Setting aside the incongruous option of devising an artificial language, it is impossible to eliminate completely the ideological overtones which all sociological vocabulary inevitably awakens in the reader, however many warnings accompany it. Of all the possible ways of reading this text, the worst would no doubt be the moralizing reading, which would exploit the ethical connotations ordinary language attaches to technical terms like ‘legitimacy’ or ‘authority’ and transform statements of fact into justifications or denunciations; or would take objective effects for the intentional, conscious, deliberate action of individuals or groups, and see malicious mystification or culpable naivety where we speak only of concealment or misrecognition.”

understood as [90] responsible for the particular situation in which they are brought into lethal relations with a particular person. The granary would have fallen in any case, but since witchcraft was present, it fell at the particular moment on a particular person. Of the causes involved, the only one which permits intervention is witchcraft, for witchcraft emanates from a person. The buffalo, the granary, the disease do not allow of intervention. And therefore, though they may be recognized as causes, they are not considered the socially relevant ones.

This can be expressed another way by saying that the Azande do not recognize the category of *accident* or *chance*. Classical science can never really disprove the Azande claim, for by the very nature of its explanatory procedure classical science rules out consideration of the lethal relationship between the fall of the granary and the presence of this particular victim. Such a relationship, it insists, is accidental: an event, by definition, that neither submits to causal analysis nor is relevant to it. But for the Azande this relationship is, in fact, the most pressing, most “socially relevant” element in the event, and their need for total explanation rules out the accidental, or better, prevents them from even understanding what it means.

Ernst Cassirer, in his monumental analysis of mythic thought (1955.43-49), has shown how the philosopher Hume, in striving to achieve a psychological critique of the causal judgment of *science*, has in fact rather found the source of all *mythic* interpretations of experience. According to Hume every representation of causality is derived from a representation of mere coexistence in space or time. Hume held that in *all* causal representations, not simply those of myth, the principles *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* and *juxta hoc, ergo propter hoc* apply. Even if one hesitates to follow Hume that far, there would appear to be no question about the universality of those two principles in mythic thought. And since anything can stand in spatial or temporal relationship with anything else, anything can come from anything. Either everything makes sense, or nothing does. The distinction that Aristotle makes between events occurring *after* one another (μετ' ἄλληλα) and those occurring *because of* one another (δι' ἄλληλα) is altogether lost on the mythic mentality. Accordingly, the concept of chance or accident is not only incompatible with this non-scientific point of view, it is a scandal. Jacques Monod, Nobel Prize-winning geneticist, goes further and argues that the concept of chance, far from being the mere by-product of the scientific enterprise, has in fact become *central* to it. He says (1971.113):

There is no scientific concept, in any of the sciences, more destructive of anthropomorphism than this one, and no other so rouses an instinctive [91] protest from the intensely teleonomic creatures that we are. For

every vitalist or animist ideology it is therefore the concept or rather the specter to be exorcised at all costs.

The most articulate spokesman for this non-determinist view of science is another Nobel laureate, Ilya Prigogine, who invites us to reverse the tendency, instilled in us by Western philosophy and classical science, to marginalize chance. The perspective of that classical science is epitomized in Laplace's famous hypothetical demon (who, by the way, sounds a lot like Sophocles' Apollo), for its knowledge of the mass, position, and velocity of all bodies at any given instant in the universe would allow it to infer all past and all future states of the universe. In rejecting that demon and the classical science it represents, Prigogine offers us a more salutary substitute in what he calls a Lucretian science. "The point," he says (1984.304),

where the [causal] trajectories cease to be determined, where [what Lucretius termed] the *foedera fati* governing the ordered and monotonous world of deterministic change break down, [that point] marks the beginning of nature. It also marks the beginning of a new science. ... In Lucretian physics we thus again find the link we have discovered in modern knowledge between the choices underlying a physical description and a philosophic, ethical, or religious conception relating to man's situation in nature. The physics of universal connections is set against another science that in the name of law and domination no longer struggles with disturbance of randomness.

When we look for scientists in antiquity, we surely find none greater than Aristotle, nor anyone who submits the concepts of chance and accident to such meticulously detailed analysis as he does in the second book of the *Physics*. In this analysis, he mentions the view of those who endow chance with the status of a genuine cause, considering it something divine and mysterious (θεῖόν τι ... καὶ δαιμονιώτερον). This view Aristotle himself summarily dismisses. Yet, in his *Poetics*, where there does indeed seem to be a concerted attempt to correlate his view of poetry with his views as metaphysician and scientist, where the best kind of plot is declared to be that in which things happen by probability or necessity (κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον), where poetry of this kind is said to be a more philosophical and more serious activity than history, why in the face of all this does he make *Oedipus Tyrannus* the paradigm of tragic composition, a play so riddled with chance, so crippled by coincidence, as to be ruled out of serious consideration by the scientist's touchstones of probability and necessity? In so lionizing Sophocles' play, is Aristotle turning against all that he holds dear as a metaphysician and [92] scientist? Is it right for a philosopher and a scientist to say that plausible impossibilities make better plots than implausible

possibilities?<sup>14</sup> Readers of the *Poetics* (1452a) will recognize a close kinship between Evans-Pritchard's cursed Azande killed by the collapsing granary and an example of Aristotle's, the murderer of one Mityls, killed when, during a festival,<sup>15</sup> the statue of his victim toppled over on him. In the discussion of the best type of tragic plots, this incident is offered as an example of something which, even though it happens by chance, has the *appearance* of design (ἐπίτηδες φαίνεται γεγονέναι), and so will arouse wonder. "Things like that," Aristotle concludes, "do not seem (ἔοικε) to happen without purpose (εἰκῆ) and plots of this kind are necessarily better."

Better (καλλίους) in what way? Because they arouse a sense of awe (*thauma*) in general, and in particular the tragic emotions in those irredeemably teleonomic beings who take such things not for accidents, as presumably a philosopher and scientist would, but for events which have happened by design, according to necessity or probability. A key term here is *phainetai*: the events merely *appear* or *seem* to happen by design, not of course to a philosopher or scientist like Aristotle, but to the uncritical mass sitting in the theater of Dionysus. The allure of such tales, the seduction of the prophetic, of poetic justice, of the curse fulfilled, even for the mind that disbelieves in such things—this Aristotle understood—derives from our abiding desire for unity, our urge to read-in a unity even where none exists.

Another key term here is the one translated as probability, *to eikos*: likelihood, verisimilitude, the view of tradition, the majority, current opinion. It bears no ironclad correspondence to "facts," whether of science or of history, but conforms more closely to public opinion, even where such opinion may depart from historical actuality or scientific possibility.<sup>16</sup> It is here that we observe the greater kinship of the *Poetics* with the *Rhetoric* than with the *Physics* or *Metaphysics*, despite Aristotle's protestations about the philosophical character of poetry.

It is here also that we must observe Aristotle's failure to answer the Platonic Socrates' charge against poets in the properly composed society. Imagine Plato's reaction to the following passage in the *Poetics* (1461a):

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<sup>14</sup> In the same passage he refers to this as "successful falsifying" (ψευδῆ λέγειν ὡς δεῖ) and even explains its secret as a *fallacia consequentis* (παράλογισμός) If A, then B. Given B, therefore A (which, of course, is false).

<sup>15</sup> Or "while he was looking at it" (θεωροῦντι 1452a9)?

<sup>16</sup> *Poetics*, beginning of chapter 25. Cf. also chapters 9 and 15. "Historical actuality" and "scientific possibility," of course, possess their own particular brands of verisimilitude, differing from "public opinion" only in degree of self-monitoring, systematicity and consistency.

If the [poetic] representation is neither true to fact nor an idealization, its accord with what people say makes it acceptable. This is the case with what [poets] say about the gods; it may be perhaps neither the better way of speaking about them, nor the truth; it may be [as reprehensible] as Xenophanes thought it was; still, it represents what people believe to be the case.

[93] Aristotle's focus here, as in the *Rhetoric*, is on *technique*. So far as the goals of tragic technique are concerned, his analysis ends with the arousal of pity and fear. About what the social or political implications of that may be, or whether it is morally beneficial, he is silent.<sup>17</sup> In fact, in this very passage he insists that, when it comes to correctness, the art of poetry is different from the art of social conduct. However, if we choose to keep our eyes fixed on those social and moral implications, as Plato did, and as Aristophanes in the *Frogs* did, it is hard not to see the *Poetics*, not as a separate and autonomous *technê*, but virtually as another chapter in the *Rhetoric*, concerned as it is with what Roland Barthes calls a "deliberately degraded" logic,<sup>18</sup> one adapted to the level of the general public, of current opinion, a common aesthetic, the taken-for-granted, verisimilitude: τὸ εἰκός, δόξα. The subsequent history of rhetoric has been one that effectively disengaged it from its immediate pragmatic aim in civic deliberation and persuasion to concentrate on the production of beauty in discourse and on enumerating and cataloguing rhetorical figures. This masking of the relationship between language and its pragmatic effect was compounded by the romantics, with their conception of poetry as an irrational and mysterious activity emanating from a solitary genius.<sup>19</sup> The effect of this view was to neutralize whatever potential rhetorical analysis might otherwise have had to deflate the

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<sup>17</sup> Unless, perhaps, we follow, as I am disinclined to do, a "medical" interpretation of *catharsis*, understood as the controlled and safe release of pent-up emotions otherwise harmful to community welfare. Stephen Halliwell (1989) identifies a source of tension in the *Poetics* in the imperfect attempt to demarcate the art of poetry analytically from the art of social conduct, and yet at the same time to insist that tragedy (for Aristotle the poetic art par excellence) is the representation of a morally serious action. Aristotle's preoccupation with intelligibility and his virtual rejection of any central role for religious modes of understanding or explanation lead, Halliwell argues, to a "virtual obsession with the integrated structure" of represented action based on probability and necessity, and ultimately to the exclusion of the ethically pre-eminent agent from tragedy, for the suffering of such an agent would be irrational and unintelligible, the product of accidental factors. As a result, "in the case of tragedy," Halliwell insists, "the rationalizing thrust of the theory brings it into implicit conflict with the religious assumptions of the genre's mythical material" (173).

<sup>18</sup> "Logique volontairement dégradée" (Barthes 1970.179).

<sup>19</sup> On this point, see Ducrot and Todorov 1979.74.

claims of the muse-inspired bard. The history of rhetoric since Aristotle has forced upon us a way of reading the *Oedipus Tyrannus* and of esteeming it that is hard to justify from either a fifth-century sophistic perspective or a contemporary semiotic and hermeneutic perspective.

For in our time it is largely semiotics and discourse analysis that have reversed this history of rhetoric by exposing our unreflective tendency (on which Aristotelian rhetoric heavily relies) to confuse linguistic or narrative reality with so-called “natural” reality, or better, to confuse what is being *referred to* with what really *is*, to confuse the mutant and heterogeneous forms of culture and history (verisimilitude) with enduring universals of nature, particularly human nature. By exposing the mechanics at the secret core of narrative discourse, semiotics makes ideology explicit, it unmasks the process, to which language is ever open, of making what is merely arbitrary seem *natural*, of turning the merely *accidental* into the *necessary*. Yet, so powerful is this process and the resistance to its exposure, that there are many who, even if they concede the legitimacy and importance of its exposure, still consider it isolable from the act of reading poetry and insist on its suspension if the work is to be enjoyed. They would argue that to expose the rules of the [94] game, the process and devices of construction that ground and authenticate the representational surface of the work, is to spoil the pleasure we derive from that representational surface. But semiotics forces us to question how far this suspension of disbelief can really go, or should really go. Such “innocent” reading of any texts, but especially of those as overtly persuasive in intent as this one, can be morally alienating and socially damaging. As Georges Bataille wrote, “How can we linger over books to which obviously the author was not constrained?” (1957.7). In the same vein Borges, in one of his tales (1962.13), creates a fictional country, in reality the region of contemporary literary discourse, where “a book which does not contain its counterbook is considered incomplete.”

In his reading of the *Tyrannus* the sophist/scientist inserts the absent counterbook, rereads, which is to say rewrites, the text along the lines suggested by Valery when he speaks of an unconventional literary work which, he says (1957.1467),

would [openly] display at each of its junctures the plurality which is available to the mind, a plurality in the midst of which it *makes a choice of* that single sequence which will be given in the text. This would be to take the illusion of a determinism which has no options and which copies reality, and to substitute for it the illusion of what is *possible-at-each-moment*, an illusion which for me exhibits more verisimilitude.

What would emerge from such a critical rereading of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*?

1) Let us start, where Voltaire does, with the arrival of the Corinthian messenger. Change the play to bring him in twenty minutes earlier or twenty minutes later and the tragedy dissolves. His arrival is timed to coincide with the arrival of Laius's herdsman summoned by Oedipus for questioning, and occurs immediately *after* Jocasta's prayer to Apollo for a clear resolution. Things like that do not appear to happen by accident. It is perceived as happening not simply *after* (μετά), but *because of* (διά) Jocasta's prayer. If such an event can be called a "universal," it is like the Aristotelian universals of politics and ethics, not of metaphysics or even of logic. Such events are, in other words, products of verisimilitude, cultural products, or contrivances of a poet—what, from the perspective we are assuming, we would call contingent. The arrival of the messenger can be considered in the class of events which happen δι' ἄλληλα only if we posit—as the poet or cultural convention or belief may urge us to do—a divine agent *causing* what we would otherwise call a *contingent*, coincidental occurrence.

2) The same may be said for another aspect of this Corinthian messenger. He just happens also to be the herdsman who received Oedipus as an infant [95] and gave him to king Polybus. Things like that do not appear to happen by accident.

3) There is still more of the same. This Corinthian herdsman/messenger received the child on Cithaeron from a Theban herdsman who just happens also to be the sole surviving henchman of Laius from the slaughter at the crossroads. Things like that do not appear to happen by accident. It simply will not do, as some commentators have done, to write these off as instances of so-called "dramatic economy." That strikes me as an attempt to tame the intellectual scandal of coincidence by disguising a problem of *content* as a virtue of *technique*.

4) Yet another item: someone has a little too much to drink at a party and just happens (τύχη τοιάδ' ἐπέστη 776-77) to call the king's son a bastard. Vexation at this remark eventually drives Oedipus to Delphi, to hear a horrible oracle, the whole incident perfectly timed for a fatal *chance* meeting.

5) For Oedipus and Laius both reach a spot too narrow for both to pass at precisely the same moment. They are brought into lethal relation with one another. Things like that do not appear to happen by accident.

6) Item: the plague in Thebes. At what particular moment does it strike? Immediately following Laius's death and before Oedipus has fathered four children on Jocasta? No. After Oedipus and Jocasta have died of old age, blissfully ignorant of their fate? No. Rather, long after the fated pair have had time to breed four incestuous children, and precisely timed to coincide with the death of Polybus in such a way as to bring the announcement of his death to

Thebes not twenty minutes too early or twenty minutes too late. Things like that do not appear to happen by accident.

7) Item: the crossroads. In recounting the story of Laius's murder, a thing that is motivated, mind you, by Jocasta's desire to depreciate prophecy, she mentions an irrelevant, wholly coincidental detail, ἐν τριπλαῖς ἀμαξίτοις: "at a place where three roads meet" (716), in an account otherwise brutally austere in that kind of casual, descriptive detail. But for that detail, which Oedipus catches on,<sup>20</sup> the action would not turn in its fatal direction. Things like that do not appear to happen by accident.

This way of reading will no longer permit us to follow those<sup>21</sup> who see Apollo as merely prophesying what happens to Oedipus, but not causing it. All of the events the sophist/scientist marks as accidents will be read as the products of *purposeful* activity. As Evans-Pritchard says of Azande witchcraft, such aspects of an event are the only ones which permit intervention. But for such intervention, the characters of Oedipus, of Jocasta, of Laius, and [96] of everyone else in the story are, to the unscientific and mythic mind, insufficient, less relevant causes of the outcome. From a semiotic and narratological perspective—and this is the central point I wish to make here—the actions of Apollo are identical to the constitutive actions of the author, while those of Oedipus, Jocasta, and the rest are but *products* of those constitutive actions. The text itself, if you will, ever so briefly lifts the veil on this secret when Oedipus, in commenting on all that has happened, is made to say (1329-33) Ἄπολλων τάδ' ἦν: "This was Apollo. It was Apollo, friends, who brought to completion all the terrible things that have happened to me. But the hand that struck [my eyes] was none other than my own."

Against such a background, the hypothesis that Oedipus might have killed *somebody else* at the crossroads, around the same time, is certainly no more preposterous a coincidence to assume than any of those I have enumerated, especially in view of the question raised by the play itself, and never resolved, about the number of assailants.<sup>22</sup> Remove any one of these coincidences, an easy thing to do given the infinitesimal plausibility of their all occurring, and the

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<sup>20</sup> Here Oedipus disregards, in a way that troubles *our* sense of verisimilitude, a fact that seems to touch him rather more closely: the similarity between Laius's oracle and his own. Is this perhaps a sign of two stages of composition, the one in which it is the likeness in the oracles that upsets Oedipus, and a second in which it is the likeness in the locale of the killing that moves the action forward?

<sup>21</sup> Like Knox 1957.38-41, and Dodds 1966.42-44.

<sup>22</sup> See especially Goodhart 1978.

*Tyrannus* collapses like a house of cards. That is not something that can as readily be said of tragedies involving rival allegiances to incompatible goods such as the *Antigone* or the *Philoctetes* (at least until the latter's disturbing finale, where prophecy and theatrical smoke and mirrors do indeed intrude to annul the hard decisions reached on a purely human plane of motivation).<sup>23</sup>

What is more, all the suspicion raised by semiotics and hermeneutics when it comes to literary texts goes a fortiori for drama, for drama masks even more than the written text its author as source of the discourse. It implicates us emotionally and intellectually with so called common sense and the ordinary opinion (verisimilitude) of our social group by literally surrounding us with them. It imposes its own pace upon the communicative transaction. It constrains our reception of otherwise ambiguous or multivalent textual elements by fixing gesture, tone and scenery. What is most important, it prevents rereading. We might even speak of this effect, by contrast to what happens in a reader, as the *unwilling* suspension of disbelief. This is, in Charles Bernstein's words, "not imagination (the act of forming a mental image out of something not present to the senses) but *imposition* of the image on the mind."<sup>24</sup> Put another way, the superficial deletion of the author's voice in drama actually gives him greater dominion over the discourse (especially where, as in Sophocles' case, he is also the director) and disables his audience's power to produce meaning. This sort of linguistic [97] activity is tyrannical, for it turns the arbitrary into a constraint. It was this perception that led Rousseau to advocate the banning of theater because, as he remarks, "it brings a public together to reinforce the prevailing mores rather than to exercise its constituency as constitutors of both our forms of life and principles of government."<sup>25</sup> In short, the traditional aesthetics of this

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Segal (1981.345), speaking of Philoctetes' rigidity compared to Ajax's, says "Here the old world, open to communication with the new, proves ultimately educable, albeit only through a miracle from the gods." That is a very big "albeit," for the "miracle" completely overturns the outcome of the credible logic of character development and interaction in Philoctetes and Neoptolemus. Philoctetes has been no more open to communication with the new world than Ajax was, and if any education can be said to occur, it is by the kind of simplistic divine (which is of course to say, authorial) interventions disdained by Aristotle.

<sup>24</sup> The quote is from Charles Bernstein (1986.90), who gives the name "imagabsorption" to this process. Karlheinz Stierle (1991.116), gives us a picture of what is missed in theatrical performance but occurs in the *study* of texts: A reader who studies the text does not only follow a linear and continually unfolding sense, he is multifariously engaged in trying to penetrate the meaning of a text through repeated readings and to include all of its aspects within the context of a single act of understanding. But he is also conscious of the insoluble difference and contradictory tendencies of language and speech, speech as a dynamic unfolding of verbal acts and as a remaining textual trace.

kind of tragedy may put us in danger of revivifying ghosts, of maintaining or reinstating values that history, which is to say other texts, has otherwise taught us to abandon to our advantage, values such as involuntary criminal contamination, unquestioned authority, unresponsive prophecy.

In this context, let me return to the relation between Apollo and the author. I have urged that Apollo not only predicts Oedipus's "crimes," and punishes him for them, but *causes* them to happen. Which is to say that the poet causes them to happen, and this on a level of poetic construction quite distinct from that on which he fabricates verisimilar motivation and action in his *human* characters. What results significantly reduces the usefulness of the play as a model for evaluating the relative merits of prophecy over sophistic science, as a model for a theory of action, or as a model for anything except perhaps the production of a powerfully persuasive ideological message.

What Apollo "does" in the *OT* is something the poet is doing *directly*; what Oedipus "does" is something the poet does *indirectly*. When we ask ourselves what "Oedipus" in this kind of story can or might be expected to do, we make explicit a whole set of rules (verisimilitude), shaped by prevailing views about what human beings can or are likely to do in certain circumstances. Audience- and reader-response is controlled by such rules and poets are constrained by them; in composing, they must work through these rules *indirectly*. But when we ask ourselves what "Apollo" in a story like this can or might be expected to do with respect to human beings, we realize that it is very nearly identical to what a poet, composing this kind of story, can do with respect to his characters. That is why nothing that "Apollo" does in the play is *motivated* the way human characters in the play have to be and are motivated. But this *direct* operation of the poet on the plot, specifically in the creation of the coincidences, is construed, by the unscientific mentality, as divine activity.<sup>26</sup> The

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<sup>25</sup> In a letter to D'Alembert, cited by Bernstein (1986.199).

<sup>26</sup> The heart of my argument is the correspondence between the act of narrative composition and the nature of prophecy: my insistence that what is represented as the agency of Apollo in the play are compositional decisions of the author quite distinct from those compositional acts that constitute the motivation of his human characters. The failure fully to grasp this led one of my colleagues (his view would not be untypical) to discount my analysis on the grounds that the *OT* "subscribes to the idea that the things that happened to Oedipus involve a divine intervention." This begs the question in at least two ways. (1) The *OT* does not so much *subscribe* to the idea, it *creates* it, or perhaps better *fabricates* it; at very least, it *sustains* and *nourishes* it. The interesting challenge is to demonstrate *how* it does this, which is, as I have suggested, by fairly consistent, not altogether obvious compositional choices. (2) To speak of the concept of "divine intervention" as if that were an uncomplicated linguistic event, a simple literary *representation* of something "given," whether from our point of view or a fifth-century Athenian point of view, seems like an irresponsible refusal of the philosophical/scientific perspective I am bringing to the play.

power of the play as a model of belief and conduct lies in the opacity of this distinction. To reveal the distinction is to demystify and so to neutralize that power, for our knowledge of how the effect is achieved can actually destroy the illusion, and, I am arguing, should do so.

Prophecy is not conceivable apart from narrative. It *derives* from narrative, from the representation of causal continuity in time. It is, I believe, less [98] accurate to say that a narrative represents a prophecy than that that prophecy represents that narrative, and does so by *pre-presenting* it, the frame paradoxically embedded in what it frames.<sup>27</sup> Prophecy derives from the narrator's foreknowledge (in reality, his afterknowledge) of his own products, from a process of retrogressive composition—from end to beginning (the end coming first and justifying the means), disguised in performance as a progression from beginning to end.<sup>28</sup> It is a process residing in the secret place between construction and production, in which effect precedes cause in the reality of relatively unconstrained composition, producing in performance the illusion of a necessary procession of cause and effect. Now in the life of real moral agents, "the subject," in Ricoeur's words (1984.37) "precedes the action, in the order of ethical qualities; in poetics, the composition of the action by the poet governs the ethical quality of the characters." Once this discrepancy is understood, once the camouflaged relation between prophecy and composition is laid bare, its persuasive power to bind is broken, and a play like the *OT* ceases to make sense.

If we are to make sense of the *OT*, we may (in fact, we must) assume the reality of Sophocles' Apollo. From a scientific point of view, the temporary suspension of our disbelief here is indeed salutary, for it is indispensable in realizing an experiment based on hypothesis. For literary transactions do involve hypothesis not altogether unlike scientific ones. They present us with models of action and consequences which we use in the construction of moral systems.<sup>29</sup> We are often led to believe that it is moral principles derived from such systems that offer actual grounds for conduct, when in fact they are but abstractions the significance of which continues to depend on original narrative contexts.<sup>30</sup> As

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<sup>27</sup> Compare Propp's remarks (1983.83): "Prophecy in itself is not part of the complication of the plot. Though it occurs at the starting point of the narrative, it is actually a product of the end. Prophecy does not determine the outcome; rather the outcome determines the prophecy."

<sup>28</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this process, particularly with respect to Homer's *Odyssey*, see Peradotto 1990.41-47.

<sup>29</sup> On this point, see especially Prado 1984 and Sell 1991.

<sup>30</sup> See Burrell and Hauerwas 1976.75-116, esp. 90.

models, these original narrative contexts must be judged by criteria of the useful and the good, and ranged against other models. It is out of the current consensual compilation of such models that we derive our view of what we call the “real world.” (Parenthetically and obviously, problems associated with the canonicity of texts are largely reducible to this realization and to arguments over whose use and whose good is to be served.)

In the long run, the *OT* is designed to induce us to disauthorize our scientific and rational *sophiai* because of and in favor of an authority disbelief in which we have suspended in order to realize the literary transaction. I am suggesting that nothing accomplished by the play should dissuade us from reinstating that disbelief. In fact, the semiotic reading of the play only serves to confirm that disbelief. When the existential reality of [99] spectators/readers is modelled on the *OT*, if what the character Oedipus represents in the order of experience is something which grounds decisions about that world and the actions we can take in it, what then does the character Apollo represent? Or Tiresias? This realization, I believe, argues not for the removal of the *OT* from our canon, but rather for an even securer place for it there—as a powerful paradigm of theocratic and prophetic rhetoric in need of exposure.

My attempts to disauthorize prophecy should not necessarily be construed as attempts to demystify the tragic view this play is alleged to embody. We may all well agree that self-knowledge—complete and clear—is an illusion. We may even then go on to agree that this illusion is tragic. But I would submit that that insight is based on or embodied in other sources, other texts. I am no longer persuaded that it can legitimately be based on this one. We can indeed act in massive ignorance of forces that have shaped us, and by such actions precipitate major misfortune for ourselves. But in the life of “real” (vs. fictional) agents, those forces, from the sophist/scientist’s perspective, are to a large extent random. They are not orchestrated toward the goal of our destruction, nor do they generate prophetic signs whose effect is to keep us on a fatal track we might otherwise diverge from.

The view I am expressing here is sure to incur the charge of “rationalism,” of attempting to reinstate a philosophical, scientific and rational point of view long after its defects have been exposed. But for all those defects—defects we know well how to demystify—I would insist it is once again time to emphasize the virtues of rational thought,<sup>31</sup> the discourse of the scientist and sophist. We

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<sup>31</sup> The view of the rational and the scientific espoused here may best be understood by resort to a clear distinction Roy Bhaskar (1986.72-73) makes between “(a) the principle of *epistemic relativity*, viz that all beliefs are socially produced, so that knowledge is transient and neither truth-values nor criteria of rationality exist outside of historical time and (b) the doctrine of *judgmental relativism*, which maintains that all beliefs are equally valid in the sense that there are no rational

have much more to fear from the other side, from what sophism came into being to demystify. I do not wish, here of all places, to give the appearance of oversimplifying a complex issue. Indeed, what goes by the name of reason or the rational these days is not negotiated comfortably; it hardly ever occurs without some having more negotiating power than others, or worse, the power to exclude others from the negotiations altogether. But we do not escape the tyranny of reason by abandoning it. The only proof that the sophist enterprise is bankrupt will be one supplied by sophism itself.<sup>32</sup> Any other will be the unresponsive dogma of the prophet. How can we not be apprehensive over the image, at the end of the *Tyrannus*, of power transferred into the hands of a self-confessed shirker of responsibility who will make no moves until clearing them with Delphi?<sup>33</sup> And as for Tiresias, what are we to think of one who lives in reclusive isolation from the community and the problems of its survival?

The stand taken here is based upon a mounting anxiety over agenda that are unresponsive, prophetic, and absolutist, whether religious or secular, national or international, inside [100] academia or beyond it, inside our profession's ranks or outside of it; whether it masks its partisanship as centrality or marginality, institutional loyalty or "political correctness," dignity or righteous indignation. As Fred Weinstein has pointed out, political and other forms of unresponsive authority continue to occupy elevated and venerated positions everywhere, more so than advocates of the democratization process would have expected. "The ritualization of authority," he says (1990.146), "cuts across all lines and exists in all cultures, to different degrees, certainly, but to significant degrees, no matter how rationalized, bureaucratized, or even democratized they may be." By social and cultural commitment, our profession, like other scholarly professions, and the colleges and universities where we do our work, are the only institutions formally dedicated to what I have been calling the sophist enterprise. If we let it fail, no one else will take it up. Our business is,

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grounds for preferring one to another. I accept (a), so disavowing any form of epistemic absolutism, but reject (b), so upholding judgmental rationality against a- (and/or ir-) rationalism. Relativists have mistakenly inferred (b) from (a), while anti-relativists have wrongly taken the unacceptability of (b) as a *reductio* of (a)."

<sup>32</sup> Compare Merrell (1992.146): "Some form of trust in reason and the validity of argumentation is a matter of fact. If we deny this trust, our pen will be paralyzed: we will not reasonably be able to reason about the impossibility of reason."

<sup>33</sup> This play is the only version of the Oedipus legend in which Creon assumes the Theban throne immediately after Oedipus's self-blinding. And as Ahl (1991.262) is right to emphasize, Oedipus's self-punishment and voluntary abdication only escalate his city's troubles and precipitate a series of events that lead to its ultimate defeat and subjugation.

simply—or not so simply—knowledge. And knowledge, as Elizabeth Wolgast argues (1977.204),

belongs to the sphere of debate, challenge, inquiry, proof; that is its logical home. It does not belong where there is final and unquestioned authority; it belongs where there are differences and controversy.

In short, if we believe that there are answers to the kinds of questions we ask, however provisional, however makeshift, then in order to tolerate our differences, there must be a shared language—call it a rhetoric if you must, but *shared*—in which these sorts of things can be done.<sup>34</sup> It is surely possible to acknowledge scientific incommensurability and linguistic indeterminacy without denying mutuality of meaning. As Jacques Derrida insists (1989.137: a passage likely to shock his misinformed and oversimplifying critics), it must always be not only possible but absolutely necessary “to invoke rules of competence, criteria of discussion and of consensus, good faith, lucidity, rigour, criticism, and pedagogy.” If there are values deriving from what I have been calling the prophetic viewpoint, and I do not discount that possibility, I believe it is our greater social obligation to force them into an open and responsive arena of justification. Others may find, perhaps with good reason, that they have to yield to the despair of Themistocles or Aristotle’s resigned concession to public opinion. We cannot afford to do so.

To say that the *Tyrannus* is an anti-sophist tract is to say that it yields to that despair. What should be emphasized, however, is that the sophist Oedipus who is demolished is but a half-baked sophist, one still immersed in an archaic notion of criminal contamination that even Aristotle would have discounted. And in the conflict of social skills or *technai* of which Oedipus himself speaks (380), in the competition of “wisdoms” or *sophiai* mentioned by an ambivalent chorus (501), he is made finally to abandon not only the problem of the number of Laius’s assailants, but even the evidence of his own senses in recollecting that he killed *all* those he encountered at the crossroads. Not only has one been made equal to many, but zero has been made equal to one. And the not so evident irony is that to make sense of the *Tyrannus*, even in a pious, unscientific reading, in what has been [101] called the “natural” reading of the play, requires fairly heavy application of the very skill for which Oedipus as enlightened sophist is noted, namely *inference*, to reconstruct, among other things, by what motivation the survivor from the crossroads should lie about the number of assailants but,

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<sup>34</sup> On this point, see Christopher Prendergast 1986 especially 246. He sums the matter up sensibly when he observes that “there may be limits to the activity of rule breaking, beyond which it collapses into the fundamentally unmanageable or even into sheer unintelligibility” (p.75). For a good introduction to the problems of defining rationality, see Max Black 1986.

under examination by the king, not about whose child the infant Oedipus was. In the same way we must reconstruct how Oedipus could have missed this survivor, thinking instead that he had killed everyone in Laius's party, and how the Corinthian drunk should come to know the secret surrounding King Polybus's son, and why Laius wished to go to Delphi. In the same way we must reconstruct—this one is harder!—how Oedipus could have missed the survivor's story, one which, as Jocasta says (850), the whole city heard, not she alone. To do all this, to make all these inferences, is to read the play as Oedipus reads Tiresias.

Shortly before the terrifying disclosure Oedipus is made to consider himself a *παῖς τῆς τύχης* (1080), a child of Tyche, a consequence of coincidence, an effect of the arbitrary. That is true of him and of the play, of course in a sense he does not mean, nor Sophocles intend. He is the effect of the arbitrary made to appear necessary. And if the sophist/scientist is frustrated by the power of the play to mask this from the teleonomic creatures that we are, and by Aristotle's apparent concession to this perhaps inevitable illusion in mass culture, he can at least find poetic justice and perhaps perverse delight in the way prizes were awarded on the occasion of its performance. Into the urn, the judges cast ten ballots, perhaps, one may speculate, as many as seven for Sophocles. In the customary way, five were shaken out, but no more than two for Sophocles. Submitted to the true lottery of chance, and altogether beyond the reach of personal intervention and purpose, the *Tyrannus* took second place. Like it or not, that's just the kind of thing that *does* happen by chance. Yet, by a further irony, perhaps disconcerting for my purposes—I shall not hide it!—that version of what happened makes a good story for the same reason as the story of Mitys's statue: the same poetic justice is at work, Sophocles undone by chance for writing a play discounting chance. Not the kind of thing that happens by chance!

As provocative as that hypothetical history may be, I would prefer to conclude with a narrative that consorts more aptly with the view I have taken: a talmudic text that offers an elaboration of, if not an alternative to, the canonical picture of creation in Genesis. In that version,<sup>35</sup> the Creator made twenty-six attempts at the task, each of them doomed to failure, before getting things the way they are. The world we inhabit is made out of the debris of provisional and failed creations. Made in the image of its Maker, [102] the human creature faces the same risk of failure. In the tale, God looks upon the latest creation, and says, not "This is good," but "Let's hope it works" (*Halway Sheyaamod*), thus branding the human story, right from its outset, with the mark of radical chanciness and risk, its end *not* written in the beginning, and its main characters left to conclude it for themselves.

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<sup>35</sup> Cited in Neher 1975.179.

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