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**Disauthorizing Prophecy:
The Ideological Mapping of *Oedipus Tyrannus***

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γνώμη δ' ἀρίστη μάντις ἢ τ' εὐβουλία. Euripides, *Helen*

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 λογισμοίς), and resorted to signs from heaven and prophecies (σημεῖα δαιμόνια καὶ χρησμούς), “contriving machinery as someone would in performing a tragedy” (ὥσπερ ἐν τραγωδίᾳ μηχανὴν ἄρας). The statesman, frustrated by the failure of rational discourse, finds success in theatrical smoke and mirrors, Themistocles probably not the first and certainly not the last. The story illustrates the power of non-rational over rational representation and uses theater as its most apt metaphor. I invite you to imagine, if you will, a sophist—someone like Critias or Gorgias or even, perhaps, Protagoras or Socrates—sitting in the theater of Dionysus during a not altogether dissimilar representation: the enactment of Sophocles' *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. I should like to take that frustrated sophist's part today, respectfully disregarding, for the while, the many other valid ways there may be to read *Oedipus Tyrannus*. 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 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 from narratives of enslavement and thereby to promote the autonomy of reading subjects and their society (Godzich 1989). 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. Achieving these goals 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. 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 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 does. 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 understood as responsible for the particular situation in which they are brought into lethal relationship with a particular person. The granary would have fallen in any case, but since witchcraft was present, it fell at a 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 (Evans–Pritchard 1935: 418–19).

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 for an event to be accidental.

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 derives 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 *iuxta 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 these 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 draws 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 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 (1984: 304) offers us a more salutary substitute in what he calls a Lucretian science. "The point," he says,

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.

In antiquity there surely is no greater scientist 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 the *Poetics*, where there does indeed seem to be a concerted effort to correlate his view of poetry with his views as metaphysician and scientist, where the best kind of plot is 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 scientist? Is it right for a philosopher and a scientist to say that plausible impossibilities make better plots than implausible possibilities (also called "successful falsifying" ψευδῆ λέγειν ὥς δεῖ)? Readers of the *Poetics* (1752a) 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 Mitys, killed when, during a festival, 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 (θαῦμα) 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 φαίνεται: the events merely *appear* or *seem* to happen by design, not of course to a philosopher or scientist like Aristotle, but to the mass of folks 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, τὸ εἰκός: 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 (*Poetics* ch. 25; cf. also 9 and 15). Of course, we would say that “historical actuality” and “scientific possibility” possess their own particular brands of verisimilitude, differing from “public opinion” only in degree of self-monitoring, systematicity and consistency. But in Aristotle’s remarks here we observe the greater kinship of the *Poetics* with the *Rhetoric* than with the *Physics* or *Metaphysics*, despite his 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):

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.

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. 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 τέχνη but as virtually another chapter in the *Rhetoric*, concerned as it is with what Roland Barthes (1970: 179) calls a "deliberately degraded" logic ("logique volontairement dégradée"), 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 (Ducrot and Todorov 1979: 74). 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. The effect of this view was to neutralize whatever potential rhetorical analysis might have had to deflate the claims of the muse-inspired bard. That history has forced upon us a way of reading *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 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 (1957, foreword), “How can we linger over books to which obviously the author was not constrained?” In the same vein Borges, in his tale “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (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 perhaps to say rewrites, the text along the lines suggested by Valéry (1957: 1467) when he speaks of an unconventional literary work which, he says,

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’ 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 said to happen δι’ ἄλληλα only if we posit—as the poet or cultural convention or belief may force 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 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’ 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’ 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 (716), in an account otherwise brutally austere in that kind of casual, descriptive detail. But for that detail, which Oedipus catches on, 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 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 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): ‘Ἀπόλλων τὰδ’ 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 Laius’ assailants (Goodhart 1978). Remove any one of these coincidences, an easy thing to do given the infinitesimal plausibility of their all occurring, and the *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).

What is more, all the suspicion raised by semiotics and hermeneutics when it comes to literary texts goes a fortiori for drama, for drama, even more than the written text, masks an 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, by fixing gesture, tone and scenery, our reception of otherwise ambiguous or multivalent textual elements. 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 *im-position* of the image on the mind” (1986: 90). 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 activity is tyrannical, for it turns the arbitrary into a constraint. It was this perception that led Rousseau (in a letter to D’Alembert) 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.” In short, the traditional aesthetics of this kind of tragedy may put us in danger of revivifying ghosts, of maintaining or reinstating values which 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’ “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, 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 actions 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. The 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 accurate to say that a narrative represents a prophecy than to say that prophecy represents that narrative, and does so by *pre-presenting* it, the frame paradoxically embedded in what it frames. 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. 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 "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" (1984: 37). 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. 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 whose significance remains dependent on original narrative contexts (Burrell and Hauerwas 1976: 90). As 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 σοφία 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 spectators/readers is modelled on the *OT*, if whatever 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 this 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, the discourse of the scientist and sophist. We 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 sophistic enterprise is bankrupt will be one executed by sophism itself. Any other will be the unresponsive dogma of the prophet. I, for one, am 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. 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 academia or outside of 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, “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” (1990: 146). 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 sophistic enterprise. If we let it fail, no one else will take it up. 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 (Prendergast 1986: 246). 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.

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 τέχναι of which Oedipus himself speaks (380), in the competition of “wisdoms” or σοφίαι mentioned by an ambivalent chorus (501), he is made finally to abandon not only the problem of the number of Laius’ 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 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, 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’ party, and how the Corinthian drunk should come to know the secret surrounding King Polybus’ 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 Tychê, 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' 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 this version (cited in Neher 1975: 179), 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 failing creations. Made in the image of its maker, the human creature faces the same risk of failure. In the tale, as God looks upon his latest creation, he 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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