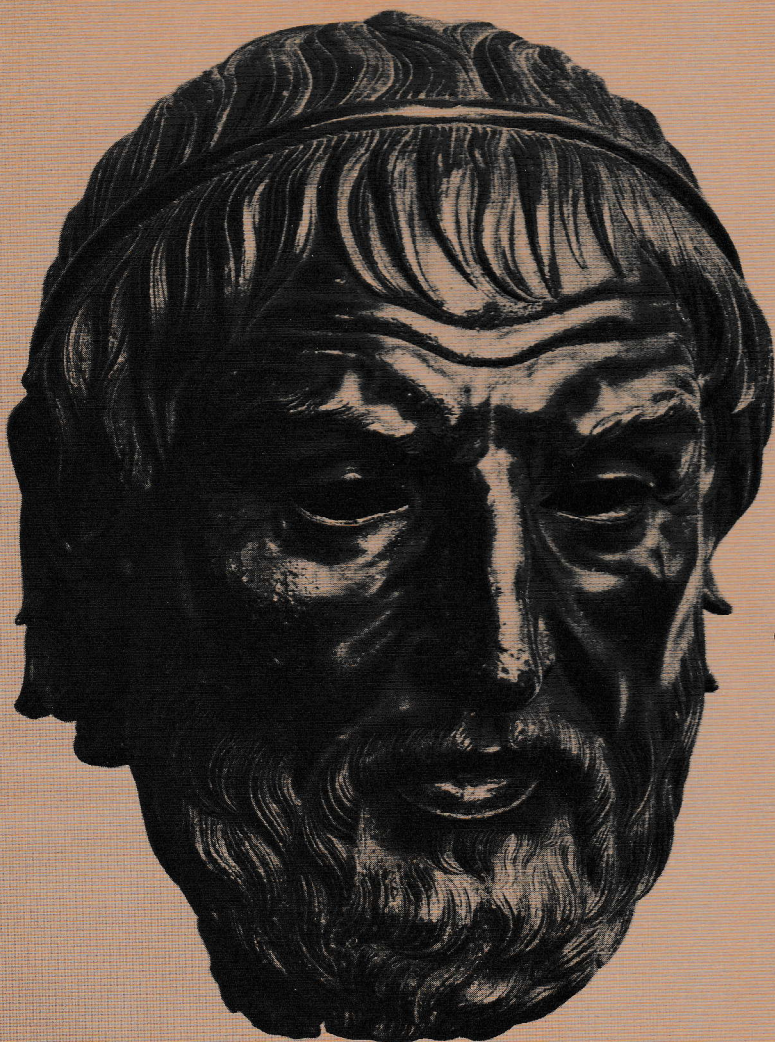


SOPHOCLES



Karl Reinhardt

fate, and the other, by contrast, of dialogue form and overlapping; the former composed of pathos-filled, inflexible and unchanging elements, the other of shifting, changing elements, both in the details and in general. By 'monologue form' I do not mean soliloquy or speaking to oneself in solitude, but rather the nature of the scene, the language and the dramatic action by which a person's fate is announced to the audience, either through his own mouth or that of another, without his reaching through as a person to another outside himself, or joining with another in any lasting relationship.⁴ Between the two groups there are two transitional works: they might well be called the poet's middle period, since they display his strongest powers; they are the plays translated by Hölderlin [the *Antigone* and the *Oedipus Tyrannus*].

17 The objection may be raised that it is hardly permissible to draw such conclusions about style and dating from a selection of only seven dramas out of a total of more than a hundred satyr-plays and tragedies. But the surviving selection is not an arbitrary one: it reflects the judgment of antiquity, and we may be sure that it neither omits the greatest nor immortalizes the insignificant.

I

AJAX

18 The *Ajax* is a drama which plunges right into the middle of the catastrophe, or its consequences; it does not begin with what had preceded that catastrophe. The subject of the tragedy is not Ajax's quarrel with Odysseus and the Atridae, or how, cheated of the arms of Achilles, Ajax resolves on vengeance, or how he is seized by madness—all of which might well have provided highly dramatic themes. On the contrary, the drama begins on an unprepared *fortissimo*: during the prologue the mad Ajax is summoned out of his tent; at this point there is a break; and what follows is virtually a new, contrasting beginning. Then comes, as the first part of the tragedy, the melancholia and death of a man fully conscious of what he is doing, and, as the second part, the dispute about his burial. We have here a kind of catastrophe-drama which shows from the very beginning how a human being has to *come to terms* with his fate, which has already been *decided*.¹ This type of structure and content is by no means common in Attic drama; of all the tragedies that survive, the *Ajax* is the only one of this kind. The *Ajax* is also unique among Sophocles' tragedies in that it opens with the entrance of a visible deity who points to the victim of its wrath. In front of the tent of Ajax, Odysseus hears the voice of his patron goddess, Athena, visible in her divine splendour only to the audience and to the demented Ajax; she summons her victim out of the tent, encourages him in his confusion, pretending to support him, but at the same time really betraying him to his enemy; and not content with this cruel behaviour, she goes on to drive home a moral (118 ff.):

Athena

Do you see, Odysseus, how great the gods' power is?
Who was more full of foresight than this man,
Or abler, do you think, to act with judgment?

Odysseus

19 None that I know of. Yet I pity
 His wretchedness, though he is my enemy,
 For the terrible yoke of blindness that is on him.
 I think of him, yet also of myself;
 For I see the true state of all of us that live—
 We are dim shapes, no more, and weightless shadow.

Athena

Look well at this, and speak no towering word
 Yourself against the gods, nor walk too grandly
 Because your hand is weightier than another's,
 Or your great wealth deeper founded. One short day
 Inclines the balance of all human things
 To sink or rise again. Know that the gods
 Love men of steady sense and hate the proud.

The speech of the avenging deity, and the fact that the drama begins *after* the catastrophe, are both unparalleled and have therefore struck critics as odd. Those who were not content to account for this in terms of aesthetic considerations put the blame for what they considered a faulty structure on an alleged primitiveness on the part of a poet 'not yet quite sure of himself'. They tried to lessen the *fabula docet* effect, the didacticism which offends our sensibilities, by regarding it as addressed to the audience only, and by separating it from the action; as if Sophocles were making use of the goddess to mention something in passing. . . .² But in fact these two difficulties, the nature of the deity, and the opening of the play at the point of the catastrophe, are closely bound together. And the lesson to be drawn from the words of the goddess, however strange it may seem that she apparently stands outside the realm of morality, gives her intervention an unmistakable meaning: this is Man before God!

But where is the origin of this to be found? The Ajax theme had already been treated in epic, in the *Little Iliad* or in the *Aethiopsis*; and although it is no longer known what rôle Athena played in these works, it was certainly not the rôle she plays in Sophocles. In the *Iliad* Athena deceives Hector in his flight, in order to deliver him into Achilles' hands. But Sophocles' Athena goes much further than Homer's: she continues to play her tricks on the man after he has been betrayed. And it is this element of pointing, demonstrating,

20 making an example of a man, which is as far removed from epic as anything can be, especially with the additional didactic element. But if it comes from neither epic nor saga, where does it come from? Is it an innovation by Sophocles? But in that case why do we have nothing else like it? And if it is Sophoclean, is it early or late? Is it developed or primitive?

These questions can now be answered, thanks to a text which has only recently been discovered. The unique elements in the *Ajax* are not to be explained by any lack of skill or any wilfulness on the part of the poet; they are due to the influence of an earlier work and reveal a style which is still bound by archaic conventions. In the light of this discovery we can now estimate for the first time how much Sophocles 'learnt from Aeschylus', as the *Vita* puts it. It is the first certain proof that the *Ajax* is an early play. It must be the earliest of all the surviving plays, certainly much earlier than the *Antigone*, which is generally considered to be the earliest.³

The discovery to which we are indebted for this is a piece of papyrus containing fragments of Aeschylus' *Niobe*. From the twenty-two lines—for that is all that survives, and the beginning and end of each line are lost—we may infer an unexpected amount of information concerning the history of tragedy. Like the *Ajax*, the *Niobe* was a tragedy of shattering destruction, opening—*after* the judgment of the deity, *after* the *hybris* of the heroine—with the sufferings of a character persecuted by a divine being; a drama of dumb anger, of dull pain, of the need to come to terms with the terrifying power of fate; a representation of passive pathos, with just as little 'action' as the *Ajax*. When Ajax has become conscious of what he has done, he sits absorbed in his own thoughts, brooding on his fate, without uttering a word; he reveals himself in his misery and breaks his silence in answer to the cry of his family in order to bid farewell to his little son, only to plunge immediately all the more violently into silence within his tent. That is exactly how Niobe sat in dumb misery 'without a word during half the drama', veiled, at the tomb of her children. Just as Athena points her finger at the mad hero, we learn from the new papyrus that Leto, the immortal mother, revealing herself in all her power, pointed at the mortal mother: for just as Ajax had boasted before Athena of his heroic deeds, Niobe had boasted before Leto of the number of her children. And the moral conclusion which the goddess in Aeschylus

21 adds is astonishingly similar to the didactic passage which is put into the mouth of Athena in the *Ajax*:⁴

Leto

Now you can see the marriage's conclusion.
This is the third day that she has sat by this tomb,
the living mother wailing over her dead children,
lamenting the wretched fortune of their beauty.
A mortal brought to ruin is nothing but a shadow.
Mighty Tantalus will soon come here
intent on bringing her back home again. . . .
To you—since you are not unsympathetic—I will
explain: a god implants a fault in mortals
when he intends to ruin their house utterly.
Even so, a mortal must not speak presumptuously
but guard the fortune that the gods have sent him.
Yet in great prosperity men never think that they
may stumble and spill the full cup they're holding.
And so, exultant in their beauty, she . . .*

The same stylistic elements—the visibility of the goddess, gnomic interpretation, the victims' consciousness of their fate—are peculiar to both tragedies; even before the discovery of the papyrus a fragment [fr. 159 Nauck² = fr. 278 D Mette] was known which read:

Tantalus

My destiny, which reached up to the heavens
now plunges down to earth and says to me:
'Learn not to admire too much the things of man'.

Just as Tecmessa finally comes to Ajax pleading in vain, so Tantalus came in vain to Niobe, hoping to comfort her and to persuade her to live. . . . And even if we can never know the rest of the tragedy, enough is certain. The *Ajax* and the *Niobe* belong to the same genre.

But the similarities in external formal construction show up all the more clearly the difference between the two poets' deeper

*[We have translated the text of H. Lloyd-Jones (Loeb Aeschylus ii), not that used by Reinhardt.]

22 personal conceptions of tragedy. In Aeschylus the disaster falls on the whole house; husband and father share in the downfall. . . . Niobe represents the fate of her whole immoderately large family. In Aeschylus a human being even in his downfall does not stand only for himself or by himself. The ruined man is not *μονοῦμενος*, an individual separated from the world that contains and sustains him, before Sophocles. The fact that it is necessary to make room by force for Ajax's monologue for the first time in the middle of this drama, an indication of the break-through of a new mode of speech, is at the same time the most powerful expression, and historically the most memorable symbol of a new tragic consciousness which is unknown before the time of Sophocles. The relationship between the two poets is made clear by the fact that in Aeschylus' *Women of Thrace* [fr. 83 Nauck² = fr. 252 Mette] which treated the same material, there was still the traditional messenger's report instead of a monologue, still a description of the unhappy death of Ajax instead of the speech of the isolated individual who has prepared himself for death.

But there is another innovation. We cannot understand the deeper contrast between the nature of the tragedy of Ajax and the tragedy of Niobe if we do not realize that each is conditioned by a different type of deity. In Sophocles the goddess has her sport with the mortal.⁵ And this sport, and everything connected with it (on the one hand the confusion of the madman trapped by his own delusions, on the other hand the harshness and irony of the divine will) is presented in a form which is more cruel than anything in the Ajax saga or any other work known to us. Even more cruel than anything in Aeschylus, despite the terrible things of which his gods are capable. That a person's intentions and impressions should clash with the reality of his nature and his surroundings, so that everything he does and says becomes a mockery of what he wants and believes, is a peculiarly Sophoclean motif; it appears for the first time—admittedly in a traditional form—in the prologue of the *Ajax*, and it recurs in some form or variation in every later work. And even if in the three late works, the *Electra*, the *Philoctetes* and the *Oedipus at Colonus*, the clash appears playful and secondary rather than terrible and central, nevertheless in the end it breaks out once more with all its old power: for finally it creates one of the most powerful scenes in the *Oedipus at Colonus*.

23 But what is later revealed within the bounds of a human fate appears at the beginning in the form of the divinity in person (71 ff.):

Athena

You there, who are binding fast your captives' arms
With fetters, come outside! Ajax! Come out!

Ajax, I call you once again!

Is this how much you care for your old ally?

*(Ajax enters with a bloodstained whip from the tent, where
he has been lashing, not Odysseus, but a ram.)*

Ajax

Hail, Athena! Daughter of Zeus,

Hail and welcome! How well you have stood by me!

I shall deck you with trophies all of gold

From the spoils of this hunting, in thanksgiving.

Athena

Excellent. But tell me, did you dip

Your blade well in the Greeks' blood?

Athena

Well, then, if your good pleasure wills it so,

Do execution, carry out all you have in mind.

Ajax

I must be at my work. Goddess, I charge you to⁶

Stand always my ally as you have today.

If we listen to the goddess, Ajax is 'bad' and Odysseus good. But this is only the judgment of the religion of humility—admittedly, a Greek, not a Christian humility—whereas, if we disregard the voice of this religion, Ajax is great, a hero, a colossus indeed in the greatness of his heart no less than in his physical strength. Does this mean that the goddess is blind to what Odysseus sees and feels? It is obvious that the morality of the gods has nothing to do with their power. For the function of the divine (leaving aside, that is, its function in epic poetry) seems to be to define and limit the area within which man can act, and which can be measured by the mind of man.

The figure of Ajax the outsider is developed by Sophocles

24 beyond the Ajax of the epic poems. Similarly, Odysseus, the figure who stands in opposition to him, develops from the crafty fox of the epic into a character of god-fearing resignation, who can recognize himself in his neighbour. What has happened to the age-old contrast between the giant and the trickster, between the archer and the warrior with his shield and spear, between the nimble, inventive, adaptable Odysseus and the stubborn, steadfast, direct Ajax? It has developed beyond Homer's representation of the spirit of two types of warrior to become a contrast between two attitudes towards fate.⁷ On the one hand stands the tragically unprotected, heroically rigid and inflexible Ajax; on the other, the protected, perceptive Odysseus, well-adjusted to his fate. Sophocles sets the intransigent Ajax, the man who wanted to massacre the Achaeans out of wounded pride and ambition, and the humane Odysseus side by side, thus foreshadowing the later contrast between the inflexibility of Antigone and the mildness of Ismene. Yet a comparison between this situation and a later untragic and protected contrasting figure—for Creon too stands in the same relationship to Oedipus—shows how the *Ajax* belongs to a quite different, earlier stylistic phase: there is as yet no tension or conflict between the opposites. Each stands alone, each holds his own fate within himself, each is self-sufficient, separated from the other—not seen in relation to him. Sophocles was able to make characters stand out in contrast with each other before he could relate them to each other and involve them with each other.

The contrast between the victim of fate and the man who knows occurs also in religious narratives, and these may well have influenced Sophocles. Odysseus' awe in the presence of the downfall of human greatness is shared by Cyrus (Herodotus i. 86.6) when he rescues his enemy Croesus—who 'was a fellow human-being'—from the pyre, 'reflecting that nothing in the affairs of mortals is secure'. But what a difference dramatic presentation makes! It concentrates the abstract opposition of fortune and misfortune into a contrast between one individual in the grip of a daimon and one untouched by any daimon.

25 In the *parodos* the fall of Ajax, their leader, is echoed by the fears of his followers. The one is joined by the many, the great man by small men, who are brought together by the bad news. Their urgent questions bring Tecmessa from the tent. Expressions of fear con-

avoided, and takes place not off-stage but as the climax of the *epeisodia*. The *Ajax* and the *Trachiniae*, in which pathos is presented in a stationary form and in which no reversal of emotion occurs during the action, stand on one side, and all the other plays on the other. Both in language and in dramatic composition, a change has taken place between the two types of play.

Nevertheless, in this early work, once the tonality has been established, the stream of lyric poetry is more resonant, ranges more widely, and breathes more deeply and expansively than in any other play of Sophocles. The lament of Ajax, like Ajax himself, is colossal. It lacks changes and variations of mood, but the result is that its fixed contrasts resound on an unceasing note, and the horror of the circumstances can be expressed without restraint: the greatness of Ajax and his shame, the sense of his heroic being and the senselessness of his fate, the hero turning his hatred on the outside world and his misery on himself, locked in lament or shouting his heart out. . . . The first sounds issue from the closed tent, as he calls for his little son and his half-brother; then the *kommos* (lament) accompanies the revelation of the interior of the tent: the battle-field strewn with dead cattle, the hero seated in the middle amidst the laments of Tecmessa and the chorus: the *picture* turns into melic dialogue. . . . And what echoes and re-echoes in this scene, the slyness of Odysseus his arch-enemy, the falseness of the leaders of the army, the mockery of his soldiers, the landscape and the scenes of his glory. . . all these threads are woven into the harmony of the inevitable end of the *kommos* (364 ff.):

Ajax

Here I am, the bold, the valiant,
Unflinching in the shock of war,
A terrible threat to unsuspecting beasts.
Oh! what a mockery I have come to! What indignity!

Tecmessa

Ajax, my lord and master,
I beg you not to say such things.

Ajax

Go away! Take yourself out of my sight!

(*He groans*)

28 He is no longer worthy to lift his eyes to seek help from either gods or men. Where can he flee? Where can he stay? . . . (412 ff):

Ajax

O

Sounding straits of the sea
Caves by the sea's edge, meadows on the shore,
Long and long have you kept me here in Troyland . . .

What follows the *kommos* is very much the same in the static way in which it expresses the tragedy: it is just as much without crescendo, change, climax or descent. In the prologue Ajax and Odysseus had stood in contrast with each other without either penetrating the consciousness of the other; the same is true of Ajax and Tecmessa in the second *epeisodion*. There is no interplay of dialogue, there is not a single word which has the power to communicate and penetrate the wall between them. Each remains the prisoner of his own fate. Ajax's speech rings out as though Tecmessa were not present; and Tecmessa's plea, urgent and touching as it is, does not touch Ajax either by its vibrant tone or the power of its arguments. She does not even provoke him to contradict her. And when she pleads, she expresses herself only from her own point of view; and that is hopelessly out of touch with her husband's.

The speeches of both characters begin with the same emphasis on fate; both characters recall their fathers; both end with themselves—and again it is not a coincidence that in all the tragedies of Sophocles it is this passage that is most comparable in genre and attitude with the opening speech of the *Trachiniae*. Even if the chorus does hear Ajax's decision—let them hear it, they hear it only as the audience hears it. No advice, no directions, no words are addressed to him—Ajax's powerful survey of the hopelessness of his position, delivered to the world with such pathos, stands in isolation, unresolved (457 f.):

Ajax

And now, Ajax—what is to be done now?
I am hated by the gods, that's plain; the Greek camp hates me . . .

29

Tecmessa begins her speech with a solemn *gnōmē*, which is

followed by the account of her fate—her plea, too, develops into a narrative imbued with pathos (485 ff.):

Tecmessa

Ajax, my master, life knows no harder thing
Than to be at the mercy of compelling fortune.
I, for example, was born of a free father;
If any man in Phrygia was lordly and prosperous, he was.
Now I'm a slave. Such, it seems, was the gods' will,
And the will of your strong hand . . .

The rest of her plea, right down to the last detail, is based on Homer—Hector's farewell to Andromache in the sixth book of the *Iliad*.¹⁰ But because the model is so clear, the difference that is revealed by the way in which Sophocles adapts it for the stage is particularly significant. In the epic (vi 407 ff.: the following excerpts give some idea of the content), Andromache laments:

And you have no pity on your little son, nor on me, who soon must be your widow. . . . For me it would be far better to sink into the earth when I have lost you, for there is no other consolation for me . . . since I have no father, no mother and they who were my seven brothers all went down into Hades, for Achilles slaughtered all of them, and my father too; my mother died at home, struck down by Artemis . . . Hector, you are father to me, and my mother, you are my brother, and my husband. Take pity upon me, that you may not leave your child an orphan, your wife a widow. . . .*

Like Tecmessa, Andromache speaks of herself and her son, but mainly because these are the two things most likely to persuade her departing husband to turn back. His reply also refers to them:

All these things are in my mind also; yet I would feel deep shame before the Trojans, and the Trojan women. . . . For I know there will come a day when Ilium shall perish, and Priam, and the people of Priam. . . . But it is not so much the pain to come of the Trojans that troubles me, nor even of Hecuba nor Priam, nor the thought of my

*[This is based on the translation by Richard Lattimore (University of Chicago Press, 1951), modified to correspond with Reinhardt's phrasing.]

30

brothers in their numbers and valour, . . . as the thought of you, when some Achaean leads you off, taking away your day of liberty, in tears; and in Argos you must work at the loom of another, and carry water from the spring Messeis or Hypereia, reviled and dishonoured; and some day seeing you shedding tears a man will say of you: 'This is the wife of Hector, who was the bravest fighter of the Trojans, in the days when they fought at Ilium!' May the earth hide me under before I hear you crying and know by this that they drag you captive.*

Tecmessa's plea does not seem at first sight so very different (510 ff.):

. . . And last, dear lord, show pity to your child.
Robbed of his infant nurture, reft of you,
To live his life out under the rule of guardians
Not kind nor kindred—what a wretchedness
You by your death will deal to him and me!
And I no longer have anywhere to look for help,
If not to you. My country was destroyed
Utterly by your spear, and another fate
Brought down my mother and my father too . . .
. . . Then what fatherland
Shall I ever have but you? Or what prosperity?
You are my only safety . . .

And yet how *different* the two speeches are. Take, for instance the slavery awaiting the wife—Tecmessa and Andromache alike, for the future of each will be the same—when one of the Achaeans takes her away as his booty, and the remarks that will then be passed around: 'See, this woman was once the wife of Hector' or 'this woman was the wife of Ajax, the greatest of all heroes.' In the epic it is the husband who thinks about this, a touch which enhances the tenderness of the situation; in the tragedy it is not the husband but the wife. That is, in the epic they speak to each other, in the tragedy they speak without communicating with each other, for each speaks his own language to which the other does not listen. The words of the wife die away without a syllable having reached her husband's ears, and vice versa. Ajax's thoughts of his father, his

*See note on p. 20.

home, his son, respect and shame (*αἰδώς*) are to him reasons for committing suicide; but precisely the same ideas appear to Tecmessa as reasons for *not* committing suicide (*ἀλλ' αἰδεσθαι μὲν πατέρα . . .*). But neither speech refers to the other, neither refutes the other; they do not touch or lead to any argument for and against; rather, they express two incompatible philosophies of life, each justified from a different, totally separate standpoint.

Instead of replying, Ajax commands that his son be brought to him.¹¹ Why had he been kept at a distance? When Ajax hears that it was for fear that in his madness he might attack him too, he says (534):

Yes, that would have been worthy of my evil genius.

31 And yet, when the child is brought to him, we forget for a moment that the hero is standing, not among dead enemies, but among dead cattle; the hero's farewell is like a farewell on a battlefield; the dissonance between the hero and his fate, his soul and his circumstances could not be more terrible (545 ff.):

Ajax

Lift him up, lift him to me. He won't be frightened,
Even by seeing this fresh-butchered gore,
Not if he really is my son.

My boy, have better luck than your father had,
Be like him in all else; and you will not be base.

He will not let the mother come near him. His solicitude for his son, the heir to his heroism, is the only thing which brings him out of the prison of his fate, the barrier erected around him by his 'daimon'.¹² But as though this were too great a sacrifice to sentiment, he has scarcely finished pouring out his heart when he calls even more impatiently for the door of the tent to be shut, so that he may retreat silently into himself again.

There can no longer be any doubt as to what will happen. The chorus which concludes this scene ends like a lament over one who has already fallen: they sing of how the mother of Ajax will cry 'woe' and beat her breast when she hears of the calamity that has

32 befallen her child. It would be better for him to be hidden in Hades; when he left his father's house he was the best of the Achaeans, and now he has gone so far astray. . . . But when in the *episodes* which immediately follows Ajax steps out of his tent, he is a changed man. And now, if we are not to misinterpret what follows, we must make use of comparisons.¹³ Only by comparison can we grasp the formal structure and avoid being misled by perverse modern interpretations. Has a genuine transformation taken place? Can Ajax be lying? And if he is lying, why? Or do his lies change into truth? There are as many interpretations of this passage as there are possibilities. But before we indulge in speculation, we should bear in mind that the same phenomenon recurs in the *Trachiniae* (436 ff.), the play which comes next in chronological order. So we should start by making sure that the interpretation is valid for both the *Ajax* and the *Trachiniae*.

It is true that the two speeches, both that of Ajax and that of Deianira, are speeches of deception, obviously uttered to mislead another person. Both are equally unexpected in the mouth of a person who until that point, whether standing in silence, speaking or singing, had always remained rigidly enclosed in the world to which he is bound by his own fate, apparently incapable of any difference in conduct or any change of attitude. The characters plunge into both speeches with equal abruptness; neither is preceded by any previous deliberation; neither is directed towards any goal which has been mentioned before. They are thus both very different from any form of *intrigue*, either external and caused by circumstances, or within the mind. But in that case are we entitled to speak of deception? Indeed some scholars have concluded that we cannot. Yet in both cases the deception is revealed by the reversal which follows, in which the apparent truth of the speech is confronted with the real truth. In both cases we are completely unprepared for the reversal that reveals the real truth; its effect is like the impact of a shattering blow on the chorus in both plays, an impact similar to that caused by the reversal that had revealed the apparent truth a little earlier.

But the roots of the relationship between the speeches go even deeper. They both counterfeit the truth; but, more than that, in spite of the obvious deception involved, they both unfold a tale which is rendered so convincing to the ear by the wealth of its imagery that

the will to deceive does not suffice to explain its pathos. In these speeches the individual, in his loneliness and isolation, comes to realize the truth about the way in which all things fit together, in an order which is valid not only for the community of which he is no longer a part, but as the very essence of Nature, which is valid both in heaven and on earth. So the individual who has been cast out exercises his own will in spite of the circumstances by which he is bound, and frees himself not only from the ordinances of society but also from the ordinances of all existence.¹⁴

The eyes of Ajax are suddenly opened, he recognizes the world, but he refuses to fit into it, to submit to its ordinances, to follow the rule 'Know thyself'. Rather, he sees in the world something alien and contrary to his nature, in which he could participate only if he were no longer Ajax: 'If I were to submit to this world and its gods, who tolerate nothing that is extreme or persistent, no final Yes or No, I would hate my enemy, but, bearing in mind that he may one day become my friend, I would limit my hatred accordingly' (he alludes to the saying of Bias [Ar. *Rhet.* 1389 b, 24–5]); 'and I would do good to my friend, bearing in mind that his friendship might not endure for ever' [679–82]. He has to perish, not only because he has detached himself from his heroic environment—that was already his fate in the epic—but because the world can no longer contain him. The comparisons which he makes between himself and the world of nature are more than a rhetorical device; they are more than the dignified language of tragic diction. While they stress change as a universal law to which all realms, both the macrocosm of nature and the microcosm of man, are subject, they bear witness to a feeling concerning the world close to that of Heraclitus: 'God is summer and winter, day and night . . .' [fr. 67 Diels-Kranz⁶]. But in the words of Ajax a discord can be heard underneath the noble praise of the order of the world, an undertone of revulsion, almost of scorn of that wisdom which is the wisdom of this world (646 ff.):

Ajax

Strangely the long and countless drift of time
Brings all things forth from darkness into light,
Then covers them once more. Nothing so marvellous
That man can say it surely will not be—

Strong oath and iron intent come crashing down.
My mood, which just before was strong and rigid,
No dipped sword more so, now has lost its edge—
My speech is womanish for this woman's sake. . .

From now on this will be my rule: Give way
To Heaven, and bow before the sons of Atreus.
They are our rulers, they must be obeyed.
I must give way, as all dread strengths give way,
In turn and deference. Winter's hard-packed snow
Cedes to the fruitful summer; stubborn night
At last removes, for day's white steeds to shine.
The dread blast of the gale slackens and gives
Peace to the sounding sea; and Sleep, strong jailer,
In time yields up his captive. Shall not I
Learn peace and wisdom? Have I not learned this,
Only so much to hate my enemy
As though he might again become my friend,
And so much good to wish to do my friend,
As knowing he may yet become my foe?

In this passage the deception grows from an irony which has deeper roots than what we generally call 'tragic irony'; here the irony arises from a dawning perception of an everlasting discord between the hero and the way in which the world is organized.¹⁵

It is true that the speech of deception in the *Trachiniae* does not employ the same wealth of comparisons with the world of nature as that in the *Ajax*; but Deianira disguises her intentions in the same way. She pretends to recognize and glorify a power which governs mankind, the gods and the world; but this recognition is deceptive, since she does not act in accordance with her words. Admittedly it is not the same power as that in the *Ajax*; but it is as much in conflict with the unchangeable nature of the loving Deianira as the law of change is in conflict with the inflexibility of Ajax. What Deianira pretends to recognize—that is, what she recognizes as valid for the world, but not for herself—is the law of change, confined to the only part of the world that she recognizes, her own world—Love. Just as Deianira boasts of her insight (*ἐπίστασθαι τὰ ἀνθρώπεια*) at the moment when she least possesses it, so Ajax pretends to fulfil the law 'think as a mortal should: do not presume to go further'

(κατ' ἀνθρώπων φρονεῖν) when he is furthest from doing so [cf. *Trach.* 439, *Ajax* 677].

But in Ajax's 'speech of deception' his newly gained perception helps him to make a decision. The result of his perception was not deliberate dissimulation; similarly the result of his decision is not an intention to mislead. Rather, Ajax's own mind is the victim of self-deception to such an extent that, far from voluntarily intending to mislead, Ajax involuntarily *veils* his meaning: 'But you [Tecmessa] go in and pray to the gods that they may grant fulfilment of my heart's desire.' In this passage the words 'desire' and 'fulfilment' are both veiled; they are veiled allusions to 'the fulfilment of death' (τέλος θανάτοιο)—and this is an action as far removed from a trick as it is from the usual word-play of irony; it is not even ambiguous like the 'long sleep' which Schiller's Wallenstein plans, but is the attitude of a man hiding himself in darkness (687 ff.):

Ajax

And you, my friends, heed my instructions too,
And when he comes, deliver this to Teucer:
Let him take care for me and thought for you.
Now I am going where my way must go . . .

But the veiled language is at its most veiled when it comes to the thought of the suicide weapon, the sword. It is true that Ajax needs an excuse to move away with his sword without arousing any suspicion, but it is not merely this excuse which gives his speech a secret inner meaning: his intention outstrips his words, and the 'speech of deception' becomes a monologue; his words, instead of remaining within the play, break right through its framework and address the audience. They signify: this is Ajax, this is how he veils his words, here is a man who is turning away from reality to appearances, who is renewing his allegiance to the unreal, a man who is making atonement, who is in truth unteachable, who is shutting himself off from everything—for he does not begin to shut himself off completely before the lines which give an *appearance* of participation in society (654 ff.):

Ajax

But now I'm going to the bathing place
And meadows by the sea, to cleanse my stains,

In hope the goddess' wrath may pass from me.
And when I've found a place that's quite deserted,
I'll dig in the ground, and hide this sword of mine,
Hatefullest of weapons, out of sight. May Darkness
And Hades, God of Death, hold it in their safe keeping.
For never, since I took it as a gift
Which Hector, my great enemy, gave to me,
Have I known any kindness from the Greeks . . .

36

His thoughts circle around his death. The 'enmity' of the weapon, the 'digging' of it 'in the ground', 'Darkness' and 'Hades', the 'beyondness' (ἐκεῖσε) of the 'deserted place', the 'cleansing' of the 'stain': all these are just as valid as images of his inner self, but transposed from clarity into obscuring, veiling references.¹⁶ Deception drives Ajax into the abyss: once more he draws around himself the disguising veils of this world and its hopes which have become alien and inimical to him.

This is the key to the relationship between Ajax's 'speech of deception' and his monologue, from which it is separated by the episode in which his followers go to look for him. The relationship is one of contrast between veiling and unveiling, between illusory participation in society and the nakedness of the solitary soul in the face of death. The cleansing of the stain, the enmity of the weapon, the hostility of the ground and the implacability of his hatred, everything that had previously been veiled, now stands as naked as the hero himself (815 ff.):

Ajax

He's firm in the ground, my Slayer. And his cut
(If I have time even for this reflection)
Should now be deadliest. For, first, the sword
Was Hector's gift, a token of guest-friendship,
And he of all guest-friends my bitterest foe;
Here, too, it stands, lodged in this hostile ground
Of Troy, its edge made new with iron-devouring stone.
And, last, I've propped it, so, with careful handling,
To help me soon and kindly to my death.
This preparation I have made. And now,
Making my invocation, as is right,
I call first, Zeus, on you . . .

The monologue with its sevenfold invocation embraces the entire world around him, the world in which he has his roots and from which he is departing; friend and enemy; Hector and the Atridae; Zeus and the Erinyes; his ancestral home and the scene of his exploits; Salamis and Troy; light and death. This invocation is arranged in accordance with the Greeks' view of the world as composed of pairs of contrasted antitheses. No lament, reproach, world-weariness, aversion, no hint of melancholy, not even the melancholy of a Brutus—none of the bitterness of renunciation; right up to the very moment of his death, the moment when he sets himself free from the ties of the world, he is unable to lose, either in love or in hate, his preoccupation with that same world which scorns him, and him alone, and which he, and only he, can no longer bear. Imagine the totally different way in which Euripides would have made Ajax put the blame on the world! Each of the invocations is followed by a final prayer, a final greeting—except that the invocation of death is broken off, and in its place comes a final greeting to light (854 ff.):

Ajax

Strong God of Death, attend me now and come.
 And yet I shall converse with you hereafter . . .
 O radiance, O my home and hallowed ground
 Of Salamis, and my father's hearth, farewell!
 And glorious Athens, and my peers and kin
 Nurtured with me, and here all springs and streams,
 My nurses, you that wet the plains of Troy,
 Farewell! This last word Ajax gives to you;
 The rest he keeps, to speak among the dead.

It is only in his speech of deception, taken in conjunction with his monologue, that Ajax is finally caught up in the incompatibility between two worlds—his private world and the everyday world. The inflexible fighter becomes the inflexible soul; the man deprived of his honour becomes the man deprived of the world, and, because he was too firmly rooted in his private world, he is punished. For the gods remain the guardians of this cosmos. The tragedy of Ajax does not take place in a world which is out of joint.

For the purpose of dramatic presentation, the contrast between

what is veiled and what is revealed is set in the context of a rambling, changing inter-play of hope, awe and fear on the part of those close to Ajax; a song of jubilation at his 'unhoped-for change' (716–17) is followed by the news of the warnings of the seer, and everyone hurries to look for the hero whom they now know to be in danger. . . . The stage has to be empty to allow for the change of scene—it appears that the *ekkyklema* was used for the second time at this point:¹⁷ now, suddenly, we are taken to a distant place, where the sword is fixed firmly into the ground, concealed by the surrounding undergrowth, and the hero stands in front of it. There also had to be provision for the actor who played the part of the living hero to be replaced by the dummy representing his dead body, which appears with the sword thrust through its chest. . . . After that, the chorus, divided into semi-choruses, re-enter from either side, with weary steps to indicate that they have come a long way in their desperate search—and then Tecmessa stops with a sudden cry at the place where the body has fallen. Now that the body has been discovered, they all stand around it, and begin the lamentation over the dead hero. His body has fallen forward, but Teucer lifts it up and displays it, covered in blood. . . .

But this is more a question of stage-management, the outer trappings of the play, an area in which the young Sophocles was fond of innovation and experiment. Furthermore, the motif 'Too late!' is not developed from the character of the fallen hero, and has no connection with his fate; he is involved in it merely for the purpose of the framework of the play. It is true that the speech of the seer, as reported by the messenger, recapitulates, interprets, and points to the future, but what a difference between this early work and the language of the Tiresias scenes in the later plays! Instead of arousing shudders of fear and unleashing threatening powers, it adds no more to the play than an anxious warning and a didactic explanation, which, in any case, after a gnomic opening, soon reverts to the epic style of reported narrative. The anecdote about the remark of Ajax which illustrates his lack of a sense of moderation is modelled on Odysseus' description of Achilles' departure from home in the *Iliad* (ix 254);¹⁸ and what follows is much the same. There is no question in this scene, as opposed to those in the later plays in which a prophet appears, of two different worlds coming into contact with each other; the relationship between man

and god, as illustrated in this speech with examples from the past, does not go beyond the traditional framework of archaic ethics, the doctrine of moderation. Thus the traditional type of interpretation is juxtaposed in this early work with the power of the new style of tragedy just as sharply as the tremendous innovation of the monologue is juxtaposed with the old device of introducing a messenger within an *episodesion* to bring news and to explain the situation. Scenes of this kind are no longer to be found in the plays of Sophocles' later style.

The second part of the play—the coda or whatever you like to call it, the dispute about the burial—is less concerned with purely theatrical considerations than the first. For it is certainly not just tacked on for merely external reasons, in order to make up the length of the play, as some have thought; nor is the relationship of this part to the whole satisfactorily explained by saying that the fate of the body was more important to an Athenian than it is to us. Not everything which is considered important is turned into drama. The purpose of the finale is rather to contrast the genuine greatness of the tragic hero who was fated to die with the spuriousness and conceit of those who opposed him, triumphed over him, and lived on—their ingratitude, pusillanimity, envy, meanness and arrogance.

Certainly we must take the play for what it is. There is no development or forward movement; instead, one set of circumstances simply succeeds another, and we watch a collection of contrasting figures who are united only by their relationship to the central figure of the hero. It is not that he has any effect on them or they on him: it is rather that they shed light on his character, in that their characters define his by contrast. We have already seen how Tecmessa, while embodying and foreshadowing her own fate, provided the contrast of feminine with masculine. Similarly Teucer defines Ajax's character by contrast: he is the noble bastard, who is to be driven out of his own country with curses by his father because he returns home without his greater, legitimate brother: for that incident too—which involves the same type of pathetic deliberation as Ajax's decision to die—is presented simply in the form of a lament of the surviving for the fallen, without being interwoven into the plot as 'action'. This preference for setting the fates of different characters in contrast with each other, and indeed the

overall preponderance of demonstration, direct representation and didacticism over development and forward movement, the predominance of a series of relationships over dynamic action and gradual downfall, is the aspect of the play which more than anything else determines the character of the whole of the *Ajax*, not only of its last part. Thus, later, when Teucer becomes the mouthpiece of the poet, even the relationship of both friendship and enmity between Hector and Ajax is revealed as determined by fate (1034): when they exchanged the sword and the belt, what a difference between the meaning that they had both attached to the action and the meaning which in fact it was destined to have! Hector was dragged to death, according to Sophocles, by that same belt which Ajax had given him, and Ajax killed himself with that same sword. They had hoped to escape the fate that hung over them, but it used their behaviour as a means of fulfilling the divine will which operates above and beyond the human context (1034 ff.):

Teucer

Did not a Fury beat this weapon out?
And was it not Aidoneus, that grim craftsman,
Who made that other one? In my opinion,
That was the gods' contrivance, like all other
Destinies of men, for the gods weave them all.

Thus there would obviously be something lacking from the whole picture if there were no opportunity for that deceitful world which opposed Ajax, and upon which he wanted to take his revenge, to express itself; and it is the Atridae who speak for it. And the fame of the hero whom the gods overthrew is enhanced by contrast with the lack of moderation of the petty men who seek vengeance: the sententious complaint of the over-commanding sub-commander Menelaus, who preserves the morality of the *polis*—and yet is unable to get the better of Ajax to any great degree (much in his character already points to the Creon of the *Antigone*), and the explosively quarrelsome way in which the highest dignitary, Agamemnon, expresses his envy of Ajax's glory. Confronted with innate worth, outward rank, as represented by Agamemnon, can only adorn itself with jangling maxims about the wholesomeness of obedience and the stability of the state: orders must inspire

fear in the army just as *nomoi* do in the *polis*, and so forth. Contrast this petty-mindedness with the final greatness of Ajax! Contrast this 'righteousness' of the little men with the 'wrong-doing' of the great hero!

But in order to round off the drama in this way, Sophocles made use of the old formal device of the *agon*, or set debate—indeed, as scholars have observed, an *agon* of a particularly antiquated type: the opponents enter to prevent the burial, one after the other, and exit again with threats or protests, as in the *agon*-scenes of comedy; word rebounds against word, reproach against reproach, maxim against maxim. There is so little attempt to disguise the genre that the *agon* is even described as such in the choral anapaests that introduce the second half (1163). Thus as a method of representing the opponents, the *agon* appears to our minds to be unduly restricted by the formal nature of its construction. Instead of situations which develop from the *nature* of the pervading hostility, there is a ready-made *schema*, a mere substitute for it, which has to be filled with the appropriate ingredients. Perhaps the lack of development, movement and progress is due to the traditional nature of the form. Even the grudging retraction of Agamemnon which is provoked by Odysseus makes no difference. The attitudes of the opponents at the end are just the same as they were at the beginning; the strife continues to rage in all its fury but it does not shift its ground—and in this too it is similar to the *agon*-scenes of comedy.

The tableau on the stage makes amends to us for this in one respect: all the time that the brawl is growing in intensity, Tecmessa and Eurysaces kneel in the background, guarding the body, a silent, motionless group. The child holds in his hand the hair-offerings of his family as a gift to his dead father, in the posture prescribed by Teucer (1180):

Teucer

Take it, dear child, and guard it, and let no one
Remove you, but cling fast, inclining over him . . .

At the end, the chorus divides, going away in groups to either side, as Teucer commands: to dig the grave, erect the tripod, fetch the armour. . . . Teucer and the boy remain by the dead man, they raise him—he is still bleeding. . . .

Thus there is much in this play that is unique. Methods which will be discarded by Sophocles in his later work stand cheek by jowl with others which point ahead to later developments. Above all there is the conception of a single figure who is presented in only one or two situations, which is unparalleled in the later plays. To a greater extent than any of the later works, the *Ajax* seems to have been composed around this central character; the rest of the characters are seen in the light of this dominating figure, whether they interpret it, look back at it, or stand in contrast to it. But the interpretation falls short of the conception, and the form of the play seems to conform to the religious drama of the older style rather than to rise from the heart of the work. It is not until the *Oedipus Tyrannus* that both form and content grow together so as to form a perfect unity.