OEDIPAL TEXTUALITY: Reading Freud's Reading of Oedipus

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"Where is my voice scattered abroad on wings?"
—Oedipus

"You should have meant! What do you suppose is the use of a child without any meaning? Even a joke should have some meaning—and a child's more important than a joke, I hope."
—the Red Queen

Of all the fictions that Freud calls upon to render an account of the psyche—from "The Emperor's New Clothes" in The Interpretation of Dreams to the legend of Moses in Moses and Monotheism—the drama of Oedipus is his most recurrent and insistent reference. Sophocles' protagonist provides the name for what Freud frequently presented as his major discovery. The Oedipus complex still challenges definition from contemporary analysts and theorists, and writers' interpretive stances can be situated according to their characteristic uses of this one concept. With the matter of Oedipus so chronically urgent and undecided, one recent perspective in particular seems promising, one which aligns psychoanalysis with the theory of drama and theorizes a dramatic structure informing the psychic order [See André Green, Un Oeil en trop. Le complexe d'Oedipe dans la tragedie (Paris: Minuit, 1969), and Philippe Locoue-Labarthe, "Theatrum Analyticum," Glyph 2 (1970)]. For if a drama could signify for Freud such crucial propositions of psychoanalytic thought, then the signifying mode of drama warrants inquiry. Freud reads Oedipus; the Oedipus complex draws its specificity from the Sophoclean tragedy, rather than just from the ostensible semantic content of the Oedipus legend. To rethink Freud's concept, we ought not only to re-read its first formulation, his claim in The Interpretation of Dreams that Oedipus' unfolding "can be likened to the work of a psychoanalysis," but also to reconsider its primary source, Sophocles' version of the myth. Freud uses the drama of Oedipus to tell a story about psychic development and to describe the status of sex in human existence. Perhaps we can use the drama of Oedipus to tell a story about the development of Freudian thought and to describe the status of the text in psychoanalytic thinking. We could take our cue from the initial, exemplary project of psychoanalytic investigation, The Interpretation of Dreams, and take as clue Freud's dream of solving the riddle of the Sphinx—an actual dream mentioned in a letter to Fliess on May 31st, 1897. Freud was also dreaming of solving the riddle of dreams, and the solution written out in the Traum-

1 The Interpretation of Dreams (New York: Avon Books, 1965), p. 295. Quotations from The Interpretation of Dreams, henceforth cited as I.D., are from this edition unless otherwise indicated.

deutung in certain ways resembles the answer to the dream-like enigma of the Sphinx. By constructing the analogy between them, we may be led to grasp some distinctive traits of Freudian interpretation as well as the crucial features of the Oedipus story that rendered it significant for Freud.

The writing of *The Interpretation of Dreams* takes form both unconsciously and consciously as what will come to be described as an “oedipal” endeavor. Like the inquiry of Sophocles’ protagonist, it is an investigation in relation to and for the sake of the father, the end result of which is the disclosure of a parcellal effect: the discovery of the Oedipus complex. In his preface to the second edition Freud identifies the writing of the book as “a portion of my own self-analysis, my reaction to my father’s death”—“a significance I only grasped after I had completed it” ([I.D., p. xxvi]). Freud’s own most manifest “Oedipus complex” is the drive to interpretation and “self-analysis” dramatized by Sophocles’ hero, which is initially at least, in the tragedy as in *The Interpretation*, a more prominent “complex” (an excessively insistent and self-exceeding intention) than any parcellal or incestuous tendency. The complex Freud shares with Oedipus is, first, the drive to discover an Oedipus complex. We may take this as an initial pretext for seeking the relationships between *The Interpretation of Dreams*, interpretation, and writing, on the one hand, and on the other hand the Oedipus complex conceived as a theory of the child’s relationships to his father and mother. Reading Sophocles with Freud could help to illustrate the complicity of Oedipal sexuality with a certain textuality.

Turning points in the legendary career of Oedipus, and the legible career of Freud, take place with the formulation of an enigma or riddle. First there is the question of Oedipus’ parentage, which the Pythia answers with an unassimilable structural definition: your mother is she whose lover and your father he whose murderer you shall be. Then comes the riddle posed by the female-male being, creature of Apollo, the Sphinx: what is the thing that changes shape, with two feet and four feet, with a single voice, that has three feet as well? Finally, there is the enigma of the Phocalian crime: “How can we ever find the track of ancient guilt now hard to read?” Freud riddles: do dreams have meaning? what meaning? why is it distorted? And in the course of interrogating the significance of dreams he comes to interrogate the significance of audience response to dramatic presentations, and the particular enigma of the universal effectiveness of *Oedipus Tyrannus* for generation after generation of audiences.

This is the riddle of the riddle: the enigma of why the riddle of the Phocalian crime should be so absorbing. It is solved along with the riddle of dreaming, which Freud answers by positing a censoring agent active in mental life—by discovering repression, and by positing the unconscious. The riddle of another riddle initiated the metapsychological inquiries that preoccupied Freud from 1895 on, even as he completed his *Traumdeutung*. As he wrote in the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*: “it is quite impossible to suppose that distressing sexual affects so greatly exceed all other unpleasurable affects in intensity. It must be another characteristic of sexual ideas that can explain how they are alone subjected to repression” (*The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, J. Strachey, ed. (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), vol. 1, p. 352). How can one interpret the fact that sexuality alone (of all “drives”) is uniquely enigmatic? How can one interpret the enigmatic fact that Oedipus (of all “tragedies of destiny”) is uniquely enthralling? Freud’s explanation for the repression of sexuality first takes shape in his theory of seduction, or of the proton pseudos or “primal deceit,” formulated in the *Project of 1895*. It focuses on the decisive effect of a distinctive temporal structure in sexual de-

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*J. Strachey. (N.Y.: Basic Books, 1954), p. 322: “Do you suppose that some day a marble tablet will be placed on the house, inscribed with these words: ‘In this house on July 24, 1895, the Secret of Dreams was revealed to Dr. Sigmund Freud’?”


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velopment, a proleptic or metaleptic structure marked by prematuration and deferral, or, in Freud’s term, Nachträglichkeit. The same conception of a peculiar time scheme, Freud’s solution to the riddle of the sexual riddle, becomes the principle of his reading of the Oedipal riddle, the peculiar power of Oedipus Tyrannus.

Freud indicates a solution in the “peculiar nature of the material,” a “voice within us,” a “factor” or “moment” of a certain kind. Modern dramatists, on the theory that Oedipus owes its success to its construction as a “tragedy of destiny,” to the conflict of “divine will” with “human responsibility,” have tried to achieve the same effect by constructing plots on the same theme; but, remarks Freud, the plays based on such “selbsterfundenen Fabeln” (plots invented by the playwrights themselves) have failed to move their audiences. Hence:


If Oedipus Rex moves a modern audience no less than it did the contemporary Greek one, the explanation can only be that its effect does not lie in the contrast between destiny and the human will, but is to be looked for in the particular nature of the material on which that contrast is exemplified. There must be something which makes a voice within us ready to recognize the compelling force of destiny in the Oedipus, while we can dismiss as merely arbitrary such dispositions as are laid down in [Grillparzer’s] Die Ahnfrau or other modern tragedies of destiny. And a factor of this kind is in fact involved in the story of King Oedipus. [I.D., pp. 295-6. Italics added.]

The original German text refers to an inner “voice which is ready,” not to “something which makes” it ready, to perform the act of recognition. In the German, then, “such a Moment” refers back to the “voice which is ready”: Freud is pointing to a “moment” or “factor” in Sophocles’ drama involving recognition carried out by a “voice” poised for such an act. The relation between that voice and ein solches Moment is a problematic one, the German text suggests; whereas the English translation of Moment as “factor” neatly elides the difficulty, excluding the temporal character of the “factor” and identifying it with a “something” in the play’s thematic content. Hence the passage is most often read in a way that reduces it to the statement that follows it, to the effect that “It is the fate of all of us . . . to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father.” But we should make the attempt to read it in conjunction with Freud’s remark in the preceding paragraph that the “process of revealing” that constitutes “the action of the play . . . can be likened to the work of a psychoanalysis.” Freud is not simply evoking the psychoanalytic practice of disclosing a patient’s Oedipus complex. In the context of his practice and writing in this period, Freud’s comparison means that Oedipus Tyrannus successfully dramatizes the activity of repression and un repression—the “abnormal defense” that characterizes “psychoneurosis” and the peculiar “process of revealing” that constitutes interpre-

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tation of dreams, or psychoanalysis. Freud theorized the relationship between sexuality and repression in the light of the temporal structure he reconstructed in the case histories of his hysterical subjects in the 1890’s. In identifying the uniquely revelatory character of Oedipus, Freud is remarking the same crucial structure, the same exemplary plot. The parallel between the riddle of Oedipus’ power and the riddle of sexual repression can be situated in a certain moment or factor (“ein solches Moment . . .”) in the sequence of sexual development—something for which Freud used the term “trauma.”

Trauma is a key concept in the interpretation of sexual repression first outlined by Freud in the Project of 1895, where he reconstructs a kind of plot for the neurosis of a patient fictitiously named “Emma.” This plot focuses on two moments or scenes, which between them constitute the trauma and install repression. One scene takes place before, the other after, puberty. There is a fateful time lag between the child’s passive participation in an adult world imbued with sexuality, and the child’s own accession to biological maturity and sexual awareness; the difference or deferral between “moments” is the decisive factor in causing the extraordinary “abnormal defense” of “hysterical” repression, in which the mind blinds itself to the “first scene” of a sexual encounter. As Jean Laplanche summarizes: there are two scenes “separated from each other by a temporal barrier which inscribes them in two different spheres of meaning.”

The first scene in “Emma”’s drama, as Freud narrates it, is a putative seduction, an adult’s sexual gesture toward her, the sexual nature of which, however, the child cannot sense. After sexual maturity there occurs a second scene which is banal, nonsexual, and distinguished only by the fact that through some detail of resemblance it recalls the first scene. In provoking a sudden recollection of that scene, together with its sexual significance now understood for the first time, the second scene produces within “Emma” a sexual excitation which takes the ego by surprise, for the danger comes from a memory, from within, not, as the ego’s defenses expect, from an outside stimulus. The result is that the second scene institutes not only the normal defensive mechanism of “attenuating” the threatening tension by associating the sexual idea with others, allowing its assimilation into consciousness, but the more “primary process” of “total evacuation of affect”: the first scene is completely forgotten, and the second, in its insignificant detail, takes on all the affective significance of the first alien sexual gesture. Freud writes, “here we have an instance of a memory exciting an affect which it had not excited as an experience, because in the meantime changes produced by puberty had made possible a different understanding of what was remembered [. . .] the memory is repressed which has only become a trauma by deferred action” [Project, Standard Edition, vol. 1, p. 410]. The peculiar status of the traumatic moment, the sexual factor, stems from the impossibility of locating it in either scene: it is neither in the first, which has a sexual content merely “as it were, in itself and not for the subject,” and which “has no immediate sexual effect, produces no excitation, and provokes no defense”; nor the second, which includes no sexual gesture at all. Like self-blinded Oedipus, “Emma” feels herself a prey to “double griefs and double evils” (1. 1320), the things done involuntarily, years before, and the things done just now, by and to the self. It is precisely a neither-nor that empowers the both-and of repression, as the subject blinds herself to the past, to the entry into a world structured by sexual meanings inaccessible to the subject’s initial understanding. As Sophocles’ Chorus declares, “Time, all-seeing, surprised you living an unwilled life” (1. 1213).

Like “Emma”’s typical “psychoneurosis,” “Oedipal” sexuality concerns a certain lag or limp of the subject in relation to structures of meaning. The “Oedipus complex” takes its explanatory power not simply from the generality of incestuous desire, but from the rigorous representation, in the Oedipal drama, of the temporal

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* Laplanche, Life and Death, p. 40, and p. 43 where he quotes Freud: “the retardation of puberty makes possible the occurrence of posthumous primary process.”

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logic of repression. Reading *Oedipus Tyrannus* as structured according to a “first scene” and a “second scene” like the history of the repressed subject, we may come to distinguish, in Sophocles’ more complex plotting, an enrichment of the conception of repression which will be taken up and implied by Freud in all his subsequent references to our Oedipal sexuality.

An initial recollection of Sophocles’ play gives us a “first scene” in the murder of Laius, the Phocalian crime, and a “second scene” precisely in the drama itself, the moment of the legendary story chosen by Sophocles for representation on the stage, the quest for and recognition of the deed’s agent and meaning. The accession to sexual awareness that converts an indifferent episode into a seduction in “Emma”—s case is paralleled in Oedipus’ “case” by an accession to genealogical awareness that converts an accidental manslaughter into patricide. In this perspective, Sophocles’ play portrays Oedipus as the one person in history without an Oedipus complex in the conventional sense: he has murdered his father and married his mother in an appreciation of expediency rather than in satisfaction of a desire. The one person who actually enacts patricide and incest completely misses the experience—until after the fact, when the parricide is inscribed as a palimpsest and becomes readable for the first time. The Phocalian event, the real, as Lacan writes, exists as what is missed, according to the traumatic logic of psychoanalytic thinking:

That which is repeated, in fact, is always something produced—the very expression reveals its relation tuche—as if by chance [...] the function of tuche, of the real as encounter [rencontre]—an encounter insofar as it can be missed, and as it is essentially an encounter which is missed [rencontre manquée]—first appeared in the history of psychoanalysis in a form which is itself enough to awaken our attention—as trauma. [Le Séminaire XI: (Paris: Seuil, 1973, p. 54)]

In the very drama of the “one in whom the primordial wishes of our childhood have been fulfilled” [L.D., p. 296], there lies inscribed the metaepic plot structure which makes such fulfillment an impossibility. The sex of the cause is produced only through the text of the effect. The “cause”—the parricidal experience that has supreme guilt as its “effect”—is, practically, the effect of its effect. “Hysterical,” “Emma” draws the connection: so that was sex! “Horror-stricken,” Oedipus draws the connection: so that was . . . text! “Emma” represses the first scene, forgets it absolutely, yet is unable to return to the scene of the crime (shops, where both the first and second “moments” of the trauma took place; her symptom is a phobic evasion of shopping, and at last commits herself to “the work of a psychoanalysis.” Oedipus engages in “a process of revealing, with cunning delays and mounting excitement—a process that can be likened to the work of a psychoanalysis—that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius . . . [and] son of the murdered man and of Jocasta”; and at last he “represses” the scene of the crime by blinding himself. We remark initially, then, the analogy between “Emma”’s hysterical forgetting and Oedipus’ self-blinding, and between “Emma”’s engagement in psychoanalysis and Oedipus’ analysis of the Phocalian crime. There also emerges the possibility—suggested by a certain literal reading of Freud’s ambiguous comparison between the plot and an analysis—of leaving the two plot sequences strictly parallel: if Oedipus’ self-blinding is his final act in the play, are we to understand that a similar action concludes a psychoanalysis?—blinding oneself to the impossibility of cure for a temporally determined predicament? In matching the Sophoclean to the psychoanalytic plot, Freud suggests a critique of psychoanalysis as radical as the most strenuously anti-Freudian or anti-psychoanalytic critic could compose.5

With a facetious equation of “Emma”’s and Oedipus’ rhyming revelations we

exploit an opportune coincidence—in order to raise the question of the text. Or rather, we begin to read the question of Freud's text, the riddle Freud ravel in citing another text ('Sophocles') which exposes questionable relations between text and sex. While an extraordinary sex act is one major component of Oedipus' drama, text acts are just as major and extraordinary a component of the story; if there is a scandal to match (in the modern mind from Jocasta to Girard) that of incest, it is that of oracles. A recent Girardian reading of Sophocles' Oedipus, Sandor Goodhart's "Oedipus and Laius' Many Murderers" [Diacritics (Spring 1978)] refreshes our apprehension of the scandalously textual nature of Oedipus' central act, his affirmation of his guilt as the murderer of Laius. In Sophocles' version of the legendary story, the facts of Laius' murder are never empirically established. Empirical proof of Oedipus' guilt hinges on the testimony of the one eyewitness to the murder, the Herdsman, who is said to have said that not one but many assailters felled the king and his party (O., 11.842-7). Oedipus initially focuses on the question of one or many murderers as the fact that will absolve or condemn him. By the time the Herdsman has arrived to testify, however, the arrival of the Corinthian Messenger has shifted all attention to the question of Oedipus' parentage. What finally convinces Oedipus of his guilt is the Herdsman's implication that he, Oedipus ('Swellfoot'), is the child exposed with pierced ankles by Jocasta and Laius in response to the oracle's prediction that he would kill the latter and marry the former.

Goodhart's reading helps us to perceive more readily the parallel between Oedipus' appropriation of guilt and "Emma"'s repression of her "seduction": both can be seen as phobic gestures responsive to juxtaposed structures, rather than reactions to accumulated empirical evidence. Oedipus reads his guilt in a palimpsest compounding the oracle told to Jocasta and Laius with the oracular definition of his parentage that first drove him from Corinth. What convinces him is a constraining network of texts; the Herdsman's word that he helped 'save for a dreadful fate' the exposed child entrusted to him by the queen, the Messenger's news that he was Polybus' and Merope's adopted heir, his wife's confession to exposing her child, and, above all, the words of the oracles, the Pythia's dreadful structural account of ancestry, and Apollo's fearful designation of a particular infant aggressor. Sophocles arranges for the eyewitness to appear, and to testify, but never to be asked the empirical question, "Who killed Laius?" "From a semiotic point of view," says Jonathan Culler, "what is important here is the play's implicit commentary on the relation between meaning and event, between signs and the 'realities' often thought to be independent of them . . . We are not given a deed from which we infer a meaning but a meaning from which we infer a deed" ["Semiotic Consequences," MLA Semiotics Forum, Dec. 1977]. In Sophocles' tragedy, then, as Sandor Goodhart writes, "it is the status of the explanation that identifies those crimes that comes to be questioned . . . Sophocles has shifted his interest from the myth to its appropriation, and it is this appropriation, in its origin and danger, that is examined" [Who Killed Laius? Unpublished Ph.D. thesis (SUNY Buffalo, 1977), pp. 186, 183]. Precisely this dimension of Sophocles' drama enables it to be a uniquely rich reference for Freud.

Ignoring the fact that Freud's reference to Oedipus Tyrannus in The Interpretation of Dreams focuses on the very appropriative gesture re-illuminated in a Girardian perspective, the Girardian reading (both Goodhart's and Girard's own) goes on to claim that Freud just blindly repeats the "mythopoetic gesture" of Oedipus. The claim is that Freud appropriates Sophocles' Oedipus as an oracular text, and, in the manner of Tiresias, uses it to force his every subject to confess an "Oedipus complex." Such a notion of Freud as a tyrannical Tiresias can only stem from a myth of

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*It would seem that one could distinguish between the two oracles in terms of the difference between anxiety and fear, or in terms of Freud's conception of the threat of anxiety as an endemic hazard like free-floating libido, or alternatively, as a specific hazard like castration. Cf. Mehlman, Revolution and Repetition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977) pp. 96-7.*
Freud as analytic practitioner, not from the founding texts of Freudian analysis. This adherence to a mythic version of Freud compounds strangely with the “antimythical” reading of Oedipus celebrating Sophocles’ exposure of mythification. The account ultimately identifies the Crucifixion as the one non-mythical and efficacious sacrifice [Violence and the Sacred] (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1977). Girard’s antimythical interpretation of Oedipus thus repeats the Christian attack on myth in favor of Logos. The curious characteristic of the Girardian interpretation of Freud is that it seems simultaneously to read, and learn from, the critique of appropriation that runs through Freud’s own writing, and to decline to read it, denying its self-critical power. Girard attempts to establish the absolute difference between his critique and Freud’s. Yet in Girard’s view, aggressive attempts to reestablish eroded differences are the crucial symptom of our drastic cultural disintegration. He must therefore fail to recognize his own strenuous efforts at self-distinction—must decline to reckon with the significance of this very gesture in the elaboration of his own thesis. Girard is impelled to conceive a purely literal, non-mythic, non-representational sacrificial event—and to produce a strictly true self-sacrificial writing. The intriguing irony in this itinerary is that rejection of the Freudian generalization of the Oedipus complex is ultimately accompanied with a denial of Freud’s generalization of an oedipal textuality.

Let us return to a Freudian reading of the case of Sophocles’ Oedipus. The Oedipal drama presents itself for analysis as a “first scene” made up of all that precedes the point at which the stage representation picks up the story, and a “second scene” made up of all that is represented on the stage. The “first scene” itself includes several crucial scenes or moments which can be analyzed in the light of Freud’s account of the primary instance of such a “sexual-presexual” condition, infantile sexuality. The conception of an infantile sexuality ultimately impinges on the theory of seduction, as Freud comes to insist on the literal universality of seduction in at least one form, the earliest gestures of a mother toward her child, which are necessarily imbued with sexual meaning owing to her engagement in the sexualized adult world. The “first scene,” then, is not just an accidental episode in the case history of a hysteric, but the first entry upon the human scene of every subject. Maternal care (in the first instance, nursing) sensitizes particular parts of the infant’s body (in the first instance the mouth and lips) and establishes an erogenous zone, a specially sensitive and significant region of the body. Initiating the oral phase, this zonalizing institutes the course of sexual development that, for Freud, spells the individual’s destiny. Lacan, following Freud, stresses that this is an entry into not only a preexistent sexual, but a preexistent textual order, that of language. The child’s ascension to speech, like its accession to sexual maturity, comes long after its insertion into a sexual-social structure, through maternal and familial care and subscription in a discursive order, in the first instance by being given a name. Zoning and naming thus constitute the individual’s inscription in a sexual-textual or “Symbolic order.” One of the extraordinary features of the legend of Oedipus, of “Swellfoot,” is its representation of these modes of facticity as radically identical. Thus the piercing of Oedipus’ ankles, the maiming of his feet, is the terrible gesture of parental “care” that marks the infant’s position as the potential murderer of his father and lover of his mother, in the sexual-social order that is precisely a textual, discursive order, the language of the oracle. The parental gesture at once marks a special spot in the infant’s body and generates his name, Oidi-pous. The mark and the name in fact determine Oedipus’ relation to the Symbolic order and regulate his destiny. The most spectacular instance of this is his competition with the Sphinx: sensitive to

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“feet” as part of a name for man, Oedipus can provide the identification that destroys the Sphinx and lays the city of Thebes at his feet—where Sophocles sets the Chorus at the beginning of his drama.

Sophocles’ text plays repeatedly on the syllable pous and expressions involving “feet.” Tiresias speaks of “a mother’s and a father’s double-lashing terrible-footed curse”; Creon explains the failure to track down the regicide by saying that the Sphinx compelled the Thebans “to turn from the obscure to what lay at our feet” (11.417-418, 130-1). At another moment, attacking Tiresias’ mantic power and celebrating his own power of reasoning, gnōmē, Oedipus reminds his listeners how he read the Sphinx’s riddle:

Why, when the dog who chanted verse was here, did you not speak and liberate this city? Her riddle wasn’t for a man chanceing by to interpret; prophetic art was needed, but you had none, it seems—learned from birds or from a god. I came along, yes I, Oedipus the ignorant, and stopped her—by using thought, not augury from birds. [11.391-398]

In a footnote to his translation of this passage, Thomas Gould comments:

Oedipus uses sarcasm that rebounds bitterly on himself. In Greek, the phrase Oedipus the ignorant has an assonance and an apparent etymological connection that make it seem right in a sinister way: ho mēden eīdōs Oidipous. Eīdōs means “knowing”: oïda means “I know.” Oedipus seems to be speaking of himself as “I whose name sounds like oïda but really signifies the reverse.” (Oïda and eīdōs are also related to the verb “to see”.) Pous, the other half of Oedipus’ name, means “foot.” “As ‘Knowfoot’ (eīdōs tous podas) he solves the riddle about feet” (M. L. Earle, The Oedipus Tyrannus . . .) 9

In the very act of claiming reasoned control over language, Oedipus utters syllables that speak the opposite; the controlling utterance here is not his, but that of a fragmentary language speaking itself.10 “Lack-knowing- I know-foot”: in the very act of deploying a limited local irony, with his sarcastic references to himself as “the ignorant,” Oedipus produces an irony of that irony, which fragments meaning into material signifiers. Expressions of double meaning, not usually of the fragmentary pun-like kind here, abound in tragic drama, and Oedipus Tyrannus has more than twice as many ambiguous forms as Sophocles’ other plays [Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Ambiguity and Reversal: On the Enigmatic Structure of Oedipus Rex,” New Literary History (Vol. IX, Spring 1978, No. 3), p. 474]. Missed by Oedipus (even and especially in his own speech), these double meanings speak to the spectators (who always already know the story). There is an irony to this “tragic irony,” however, which ultimately overwhelms the audience just as much as the irony of his local irony overwhelms sarcastic Oedipus. As Gould writes,

the double meaning is the most tactful possible way to keep the audience focused on the patricide and incest. Each person in the theater, as he is caught up in the fantasy, must imagine himself discovering the same guilt in

9 Gould, p. 63. Gould also points out that the messenger who recounts Oedipus’ blinding speaks of his piercing of his ball-joints, arthra, in “an unparalleled use of this word.” With this catachresis naming eyes as feet, Sophocles calls attention to Oedipus’ completion of his first maiming (and naming). We are also brought to “see” the two acts as putative and deliberate castrations.
10 This instance illuminates the well-known Lacanian dictum that “La langue se parle.”
Sophocles’ strategy to prevent our prompt disassociation from the parrinest engages us in interpreting a meaning gradually ramified until it refers to our own condition and confronts us with our complicity with Oedipus. The double meanings thus mark our distance only to draw us in. They impel us to read into them a complex of significations so distant and different from the secret we know in advance that finally we find ourselves written into a representation that traverses and exceeds us.

We may undergo a similar effect in reading the text of Freud. Freud’s Oedipus complex exceeds itself in a particular way that the legend of the name of Oedipus represents precisely. It seems that sexual repression, generating the unconscious, implicates the subject in an order not only of the living but also of the dead. Recent psychoanalytic theorists have followed the ghost of a suggestion in Freud’s writing that the subject is obscurely constrained not only by his own lively unconscious but by the unconscious of his parents and their parents [see J. Derrida, “Fors,” The Georgia Review 21:2 (Spring 1977)]. This notion would take support from the observation that, as Laplanche explains, “the slightest parental gesture bear[s] the parents’ fantasies... the parents themselves had their own parents; they have their ‘complexes,’ wishes marked by historicity, so that at two vertices of the triangle [of the child’s oedipus complex] each adult protagonist is himself the bearer of a small triangle and even of a whole series of triangles” [Life and Death, p. 45]. The “zoning” and naming of Oedipus clearly reflect Laius’ fantasmatic relation to his father, Labdacus, “the limping one,” with his maimed walk. As the son of his father, Laius makes a father of his son: he ascribes to him the threat of castration (as parrinest) that a son might have ascribed to his kingly father. In giving the child the “Name-of-the-Father,” 11 in effect, the father empowers him, in fact, to take his (father’s) place, for as “Swellfoot” he solves the riddle of excess feet, and takes the king’s place in Thebes.

Freud takes his place as a master, “the father of psychoanalysis,” when he solves the riddle of dreams and in 1900 publishes the Traumdeutung. Rather as Oedipus is enabled to answer the Sphinx by an intimate sense of the significance of feet, Freud is empowered to interpret dreaming by an intimate conviction that it does have meaning, that (to quote the opening sentence of The Interpretation of Dreams) “there is a psychological technique which makes it possible to interpret dreams, and that, if that procedure is employed, every dream reveals itself as a psychical structure which has a meaning and which can be inserted at an assignable point in the mental activities of waking life.” Like Oedipus’ simple solution to the Sphinx’s bizarre questions, Freud’s Traumdeutung restores to the light of “waking life” the weird productions of nighttime fantasy. Each rediscovers the uncanny and unheimlich as heimlich, canny, homely, “what lay at our feet.” Each reconstructs a narrative scheme capable of explaining the inconceivable kind of being expressed by the dream or the riddle. Oedipus must identify “a thing with two feet and four feet, with a single voice, that has three feet as well. It changes shape, alone among the things that move on land or in the air or down through the sea. Yet during the periods when it walks supported by the largest number of feet, then is the speed in its limbs the feeblest of all” [Oedipus the King, p. 19]. The riddle concerns a coincidence of excess and lack, a collusion of sameness and difference, and a question of “speed” and a question of “support.” These are the factors of Freud’s riddle as well, if not most patent in The Interpretation of Dreams, more clearly at least in his solutions to the general puzzle of repression that dreams manifest. It is unriddled, as we have seen, in terms of the

11 “Nom-du-Père”; the concept is Lacan’s.

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shifting zones and phases of the sexual being. The inadequacy of the “speed” of sexual development is most evident when the creature has the most “support”: the human infant supported by sexual care (and with the greatest number of relevant “limbs,” if we recall the theory of the infant’s “polymorphous perversity”) is least capable of sexual action. We can even draw a connection between the riddle’s emphasis on “walking supported” and Freud’s conception of the sexual drive propped upon a biological function—in his scheme, as in Oedipus’ answer to the Sphinx, at the infantile stage, when the infant’s satisfaction in ingesting its mother’s milk is supplemented by a pleasure in sucking the mother’s breast. These principles of Anlehnung and Nebenwirkung compose Freud’s recurrent report of the genesis of sexuality.12

Like Freud, Oedipus solves the riddle of human being by identifying its distinctively temporal structure: his answer is man, who moves on four limbs as an infant, on two feet in his prime, and with the aid of a staff in old age—and whose dilemma is compounded, we might add, by his provision with a “single voice,” which cannot adequately express the overlapping discontinuous phases of his metamorphosis. Oedipus answers “man”; he does not answer “man, I myself”; yet Oedipus himself is the prime example of the bizarre being described by the Sphinx, precisely in the senseless numbering and collapsed syntax of the riddle’s opening sentence. Through the very act of reading the riddle, Oedipus will become the one man who exemplifies the Sphinx’s challenge not merely in the form of its answer but in its form as riddle. For Oedipus’ parricest (half finished even as he makes his reply to the Sphinx) makes him at once a husband (“with two feet”) of his mother, a child among his children (“and four feet”), and the father of his father (“that has three feet as well”). Sophocles dramatizes the riddle by representing Oedipus as king, as exposed child, and as blind old man all in the single scene of the tragedy. Parricest is a catastrophic convergence and crossing of life-lines—the unspeakable event “at the place where three roads meet,” and an unreadable palimpsest, the text that cannot be read out with a “single voice.”

The restriction of “voice” affects Oedipus’ answer to the Sphinx, and we can trace a similar effect in Freud’s answer to the riddle of dreams. Freud recurrently neglects to implicate his own theory in his account of the reductive or recuperative rationalization that he finds to be characteristic both of the reporting of dreams and of the elaboration of systematic thought. In The Interpretation of Dreams Freud calls this rationalization “secondary revision,” the activity by which the dream’s patent absurdities are viewed from the standpoint of the ego and made to seem to conform to some kind of rational expectation.13 In Totem and Taboo Freud defines systematic thought in general as a type of “secondary revision.” Yet he continues to claim for psychoanalytic theory the power to distinguish between the primary and the secondary, or the riddles and the answer, without being subject to the recuperative revision it ascribes to all theorizing. This tendency to ignore the implications of the critique of theory for his own emerging theories can be noticed throughout Freud’s works, from the Project for a Scientific Psychology (1895) to Negation (1925).

At other moments, however, and particularly where he addresses the question of literature, as in his generalizing reading of Oedipus, Freud insists that no position exists—including that of psychoanalysis—immune to the distortions of secondary revision involved in all writing, no position from which writing or revision could be judged with disinterested final accuracy.14 The theory of transference, too, which has

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14 Cf. Shoshana Felman, “Turning the Screw,” p. 200: “The fact that literature has no outside, that there is no safe spot assuredly outside of madness, from which one might demystify and judge it, locate it in the Other without oneself participating in it, was indeed ceaselessly affirmed by Freud in the most revealing moments of his text (and in spite of the constant opposite temptation—the mastery temptation—to which he at other times inevitably succumbed).”
been re-read by Lacan [see Le Séminaire I, “Les Écrits techniques de Freud”], situates both the power and the danger of psychoanalysis in the determinate resemblance between analyst and analysand, interpretation and symptom. It initially takes form as a mirror-image relation like that of Oedipus to Oedipus in the Sophoclean plot Freud compares to “the work of a psychoanalysis.”

There is also another dimension of Freud’s texts that converges with the critique of clear thinking, passages that insist on a kind of theoretical obscurity, and that formulate peculiarly elusive riddles. Thus in the final chapter of the Traumdeutung (in the section entitled “The Forgetting of Dreams”):

Even in the best interpreted dreams, there is often a place [eine Stelle] that must be left in the dark, because in the process of interpreting, one notices a tangle of dream-thoughts arising [anhebt], which resists unravelling but has also made no further contributions [keine weiteren Beiträge] to the dream-content. This is then the dream’s navel, the place where it straddles the unknown [dem Unerkannten aufsitzt]. The dream-thoughts, to which interpretation leads one, are necessarily interminable [ohne Abschluss] and branch out on all sides into the netlike entanglement [in die netzartige Verstrickung] of our world of thought. Out of one of the denser places of this meshwork, the dream-wish rises [erhebt sich] like a mushroom out of its mycelium. [transl. Samuel Weber, “The Divaricator,” in “Remarks on Freud’s Witz,” Glyph 1 (1977), p. 8]

Samuel Weber, reading this passage in the course of “Remarks on Freud’s Witz,” calls attention to the riddle it evokes. Freud’s text describes the “dream-navel” as like a “mycelium,” which the dictionary defines as “part of the thallus of fungi”—leading the reader on to the definition of the “thallus”:

Thallus . . . Bot. A vegetable structure without vascular tissue, in which there is no differentiation into stem and leaves, and from which true roots are absent. [p. 13]

The riddle of Freud’s riddle is that there exists a thing that is without tissue, without differentiation, and without roots. We might be tempted simply to unridge this as the concept of the unconscious, which also, by definition, is definable only as what it is not. What should be remarked here, however, is not any supposed ramifications of the concept, but the resurgence of the thing itself in Freud’s text. In its very unreadability, in passages like the one above, Freud’s writing generates itself as the thing evoked in the riddle of the dream—or in the riddle of the Sphinx. For if the Oedipus of legend is the one who is the very riddle, not just its answer, whose parricidal criss-crosses the numbered phases of existence, so the text of Freud is also the very dream-text that is his riddle, and not just its interpretation. Freud’s dream-book is a dream-text and palimpsest, in which the unreadable “primary” text of “primary process” is written under and over the systematic “secondary revision.” This writing is the discourse of the Sphinx, as well as the human response.

The effect of the text, whether as Sphinx or as hero, can only be constituted by a third dimension, by the presence of witnesses—of readers. In Freud’s case, the fact of his writing is precisely that third dimension. The psychoanalytic project came into being with the writing that Freud carried on in supplement to his ongoing clinical practice, writings which supplemented the relationship between analyst and analysand by an invocation of readers. We too readily take Freud’s writing for granted and forget that it had to be carried on in addition to a practice that generally occupied nine hours a day; that it was carried on makes psychoanalysis, from the start, a triangular complex relating an analyst, a subject, and a text with its readers. The Interpretation of Dreams, for example, viewed as a self-analysis, is composed as a triangle made up by the analysing subject (“Freud”), the analysed subject (“Freud”), and the text with which the analysis takes place, the text of Freud. Freud’s
text constitutes the meaning of the analysis by letting it be read—and misread, as readers repeat the Oedipal gesture of appropriating the textual network for an over-determined signification. Its definitive and continuous dependency on writing makes psychoanalysis what a certain popular view and a certain scientific perspective have long held it to be, a joke. It is a joke, that is, as rigorously defined in Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious, which describes how sexual jokes or “dirty jokes,” in particular, are constituted as jokes—as funny—by the laughter of a third person, not the teller, nor the one on whom the joke is told, but the one to whom it is told, whose laughter alone makes the joke telling. That laughter cannot be controlled or explained, neither by the one who does the laughing, the third person, nor by the first, who does the telling.15 Like the “fantômes” of parental fantasies that fix the nuclear oedipal triangle in a network of endless interlocking triangles, the laughter of the listener or reader sets the scene of psychoanalysis in the context of an endlessly-to-be-repeated joke.

We could also put it another way: as writing, and reading, psychoanalysis is an endlessly recited tragedy. For it is generated, as joke or tragedy, by the aspiration to a cure, whether conceived as resembling laughter or as resembling a catharsis of pity and fear. The structure of Oedipus Tyrannus is instructive here, in suggesting how writing is written into the psychoanalytic encounter itself, as “analysis terminable and interminable”—how it constitutes the scenario of cure, or of interminable interpretation. Thus the tragedy of Oedipus consisted in a dramatization, for an audience of Athenians, of a dramatization on the stage, for a Chorus of fictive Thebans, of the drama of Oedipus’ discovery of his role in the drama of the Phocal crime. An audience, an effect of witnesses, is built into the drama in the form of the tragic Chorus, which with Sophocles’ addition of secondary characters (the High Priest, then Tiresias, then Creon, then Jocasta) takes the position of a third person (“we know that it was Sophocles who introduced the third character,” notes André Green [Un Oeil en trop, p. 167 n.]). This third person is an audience up on the stage, radically implicated in Oedipus’ interpretations, and unable to predict or withhold its responses of fear, pity, laughter, or revulsion. It is like the third position constituted between and within the analyst and analysand, a writing that is not just the record of their exchange, but a primary text generated as the unconscious significations of the discourse they together produce. The text that requires a reader, and the reader collapsed in laughter or dread, is written into Freud’s practice of psychoanalysis, as well as written out in the tomes of texts where analysis accumulated a history.

One way in which the Freudian text exceeds systematization is particularly Oedipal, in the Sophoclean sense that focuses on Oedipus’ interpretive confession. We have discussed this previously as a gesture of appropriation, like Oedipus’ assumption of guilt for the Phocal crime through an appropriation of the meaning of converging oracle texts. Similarly, it was suggested, Freud conceives the Oedipus complex through an appropriation of the text of Sophocles. We ought now to note, again, that this gesture is more, or less, than an assumption of mastery, an appropriation in the active sense. Sophocles’ text, rather, might be seen to appropriate Freud’s, by means, specifically, of the dramatic or the “literary,” figurative language that his text incorporates—for example: “like Oedipus, we live in ignorance of these wishes, repugnant to morality, which have been forced upon us by Nature, and after their revelation we may all of us well seek to close our eyes [den Blick abwenden] to the scenes of our childhood” [p. 297]. We noted before the radical critique of his own invention implicit in Freud’s comparison between the plot that ends with Oedipus’ self-blinding and “the work of a psychoanalysis.” In this passage, that ending becomes Freud’s focus. The peculiar effect of the sentence lies in its tone of

15 Weber goes on to evoke a special case described by Freud, the bad joke in which the only joke is that there is no joke, and the expectation of the listener is thwarted. This is another instance of that marginal logic whereby the exception comes to appear more exemplary than the norm, for Freud’s theory of jokes depends on his being able to refer to this joke of the joke. Weber is suggesting that Freud’s text operates as a bad joke or no-joke of this kind.
resigned, slightly sententious moralizing, and the all but effaced concluding figure that suddenly springs into relief and confronts us with the figure of Oedipus raining down tears of blood. The lag or deferral of our response, which supplements its intensity by surprise, results from a shifting in levels of discourse: first, between the first and second parts of the sentence, a shift from “literal” to “figurative”; and then a last startling reversion as we recognize the shift back to the literal—and literary—register of the final figure. The Freudian sentence is structured like the case history of “Emma” or the plot of Oedipus: two phases, linked associatively but differentiated by their inscription in two different orders of meaning (“literal” and “figurative,” pretextual and textual, pre-oedipal and oedipal, scientific and literary). The slight shock administered to the reader is produced in the same way as the enduring trauma of the repressed subject.

This observation is not intended to propose a stylistic study of Freud (our description of the sentence is obviously predetermined by a preexisting interpretation), nor to suggest that trauma can be trivialized to something on the scale of a reader’s fleeting thrill at a metaphor. The history of psychoanalysis since that sentence was written suggests, however, that precisely the experience of reading Freud’s text—such sentences as the above—provoked a trauma and produced a repression on a larger scale. Most of the institutions of psychoanalytic thought could be characterized in terms of their various ways of forgetting Freud’s sentence, of their “total evacuation” from the Freudian text. One such case is that of the traditional analyst who represses awareness that the text sentences him as well as his analysand (“möchten wir wohl alle. . .”) to a career like that of Oedipus.

A special case is that of René Girard, who professes not to see that in his description of an originary scenario of sexual genesis Freud writes a theory of mimetic desire more far-reaching than Girard’s universal history can accommodate. Recurrent in analytic thinking is a symptomatic suppression of the figure of Oedipus—of figure, and of Oedipus—inscribed in Freud’s writing. This endemic form of repression represses the text in the text, the representation of mimesis, or what we call literature. This is also a repression of the Oedipus complex: for it arises in resistance to the marginal logic that makes Oedipus the unique monster into Oedipus the exemplary case, and the Oedipal model for normal sexual maturation into an Oedipal model for exceptional poetic maturation (in the writing of Harold Bloom, for example). We might make “Oedipal” become a name for a principle by which the exception takes the rule along with it—as in Laplanche’s account of Freud’s description of sex acts (where “perversion” comes to characterize sexuality as such, as a deviation from need and function to drive and “organ pleasure”) [Life and Death, chapter 1]; and as in Derrida’s rendition of Austin’s theory of speech acts (where the possibility of a misfire sparks the conception of a normative success); and, more generally, as in other post-structuralist accounts of language, where theories of literature based on seeing it as a special restricted language have given way to investigations of language exploring the notion that language is a special case of a more generally conceived textuality. The most famous case is Derrida’s Grammatology, an inversion of parole and écriture that reconstrues language as various derivative forms of writing.

The symptomatic suppression of the supplementary principle can be maintained with equal security by psychoanalytic critics of literature and by a theorist like Girard, who chastises Freud for failing, in Totem and Taboo, to keep to a “sense of the function of the rite,” and concedes, “nevertheless, Freud made an important discovery. He was the first to maintain that all ritual practices, all mythical implications, have their scope in an actual murder” [Violence and the Sacred, p. 201]. To produce this certainty of the facts from the conclusion of Totem and Taboo that Girard acclaims, the theorist requires a measurable effort of repression: the symptom, precisely, of not reading: “. . . neurotics are above all inhibited in their actions: with them the thought is a complete substitute for the deed. Primitive men, on the other hand, are uninhibited: thought passes directly into action. With them it is rather the deed that is a substitute for the thought. And that is why, without laying any claim to
finality of judgment, I think that in the case before us it may safely be assumed that “in the beginning was the Deed.” In the finishing phrase of his final conclusion as to the reality of a primal fact, Freud invokes a prior text. The conclusion of the scientific inquiry comes in quotes. We witness here Freud’s chronically oedipal textuality: like his model, to account for ancient murder Freud calls upon another authority’s oracular word. That word is itself a deliberate revision of a primary text: Goethe’s Faust, of course, is misquoting the beginning of the Gospel of St. John, “In the beginning was the Word.” If “the Word” is in the text behind the text in his text, how can we take Freud at his word? He withholds it, performing instead the deed of literary quotation. At this crucial juncture the Freudian text gives us not the facts but the literature. What might seem to be a gesture of closure, or appropriation, opens the passage to a textuality that overrides Freud’s tendency to control his textual drive.17

The time lag that dooms sexual ideas to repression also affects the ideas we have of texts. Reading, like sexual development, is a discontinuous temporal process in which the subject’s awareness lags behind her or his ever-shifting enmeshment with a preexistent order of meaning, and not only because of the multiple significations of individual elements of discourse (such as the divergence between literal and figurative senses, and more complex kinds of rhetorical difference). The process must begin as misreading and go on to rereading, and to a rewriting in which the reader becomes legible. Like the Freudian subject’s reading of sex, the analytic reader’s writing on texts enforces and appropriates coincidences, collapsing the difference between disparate textual scenes. In this reading of Freud’s reading of Oedipus, for example, not only have we compressed the different stories within each text, but we have stressed the relation of consistency and complicity between Freud’s text and Sophocles’ rather than a radically illegible discontinuity between them (which could be seen to be equally inconsistent). That illegible difference might be written (though not here) as the distinctively textual phenomenon, a trauma of unreadability, sited in a neither-nor between two almost incomparable texts. In differentiating such an option from our own writing strategy here, we assume (in every sense) the limp or lag that psychoanalysis, like Sophocles, ascribes to the exemplary subject.

Reading must culminate in a rewriting that cannot fail to be symptomatic. Oedipus is engaged in this dilemma when he encounters the unreadable structure of meanings produced by the Pythia, who tells him, in effect, that his knowledge will catch up with him [1. 788 ff. “I went to Pytho . . .”]. It does—not (in der Tat) in the event, but only when Oedipus rereads her pronouncement in conjunction with another oracle and other histories of his case. Pythian prophecy may be saliently characterized as a type of writing, for the tradition describes the Pythia as a frenzied priestess who would cite Apollo and be quoted, by a priest, to the waiting supplicant. Like writing, then, Pythian prophecy is mediated—and female and probably mad, also like writing (when opposed to speech) in the scheme which dominates culture. Psychoanalysis differed with this scheme from the start, when Freud’s theory of seduction as a proton pseudos, or primary deceit inscribed in the facts, positioned his writing “beyond the banalities of official ‘clinical’ practice, which regularly invoked bad faith and simulation to account for what it called ‘pithiasm,’” the lying of hysterics [Laplanche, Life and Death, p. 34]. Freud’s temporal scheme of sexual repression enabled him to unravel these lies as the productions neither of bad faith nor of error, but as the expressions of victims of a fundamental duplicity grounded in the historicity of desire. Here too the Freudian perspective involves a Sophoclean

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17 For a persuasive account of the logic of a certain kind of “secondary revision” in Freud’s writing, see Mehlman’s summary of Laplanche on anxiety in Revolution and Repetition, pp. 96-101. Laplanche identifies the “castration anxiety” version of the Oedipus complex as a phobic symptom predictable in terms of the earlier, “naïve” theory of anxiety as “a free-floating form of affect” that Freud called a “poison.”
insight, for as the finest scholarly reader of Oedipus remarks, the one issue that is not brought up in the tragedy is the question, where does the blame lie? “The battle is not in this case between truth and error. For when one speaks of ‘error’ one does not mean an inevitable failure such as we have here, a flaw not of mind but of the whole human condition, both internal and external” [Karl Rheinhardt, Sophokles (Frankfurt am Mein: Klosterman, 1949), p. 127]. Oedipus at Colonnus dismisses his guilt for his blindness and his limp [11. 213-88]. Freud ends Beyond the Pleasure Principle in the same way. The argument of that work, he is aware, more than usually succumbs to the deferrals and differences that mark his text. In a gesture like that which terminates Totem and Taboo, Freud ends by reciting a quotation. We may take comfort, too, for the slow advances of our scientific knowledge in the words of the poet:

Was man nicht erfliegen kann, muss man erhinken.

Die Schrift sagt, es ist keine Sünde zu hinken.

What one cannot reach flying one must reach limping.

The Scripture says it is no sin to limp.¹⁸

¹⁸ Freud is quoting the last lines of “Die beiden Gülden,” Strachey’s note tells us, which is “a version of Rükert of one of the Māqamāt of al-Ha'iri,” quoting “Die Schrift”!

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