

OEDIPUS AND BEYOND : THOUGHTS ON THE MYTH OF ANALYSIS

‘that we must suffer, suffer into truth.
We cannot sleep, and drop by drop at the heart
the pain of pain remembered comes again
and we resist.’¹

No, this is not a quote from Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannos*, as the Greeks called it, *Oedipus Rex* as the Latinists and Sigmund Freud denominated it, or *Oedipus the King*, as it is standardly translated into English. *Oedipus* was for Freud a rich literary geological lode in which he could focus, by projection, the tormenting and turbulent early childhood fantasies of his own troubled unconscious, and from which he extrapolated a general principle of his psychology which eventually became elevated and enshrined as a dogma of psychoanalysis: the Oedipus complex. And let me say that after a quarter of a century of professional practice I would affirm that for me the Oedipus complex, with its attendant female version which Jung named the Electra complex², is, in its looser and wider manifestation, so psychologically significant and ramifying, interpretable at the levels of personal (that is, intrapsychic), familial, and collective/cultural, that I would term it ‘archetypal.’ It is probably Freud’s greatest discovery; for him it was what he called the core complex in analysis.

But no, the quote is not from Sophocles. Let me read it again. [Read] For me, it is the quote from ancient Greek drama that best epitomises the body of an analysis. And it predates Sophocles. The celebration of the rites of the god Dionysus – god of wine and unbridled passions, and at a deeper level, the ‘spirit of human culture...the tragic

¹ *Agamemnon*, in Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, translated Robert Eagles. London: Wildwood House, 1976, p. 179-82.

² CW 4, par. 347.

spirit of suffering and regeneration’³ – was annually effected in the spring in Athens in the creation and public performance of tragedy, ““a terrible sacrament of the god,” as Yeats imagined it.’⁴ In this context one might well say: In the beginning was Aeschylus, for with Aeschylus we have not only the earliest extant dramas, but the only complete trilogy of tragedies, the *Oresteia*, comprising the *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*. The opening quotation comes from the first chorus in the *Agamemnon*, and as I said, for me it epitomises the body of an analysis, what Jung more succinctly called ‘surgery without anaesthesia’.⁵

Every analytical journey is unique. It is an enquiry into, and discovery and consequent living of, one’s personal myth, which embodies in unique form the archetypal speech of the collective unconscious. Jung put it thus:

‘Psychology, as one of the many expressions of psychic life, operates with ideas which in their turn are derived from archetypal structures... Psychology... translates the archaic speech of myth into a modern mythologem [or myth motif]... This... undertaking is a *living and lived myth*. [itals. Jung’s]’⁶

In order to talk about my collective experience of all the analytical journeys in which I have been privileged to be a participant, I need to use myth in a further way. Just as all the individual ‘living and lived myths’ are differentiated out of the archetypal mythic language of the collective unconscious, so I need to distil them together again and focus them in a mythic unity, a recognisable pattern of collective consciousness. To do this, I shall use the material of the ancient Greek myth of Oedipus as embodied by Sophocles, attempting the distillation of the many ‘living myths’ from analysis into a single pattern. Many of the quotations selected may seem savage and confronting,

³ *The Oresteia*. Quote from Introductory Essay by W.B. Stanford, p. 8.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 8.

⁵ Personal communication, Rix Weaver.

⁶ CW 9i, par. 302.

but then so is the process of analysis. Adjectives such as ‘nice’ and ‘respectable’ have no place in any description of the process. The central myth used to flesh out the pain-filled opening quotation is that of Oedipus in Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* (which for simplicity I will from now on refer to, as is customary, as the *Tyrannos*). But I will also use the second of Sophocles’ dramas about Oedipus, the *Oedipus at Colonus* (from now on referred to as the *Colonus*), to focus what happens in the later stage of an analysis for those who decide to continue the journey – with all their inevitable psychic scar-tissue – once the fundamental psychic wounds are sufficiently healed.

Jung early in his career, summarised the two phases as the ‘reductive’ and the ‘synthetic’ or ‘constructive.’⁷ According to Jung:

‘the reductive method traces the unconscious product back to its elements, no matter whether these be reminiscences of events that actually took place, or elementary psychic processes. The reductive method is oriented backwards, in contrast to the constructive method.’⁸ ‘Constructive means “building up.” Constructive and synthetic [are] concerned with the elaboration of the products of the unconscious.’⁹

Jung originally used ‘reductive’ to describe Freud’s and Adler’s methods, and ‘constructive’ to describe his own. But only four years after his break with Freud, both methods were seen as part of an analysis.

‘The method of the Zurich School...is not only analytical and causal [that is, reductive] but synthetic and prospective.’¹⁰

The reductive phase is concerned with the psychic detective story of discovering what Mother and Father did and didn’t do to us, and the reconstructive work of building a strong-enough ego. Once the ego is sufficiently strong and boundaried, it can truly

⁷ See both Essays in CW 7. See also Definitions in CW 6 under ‘reductive’ (par. 788) and ‘constructive’ (par. 701-4.)

⁸ CW 6, par. 788.

⁹ CW 6, par. 701.

¹⁰ CW 4, par. 675.

engage with the unconscious in dialogue and make the second journey into the perilous depths, this time taking ego responsibility for personal fate, which means taking responsibility for one's own shadow and not excusing it and blaming others. This process embodies Jung's terrible dictum: 'My problem it always myself: never other people.'¹¹ In practise, both methods co-exist in every analysis; it is just the proportion of each at any one period of a respective analysis that differ, and the proportions cover the whole percentage spectrum. Nonetheless, the constructive or heuristic synthetic phase cannot be taken on until the reductive analytic phase has been substantially completed. In my myth of analysis I shall use Sophocles' two plays to identify the two phases, the *Tyrannos* for the reductive analytic, and the *Colonus* for the heuristic synthetic.

But to begin at the beginning: Why come into analysis? There are of course as many answers to this question as there are analysands. But the usual reason is intolerable suffering; as the quote says: 'that we must suffer.' And the process of analysis is that we must 'suffer into truth'; and as session succeeds session, so 'drop by drop at the heart/the pain of pain remembered comes again.' And so intense and agonising is memory, that the final bit of the quote, 'and we resist', has become a founding principle of psychoanalysis, Resistance, on which much transference/countertransference thought has been expended, and many a learned tract has been penned. In fact, in Freud's polemical article, 'On the history of the psychoanalytic movement,' he defines psychoanalysis as 'the facts of transference and resistance.'¹² We bring into analysis our whole family background, and not only our immediate, known family, but the whole ancestral background too. We are part of

¹¹ Personal communication, Rix Weaver.

¹² Quoted in James Astor, 'The Jungian and Freudian Perspectives on the Oedipus Myth and Beyond', *Int. J. Psychoanal.*, 79, p. 698.

dynasty; indeed, it might be argued that dynasty is our destiny. Jung was fond of quoting from the second commandment, that the sins of the fathers are visited on the children to the third and fourth generation. And, he avers, that no matter how unfair this might seem, the psychological truth is much more severe. In fact the sins of the ancestors continue down the generations until one person comes to consciousness and redeems the curse. I have often been in awe of the mystery, how a deep and prolonged analysis brings healing, not only to the analysand, but to an entire dynasty. The facts of history cannot be changed, but the whole aura of them, their feeling and influence over time, can be transformed into an abiding effect of peace and wholeness. This is also the motivation behind the psychological inquiry and ritual which has been developing in a small way in the mainstream churches under the title, 'Healing the Family Tree'.

So what is the typical family and dynastic background that drives someone into analysis? Whatever the individual characteristics, it is to a lesser or greater degree dysfunctional; it does not operate with emotional or creative productivity, because it is stunted and starved of love. The inability to love and to demonstrate love to children, whose birthright it is to be nurtured in love, is the root of all family dysfunction. Children are not loved and lovingly nurtured, so they grow up unable to love. Short of a near-miracle which sometimes happens and delivers them from the cycle, they grow up and are, by grim, inevitable magnetism, each attracted to like partners who have not been loved nor lovingly nurtured and therefore cannot love, and the couple co-parent another cloned loveless generation, and so on and so on down the dynasty. If there is no love, then the law of the jungle – what Nietzsche and later Alfred Adler called the 'will to power' – flourishes. Love and power are reciprocal opposites: the

more there is of one, the less there is of the other. And real love is hard work; for, as St Paul informs us, ‘Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous;...it is never rude or selfish; it does not take offence, and is not resentful. Love...is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes.’¹³ This is an ideal; but (in Winnicott’s celebrated little phrase) a ‘good enough’ measure of this kind of love, usually termed ‘agape’ or selfless compassionate love, will minimalise dysfunction.

Let us now turn to the *Tyrannos*. For Freud, the myth of Oedipus as embodied by Sophocles, was the primal myth and, as previously stated, the Oedipus complex the core complex. I want to begin to examine the psychological journey of Oedipus by quoting from *The Interpretation of Dreams*. This is partly because Freud gives an excellent précis of the first drama, and partly because one cannot give a psychoanalytic paper on Oedipus without somehow honouring its first investigator. Incidentally, so influential was Freud’s formulation, that in 1948 there was published a volume consisting of writings on Oedipus by Freud and subsequent depth psychologists, namely Adler, Jung, Otto Rank, Karen Horney, Erich Fromm, and Harry Stack Sullivan¹⁴ – virtually a map of the historical development of the craft to that point in time. Freud’s précis is embedded in his formulation, of which I will give only a few leading sentences:

‘According to my already extensive experience, parents play a leading part in the infantile psychology of all persons who subsequently become psychoneurotics. Falling in love with one parent and hating the other forms part of the permanent stock of the psychic impulses which arise in early childhood, and are of such importance as the material of the subsequent neurosis...[but] psychoneurotics do no more than reveal to us, by magnification, something that occurs less markedly and intensively in the minds of the majority of children. Antiquity has furnished us with legendary matter which corroborates this belief...

¹³ The Jerusalem Bible, I Corinthians 13:4-7

¹⁴ Patrick Mullahy, *Oedipus: Myth and Complex : A Review of Psychoanalytic Theory*. New York: Hermitage Press, 1948.

‘I am referring to the legend of King Oedipus and the *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles. Oedipus, the son of Laius, king of Thebes, and Jocasta, is exposed as a suckling, because an oracle had informed the father that his son, who was still unborn, would be his murderer. He is rescued, and grows up as a king’s son at a foreign court, until, being uncertain of his origin, he, too, consults the oracle, and is warned to avoid his native place, for he is destined to become the murderer of his father and the husband of his mother. On the road leading away from his supposed home he meets King Laius, and in a sudden quarrel strikes him dead. He comes to Thebes, where he solves the riddle of the Sphinx, who is barring the way to the city, whereupon he is elected king by the grateful Thebans, and is rewarded with the hand of Jocasta. He reigns for many years in peace and honour, and begets two sons and two daughters upon his unknown mother, until at last a plague breaks out – which causes the Thebans to consult the oracle anew. Here Sophocles’ tragedy begins. The messengers bring the reply that the plague will stop as soon as the murderer of Laius is driven from the country. But where is he? “Where shall he be found, /Faint, and hard to be known, the trace of the ancient guilt?”

‘The action of the play consists simply in the disclosure, approached step by step and artistically delayed (*and comparable to the work of a psychoanalysis* [my italics]) that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius, and that he is the son of the murdered man and Jocasta. Shocked by the abominable crime which he has unwittingly committed, Oedipus blinds himself, and departs from his native city. The prophecy of the oracle has been fulfilled.

‘The *Oedipus Rex* is a tragedy of fate...His fate moves us only because it might have been our own...It may be that we were all destined to direct our first sexual impulses toward our mothers, and our first impulses of hatred and violence toward our fathers...King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and wedded his mother Jocasta, is nothing more or less than a wish-fulfilment – the fulfilment of the wish of our childhood.’¹⁵

In this précis we have the violent motif of parricide which is also regicide, although it is committed unconsciously, not consciously. We also have incest, which is likewise unconscious. In the myth of Oedipus, in contrast with, say, the myth of the *Oresteia* where the regicide is conscious, all the terrible action occurs from *unconscious* motives. And it is this which makes it the stuff of analysis. I want to show *why*

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, translated Dr. A.A. Brill. New York: The Modern Library, 1994, p. 159-61.

analysands are like Oedipus, why they are forced into analysis the way Oedipus is forced into his search for the truth. (As Freud remarked, ‘the action of the play [is] comparable to the work of a psychoanalysis.’) In an analysis one sometimes asks the analysand to make a genogram – a diagrammatic family tree that stretches back as far and the dynastic facts are known, with any striking shadow features, such as suicide, rape, murder, bankruptcy, alcoholism etc. added next to the appropriate name. When this is set out in a schematic pattern, suddenly the past can be seen as an intolerable curse, an overwhelming burden, carried by the analysand, just as the Greek Titan Atlas carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. And if we make a genogram of Oedipus’s family tree, it becomes obvious why Oedipus is the archetypal analysand. Neither Sophocles, nor Freud précising Sophocles, gives any hint of the real murk and violence lurking in the background. To establish this, and why Apollo’s oracle at Delphi told Laius in the first place that if he generated a son, by that son’s hand he would die (the oracle was, in fact, divine justice for Laius’s sin, of which more later), we must seek further into Greek myth, especially Hesiod’s poem of the genealogy of the gods, the *Theogony*, which pre-dates Sophocles by some four centuries. Then we really do begin to see the sins of the fathers visited on the children for generation after generation.

A genogram of Oedipus’s family takes us back seven generations, to the cosmogony, the coming-into-being of the universe, and to what is usually called the First Dynasty, with the primal parents, Ouranos and Gaia, Heaven and Earth. Not only is there no love between the primal parents (they are what Aeschylus calls ‘the wedded love-in-hate’),¹⁶ there is also none between them and their monstrous children, the Titans.

¹⁶ *The Libation Bearers*, 608.

There is only the psychotic-making stuff of rage, violence, hatred, revenge, sadism, political conspiracy and, in order to effect the coup d'état, patriarchal castration. The first generation of Olympus is archetypally dysfunctional. The *Theogony* states:

‘For all those that were born of Earth and Heaven were the most fearsome of children, and their own father loathed them from the beginning. As soon as each of them was born, he hid them all away in a cavern of Earth, and would not let them into the light; and he took pleasure in the wicked work, did Heaven, while the huge Earth was tight-pressed inside, and groaned. She thought up a nasty trick. Without delay she created the element of grey adamant, and made a great reaping-hook, and showed it to her dear children, and spoke to give them courage...:

“Children of mine and of an evil father, I wonder whether you would like to do as I say? We could get redress for your father’s cruelty...”

‘So she spoke; but they were all seized by fear, and none of them uttered a word. But the last-born, crooked-schemer Kronos, most fearsome of children, who loathed his lusty father, took courage, and...replied...:

“Mother, I would undertake this task and accomplish it – I am not afraid of our unspeakable father. After all, he began it by his ugly behaviour.”

‘So he spoke, and mighty Earth was delighted. She set him hidden in ambush, put the sharp-toothed sickle into his hand, and explained the whole stratagem to him.

‘Great Heaven came, bringing on the night, and, desirous of love, he spread himself over Earth, stretched out in every direction. His son reached out from the ambush with his left hand; with his right he took the huge sickle with its long row of sharp teeth and quickly cut off his father’s genitals, and....threw them from the land into the surging sea.’¹⁷

So crooked-schemer Kronos, in partnership with his wife Rhea, usurps and becomes the Second Dynasty, the second Olympian generation, and the motif of cannibalism enters the litany of dysfunction.. Now the motif of literal cannibalism is shocking; yet psychic cannibalism is a commonplace in clinical practice and besets many a victim who finds their way into the consulting room. Emotionally starving, envious, rageful and greedy parents devour and abuse their children until there is nothing of the ego

¹⁷ Hesiod, *Theogony*, translated M.L. West. Oxford: OUP, 1988, p. 7-8.

but a pile of fragmented bone-chips which cannot cohere and integrate to give a strong psychic skeleton, at least not until the intolerable suffering drives them into therapy and the reconstructive work can begin through reductive analysis. In the *Theogony*, because Kronos had learned from Ouranos and Gaia

‘that it was fated for him to be defeated by his own child [Zeus], powerful though he was... So he... observed and swallowed his children, as each of them reached their mother’s knees from her holy womb.’¹⁸

But Rhea defeats him:

‘When she was about to give birth to Zeus... she wrapped a large stone in babycloth and delivered it to the son of Heaven... Seizing it in his hands, he put it away in his belly, the brute, not realizing that thereafter not a stone but his son remained, secure and invincible, who before long was to defeat him by physical strength and drive him from his high station, himself to be king among the immortals.’¹⁹

So the power passes to the Olympian Third Dynasty, headed by Zeus and Hera.

Compared with his father and his grandfather, Zeus seems a little more integrated and civilised, his main faults being unbridled promiscuity and narcissistic rage (his interminable lightnings and thunderbolts.) The fourth generation is the only one that has any sense of temporary calm and some positive parenting. There is a celebrated wedding between Cadmus, son of Agenor and the founder of the city of Thebes, and the goddess Harmonia, daughter of Ares, god of War, son of Zeus and Hera, and of Aphrodite, foam-born from the meeting of Ouranos’s severed genitals with Thetys, the Ocean. They enjoy a long and happy marriage, despite being eventually dispossessed and exiled from Thebes by a conspiracy. But the bad blood resurfaces in their children, the fifth generation, who begin again the disintegrative, dysfunctional process. Cadmus and Harmonia have one son, Polydorus, and four

¹⁸ Hesiod, p. 16-7.

¹⁹ Hesiod, p. 17.

daughters, Ino, Semele, Autonoe, and Argave. Polydorus is mentioned in the *Tyrannos*, along with his son, Labdacus, because they were respectively the grandfather and father of Laius. Semele was beloved of Zeus and the mother of Dionysus (Bacchus). Granted any boon by Zeus, who was passingly besotted by her (she is his great-granddaughter), and tempted to hubris by jealous Hera, she asks to see him in his full glory. Unable to rescind his promise, the god unveils, and she is promptly incinerated. Agave becomes the mother of Pentheus, King of Thebes. With her sisters Ino and Autonoe, Agave is a member of the Maenads, Bacchantes, female followers of Dionysus in his guise as wine-god. In the frenzy of their rites on Mount Cithaeron, the same mountain upon which Laius was to abandon the baby Oedipus two generations later, the three sisters participate in the ritual dismemberment of Agave's son, Pentheus, whose hubris manifested in the curiosity which had led him to spy on them. As Euripides graphically describes it in *The Bacchae*:

‘moaning: he’d begun to understand his doom.
The first one at him was the priestess of the slaughter,
his own mother. She fell upon him, and he,
that she, poor Agave, might recognize him, tore
his headband off and, touching her cheek, shrieked
at her: “*Me!* It’s me! It’s Pentheus, Mother.
Your son! You are my *mother!* Look at me!
I’ve made mistakes, but I’m your son: don’t kill me!’”

Agave was foaming at the mouth, though.
Her eyes were rolling, wild; she was mad,
utterly possessed by Bacchus: what Pentheus said
was nothing to her. She took him by the arm,
the left arm, under the elbow, then she planted
a foot against his ribs and tore his arm off...
Ino was working at his other side,
clawing at the flesh. And Autonoe
and the rest of them... were swarming over him.²⁰

Dismemberment reappears in Autonoe's family as her son, Actaeon is dismembered by his own hunting dogs after his hubris led him to gaze voyeuristically at Artemis

²⁰ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, translated C.K Williams. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990, 1112-32.

bathing. Now while these scenes are terrifyingly dramatic, psychic dismemberment is fairly regular in dysfunctional families, where the child's developing ego is consistently smashed and torn apart. Autonoe is also the mother of Monoeceus, who is the father of Jocasta, wife of Laius, mother of Oedipus, wife of Oedipus, mother of Eteocles, Polynices, Ismene and Antigone. And the story of Oedipus is in turn predicated on Oedipus' hubris.

So what is hubris? There is an explicit definition in the fourth chorus of *The Bacchae*:

‘slowly, the power of the gods...does...stir,
does come to pass, and, inexorably,
comes to punish humans who honour first self-pride,
and turn their judgment...their reason.... from the holy.’²¹

Psychologically hubris is that driving narcissistic pride which must have its own way. Behind its trajectory lies the narcissistic wound, the black hole which exists where the centre should be, and from which comes the driving dynamic of envious rage. The third chorus in the *Tyrannos* captures well the flavour of the narcissistic defences.

The Chorus chants an indictment of Oedipus:

‘Pride breeds the tyrant
violent pride, gorging, crammed to bursting
with all that is overripe and rich with ruin –
clawing up to the heights, headlong pride
crashes down the abyss – sheer doom!’²²

But before we name the hubris of Oedipus, let us finalise the genogram of his ancestry and look at the hubris of his father, Laius. Now Apollo's oracle at Delphi decreed that if Laius had a son, by the hand of that son he would die. Pretty hardline stuff, and at face value a rather brutal and unnecessary decree on Apollo's part. But no; the oracle is in fact divine justice. For the savagery of the contaminated dynasty which

²¹ *The Bacchae*, 883-7.

²² *Tyrannos*, 963-7.

began with the patriarchal castration of Ouranos, eventuated in the sin of Laius. Laius, married to Jocasta, fell in love with Chrysippos, the son of a neighbouring king. This was perfectly in order, except that Chrysippos rejected Laius's love. So Laius had Chrysippos kidnapped, and he raped him, and in despair, Chrysippos committed suicide. It was as retribution that Apollo made his decree; and for the same reason Hera sent the Sphinx to Thebes to wreak catastrophe on the city and its populace. Sophocles does not refer to Laius's sin, only to the oracle and the Sphinx. In the *Tyrannos* Jocasta speaks of the oracle:

‘An oracle came to Laius one...day...and it said
that doom would strike him down at the hands of a son.’²³

Laius in his hubris took no notice and generated a son who, naturally he would have to kill. So, according to Jocasta,

‘my son –
he wasn't three days old and the boy's father
fastened his ankles, had a henchman fling him away
on a barren trackless mountain.’²⁴

Abandoned on Mount Cithaeron with his ankles stapled together with an iron pin. But the henchman was tender-hearted and gave the baby to a Corinthian shepherd who pastured his flocks on Cithaeron and who took him over the mountain range to Corinth, where he was adopted by Polybus and Merope, the childless royal couple who Oedipus believes to be his parents.

In the *Tyrannos*, Oedipus's narcissistic pride is right there in the drama's opening lines. Oedipus addresses the citizens of Thebes:

‘Oh my children, the new blood of ancient Thebes,...
you all know me, the world knows my fame:
I am Oedipus.’²⁵

²³ *Tyrannos*, 784,787.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 790-3.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 1, 8.

Between this and the famous final line of the play ('count no man happy till he dies'),²⁶ there is the most devastating psychic detective story, with Oedipus acting the dual roles of inquiring analyst and increasingly horrified analysand, and the drama's other characters fulfilling the roles which in an analysis fall to memory, dreams and part-selves, which all bring pertinent information that inexorably draws the truth of the past into consciousness. The drama's opening situation is dire, just as it is in the life of almost everyone driven to seek analysis. The images in the *Tyrannos* are, of course, exceedingly dramatic and may seem exaggerated in terms of the individual analysis of some people, but there is a core of truth in each analysis which relates it to those images. The opening image of the *Tyrannos*, with its blighted countryside, counterparts the state of soul-sickness that seeks understanding and healing. A priest tells Oedipus::

'Thebes is dying. A blight on the fresh crops
and the rich pastures, cattle sicken and die,
and the women die in labor, children stillborn,
and...raging plague in all its vengeance, devastating
the house of Cadmus!'²⁷

Apollo's oracle at Delphi has been consulted and the decree arrives. The cause of the contamination is that the city still harbours the murderer of the previous king, Laius.

The oracle commands:

'Uncover the murderers of Laius'²⁸
'Drive the corruption from the land...
Pay the killers back –whoever is responsible.'²⁹

Oedipus's response is hubris-filled:

'I'll bring it all to light myself.'³⁰
'Let me grant your prayers.'³¹

²⁶ Ibid, 1684.

²⁷ Ibid, 31-37.

²⁸ Ibid, 350.

²⁹ Ibid, 109, 122.

³⁰ Ibid, 150.

In the first stage of analysis we truly feel that we are innocent: what has happened to us, what makes our life so intolerable, what has driven us into analysis, is never our ego's fault. The guilt belongs to our parents and their forebears, and what they did or didn't do to us. When the blind prophet Tiresias is called, the man who, outwardly blind holds the inner vision of the truth, Tiresias says cryptically,

‘I will never reveal my dreadful secrets,
not to say your own.’³²

His obscurantist utterings drive Oedipus to narcissistic rage:

‘Oh, I'll let loose, I have such fury in me.’³³

Which provokes Tiresias to say:

‘*You* are the curse, the corruption of the land!’³⁴

which Oedipus instantly rejects, just as an analysand denies and rejects an interpretation made too early. In analysis, timing is everything. Oedipus turns on Tiresias with the full power of a righteous, hubris-driven analytical negative transference. He calls Tiresias

‘this wizard,...this fortune-teller peddling lies, eyes peeled
for his own profit – seer blind in his craft!...
you pious fraud...
when did you ever prove yourself a prophet?
When the Sphinx...kept her deathwatch here,;;;
Where were you?...
Did you rise to the crisis?...
No, but I came by, Oedipus...
I stopped the Sphinx!’³⁵

Oedipus's denial and heroic assertion of ego strength is neutralised by the ensuing Chorus who, like the appearance of a baleful dream in analysis, sing of the unconscious reality about to burst into consciousness:

³¹ Ibid, 245.

³² Ibid, 374-5.

³³ Ibid, 393.

³⁴ Ibid, 401.

³⁵ Ibid, 440-52.

‘the man the voice of god denounces...’³⁶
 he cannot outrace the dread voices of Delphi
 ringing out of the heart of Earth,
 the dark wings beating around him shrieking doom
 the doom that never dies, the terror – ’³⁷

And incremental bits of information cohere menacingly. Oedipus tells Jocasta how he slew a man at the crossroads where the road from Thebes meets the forked roads from Daulia and Delphi.

‘Making my way toward this triple crossroad
 I began to see a herald, then a brace of colts
 drawing a wagon, and mounted on the bench... a man,
 ...[T]he one in the lead and the old man himself
 were about to thrust me off the road – brute force —
 and the one shouldering me aside, the driver,
 I strike him in anger! – and the old man, watching me...brings down
 his prod, two prongs straight at my head!...
 [W]ith one blow of the staff
 in this right hand I knock him out of his high seat,
 roll him out of the wagon, sprawling headlong –
 I killed them all – every mother’s son.

‘Oh, but if there is any blood-tie
 between Laius and this stranger...
 what man alive more miserable than I?...
 And you, his wife, I’ve touched your body with these,
 The hands that killed your husband cover you with blood.
 Wasn’t I born for torment?’³⁸

Oedipus, however, still believes Polybus to be his father, until a Messenger arrives from Corinth with news of Polybus’s death, and the offer of the throne of Corinth in addition to that of Thebes. Further dialogue with the Messenger elicits the even more disconcerting news that Polybus and Merope are not Oedipus’s real parents, that as a baby Oedipus was saved from abandonment on Mount Cithaeron. The vice grips with tragic severity. The dialogue is short and sharp:

Oedipus: ‘when you picked me up, was I in pain?’

Messenger: ‘Your ankles...they tell the story. Look at them.

³⁶ Ibid, 527.

³⁷ Ibid, 546-9.

³⁸ Ibid, 884-910.

Oedipus: 'Why remind me of that, that old affliction?

Messenger: 'Your ankles were pinned together; I set you free.

Oedipus: 'That dreadful mark – I've had it from the cradle.

Messenger: 'And you got your name from that misfortune too,
The name's still with you.

Oedipus: 'Dear god, who did it?'³⁹

The name 'Oedipus' means 'Wounded foot' or, as Jung translates it, 'Swell-foot',⁴⁰ deriving from the iron pin which Laius had had thrust through the ankles of the baby he was abandoning. My reading of the act of parricide in Sophocles is that Oedipus murdered his father from unconscious primal rage and desire for revenge at his father's sadistic ankle-nailing and primal parental abandonment. Rage and violence are closer to the psychotic core of the unconscious than sexual desire, which is developmentally more sophisticated. Oedipus has been brought up with loving adoptive parents. Of Polybus he says, 'he love[d] me so. He loved me deeply.'⁴¹ Yet when he meets his birth father, the trauma rises and so does the murderous rage. Oedipus commits in one act, murder, parricide and regicide; his defeat of the Sphinx, the archetypal Terrible Mother, gives him the right to the hand and body of his own mother, and he unconsciously commits incest. The ghastly genogram is complete. Jocasta is the first to recognise the full truth. She leaves the stage with a terrible cry, 'flinging through the palace doors', says the stage direction, to hang herself in the royal apartment. Her last words are:

'Aieeeeeee – man of agony –
that is the only name I have for you,
that, no other – ever, ever, ever!'⁴²
:

³⁹ Ibid, 1130-36.

⁴⁰ CW 5, par. 356.

⁴¹ *Tyrannos*, 1120.

⁴² Ibid, 1176-8.

Oedipus cannot look on his truth when finally it is fully revealed and impossible to deny. He has to resort to self-blinding with the brooch-pins of the despairing, self-hanged Jocasta. The cathartic moment is reported by the Messenger in savage language:

‘He rips off her brooches, the long gold pins
holding her robes – and lifting them high,
looking straight up into the points,
he digs them down the sockets of his eyes, crying...“Blind
from this hour on! Blind in the darkness – blind!”
His voice like a dirge, rising, over and over
raising the pins, raking them down his eyes,
And at each stroke blood spurts from the roots,
splashing his beard, a swirl of it, nerves and clots –
black hail of blood pulsing, gushing down.’⁴³

Oedipus’s self-blinding represents a momentous, if temporary, turning away from a truth which has become utterly intolerable. In the drama the self-inflicted mutilation corresponds in psychopathology to the act of self-harming – cutting or gashing oneself – which some very damaged individuals practise. When asked the meaning of their act, they always indicate that the physical pain releases some of their intolerable psychic pain, the ice-chill of permanent parental emotional abandonment: life in the outer reaches of the abyss where no one else ever comes. So the meaning of self-mutilation is paradoxical: the infliction of physical pain makes the pain of searing inner loneliness more bearable. But Oedipus does more than just name the pain, and because of this, his utterances at the end of the play mark a turn in his inner journey, from what analytically would be the reductive phase into the synthetic. He is blinded and exiled from Thebes, moving on to a path of further suffering, an intense dark night of the soul or, to use a mythologem beloved of Jung, a Night Sea Journey.⁴⁴

⁴³ Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, translated Robert Fagels. London: Allen Lane, 1982. *Oedipus the King*, 1402-15.

⁴⁴ CW 5, pars. 306-12.

What has been born in Oedipus is a small, flickering flame of self-knowledge, a new level of ego-consciousness that can truly own his own shadow and take responsibility for his pain, his darkness, his inherited fate, and his life.

‘...the hand that struck my eyes was mine,
mine alone – no one else –
I did it all myself.’⁴⁵
‘What grief can crown this grief?
It’s mine alone, my destiny – I am Oedipus!’⁴⁶

This is the same ego-announcement as at the drama’s opening: ‘I am Oedipus.’ Then it was hubris-filled; now that that hubris is purged in pain, inner illumination has arrived and a new stage begins in the psychological journey.

‘My troubles are mine
And I am the only man alive who can sustain them.’⁴⁷

The culmination of that stage is the theme of the *Colonus*. After many years of wandering, at the very end of his life, as Oedipus’ last mortal hours are slipping away, the nature of the terrible journey he has made as a mendicant exile is finally revealed in images of transformation. Like Tiresias he is now outwardly blind but inwardly lucid, his blindness and consciously accepted suffering having brought him fruit of pure gold: wisdom and compassion. He has passed beyond hubris and the narcissistic power complex into the dawn of the primeval light which is compassionate love, agape. If an analysis has journeyed thus far – and many do – this is the time for closure, for the analysand to take on full responsibility for their ongoing dialogue with the unconscious which is the wellspring of their life and food of their psyche. Sometimes the time of closure is heralded by the analysand dreaming of the analyst’s death. There is, however, a strong sense in both analysand and analyst that this is the

⁴⁵ Ibid, 1467-71.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 1495-6.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 1548-9.

time of parting, and that the timing is absolutely right, even if there may be attendant feelings of sadness. For it is a death, a death of the journeying together, of the therapeutic alliance. In the *Colonus*, (Colonus in Oedipus's day was just outside Athens; today it is a bus station in the suburbs), the transformed Oedipus offers to Theseus, the benign and noble hero who is Athens' ruler, a great gift: his power, following his death, to protect Athens from all future invasions and secure victory for the Athenians. There is paradox of contrast between Oedipus' appearance and his inner power.

‘So now there is nothing left for me to tell
but my desire, and then the story's finished...
I come with a gift for you,
my own shattered body...no feast for the eyes,
but the gains it holds are greater than great beauty.’⁴⁸

The gift Oedipus brings to Theseus, and hence to the polis of Athens, is the spiritual power and distilled wisdom which has been gained through suffering and the loss of physical power, and which, transformed by death, he offers as protector of the city in a far different way from his former manner as liberator of Thebes from the ravages of the Sphinx and acceptance of the protective role of kingship. In response to Theseus's question: ‘And when will the gifts you offer come to light?’ he replies: ‘When I am dead, and you have put my body in the grave.’⁴⁹ Oedipus continues with a profound meditation on the rhythms of Time, and of the eventual need of the polis for his protection against invasion:

‘All...in the world
almighty Time obliterates, crushes all
to nothing. The earth's strength wastes away,
the strength of a man's body wastes and dies...’⁵⁰
For some of us soon, for others later,
Joy turns to hate and back again to love...’⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid, 646-50.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 654-5.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 687-90.

⁵¹ Ibid, 695-6.

infinite Time, sweeping through its rounds
 gives birth to infinite nights and days...
 and a day will come when the treaties of an hour,
 the pacts firmed with a handclasp will snap –
 at the slightest word a spear will hurl them to the winds –some
 far-off day when my dead body, slumbering, buried,
 cold in death, will drain their hot blood down.⁵²

But having named his gift to Theseus, Oedipus summarily withdraws his glance from
 ‘the dark backward and abysm of time’, as Shakespeare would have it, as if to linger
 longer were somehow to desecrate his in-sight.

‘Enough. It’s no pleasure
 to break the silence of these mysteries.’⁵³

Theseus does accept the offer. When the time of Oedipus’ death is imminent – in
 analytic terms, the time of the death of the therapeutic alliance – the Chorus,
 representing the collective, intones first the inevitability of death,

‘the doom of the Deathgod comes like lightning
 always death at the last.’⁵⁴

Then they describe what the aged, blind Oedipus has become, which for them is a
 grief. They do not see that the fruit of his suffering, his individuation, is the power to
 withstand with equanimity all the vicissitudes of life. It is not, as they think, an image
 of loneliness and defeat; it is instead an image of triumphant inner power and
 fortitude.

‘This is the grief he faces...
 like some great headland fronting the north
 his by the winter breakers beating down
 from every quarter – so he suffers,
 terrible blows crashing over him
 head to foot, over and over
 down from every quarter –
 now from the west, the dying sun

⁵² Ibid, 699-705.

⁵³ Ibid, 707-8.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 1387-8.

now from the first light rising
 now from the blazing beams of noon
 now from the north engulfed in endless night.⁵⁵

The Chorus as the collective Everyperson shuns the terrifying journey into truth and its consciously accepted agony of individuation, and the ultimate reward of wholeness -- an unmoveable and unbreakable inner strength. They prefer and choose death and unconsciousness. In fact, for them

‘Not to be born is best
 when all is reckoned in, but once a man has seen the light
 the next best thing, by far, is to go back
 back where he came from, quickly as he can.’⁵⁶

Just before the final mystery there is a significant dark episode where Oedipus curses his warmongering son, Polynices, and prophesies from his lucid inner sight the deaths in hand-to-hand fighting of both Polynices and his brother, Eteocles, King of Thebes, who Polynices desires to defeat and replace. In symbolic terms the cursing represents the rejection by the mature personality of the former heroic attitude: ego-driven, power-lusting and vengeful – the very qualities that caused Oedipus unwittingly to murder his father when they met at the triple crossroads. Following this, thunder sounds, the prelude to Oedipus’s passing. He notes it:

‘This winged thunder of Zeus will take me down
 to Death at any moment.’⁵⁷

And as the thunder intensifies, the Chorus intones:

‘There – look, blast on blast, it’s all around us,
 shattering, thunderheads exploding!’⁵⁸

Theseus returns so that Oedipus can fulfil ‘the pledge I made to you and Athens.’⁵⁹

Oedipus tells Theseus:

⁵⁵ Ibid, 1400-10.

⁵⁶ *Colonus*, 1388-91.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 1659-60.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 1675-6.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 1707.

‘Soon, soon I will lead you on myself...
to the place where I must die.
Never reveal the spot to mortal man...
Then it will always form a defense for you.’⁶⁰
‘Then you will keep your city safe.’⁶¹

But Oedipus does not die. He is translated alive by the gods in what appears to be a divine intervention. As always in classical drama, the climax is described by the ubiquitous Messenger. He reports that Oedipus goes to a certain place, a ‘steep descent’, where he has his still living body anointed with the rites for a corpse:

‘Bathed him in holy water, decked his body out
in shining linen, the custom for the dead.
But when he was content that all was done,
and of all he wanted, nothing more was needed,
nothing left to do – all at once
Zeus of the Underworld thundered from the depths.’⁶²
‘A deep silence fell...and suddenly,
a voice, someone crying out to him, startling,
terrifying, the hair on our heads bristled –
it was calling for him, over and over,
echoing all around us now – it was some god!
“You, you there, Oedipus – what are we waiting for?
You hold us back too long! We must move on, move on!”’⁶³
‘moving away we turned
in a moment, looked back, and Oedipus –
we couldn’t see the man – he was gone – nowhere!’⁶⁴
‘it was some escort
sent by the gods or the dark world of the dead,
the lightless depths of Earth bursting open in kindness
to receive him.’⁶⁵
‘if the death of any mortal ever was one,
his departure was a marvel!’⁶⁶

So Oedipus is translated, and his end is a conjoining with the numen, or as Jung would say, a coniunctio of ego with Self, a bridging of conscious and unconscious,

⁶⁰ Ibid, 1720-4.

⁶¹ Ibid, 1738.

⁶² Ibid, 1816-21.

⁶³ Ibid, 1839-45.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 1869-71.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 1884-7.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 1890-1.

the creation of an experiential axis between the human and the divine. If this has occurred, then the symbol of Oedipus's gift to the polis, Athens, rings true: when the Centre is secure, there will of course be future battles in life, but the citadel of the ego will not be overcome. And the spirit can freely rejoice in the countryside of the soul, for it has attained Dante's *paradiso terrestre*, the earthly paradise, Eden regained, which is a spiritual transmutation of the beautiful images the Chorus proclaims to Oedipus on his arrival in Colonus:

'Here stranger...
 you have reached the noblest home on earth
 Colonus glistening, brilliant in the sun –
 where the nightingale sings on...
 she haunts the glades, the wine-dark ivy,
 dense and dark the sacred wood of god, untrodden
 rich with laurel and olives never touched by the sun.'⁶⁷
 And here it blooms, fed by the dews of heaven
 lovely, clustering, morning-fresh forever,
 narcissus...and the gold crocus bursts like break of day
 and the springs will never sleep, will never fail...
 quickening life forever, fresh each day.'⁶⁸

To end, I want to read a dream which has some of the transformative images and energy which characterise Oedipus's closure with life. This is an analyst's dream of analytic closure. I am not going to interpret it, except to say that it has powerful images of wholeness: the square, which like the circle is a mandala, and the number four. Also the miraculous, impossible image of the sun in the depths.

'I am in a square bathroom with plain grey concrete walls and floor. There are no windows. It is a family bathroom, not a public one. There are a four plain handbasins against the walls, one against each wall, and in the middle of the room there is a line of four toilets. Everything is scrupulously clean, although austere. I look into the toilets. Each of them plunges down about a metre deeper than usual, into the earth. There is water in the S-bend of each, and this water is lit

⁶⁷ Ibid, 763-71.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 776-84.

with brilliant sunlight which comes from the earth itself, as if there were a sun in the depths of the earth.'

* * * *