

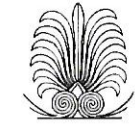
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Tragedy and Civilization

An Interpretation of Sophocles



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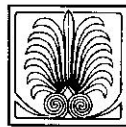
Published for Oberlin College by

Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England

1981

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Tragedy and the Civilizing Power



High on a mountainside in a rugged and lonely part of Arcadia stands a remote shrine to Zeus Lykaios, Wolf Zeus. Plato alludes to a legend that human sacrifice was regularly practiced there and the celebrant who partook of the flesh turned into a wolf. Across the valley from this grim precinct, in a spot of wild and desolate beauty, in a place known as the "glens," *Bassai*, a small Greek city erected an elaborate temple to the most civilized of its gods, Apollo Epikourios, the Helper.¹ Approaching this temple at Bassae from the city of Phigaleia, as the ancients did, the visitor experiences a striking visual confrontation of civilization and savagery. Before the ancient spectator stood the ordered geometry of columns and pediment outlined against the jagged mountaintops which stretch far into the distance. Freestanding and unexpected in that desolate setting, the temple seems as arbitrary an example of pure form and human design as an Attic amphora or the rhythms of a tragic chorus. But prominent just beyond the temple is the mountain where a grisly and primitive cult violated one of the first laws of human civilization as the Greeks defined it, the taboo against cannibalism.

What the Greek visitor would have thought of this spectacle we shall never know. The site itself stands as an architectural embodiment of the conflict between savage and civilized spaces, between nature and culture (*physis* and *nomos*), that pervades Greek thought, art, and religion. It attests to the inexhaustible power with which the Greeks were able to represent this basic antinomy to themselves and to us.

The Greek temple not only visually expresses the difference between man and nature but also forms a spiritual boundary between the safe, formed world of the polis and the dangerous, formless, territory outside, the *agros*, from which is derived the adjective *agrioi*, "wild," "savage." Thus the temples that line the ridges at Acragas, now the outskirts of modern Agrigento, enlist the aid of the gods and the shaping intelligence of men to defend the city from the unknown beyond the frontiers.

The building which, more than any other, summed up the civilized achievement of fifth-century Athens presented on its great frieze the idealized citizens in a ritual procession celebrating the civic and religious order that made the city possible. The quiet, seated figures of the gods on the east frieze contrast sharply with the agitated movement of the human figures on the north and south. But the human figures in their stately advance contrast also with the unruly beasts

being led to the sacrifice. The metopes showed a harsh struggle between the bestial Centaurs and the Lapith youths who recall the young Athenians of the frieze. The metopes are a reminder that the realized order of the frieze was not achieved without struggle nor retained without effort. On the west pediment, facing toward the sea and the mountains of Salamis and Aegina, stood Athena, goddess of the city and its civilizing arts, involved in a magnificent contest with Poseidon, god of the unbridled strength of the sea in its stormy violence, deity of the earth in its deep destructive motions. The point of the contest is itself the issue of civilization, whether Athena's olive or Poseidon's gift is the truly civilizing possession.

In the previous generation the west pediment of the temple of Zeus at Olympia gave monumental expression to the struggle for the hierarchical order of god, man, and beast against the unruly beast-men and their lust. The human figures of the Lapiths, struggling to protect their women, confront the mixed forms of the Centaurs. Apollo, facing outward in his calm frontality, marks both divine distance and divine encouragement in the battle against violence.

In the celebrated Triptolemus relief, finally, roughly contemporary with the Parthenon, the mediating role of civilization between nature and the gods is beautifully expressed in the figure of the young hero, the human agent chosen to bring agriculture to men. This configuration, the mortal youth sheltered between the two goddesses, Kore the maiden and the maternal Demeter, evokes the other characteristic institution of human civilization, the house (*oikos*) or family. Triptolemus, we may recall, was the subject of the play with which Sophocles made his debut in the dramatic competition and won first prize.

II

By "civilization" I mean the totality of man's achievement in shaping his distinctively human life, his domination and exploitation of nature, his creation of familial, tribal, and civic organizations, his establishment of ethical and religious values, and that subordination of instinct to reason, of "nature" to "convention," which is the precondition of all these.² Until recently, Western man's view of civilization has been based on the modern idea of progress, a total confidence in the power of reason, and especially scientific reason, to master nature with ever-expanding control and increasingly beneficent results.

For the Greeks civilization (for which there is no single Greek word)³ is something more basic and also more precarious. Within the structure of Greek thought, civilization—the totality of man's social organization and cultural attainments—occupies a mediate position between the "savage" life of the beasts on the one hand and the eternal happiness of the blessed gods on the other. Civilization is the fruit of man's struggle to discover and assert his humanness in the face of the impersonal forces of nature and his own potential violence on the one hand and the remote powers of the gods on the other.

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The next chapter will explore more fully some of these implicit definitions of civilization relevant to tragedy. As a preliminary statement, Vico's "three human customs" come close to the essentials of the classical view: "All [nations] have some religion, all contract solemn marriages, all bury their dead. And in no nation, however savage and crude, are any human actions performed with more elaborate ceremonies and more sacred solemnity than the rites of religion, marriage, and burial . . . From these three institutions humanity began among them all, and therefore they must be most devoutly guarded by them all, so that the world should not again become a bestial wilderness."⁴

What is particularly characteristic of classical Athens, however, is the focus of definitions of civilization on the polis, the city-state. Aristotle's *Politics*, the culmination of this attitude, virtually hypostatizes the polis as the fundamental unit of civilization. Man is a being who by nature is political. He is lawful and amenable to law; political action—deliberation, decision, legislation, and, alas, litigation—is his most human activity. Civilized life for the fifth century is unthinkable without the polis, a bounded space dividing the human world from the wild. The polis shelters its citizens, grouped by interrelated families, within its walls; harbors its meeting places, assemblies, law courts, theater in its central area; is nourished by its tilled farmland in the *agros* beyond its walls; is in touch with other city-states through sea-borne commerce and travel; and is politically autonomous, safeguarding its territory through alliances and war.

In Sophoclean tragedy the city is also the focus for the hero's problematical relation to civilized values. This is especially true of the Theban plays but applies also to *Electra* and even to the three plays not actually set in a polis, *Ajax*, *Philoctetes*, *Trachiniae*. The first two merely project a polis society upon its extension, the Greek army at Troy. The *Trachiniae* is properly the tragedy of a house rather than a city, but even here the collapse of civilized values has the destruction of a polis in the background.

The Greeks view the human condition, as they view so much else, in terms of a set of spatial configurations, a structure whose spatial and moral coordinates coincide. Man is threatened by the beast world pushing up from below, but he is also illuminated by the radiance of the Olympian gods above. Myths of heroes attaining Olympus express the highest possible human achievement. Heroes like Tantalus and Ixion in Pindar, who betray the gods' trust in them, are sent from the radiance of Olympian feasts to the utter darkness of Hades. The vicissitudes endured by heroes like Pelops and Bellerophon take the form of upward and downward movement, which represents the task of achieving the proper mediation between earth and Olympus, lower and upper realms.

The human form, idealized in the images of the Olympian gods, is the culminating point on the scale of mortal being. The great civilizing heroes—Theseus, Heracles, Oedipus, Odysseus—defeat the savage hybrids of human and bestial shapes—the Minotaur, the centaurs, the Sphinx—or monstrous deformations of humanity like the Cyclops. They are paradigms of man's effort to impose human order on the chaos that threatens to engulf him.

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I use the term "civilization" rather than "society" because I wish to consider not only the tragic hero's relation to other men, important as that is, but also his relation to the moral and intellectual capacities of man in general, his relation to the natural and divine order, his rationality and unreason, his capacity for autonomy as well as his dependence on society.

Not all of Sophocles' extant plays are equally concerned with civilization in this larger sense. *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Trachiniae*, and *Philoctetes* deal most directly with these themes, man's power to control his world and himself and the quality and limitations of that control. *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Electra*, and *Oedipus at Colonus* are more concerned with society in the narrow sense, the individual's relation to social and political organization. Yet such a distinction between the two sets of plays is arbitrary, for the more specific social issues also involve the larger questions of man's civilizing capacities. All of Sophocles' extant plays are concerned with the tension between man's autonomy and his dependence, between his power to transcend the physical and biological necessities that surround his life and his immanent position within those necessities. In this tension the institutions of society play a vital but ambiguous role. The polis, with its Olympian religion, its temples, gymnasia, theaters, and *agora*, its laws and its festivals, constitutes an area into which the (male) Athenian citizen operates with a freedom not vouchsafed him in the *oikos* (house), with its uncertainties of life and death, its demands of nurture (*trophē*), its overt or latent hostilities in the most intimate relations, its blood ties and the curses they can produce or transmit, and the underworld deities who enforce those curses.

III

Theories about the origins and development of human civilization fascinated Sophocles and his contemporaries.⁵ It was a popular enough subject to appear on the comic stage, as we may infer from a comedy called *The Wild Men* (*Agrioi*) by the poet Pherecrates cited apropos of this topic in Plato's *Protagoras*. Sophocles himself wrote one of his most famous odes on man's conquest of nature, the first stasimon of the *Antigone*. The *Philoctetes* clearly owes much to contemporary theories of the origins of culture. In at least three of his lost plays—four if we include the *Daedalus*—he used myths relating to the creation of civilization. The *Triptolemus* concerns the mythical bringer of agriculture to men. A fragment of the *Palamedes* mentions the hero's "invention" of dice during the long days of the siege of Troy (frag. 438N = 479P). The *Nauplius*' catalogue of the protagonist's civilizing inventions (frag. 399N = 432P) invites comparison with that of Aeschylus' *Prometheus*.⁶ At the other end of the spectrum, a few fragments of the *Rootcutters* (*Rhizotomoi*), like the *Trachiniae*, take us to the darker arts of civilization—magical, not medical drugs (*pharmaka*)—at the fringes of rational experience.

Interest in the origins of civilization reflects and reinforces the antinomy between culture and nature, *nomos* and *physis*, that pervades fifth-century litera-

ture.⁷ The Periclean age is, basically, optimistic about reason, centered on man, and confident in his cultural achievements. The representations on the frieze and pediments of the Parthenon are counterparts to the political, social, and scientific theories of thinkers like Protagoras, Anaxagoras, Hippodamus of Miletus, Hippocrates, Democritus, as expressions of the new intellectual currents. Simultaneously the new emphasis on the *psychē*, the inner life and moral consciousness of the individual, in the tragedians and in philosophers like Socrates and Democritus deepened the appreciation of man's uniqueness and the disjunction between man and the rest of nature.⁸

This disjunction, however, does not remain absolute. Greek thought from Homer on was haunted by an awareness of the precarious division between man and beast. The boundary is an achievement to be guarded with care, not a possession fixed and static forever. The Peloponnesian War, with its shocking atrocities like the Corcyrean revolution and the Athenian treatment of the Mytileneans and the Melians, did its work as a "violent teacher" (Thucydides 3.82.2). It laid bare the paradox that civilization could hold within itself all the savagery of the beast world. Hence, toward the end of the century *nomos* and *physis*, law and nature, undergo a strange reversal: *nomos*, the norm of civilization, is seen as repressive and destructive, and nature, *physis*, as liberating. The fragments of the work called *Truth* by the Sophist Antiphon are the fullest fifth-century statement of this position, but the point of view persists, more aggressively, in the arguments of Plato's Callicles and Thrasymachus.

This development is a familiar part of the cultural history of the fifth century. It is worth recapitulating here as part of the intellectual background to the reversals of man and beast in Sophoclean (and also Euripidean) tragedy. The triumph over the beastlike life of savagery, so proudly celebrated by Sophocles in the *Antigone*, by Euripides in the *Suppliants*, by Critias in the *Peirithous*, rings hollow when set against the recrudescence of bestiality and savagery in man's own nature. To this paradox the tragic poets return again and again.

The enormous acceleration of cultural life in fifth-century Athens, combined with a new rapidity of social, economic, and moral change, produced a heightened awareness of conflicting values and an extraordinary expansion of consciousness. Individual and society appear to be in tension rather than in harmony. The year after the completion of the Parthenon, monument to Athenian confidence in rational humanism, the beauty of man and his creations, saw the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War and the production of the *Medea* of Euripides, with its unshrinking exposure of violent hatred and destructive passion. The Athens praised as the home of the arts (*Medea* 824–845) is also the refuge that enables the barbarian witch to execute with impunity her terrible revenge.

IV

When man became "the measure of all things," in Protagoras' phrase, he also became more exposed to the violent, irrational urges of his own nature. As crea-

tions of men, the institutions of civilization, the *nomoi*, lost their privileged sanctity as the work of gods. Like all human works, then, they are vulnerable and perishable. When they collapse, the relapse into savagery is swift and sudden. It is this process that grips the imagination of Euripides and Thucydides. In a different form it also permeates the structure and imagery of Sophoclean drama. Thucydides' description of the revolution at Corcyra (3.81–82) is perhaps the most relentless analysis of law disintegrating into lawlessness, civilization into savagery, with a consequent loss of the ethical discriminations of language on which civilization relies. Beside the scalpel of Thucydides' prose we may set the hammer blows of plays like Euripides' *Hecuba*, *Trojan Women*, *Electra*, *Orestes*, *Bacchae*, all of which show a dissolution of civilization and a regression to bestiality. Sophocles is subtler, more distant from the events themselves, more sensitive to the cruelly ironic juxtaposition of human greatness and human debasement. Yet in virtually all his plays, and most prominently in the *Trachiniae*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Antigone*, and *Philoctetes*, nothing less than man's civilizing power is at stake.

Caught up in the currents of these disturbing theories and more disturbing events, the audience who watched the *Antigone* or the *Oedipus* were keenly sensitive to the violence latent in human society. "Classical serenity" is a label affixed to an age characterized by the most immense disruptions of spirit and of events. No contemporary of Sophocles would have much difficulty in understanding this modern thinker's memorable formulation of the reasons for the bloody history of our kind:

Civilized society is perpetually menaced with disintegration through this primary hostility of men towards one another. Their interests in their common work would not hold them together; the passions of instinct are stronger than reasoned interests. Culture has to call up every possible reinforcement in order to erect barriers against the aggressive instincts of men and hold their manifestations in check . . . ; hence the restrictions on sexual life; and hence, too, its ideal command to love one's neighbour as oneself, which is really justified by the fact that nothing is so completely at variance with original human nature as this . . . Civilization expects to prevent the worst atrocities of brutal violence by taking upon itself the right to employ violence against criminals, but the law is not able to lay hands on the more discreet and subtle forms in which human aggressions are expressed. The time comes when every one of us has to abandon the illusory anticipations with which in our youth we regarded our fellow-men, and when we realize how much hardship and suffering we have been caused in life through their ill-will.⁹

The writer is, of course, Freud, but one can find close parallels to these ideas, *mutatis mutandis*, in Euripides, Thucydides, Antiphon the Sophist, and Plato's Callicles and Thrasymachus.

In a stimulating book René Girard has argued that violence and sacrificial ritual are the center of tragedy.¹⁰ His point of view has its roots in Freud and

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particularly in the late Freudian emphasis on aggression. Greek tragedy, in Girard's view, makes sacred or numinous the aggressive force in man—the force that leads man to what I have been calling savagery. It thereby removes this violence from the human sphere and gives it to the gods. On such a view, the Greek solution to the problem of civilization, the ritualizing of violence and aggression, is almost the opposite of the solution proposed by Freud. Freud would have man accept his aggressiveness as a fundamental part of himself and deal with it through the integration of his ego, insofar as this is possible. Freud's solution has its analogue in the post-tragic period of fourth-century Athens, that is, in the period when the ritual and sacral solution to the problem of violence begins to break down, to be replaced by the Socratic notion of self-control (*enkrateia*) and the inward mastery of passion by reason described in the *Republic*. In this perspective one of the fifth century's great achievements would be the creation of a form that sublimates into the highest art man's harsh and painful confrontation with his own savagery. The ritual setting, with its ancient agonistic elements, dramatizes the importance of the struggle and provides some assurance of ultimate victory through the sense of continuity and tradition. At the same time the poetry, the complex dance movements, the splendid costumes surround the issue, be it distant victory or present defeat, with an aura of deep significance and great beauty. Distanced by the ritualized setting, the aesthetic frame, and the mythical subject, the conflicts which the highly competitive structure of Greek society concealed beneath its surface and sublimated into the workable fabric of everyday life could be brought out and expressed in drastic, if fictional, confrontations.¹¹

The effect of sacralizing and ritualizing violence that tragedy promotes is a means of keeping man human and civilized. One may speculate whether the high civilization attained by Athens in its age of tragedy was not due, in part at least, to the cathartic agency of its dramatic festivals. A recent writer, stressing the "cathartic discharge" effected by ritual, speculates, "Thus it is ritual which avoids the catastrophe of society. In fact only the last decades have abolished nearly all the comparable rites in our world; so it is left to our generation to experience the truth that men cannot stand the uninterrupted steadiness even of the most prosperous life; it is an open question whether the resulting convulsions will lead to *katharsis* or catastrophe."¹²

In tragedy the violence that exists in our world is not only a divine power, a manifestation of Eros or Aphrodite or Zeus's will, as it is in archaic epic or lyric. It is a numinous power and simultaneously something within us; it is both a part of ourselves and a mysterious visitation of something beyond ourselves. We approach this force with awe, respect and dread; tragedy helps us to recognize, acknowledge, and expel it. Sophocles is the great master of commingling these two ways of accounting for the violence and suffering in human life, internal and external, psychological and religious. In Aeschylus the religious interpretation predominates; in Euripides, the psychological. The combination and balance of the two in Sophocles make him perhaps the hardest of the three Attic tragedians for the modern reader to understand.

Besides representing a human personality, the Sophoclean hero is also an element in a large symbolical design, a field for the clash and potential resolution of opposing forces. This is not to say that we do not *also* identify with him as a human being. If we did not, the dramatic fiction would lose its hold on us and become a cold, intellectual exercise, devoid of moral life and unable to perform that "purgation" of pity and fear which Aristotle regarded as fundamental to tragedy. But we must keep in mind those formal elements in Greek tragedy that distance the hero from his audience: the mask, the special boots or *kothornoi*, the stylized gestures, the artificial and often difficult poetic language.

"Character" in the modern sense, as has often been pointed out, is not to be expected from Greek tragedy. Even in the late fifth century the Greeks are concerned at least as much with the objective place of an act in the world, its relation to the human order of house and city or the divine order of the cosmos, as with the interior, mental processes of conflict and decision.¹³

The individuality of the Sophoclean hero appears not in small personal details but, as in Homer, in a few large essential gestures. It is revealed not so much through the free play of idiosyncratic personality as in the vision of an idealized heroic self and the realization and resolution of the conflict between that self and the restrictions imposed by the world of men and the world of the gods.¹⁴

To be an individual in Sophocles is to have a special destiny apart from other men and to suffer a potentially dangerous, indeed fatal, isolation from the community and its secure values. That destiny stamps his life with moral significance. Only if he fulfills that destiny can the hero realize himself, and not relinquish something essential to his nature. To have such a destiny also means to have a place within the larger order of the gods. The play of divine forces about the hero's life is the mark of such tragic individuality. Conversely, that individuality brings the gods, with the disturbance that their presence always involves, crashing into his life. The hero stands at the point where the divine and human spheres intersect, where the separation between them becomes difficult and mysterious, where the intelligible order of life meets with darker levels of existence.¹⁵

Tragic character in Sophocles exists in the tension between the isolation imposed by heroic individuality and the larger design which that destiny fulfills. The hero's task is to discover and accept his life as part of this larger design. In the discovery the external and the inward shape of his life come to coincide: his nature and the divinity of his "fate" or "lot" (*daimōn*) prove to be one and the same. "Character is fate for a man," as Heraclitus said (*ēthos anthrōpō(i) daimōn*). When Ajax learns that Tecmessa had hidden his son lest he kill him in his madness, his reply, "Yes, that would be the fitting act of my daimon" (*Ajax* 534),¹⁶ takes in the full significance of his degradation and grasps it factually as the divinity or daimon that drives him, both from within and from without. Discerning his life as pattern, as destiny, the hero reaches not only forward into the

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future to fulfill that pattern, but also backward into the past to accept responsibility for what he has been and what he has done. Oedipus fulfills both movements when, on the one hand, he says, "Let my portion (*moira*) go wherever it will go" and on the other hand, "Only I could bear these sufferings" (*OT* 1458, 1414–15).

The ambiguities and paradoxes in the tragic hero's status, as I suggested above, reflect the experiences of a generation subjected to large-scale and sudden cultural and material changes. The situations of conflict and the antithetical debates, the *antilogiai* or *hamillai logon*, of tragedy, reflect not only the intellectual tools being used by philosophers and practicing rhetoricians or Sophists, but also the sharp polarization of values that men were experiencing.¹⁷ Though tragedy did not develop solely in response to such conflicts, it was especially well suited to depicting them. Its built-in structure of antitheses could give them a tough conceptual as well as poetic formulation.

Sophoclean tragedy's ample, yet austere, form could concentrate issues of enormous moment into remarkably small compass. Its climactic structure, building up from crisis to peripety to resolution, made it the ideal vehicle for exploring reversals and inversions in the situations and emotions of men, in language, in values. Sophocles especially made irony, paradox, and conscious ambiguity his stock-in-trade.

Tragedians tended to use those myths in which such reversals were especially prominent; tragic drama highlighted those myths or parts of myths which contained such patterns. Varying a limited range of plots and situations within a well-defined structure and employing a conventionalized, though rich, vocabulary of patterns, contrast, analogies, and reversals, it could point up and intensify such symmetries, transmutations, or inversions in events and make them elements in a significant moral pattern.¹⁸ Its vivid images and bold metaphors fleshed out these structural relations with a gripping particularity that gave them a penetrating poetic and symbolic power. In Sophocles especially the ironies and paradoxes of man's self-knowledge and self-ignorance, the drive of the hero's life toward pattern and coherent meaning, the interlocking and divergence of divine and human intention are illuminated from multiple perspectives. As we situate ourselves in one or another of these perspectives, parallel or contrasting sets of relations emerge, shift, or overlap in different ways. Thus new structures are always emerging, new patterns always evolving. It is an extraordinary combination of what Jean-Pierre Vernant has called malleability and eternity.

In the chapters on the individual plays that follow, therefore, I view the tragic hero less in terms of psychological realism than in terms of the configurations of antitheses and boundary situations described above. The hero not only fulfills a pattern of attaining personal knowledge out of ignorance, reality out of illusion, but also enacts paradigmatically the place of man on the axis between god and beast, between the divine order and the threat of chaos or meaninglessness. The two axes intersect at the points of man's uniquely human creations: the city, the house, ritual, law, justice, language. It is just these creations and the

structures on which they rest that the hero calls into question, threatens, and paradoxically affirms.

VI

In Homeric epic the limits between human and bestial, though threatened, are relatively stable. Homer's formulaic language confers a certain built-in continuity. In tragedy there are no such formulas to stabilize the norms; the norms themselves are called into question in the violent conflicts of values or the swing between community and isolation, grandeur and nothingness.

The interlocking system of formulas in epic implies the co-presence of all the parts of a coherent universe. "Wine-dark sea" or "eddying river" or "windy Iliion" evoke on each recurrence a steady, unchanging world, large unvarying forms, and the ever-present powers of nature in a clearly defined, if austere reality.

In tragedy the clarity of the world, like the meaning of events, is hidden behind a foreground which none of the characters can penetrate with any degree of certainty. There is no objective, third-person voice defining the constant elements of the human and natural world in a crystallized language of metrically patterned repetitions. The will of Zeus is not manifest from the beginning, as it is in the proem of the *Iliad*, but is revealed only piecemeal, obscurely, or even absurdly. The magnificent continuous sweep of epic narrative gives way to a tortuous, discontinuous movement. We receive only fragments, muted hints, momentary glimpses of a larger whole, as in the silences or the omens at the beginning of the *Agamemnon* or the sinister oxymoron of night's death begetting the flaming sun in the parode of the *Trachiniae*. Choral lyric, to be sure, also breaks down the continuous narrative of epic into isolated, discontinuous images or vivid moments. Yet the paradigmatic function of myth in the single voice of the chorus or the poet gives this narrative a singleness and clarity of meaning not to be found in tragedy.¹⁹

In tragedy truth has many voices. The time that reveals truth moves in many different rhythms: the slow, relentless unfolding of a hidden past in its closer or more remote parts in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*; the sudden veiled moment of oracular vision in the Cassandra scene of the *Agamemnon*; the detailed reception of a crucial event of recent occurrence in the messenger speeches; the agonized moment of decision; the blinding flash of recognition at the peripety; the nightmarish fit of madness in the dark night of the *Ajax* or the unexpected paroxysm of the *Heracles*. But always the total meaning of events grows to fulfillment only slowly, partially, darkly. The complex language, shifting between dialogue and lyric and between straightforward narrative and imagistic figure, conspires with the obscurity and divided quality of truth until all the interconnected pieces of the pattern reach their terrible coherence in the tragic insight that stamps the hero's life with its hallmark of loneliness, suffering, death: Agamemnon's "Alas, I am struck"; Heracles' "Alas, I understand"; Jocasta's silence; Oedipus' rain of blows upon his eyes.

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VII

Suspended between the upper and lower reaches of his nature, walking a perilous borderline between his civilized status and his capacity for bestial violence, the tragic hero is, as Cocteau suggests in his ironical version of a Greek tragedy, *déclassé* in more than one sense:

Oedipus: Know that everything which falls into classes carries the taint of death. One has to declass oneself, Teiresias, go out of one's rank. That's the sign of masterpieces and of heroes. A *déclassé*—that's what astonishes, that's what rules.²⁰

The hero's confrontation with the extreme polarities of the human condition springs the safe fastenings which hold together our logical, ordered world, the "inconclusive, compromised middle" where most human life is lived.²¹

The tragic hero occupies what Alfred Schlesinger has called "the moral frontier."²² His sufferings comprise a metaphorical and sometimes a literal journey to the limits of human experience and beyond. In all the extant plays of Sophocles the hero's relation to *place* expresses his ambiguous status. Places that should give shelter or safety become destructive, savage. The domestic hearth of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* or the domestic altar of Euripides' *Heracles* illustrates the pattern, and we shall observe it in detail in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Electra*. In *Trachiniae*, *Antigone*, and *Philoctetes* the tragic situation inverts or collapses the proper antithetical relation between civilization and the wild. Or the hero who embodies civilized values finds his closest affinities with isolated places and the elemental violence of nature.

In five of the seven plays the hero is explicitly called *apolis* or *apoptolis*, "citiless" or "cut off from city."²³ Ajax, pursued as an enemy by gods and men, separates himself from the Greek camp and kills himself by the lonely shore of a hostile land, cut off forever from his native Salamis. Antigone, whose devotion to the gods below calls into question Creon's polis as the locus of mediation between gods and beasts, Olympus and Hades, is expelled from the city to die in an underground cave in a deserted place. The *Trachiniae*, dominated by a landscape of mysterious mountains and dangerous rivers, utilizes the tension between the inner world of Deianeira's house and the beast world of Heracles' heroic exploits outside. Here the civilizing hero is himself an exile and becomes a destroyer of cities; the tamer of beasts is vanquished by a beast at a point of unsuccessful transition between the wild and the inner space of his house. In the *Oedipus Tyrannus* the king, whose place is at the very heart of the city, has his identity determined by an axis which runs between the royal palace at Thebes and the savage mountain, Cithaeron. The too intimate spaces of house and womb and the savage spaces of the mountain prove to be both opposites and the same. The most sheltered of places holds for Oedipus the secret that makes him simultaneously the legitimate heir to the palace and the child of the mountain, the king and the pollution.

In the *Electra*, as in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* from which so much of its imagery is drawn, city and palace become a dubious locus of civilization. A guilty usurper reigns in the palace. Both in the inner world which should offer security and in the larger realm of nature, life and death, light and darkness, are inverted. The legitimate heirs are threatened with burial in an underground, sunless chamber or must make their way back to their rightful place inside by undergoing themselves an inversion of life and death.

The hero of the *Philoctetes*, cruelly set apart from men to lead a lonely life on a deserted island, is in his ensavaged state a truer representative of heroic and civilized values than their official representatives, the leaders of the Greek host at Troy. The *Oedipus at Colonus* centers on the paradox that the accursed outcast and pollution confers benefits on the quintessentially civilized city of Athens. The play begins at a point of mysterious transition between the city and the wild, the mysterious grove of the Eumenides at the outskirts of Athens. Here the hero separates himself from his accursed past and from the strife-torn city of Thebes in which that past is localized. A basic symbol of mysterious transition, a "brazen-footed threshold" (57-58; cf. 1590-94), marks his passage not only between the wild and city, but also between human and divine worlds, visible and invisible space.

If the hero belongs in part to the "raw" world outside the polis, he also has, by virtue of his energy, intelligence, and capacity for loyalty and love, a place of honor within the polis.²⁴ Breaking the moral laws that give our lives order and security and bypassing the usual mediation between god and beast that constitutes civilization, the hero lacks that stability of place and identity which ordinary men, who do not have his capacity for greatness or proneness to excess, possess as a given of their humanness. The hero has to reconstruct his humanness on new terms.

The fifth-century polis is still not so secure that it can dispense with or fail to admire the heroic energy, the sheer physical strength, or the mental acumen that might be needed to defend it. Beside the graceful youths riding peacefully on the Parthenon frieze we may place the young Lapiths in mortal battle with Centaurs on the metopes. Pericles' vision of Athens' hegemony of culture includes also the need for physical and spiritual courage in the face of death.²⁵ The tragic hero, too, for all his dangerous potential, possesses some quality or qualities indispensable to civilization. Antigone and Electra champion honor and family bonds. Ajax, Oedipus, Heracles, Philoctetes—and in a sense Antigone and Electra—have been or will be saviors of the community which harbors them. Guilty, impure, cast beyond the pale, the hero is also needed, valued, and loved by those around him.

Homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto and *Homo homini lupus* ("I am a man; I consider nothing human foreign to me"; "Man a wolf to man"): these two extremes, as Albin Lesky remarks, circumscribe the whole course of man's history.²⁶ Between these two extremes Sophocles' tragic hero acts out the tensions and paradoxes of his—and our—existence.