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## **Road to Nowhere: The Mobility of Oedipus and the Task of Interpretation**

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## Road to Nowhere: The Mobility of Oedipus and the Task of Interpretation

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### *Abstract*

This essay draws on a careful close reading of the language of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* to explore how the text problematizes concepts of place, space, and movement through the ambiguous figure of Oedipus. Considering Oedipus' role in the play as well as in Western intellectual tradition as an archetypal reader of signs and interpreter of riddles, the essay goes on to investigate how Oedipus' literal and figurative mobility reveals the elusiveness and instability that conditions not only our interpretation of the play, but also the practice of interpretation writ large.

## Road to Nowhere: The Mobility of Oedipus and the Task of Interpretation

### I.

In many respects, Oedipus' failure to recognize himself simply magnifies our own mundane, everyday failure to recognize properly those things that we see every day—the things that escape our notice precisely because they stand in the plainest sight, in the most intimate relationship to what we think we are and what we think we understand. This inertia of the mundane mind, its failure to make sense again of what seems to make eminently good sense already, plays a key structural role not just in the language of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*,<sup>i</sup> but also in the language of literary criticism – particularly for a work that has generated as much criticism as this text has, and along such well-worn avenues of proliferation at that. In the process of interpretation, we often speak a language we think we understand, or even one we think we ourselves have invented and therefore one we fully control, but, like Oedipus himself, we sometimes fail to perceive the patterns we obediently reproduce, fail to listen to the words we are actually using.

Let me begin with an example from the play, from which I will work my way back to this point about the language of criticism. In the exchange with Creon upon his return from Delphi, Oedipus describes the murder of Laius figuratively as the bold transgression of a limit set on physical movement: “Unless some intrigue had been worked with bribes from here in Thebes, how would the robber have proceeded [ἔβη, lit. ‘walked’] to such a point of daring [ἐς τόδ[ε] ... τόλμης]?” (πῶς οὖν ὁ ληστής, εἴ τι μὴ ξὺν ἀργύρῳ / ἐπράσσειτ' ἐνθένδ', ἐς τόδ' ἂν τόλμης ἔβη; 124-25).<sup>ii</sup> Compare this with Oedipus' long speech to the assembled Theban elders (216-275), in which he assures the citizens that he will apply all his resources in pursuing the killer. Here the ambiguity of his language, and its gentle but unmistakable allusion to the idiom of 124-

25, characteristically rebound on its speaker: translated literally, he says that he himself “will arrive at all points” or “show up everywhere” ([ἐ]πὶ πάντ' ἀφίξομαι 265). Oedipus’ words unintentionally evoke his own, still-unrecognized arrival at the criminal “point of daring” beyond all acceptable limits that he unknowingly described earlier at 125. Over and over again, the more Oedipus tries to draw a boundary in words between the daring of the assassin and the zeal of the prosecutor, the more they continuously and conspicuously collapse into one another. And just as Oedipus in his duplicity violates all boundaries imposed on action as well as thought, destroying the “common places” that map out the shared moral and political life of Thebes, so does the troubling polysemy of Oedipus’ voice willfully violate the “commonplaces” that maintain the integrity of words, meanings, and concepts in moral and political language. This kind of ambiguity or multivocality inflects the poetic language of the *OT* through the conspicuous multiplication and dislocation of meaning in not only Oedipus’ language, but also the language of his interlocutors. From our viewpoint, the *dramatis personae* constantly mean both more and less than they say: their language is rife with double and triple meanings of which they are hopelessly unaware, even going so far as to undermine or contradict the meaning of which they are aware.<sup>iii</sup> They all talk a great deal, but they consistently fail to hear what anyone is saying.

Of course, the basic features of this kind of language have long been noted in criticism and have come to be considered part of the characteristic tragic irony that distinguishes the play.<sup>iv</sup> Critics typically read the ironic language as an effect of the asymmetry in knowledge possessed on the one hand by the characters and on the other by the external audience – that is, the critics themselves. In so doing, however, they implicitly privilege their own more comprehensive knowledge, which already foresees the outcome of the story and can read it back into the language of the play as the drama progresses. Within the boundaries of this approach, as Goldhill

describes it in a recent essay, “the audience is placed in a position of superiority to the characters on stage and responds to the action through this knowledge: [dramatic] irony lets an audience see itself as *le sujet qui sait*” (2009, 35). This line of thinking also implies that the tensions and paradoxes created by the tragic irony of the *OT* resolve themselves once the asymmetry in knowledge disappears and the full meaning of Oedipus’ deeds comes to light. What we are left with in this reading challenges neither the meaning of our commonplaces in critical discourse nor the coherence of our common places in political life. Instead, it conveys only a fleeting sense of embarrassment at things said in temporary ignorance of their ‘true’ import. At bottom, this reading protects the critic from discovering that interpretive language unavoidably speaks in more than one voice, that his/her words are already incurably infected with the disease of Oedipus’ speech.

What if the critic interprets the *OT*’s tragic irony not as a contrived dissonance that the play ultimately resolves into a default consonance, but rather as a means to reflect on the irresolvable and ubiquitous dissonance that suffuses interpretive language as such – even our own? What if we read not to congratulate ourselves for having the resources to steer clear of Oedipus’ interpretive morass, but instead to see ourselves, who are *his* interpreters, as perhaps even more deeply and ignorantly implicated in it than he is? To pursue such a course, which seeks not to avert Oedipus’ challenge but to meet it head-on in our own language and practice of interpretation, we must—like Oedipus—proceed beyond the point where we simply explain how the play’s language lends itself to multiple meanings. We have to ask how the mutual interferences between these different meanings, the displacing of commonplaces, might put our own practices of interpretation in question or reveal our own critical language as fraught with overlooked ambiguities. In a seminal essay, Vernant describes the distinctive function of tragic

language as being “not so much to establish communication between the various characters as to indicate the blockages and barriers between them and the impermeability of their minds, to locate the points of conflict.”<sup>v</sup> What if, indeed, the critical language that takes Sophocles' tragedy as its object simply repeats and elaborates these points of blockage and impermeability within a different order of discourse?<sup>vi</sup> If the fate of Oedipus, the archetypal interpreter of signs, still has meaning for us as we are engaged in the practical business of interpretation, this possibility cannot be ignored without incurring serious risk. As the example with which I began already indicated in part, this article will argue that the best place to look for this point of contact between the language of the *OT* and the language of its interpreters lies in its polysemous and disorienting vocabulary of place, space, and movement as applied to the interpretive activity of Oedipus.<sup>vii</sup> Viewed from this perspective, I want to argue that the language of the play invites us to face up to the inescapable and dangerous indeterminacy inherent in the position of the interpreter, who tries to occupy every possible place on the map but thereby risks being cast out of all of them, who tries to outmaneuver and outrun the riddle she seeks to solve, only to discover that he has thereby only outmaneuvered and outrun herself.<sup>viii</sup>

To develop this viewpoint on the play, however, only represents half the battle – since what good is an invitation to which nobody responds? I want to argue, furthermore, that we too, as critics who dwell in the afterlife of Oedipus in more than one sense, are entrenched in the uneasy mixture of location and dislocation, hard certainty and wild indeterminacy, that marks the language of the play. We fail to take up its invitation, I think, only because we have become too habituated to the words in which that invitation is addressed to us – words drawn from a very specific figurative vocabulary of place, space, and movement. Goldhill's reading of the *OT* in *Reading Greek Tragedy* ends by invoking a critical language that remains characteristically

inaudible to us in precisely this way. If we listen hard enough and long enough to it, if we overcome our deafness by saturating the ear with its sound, we find that Goldhill's language does not so much bring about the closure of his own reading as it suggests the opening of another:

Athenian tragedy questions again and again the place and role of man in the order of things; and in its specific questioning of man's status with regard to the object and processes of knowledge and intellectual enquiry, the *Oedipus Tyrannus* instigates a critique relevant not only to the fifth-century enlightenment and its view of man's progress and achievement but also to the play's subsequent readings and readers. ... The model of Oedipus as interpreter of signs and solver of riddles, of Oedipus as the confident pursuer of knowledge through rational enquiry, of Oedipus as the searcher for insight, clarity, understanding, indeed provides a model for our institutions of criticism. It is as readers and writers that we fulfil the potential of Oedipus' paradigm of transgression. (1986, 221)

Although Goldhill's is an exceptionally perceptive treatment of the play, we hear many of these words so often in readings of the *OT* that we no longer listen to them. The question concerning "the place ... of man in the order of things," so central to Athenian tragedy as well as to the fifth-century enlightenment in which it took root, makes itself felt in the *OT* as a question about the place of man as an interpreter – as a creature that makes sense both within and of its place. Against this background, as Goldhill presents it, Oedipus is nothing if not an archetypal reader of signs, a virtuoso of evidence, inference, and argument, a kind of secular soothsayer. Goldhill's implicit question about the place assigned to man the interpreter by the *OT* pales in comparison, nonetheless, with the provocation of his final statement: that when we become interpreters, we necessarily transgress against the ordered boundaries that we set out to understand – and transgress, moreover, in a degree comparable to Oedipus' own extremes. From this perspective, Oedipus' formidable power to determine the proper place and hence the true meanings of everything is suddenly made to converge with his no less formidable power to step out of place and to destroy those meanings. Hence the difficult task we face in reading the play, and in assigning Oedipus himself a place and a meaning. Precisely because this language is so much a

part of our critical habits, however, we fail to hear Goldhill talking about issues of place as such, about negotiating positions or crossing boundaries in space as such, as leading metaphors of interpretation both for Oedipus and for us.<sup>ix</sup>

If we ask what place Oedipus, that archetypal interpreter, occupies, we are also bound to ask what place *we* must occupy in order to understand him, in order to become his interpreters. This line of thinking about the *OT* leads directly out of the metacritical problem Goldhill sounds out so pregnantly in his conclusion. If the tragedy of Oedipus ultimately expresses a profound doubt about the interpreter's secure place in the order of meaning, then we must also finally ask: where does the play itself place the interpretive conversation about *its* meaning, or, really, any of our conversations about meaning? Where does this text make us stand, what place and perspective does it make us occupy, and what object does it make us take up – if not ourselves and our own processes of interpretation? Goldhill's reading confirms how much the *OT*'s attraction for generations of interpreters owes its force to the metacritical perspective it opens up on interpretation itself. At the same time, Goldhill only hints at how the figure of place, as it is developed through the play's poetic language, forms the unacknowledged *sine qua non* for this line of thinking about the tragedy – let alone how much the *OT*'s problematization of place may have made the very concept of metacriticism possible at all. Indeed, the play is constructed so as to allow the audience the rare and troubling privilege of simultaneously assuming a human and a super-human perspective on the meaning of language, of perceiving – as we otherwise seldom can – that what appears true and just to the former appears as equivocal and erroneous to the latter.<sup>x</sup> And from this equivocation, no interpretive language is immune. This is why both location and dislocation, both vision and blindness, both articulate meaning and arbitrary noise confront and interfere with one another constantly in the language of the *OT*, and why, as

Goldhill warns us, we are destined to reproduce these interferences in our own interpretive conversation about the tragedy – or, indeed, in any interpretive conversation.

Before I take up the play in earnest, however, let me articulate a caveat that necessarily follows from and conditions the approach to the text I have outlined so far. Language that either directly or indirectly reflects issues of place, space, or movement is so common and (usually) unremarkable in ancient Greek, as it is in most modern Western languages, that it stands to reason for the critic to be wary of overplaying her hand, of attempting to turn idiomatic lead into critical gold.<sup>xi</sup> This wariness is an attitude peculiarly suited to the interpretation of Sophocles: in these texts, not only is the meaning of significant words a site of uncertainty and contestation, as Vernant has also shown us, but we must also be uncertain about how far our uncertainty should extend, and we must constantly contest the very limits of our contestation. Particularly given the line of argumentation I want to develop here, I can scarcely do better than perform the very same interpretive uncertainty which Sophocles' language precipitates in the sensitive reader/spectator, whether ancient or modern. As I hope to demonstrate, the question of whether the vocabulary of place and movement significantly reflects on Oedipus' role as interpreter seems to me beyond doubt; nonetheless, the question of to what extent this or that marginally doubtful instance of this vocabulary plays a vital role in such reflection is open to much debate. I have restricted myself to what I feel are the least controversial instances and have tried to subject them to not undue interpretive pressure.

## II.

In its uneasiness surrounding the question of “where?”,<sup>xii</sup> in its overlay and interplay of rival interpretive mappings, the *OT* consistently links the indeterminacy of location to the

extraordinary power of Oedipus as interpreter to *move*: to cross boundaries, take up new positions, and redefine perspectives. This condition of simultaneous escape and pursuit, arriving and departing, coming and going constitutes the native habitat of Oedipus' conspicuously rootless character, just as it does for the practicing interpreter. More than anything else, what is truly awesome and terrifying about Oedipus is just how much he can and does move across the literal and symbolic landscapes of the drama, how his points of arrival only coincide with new points of departure, how he comes to occupy every possible position on the board and none of them at the same time. Just as his ultimate arrival at truth unmasks his single-minded pursuit as wandering in oblivion, it condemns him outright to undertake the same wandering in full awareness for the rest of his days; the capture that should have triumphantly crowned the interpreter's pursuit of truth has only marked the distance from the truth he has reached in flight. The forms of literal and figurative mobility characteristic of Oedipus and, by analogy, decisive for the activity of interpretation itself I will call the power of *kinesis* (κίνησις, "motion"). As an aspect of the poetic language of the *OT*, tracing the effects of *kinesis* helps us understand how indeterminacies of location and dislocation, place and displacement, come to govern the activity of interpretation. That our pursuit of meaning may in fact put us in flight from it, that our arrival at the truth may in fact be a departure from it, that we may be all too distantly abroad when we think we are at home, that in seeking to assign everything to its proper place, we may be setting it in perpetual motion: these name just a few of the risks that the narrative of Oedipus marks out as conditions of the activity of interpretation. In the present section of this essay, I will investigate how the play defines Oedipus' hermeneutic perspective through the vocabulary of *kinesis*, and how *kinesis* introduces a stubborn indeterminacy into not only Oedipus' interpretation of his own career, but also our interpretations of his tragedy.

If what is astonishing and frightening about Oedipus is his exceptional ability to move, this begs the simple question: what is he moving towards? At the beginning of the drama, a simple answer presents itself: he moves towards noise. In the initial encounter between interpreter and interpretandum captured in his opening speech, Oedipus describes in calm but searching tones the confusing disarray of sensations that confronts him upon entering (1-13): “the city is as filled with the smoke of burnt offerings / as it is with both songs of prayer and groans of lamentation” (πόλις δ' ὁμοῦ μὲν θυμιαμάτων γέμει, / ὁμοῦ δὲ παιάνων τε καὶ στεναγμάτων 4-5).<sup>xiii</sup> Swirling smoke, hopeful singing, desperate cries: the clear and the unclear, the articulate and the inarticulate mingle and interact in the mass of noise that confronts the interpreter and demands his response. The chorus describes how the women of Thebes “cry out in response to each other for their miserable sufferings” (λυγρῶν πόνων ... ἐπιστενάχουσιν, 184) and how “the song of prayer rings out in concert with the groaning voice” (παιῶν δὲ λάμπει στονόεσσά τε γῆρως ὄμαυλος, 185), two figures that render the interaction of sounds within the noise in musical terms, as a kind of polyphonic singing. In its dense interweaving of sounds, the city itself now repeats in changed form that other interpretive enigma confronted by Oedipus not so long ago, the riddling music of the Sphinx, who is characterized throughout the play as a “cruel singer” (σκληρᾶς ἀοιδοῦ, 36) a “bitch rhapsode” (ἡ ῥαψωδὸς ... κύων, 391) who recites “intricate, convoluted song” (ποικιλωδὸς 130). Oedipus’ first response to the confusion makes conspicuous both the autonomy of his understanding and the boldness of his approach – in interpretive as well as physical terms – by placing upon these the seal of his own name: “not judging it right to hear of these matters from others, I have come here myself – I who am called Oedipus, renowned among all men” (ἀγὼ δικαίων μὴ παρ’ ἀγγέλων ... / ἄλλων ἀκούειν αὐτὸς ὦδ’ ἐλήλυθα, / ὁ πᾶσι κλεινὸς Οἰδίπους καλούμενος 6-

8). The emphatic declaration “I have come” (ἐλήλυθα), expressed with the first-person singular perfect form of ἔρχομαι, is given added gravity through its placement at line-end and in its sheer tetrasyllabic sprawl. Oedipus thus strongly binds his own name, which is heard here in the play for the first time, to his identity and characteristic outlook as a man who *moves* towards noise, in order to hear and interpret it for himself. Just as he did with the riddle of the Sphinx, so now with the riddle of the plague he has voluntarily come forth in order to understand and overcome the disordered music that holds Thebes in its grip.<sup>xiv</sup> The emphasis laid upon Oedipus’ arrival by his self-nomination sounds out for the first time the restless, roving ubiquity, the eagerness to confront and inquire, and the courage to overcome every obstacle that distinguish his interpretive personality. But even in this brief dossier of character traits, the unmistakable mark of kinesis begins to reveal itself.

This exceptional power of movement stands in stark contrast to the group of suppliants he encounters, who seem almost rooted in their positions of desperation in front of the royal palace and at different points around Thebes (“these seats you assume,” ἔδρας τάσδε ... θοάζετε 2; “we are seated,” προσήμεθα 15 and ἐζόμεσθ’ 32; “sits,” θακεῖ 20). The group of youths and old men who have been dispatched to seek Oedipus’ help is even described by the priest as if they were flightless birds, the former being “not yet strong enough to take wing” (οὐδέπω μακρὰν / πτέσθαι σθένοντες 16-17) and the latter “weighed down with old age” (σὺν γήρᾳ βαρεῖς 17).<sup>xv</sup> The same sense of the dead weight and immobility imposed by the sufferings of the plague takes on a particularly ominous color in the priest’s comparison of the city to a ship beleaguered by a storm or a man drowning in the sea: “the city ... already rocks back and forth violently, and can no longer lift up its head from the depths of the bloody surf” (πόλις ... ἄγαν / ἤδη σαλεύει κἀνακουφίσει κάρᾳ / βυθῶν ἔτ’ οὐχ οἷα τε φοινίου σάλου 22-24; cf. 101). Unlike Oedipus,

the city does not freely and adroitly move itself; instead, it either remains motionless or is moved passively by destructive and still obscure forces outside its control. The series of figures that describe the helpless condition of Thebes in terms of being unable to rise, stand upright or move freely culminates in the priest's emphatically repeated request to Oedipus to "set this city upright so that it cannot fall" (ἀσφαλεία τήνδ' ἀνόρθωσον πόλιν 51; cf. 39, 46, 104). He adds force to this plea and, from our point of view, gives it a presciently ironic turn by reminding Oedipus of his previous triumph over the Sphinx (46-47) and declaring, "let us by no means remember your reign as men who stood upright at first only to fall flat later" (ἀρχῆς δὲ τῆς σῆς μηδαμῶς μεμνήμεθα / στάντες τ' ἐς ὀρθὸν καὶ πεσόντες ὕστερον 49-50).

Against the plague's overpowering noise and the dull paralysis of the Theban suppliants, Oedipus asserts his acute awareness of the situation: "you have not roused me awake, as if I were someone fast asleep" (οὐχ ὕπνω γ' εὔδοντά μ' ἐξεγείρετε 65). He emphasizes his agile efforts, quite literally, to pursue every possible avenue toward discovering the plague's cause – "you should know that ... I have walked on many pathways in the wanderings of thought" (ἴστε ... πολλὰς δ' ὁδοὺς ἐλθόντα φροντίδος πλάνοις 67). Far from the drowning man or flightless bird of the priest's language, the efficient and insuperable Oedipus has already set his sense-making mind in motion to confront the crisis. Moreover, he has set others in motion toward this end – namely, his brother-in-law Creon, who now opportunely returns from the consultation with the oracle at Delphi that Oedipus has already commanded. Creon reports that the plague is a result of the pollution incurred by the city (96-98) in its failure to avenge the murder of Laius, the former king of Thebes, who was killed under mysterious circumstances while traveling back from Delphi himself (114-15). Immediately upon learning of the murder (106-107), Oedipus figures his own interpretive role in terms of a hunter reading the tracks of his quarry and following it to

its hiding-place<sup>xvi</sup> – that is, in a figure of active pursuit: “In what part of the country are they now? Where will this indiscernible track of ancient guilt be found?” (οἱ δ' εἰσὶ ποῦ γῆς; ποῦ τόδ' εὔρεθήσεται / ἵχνος παλαιᾶς δυστέκμαρτον αἰτίας; 108-9; cf. 220-21).<sup>xvii</sup> Creon’s reply develops the same metaphor and expresses the heuristic principle upon which rest both the hunting-figure itself and the interpretive pursuit for which this figure stands: “[The oracle] was saying that they were in this country [i.e. the province of Thebes]. What is sought after can be captured, but what is neglected escapes” (ἐν τῇδ' ἔφασκε γῆ. τὸ δὲ ζητούμενον / ἀλωτόν, ἐκφεύγει δὲ τὰ μελούμενον 110-111). Oedipus’ active and agile intellect, already on the trail, is quick to extract from Creon all the information the latter recalls about the circumstances and aftermath of the crime (112-123). Borne along this path of evidence by his own interpretive momentum, Oedipus even wonders aloud why the Thebans were not equally nimble in their own pursuit when the murder came to light: “What kind of unfortunate obstacle [ἐμποδών, lit. ‘something in the way of the feet’]<sup>xviii</sup> hindered you [εἰργε] from finding this out?” (κακὸν δὲ ποῖον ἐμποδών ... / ... εἰργε τοῦτ' ἐξειδένα; 128-29).<sup>xix</sup> Just as he had done with the hunting-figure at 110-11, Creon again picks up Oedipus’ figure of an obstructed pathway in his understated and ironic response: “The Sphinx had persuaded [προσήγετο, ironically a gentle and alluring kind of coercion] us to defer these obscure matters and attend to what was right under our noses [πρὸς ποσὶν, lit., ‘at our feet’]” (ἢ ... Σφίγξ τὸ πρὸς ποσὶν σκοπεῖν / μεθέντας ἡμᾶς τὰ φανῆ πρόσηγετο 130-31). The obstruction posed by the Sphinx, of course, was precisely what Oedipus was able to overcome through his own interpretive kineses before he ascended the throne of Thebes: his mobile power of sense-making is such that it recognizes no obstacles and no limits.

Yet herein lies the problem Oedipus poses where his remarkable freedom of movement is concerned. For it is precisely in the ambiguities surrounding Oedipus' vigorous and, indeed, admirable defiance of all limits that even this comparatively naïve<sup>xx</sup> reading of the drama's opening must acknowledge the points of indeterminacy that entangle him in the interpretive problem he seeks to overcome. Ambiguities begin to surface once the language in which Oedipus describes his own relentless interpretive pursuit, on the one hand, and the language he applies to the murderer's transgressive flight, on the other, begin ever so subtly to converge. Here I want to return to the pair of passages with which I began this article and place them in a new light. Oedipus' remarkably quick first conjecture in interpreting the information Creon gives him is to suspect a conspiracy in Thebes to assassinate Laius. Nonetheless, and as I have already pointed out, the poetic language Oedipus uses to describe the crime as the bold transgression of a limit set on physical movement necessarily implicates his own disregard for limits and defiance of obstacles as a comparable transgression: "Unless some intrigue had been worked with bribes from here in Thebes, how would the robber have proceeded [ἔβη, lit. "walked"] to such a point of daring [ἐς τόδ(ε) ... τόλμης]?" (πῶς οὖν ὁ ληστής, εἴ τι μὴ ξὺν ἀργύρῳ / ἐπράσσειτ' ἐνθ' ἐνδ', ἐς τόδ' ἂν τόλμης ἔβη; 124-25).<sup>xxi</sup> In his long speech to the assembled Theban elders (216-275), this ambiguity emerges with even greater force when Oedipus assures the citizens that he will apply all his resources in pursuit of the killer: translated literally, he says that he "will arrive at all points" or "show up everywhere" ([ἐ]πὶ πάντ' ἀφίξομαι 265). Just as he unintentionally evokes his own crimes here, his language evinces a similar ambiguity when he assures the suppliants that he "will leave nothing untried" (πᾶν ἐμοῦ δράσοντος 145). To an audience already well aware of the enormity of Oedipus' unconscious crimes, his diction would recall an expression for criminal unscrupulousness used to great effect elsewhere in Sophoclean

tragedy: πανουργέω, “to stop at nothing,” literally “to do everything,” i.e. even things that are strictly forbidden (see Sophocles, *Antigone* 74). Even at this early point in the drama, these and other crucial ambiguities provide a clear index of the indeterminacies that Oedipus’ tireless kinesis introduces into the language of interpretation. The agile mobility so central to his method, and so incomparably valuable to both the king himself and his city, may make him indistinguishable from the criminal he is hunting down and even render him complicit in the latter’s crimes. After all, both hunter and hunted in Oedipus’ language are equally *transgressors* in the etymological sense of the term: each of them boldly “walks across” (*transgredior*) boundaries that are set up to contain and control movement, or to distinguish one meaning of a word from another. Just as Oedipus does not know and cannot control the multiplying meanings of his own language, he likewise does not know and cannot fully control the kinesis of his interpreting mind either. Oedipus’ risk lies in the fact that he can never be sure where interpretation will take him – nor what it will make him leave behind. In the last analysis, the interpreter can determine neither his point of departure nor his destination: his undertaking has as much to do with the truth he is attempting to escape as it does with the truth he pursues.

As we discover much later in the drama, Oedipus’ career of constant, restless kinesis, which began even before his defeat of the Sphinx, provides a paradigmatic instance of how interpretation allows the interpreter both to pursue and to flee from truth by the same means. In the long monologue he delivers to Jocasta relating the story of how he came to Thebes and what happened during the journey (771-833), his language dramatizes his efforts to interpret the riddle of his own origins in terms of aggress and regress, pushing through and falling back – the very same terms he then applies to his murderous encounter with Laius in the Theban countryside. Oedipus relates how he grew up in Corinth and enjoyed a place of preeminence among the

citizens there “before a chance event fell upon me” (πρὶν μοι τύχη / τοιάδ’ ἐπέστη 776-77). Using a verb (ἐφίστημι) which, as Jebb notes, is “often used of enemies suddenly coming upon one” (106-107, 776n.), Oedipus thus describes in terms of a physical attack the unnerving experience in which a drunken companion happened to accuse him of being a “fabricated” (πλαστός 780) son to Polybus, Oedipus’ putative father. In language we already recognize from the plague-induced torpor of Thebes described by the priest, Oedipus tells how he was “heavily burdened” (βαρυνθείς 781) by this accusation. He reacts to this potentially paralyzing blow, however, with aggression and pursuit of his own: he can “scarcely hold himself back” (μόλις κατέσχον 782) before “approaching” (ἰὼν πέλας, lit. “coming near to”; 782)<sup>xxii</sup> his parents to demand enlightenment. Polybus and Merope are subsequently enraged at “the one who shot forth this word” (τῷ μεθέντι τὸν λόγον 784), a phrase that again uses a verb (μεθήμι) typically applied to the release of an arrow or the throwing of a stone in combat.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Although Oedipus is temporarily satisfied with his parents’ reaction, the thought continues to “irritate” him (ἔκνιζε, also ‘to prick, goad, provoke’; 786), not least of all because the rumor, like an enemy preparing a future ambush, “crept around a great deal in secret” (ὕφειρπε γὰρ πολὺ 786).<sup>xxiv</sup> His interpretive pursuit compels him to go to Delphi without his parents’ knowledge (“I journeyed in secret,” λάθρα ... πορεύομαι 787) and to ask Apollo’s oracle about his parentage, whereupon the god abruptly repels his approach, “[sending] me away deprived of the answers for which I came” (ὦν μὲν ἰκόμην / ἄτιμον ἐξέπεμψεν 788-789). Like the groans and prayers of Thebes Oedipus hears at the opening of the play, hearing the drunkard’s accusation is a source of interpretive ‘noise’ that sets Oedipus in motion. Rather than finally solving the riddle of this accusation and, as it were, silencing its noise, Apollo redoubles its

impact by forcing Oedipus to “listen” ([ἐ]πακούσας 794) to even more noise: the terrifying and confusing prophecies about the abominable crimes that still lie in his future (789-793). Although he continues on the same path away from Corinth and toward Thebes, Oedipus’ former strategy of attack and pursuit now quite suddenly turns to one of retreat and flight: in order to avoid fulfilling the dreadful oracles he has heard, he resolves never to return home, orienting himself solely by his power to interpret his environment and move within it accordingly: “I fled [ἔφευγον] from the land of Corinth, judging its position from then on by the stars” (τὴν Κορινθίαν / ἄστροις τὸ λοιπὸν τεκμαρούμενος χθόνα / ἔφευγον 794-796). What began as pursuit continues as flight: his continuing effort to reach the truth about his parentage through interpretation now cannot be separated from his effort to evade the fulfillment of Apollo’s oracles, which directly concern his relationship to his parents. Even before he begins the inquiry that drives the dramatic plot, Oedipus is both pursuer of, and fugitive from, himself.

We have seen how what I called Oedipus’ virtuoso mobility, driven by his indefatigable will to interpret, does not exist in a vacuum, but rather results from his no less extraordinary talent for offering and overcoming resistance, by either physical or intellectual means. Once he enters the vicinity of Thebes, however, he narrates how this talent was put to a very literal and, indeed, violent test. The circumstances of this test demonstrate how the same deliberate drive of interpretive pursuit that took Oedipus to Delphi has all too easily combined itself with the arbitrary drive of flight from Corinth (*OT* 800-13):

τριπλῆς	800
ὄτ' ἢ κελεύθου τῆσδ' ὁδοιπορῶν πέλας,	
ἐνταῦθά μοι κῆρύξ τε καπὶ πωλικῆς	
ἀνῆρ ἀπήνης ἐμβεβώς, οἶον σὺ φῆς,	
ξυνηντίαζον: κάξ ὁδοῦ μ' ὅ θ' ἡγεμῶν	
αὐτός θ' ὁ πρέσβυς πρὸς βίαν ἠλαυνέτην.	805
κάγῳ τὸν ἐκτρέποντα, τὸν τροχηλάτην,	

παίω δι' ὀργῆς: καί μ' ὁ πρέσβυς ὡς ὄρα,  
 ὄχου παραστείχοντα τηρήσας, μέσον  
 κάρα διπλοῖς κέντροισί μου καθίκετο.  
 οὐ μὴν ἴσην γ' ἔτισεν, ἀλλὰ συντόμως 810  
 σκλήπτρω τυπεῖς ἐκ τῆσδε χειρὸς ὕπτιος  
 μέσης ἀπήνης εὐθύς ἐκκυλίνδεται:  
 κτείνω δὲ τοὺς ξύμπαντας.

When in my journeying [ὄδοιπορῶν] I was close to that intersection of three roads [which Jocasta has already mentioned as the scene of Laius' murder], there I encountered [ξυνηντίαζον] a herald and a man mounted upon a horse-drawn carriage, just as you described; the leader and the old man himself tried to drive [ἠλαυνέτην] me off the road by force. The one who was trying to turn me aside [τὸν ἐκτρέποντα], the charioteer, I struck out of anger; when the old man saw this, he kept a lookout as I was passing alongside [παραστείχοντα] the carriage, and then came down hard [καθίκετο] on the crown of my head with his double goad. Yet he was paid back with interest:<sup>xxv</sup> with a summary blow from the staff held in this very hand, he rolled [ἐκκυλίνδεται] straight out of the carriage and flat on his back [ὕπτιος]. And then I killed them all.

The aggressive tonality of Oedipus' language in describing the events that led to his departure from Corinth had remained merely implicit and metaphorical. Now, however, this tonality reasserts itself in the context of explicit and literal combat – the murder of the man he later discovers to be his father, Laius. In the verb meaning “I met with, encountered” (ξυνηντίαζον 804), the confrontation is represented as hostile even before it becomes hostile in fact. Once this happens, the passage's verbs vividly capture the highly animated and physical clash between the opponents: “drive hard” (ἠλαυνέτην 805), “turn aside” or “push out of the way” (ἐκτρέποντα 806), “come down hard” (καθίκετο 809) “roll out flat on one's back” (ὕπτιος ... ἐκκυλίνδεται 811-812). Despite the fact that it shares with the preceding narrative (771-797) a common language derived from hostile encounter, the shift from figurative to literal uses of the same language in this passage throws into sharp relief the moral stakes of conflating pursuit with flight in the way that Oedipus does and, indeed, in the way that interpretation must. Since Oedipus never expresses any specific motivation on his part to travel to Thebes that would justify

particular haste or persistence – such as, for instance, he had for his journey to Delphi – his aggression here seems arbitrary unless we view it both in the context of the broader pattern of his character and in terms of the activity of interpretation which, as I argue, the play explores through its language. By his own admission, Thebes is simply a place other than Corinth where, in the absence of his parents, he believes he can safely evade the fulfillment of the Delphic oracle (796-97) – a place where he can exist indefinitely in perpetual flight. The term here translated as “journeying” (ὁδοιποροῦν = walking, wayfaring, lit. ‘making one’s way on the road’), in fact, conveys just this tone of arbitrary perambulation, and acquires an even more sinister cast by recalling the Chorus’ testimony that the regicide was carried out by “highwaymen” (ὁδοιπόρων 292) – a genitive noun that differs only in its accent from the verb form that Oedipus uses to describe his travels. Indeed, Oedipus never offers any reason external to the moment of confrontation that would justify such a violent assertion of his own right-of-way other than his implicit eagerness to flee Corinth – his desire, as always, to stay in motion. While his assault of Laius and his retinue escapes legal – and presumably moral – condemnation by the fact that it would have been acquitted under contemporary Athenian law as self-defense<sup>xxvi</sup> – the driver does, after all, provoke him first (804-805) – the language of Oedipus’ narrative indicates that his primary motivation for going to such extremes was the fact that his victims simply refused to get out of his way. In a perceptive argument, Lear artfully assimilates Oedipus’ parricide on the highway to his encounter with Teiresias precisely by means of the figure of the obstructed path that these scenes share: “Laius blocked [Oedipus’] physical path to Thebes, Teiresias blocks his mental path to a conclusion, and in each case Oedipus strikes a retaliatory blow.” Even more provocatively, Lear goes so far as to suggest that the scene with Teiresias symbolically repeats the murder of Laius: both figures obstruct Oedipus’ fugitive mobility, so they become subject to

his lethal pursuit (1998a, 44). When we compare the figurative aggression that appears in Oedipus' will to interpret after his departure from Corinth with the literal aggression that appears in the confrontation with Laius, we are brought up short by the fact that the cool reportage of Oedipus' narrative tone indicates that he quite literally never gave his actions a second thought: he never paused, never stopped moving long enough to make sense of them. Unlike the figurative aggression he suffers at the hands of the Corinthian drunkard, which becomes the occasion for a fairly ambitious hermeneutic expedition, Oedipus has remained completely unconcerned about the possible larger significance of his own literal aggression – he has never taken it as a point of departure for his interpretive perambulations. Just as Oedipus' interpretive pursuit was motivated by a will to approach and to know, this will becomes inseparably combined with a will to ignore and to evade: his mobility serves flight and pursuit in equal measure. As Lear writes, Oedipus characteristically puts himself “under so much pressure to get to his conclusion that there is no time to grasp the full meaning of what he is doing” (1998a, 44). Much as we may be tempted to condemn Oedipus' act by applying our own somewhat more stringent moral standards, doing so would only represent yet another wishful effort to reassert our independence from the condition we share with his character: we would thereby seek to regain in moral superiority what he *and* we can never possess in interpretive clarity and foresight. The language of Oedipus' narrative brusquely demonstrates that our impassioned pursuit of meaning is at the same time and by the same token a headlong flight. Both the drive to interpret and the drive *not* to interpret are equally served by the ability to overcome resistance, to ignore whatever does not expedite one's progress, and, above all, to remain in continuous motion. Just as Goldhill suggests, we interpreters are indeed the ones who “fulfil the potential of Oedipus' paradigm of transgression.”

### III.

Once we take a step back, however, and see how the turn of events in the investigation of Laius' murder has prompted Oedipus to deliver his narrative of pursuit and flight, it becomes clear that the primary significance of his anecdote lies in the interpretive “second thoughts” that he is finally forced to apply to it, and in the risks for his interpretive enterprise that those second thoughts now uncover. As we shall soon see, in order to proceed beyond the point he has reached, Oedipus' *kinesis* must now turn around, reflect upon itself, and reverse its route, making the object of his pursuit converge with that of his flight. Indeed, when we consider Oedipus' career as an interpreter in the broadest terms, we readily perceive that the meaning or structure of place in the *OT* depends on a sequence of returns and recursions of this kind, and that such changes lead us to reflect upon our own endlessly recursive efforts as readers to establish, as it were, the place of place. At the very beginning of the play, as we have seen, the interpretive problem that Oedipus sets for himself lies in the enigma of the plague. Following just such a recursive pattern, this figurative riddle returns to and reiterates the literal riddle of the Sphinx under an altered guise and demands a “solution” (ἔκλυσις 306, see also ἐξέλυσας 35) perhaps even more urgently. But in the course of Oedipus' headlong, kinetic rush to reach such a solution, the riddle of the plague eventually *turns back* its interpreter to reflect upon his own unforeseen place at the very center of the first riddle as well as the utterly changed landscape of meaning he now confronts. The riddle of the plague, then, retrospectively uncovers the intractable, or indeed, “incurable” (ἀνήκεστον 98) character of the Sphinx's riddle about man – because the second riddle turns back not just upon the first riddle, but upon the solver of riddles himself. In the language and action of the tragedy as a whole, this same movement of *epistrophe* (ἐπιστροφή) –

a turning-around to reverse one's direction or to regard again, under an altered guise, something that has passed from view – precipitates the crisis of place as it appears in the *OT*. Not just in spatial, but also in temporal, political, and familial terms, this symptomatic turnaround offers perhaps the neatest summary metaphor for the hermeneutic procedure that occupies the center of the drama, which hinges on reversal and inversion of every conceivable kind. As the language of this essay itself constantly demonstrates, the reversing move of epistrophe has become just as pervasive in the interpretive language we apply to the play as it is in Oedipus' own dilemma: we quickly discover that once we turn around to reconsider, we can never stop turning.

In an effort to refute Teiresias' troubling prophecies about Oedipus' crimes, Jocasta has been relating how comparable prophecies given to Laius – to the effect that he would be murdered by his own son – were never fulfilled, since he was killed by highwaymen “at a place where three roads meet” (ἐν τριπλαῖς ἀμαξίτοις 716). She therefore advises Oedipus to disregard Teiresias' statements, saying “These are the sorts of things that prophetic statements set forth [διώρισαν, ‘to distinguish, determine, define,’ lit. ‘to separate by drawing boundaries’] – but you should take no heed [ἐντρέπου, lit. ‘to turn towards’] whatsoever of these things” (τοιαῦτα φῆμαι μαντικάι διώρισαν, / ὧν ἐντρέπου σὺ μηδέν 723-24).<sup>xxvii</sup> If we read Jocasta's idiom as figurative language, she is telling Oedipus not only to disregard boundaries – something he has already made a career of, in moral, geographical, and hermeneutic terms – but also not to turn towards the interpretive statements that have hampered the momentum of his inquiry the most. Nonetheless, her offhand mention of the place where Laius was killed has, ironically and quite unforeseeably, delivered a shock to her husband's momentum – it has compelled him to ‘epistrophe,’ to turn around so as to confront in a new light the literal and figurative terrain he has passed over. The force of this shock has shifted a marginal and near-forgotten past

experience to the very center of Oedipus' attention and anxiety, where its bare outlines have suddenly been filled with the horrendous possibilities of meaning and consequence that he dwells on after completing his narrative (813-833). The identification of the place where the crime was committed, furthermore, has made Oedipus' experience alter *its* place in the context of his interpretation, just as he has constantly altered his own place and his own context all along – by crossing boundaries, overcoming resistances, and solving riddles. The risks of Oedipus' incessant motion have started to come home to him – and they do so by enacting a dramatic reversal in his interpretive direction. We should not be surprised, then, that Oedipus chooses to express the immediate subjective effect of this shift as an intense vertigo that dislodges every object of sense and thought from its place and sets it in headlong motion: “while I was listening to you, my wife, what a wandering of the soul and a stirring-up of the mind just now took hold of me!” (οἶόν μ' ἀκούσαντ' ἀρτίως ἔχει, γύναι, / ψυχῆς πλάνημα κἀνακίνησις φρενῶν 726-727). The “wandering of the soul” that Oedipus experiences here directly recalls the “wanderings of thought” he undertook on behalf of the plague-ridden city (φροντίδος πλάνοις 67), not least of all because these words for “wandering” are cognate (πλάνημα and πλάνοις [both n.] > πλανάομαι [v.] = to wander, stray, err). Whereas his previous wandering (at 67) had an active character, however, the same wandering now (at 726) assumes a passive character (μ' ... ἔχει 726), almost as if Oedipus can no longer control his power to move himself or others towards the truth through interpretation – as if his kinesis itself had suddenly turned around to confront him as a powerful and autonomous being, a hostile *daimon* that has done the moving and controlling all along (qv. 1299-1302). The sudden shift in viewpoint to passivity and trepidation, in fact, may even ironically recall the condition of the city at the play's opening as described by the priest of Zeus: inert, powerless, tossed to and fro like a drowning man (16-17, 22-24, 101). Appropriately,

Jocasta's reaction to Oedipus' outburst again describes this abrupt and unsettling turnaround with an epistrophic figure. Her somewhat convoluted question translates literally as "having been turned around by what source of anxiety do you say this?" (ποίας μερίμνης τοῦθ' ὑποστραφεῖς λέγεις; 728). The further progress of the inquiry after this point in the play repeats and reinforces, in varied forms, the epistrophic reversal he suffers here – the first crucial 'turning point' in Oedipus' perambulations.

Nonetheless, the epistrophe that Oedipus experiences would only be of limited interest if it did not also implicate the experience of the reader and/or spectator in the risks it reveals – that is, if it did not directly pose a challenge to the direction and meaning of our own interpretive moves, our own process of kinesis in making sense of the play. This challenge only becomes clear, in fact, when we interpret epistrophically, re-opening the question of kinesis in the play's opening section from the vantage point of its crisis and discovering how the crisis of the turnaround is inscribed in Oedipus' interpretive mobility – and in our own – from its very beginnings. Without returning to the passages already discussed, we can say that there are two immediately identifiable levels on which, for both Oedipus and the reader, kinesis already contains the seed of epistrophe in the first portion of the play: one macroscopic, and the other microscopic.

On the microscopic level, we can discern the epistrophic pattern unfolding on the level of sentence pragmatics – and here I am drawing on and expanding the scope of recent valuable work in this area by Budelmann as well as, less directly, on prior research by Slings and Long.<sup>xxviii</sup> One of Oedipus' responses to Creon provides a particularly striking example of how, even in the course of a single utterance, the structure and meaning of Oedipus' language move, shift, and turn back upon themselves. By such means, the play thematizes the mobility and

volubility inherent in the construction of meaning as this process unfolds in the awareness of the reader/spectator.<sup>xxix</sup> From this viewpoint, Oedipus' reply performs an ingenious combination of kinesiology and epistrophe, embodying in the semantic movement of its language both the virtues and the dangers of Oedipus' interpretive mobility. When Creon asks whether he should report the message from Delphi in public rather than in the privacy of the palace, Oedipus replies: "Give your report before all these men, for I bear the sorrow more on their behalf than I do for my own soul" (ἐς πάντας αὐδα· τῶνδε γὰρ πλέον φέρω / τὸ πένθος ἢ καὶ τῆς ἐμῆς ψυχῆς πέρι 93-94). My admittedly flat translation does not capture the real pragmatic thrust of the statement, which inheres in the enunciatory order of its syntax rather than its diction or imagery. The sequence of words in recitation necessitates that an auditor would initially understand τῶνδε γὰρ πλέον φέρω / τὸ πένθος to mean "I bear more sorrow than they," i.e. that Oedipus' sufferings, as the unknowing murderer of his father and defiler of his mother, exceed even those imposed on plague-ridden Thebes. Upon hearing the rest of the statement, the genitive τῶνδε, originally understood as a genitive of comparison ("than they"), would consequently shift its meaning to an objective genitive ("for them" or "on their behalf"); likewise, πλέον ("more") shifts from an adjective modifying τὸ πένθος ("more sorrow") to an adverb modifying φέρω ("I bear it more for this than for that reason").<sup>xxx</sup> The auditor's initial interpretation of the statement – an entirely adequate one, given the semantic material and syntactic structure already communicated – yields to another which is diametrically opposed in meaning. This second interpretation, based on the complete communication, demonstrates that the initial interpretation was quite literally headed in the wrong direction, that it was actually in flight from the meaning the speaker was pursuing. However subtle the anacolouthon, it packs a significant literary punch. The turnabout or epistrophe that the auditor is compelled to perform in order to reach the intended meaning,

carries with it the ironic awareness that the initial interpretation – that Oedipus is describing the greater burden imposed by his own crimes – is, in fact, more true than the second, intended meaning, which is as good as a red herring in the long view. Unlike the more straightforward tragic irony that blankets the *OT*, this kind of “enunciatory irony,” made possible by the syntactic and semantic flexibility of ancient Greek on the one hand and the temporally-bound character of dramatic performance on the other, has only sporadically been recognized as a major factor in the play’s poetic and dramatic effects.<sup>xxxii</sup> It depends on the fact that auditors do not establish the meaning of a given statement only at its end, but are rather engaged in the constructive activity of interpretation during the entire process of utterance – that the mind of the interpreter, like Oedipus, is constantly in motion.<sup>xxxiii</sup> By the same token, the reader/auditor of the play is compelled by syntactic figures such as these to perform the same interpretive movements as Oedipus himself, who simultaneously pursues and flees from the truth, and whose drama is enacted as a series of abrupt and unforeseeable turnabouts in meaning. The risk of epistrophe that we incur by interpreting Oedipus, like the risk Oedipus incurs by interpreting the plague, is that the momentum built up by our own interpretive language may actually rebound upon its own limits, revealing not the meaning of its object, but the degree to which our own language has led us astray from that meaning.

On the macroscopic level of the play’s overall structure, Oedipus quite literally identifies the inquiry into Laius’ murder as an epistrophe at its very inception, but not without unwittingly putting his finger on the dangers that accompany his subsequent moves toward the truth. Once Creon admits that the Thebans had neglected the prosecution of Laius’ murderer because of their more immediate concern with the Sphinx (130-131), Oedipus says he will open the inquiry afresh: “Then I will bring these same things [sc. the “obscure matters” Creon mentions at 131] to

light all over again from the beginning [ἐξ ὑπαρχῆς αὐθις]. Most worthily has Phoebus Apollo, and worthily have you insisted upon this regard [ἐπιστροφῆν here = attention, respect, regard; lit. ‘turning-around, twisting’] for the deceased” (ἀλλ' ἐξ ὑπαρχῆς αὐθις αὐτ' ἐγὼ φανῶ. / ἐπαξίως γὰρ Φοῖβος, ἀξίως δὲ σὺ / πρὸ τοῦ θανόντος τήνδ' ἔθεσθ' ἐπιστροφῆν 132-134). For Oedipus, on the one hand, this statement means that the kinesis of his inquiry, which proceeds toward the truth and the future deliverance of the city, paradoxically depends upon a recursive epistrophy that recedes ever more deeply into the obscure distances of the past. Hermeneutic progress and regress can no longer be distinguished in this circular path, forged equally of kinesis and epistrophy.

From this viewpoint, Oedipus' travels unfold as if he keeps one foot in continuous motion and the other firmly fixed: the end and the beginning of the interpreter's path coincide, with horrible precision.<sup>xxxiii</sup> For the spectator/reader of the play, on the other hand, this same statement proves to be prophetic insofar as we try to approach, understand, and overcome Oedipus himself through our own interpretive moves, and incur the same risks along the way. We only seem to arrive at the ultimate meaning of Oedipus' fate when, like him, we remain in continuous motion: beginning from the beginning over and over again, constantly moving forward in false confidence and turning around again to reconsider in fear and doubt. In the end, though, Oedipus eludes every attempt to make sense of him because he reveals the degree to which the language of the interpreter – the language we share with him, the language that by definition *makes* sense – is also unwittingly complicit in the *unmaking* of sense. When we attempt to apply normative language to Oedipus, when we try to respond adequately to the challenge he poses, we find that such an attempt produces multiple, fragmentary, and divergent evaluations of one and the same phenomenon. Like Oedipus' voice, the voice of *his* interpreter – my voice, your voice –

ultimately contains a multitude of voices that arise in many places at once and may not finally be reconciled with each other. Rather than affirming the unity and coherence of their origin, they tear themselves apart in headlong flight and infinite dispersal. Oedipus himself, blinded and abject, puts it best: “Alas, alas, how miserable I am, where on earth am I being carried in my misery? Where is my voice being swept away to, born on the wings of the air? O my spirit, how far you sprang forth!” (αἰαῖ αἰαῖ, δύστανος ἐγώ, / ποῖ γὰρ φέρομαι τλάμων; πᾶ μοι / φθογγὰ διαπωτᾶται φοράδαν; / ἰὼ δαῖμον, ἴν' ἐξήλου 1308-311).<sup>xxxiv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup>Henceforth *OT*.

<sup>ii</sup>My source for the text of the *OT* is the Oxford Classical Text: Sophocles, ed. Lloyd-Jones & Wilson (1990). I have also consulted the editions and commentaries of Jebb (1893) and Dawe (2006). Henceforth I will cite the Oxford text of the *OT* by line number alone. All translations from the Greek are my own.

<sup>iii</sup>See on this point Burkert 1991, 11. By focusing exclusively on questions of verbal communication and interpretation in the present discussion, of course, I must unfortunately neglect the rich scholarly contributions of the last twenty to thirty years which have sought to counterbalance the text-centric tendencies of modern criticism of tragedy by reconstructing and reevaluating the visual and properly theatrical aspects of tragedy. Calame's (1996) essay on the *Oedipus Rex*, for instance, gets considerable leverage on Aristotle's prejudice against visual spectacle in the *Poetics* by exploring how the conditions of masked theater inflect the visual vocabulary of the *OT*. Similarly, Seale's (1982) magisterial treatment of the interface between the language of vision and the *OT*'s stage spectacle remains almost unrivalled for sheer completeness and intricacy. A similar strong interest in visual vocabulary distinguishes the first of four treatments of the *OT* in Segal's *Sophocles' Tragic World* (1995, Ch. 6, 138-160).

<sup>iv</sup>Gould (1990, 208) is typical in this regard when he writes, “*King Oedipus* is a play whose qualities of inscrutability and of pervasive irony quickly come to complicate any critical discussion. It is a play of transformations in which things turn into other things as we watch, where meanings and implications seem to be half-glimpsed beneath the surface of the text only to vanish as we try to take them in, and where ironical resemblances and reflections

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abound to confuse our response.” Less typical is when Gould broaches the territory of my own discussion here, and suggests its reflexive or metacritical form, in arguing that Sophoclean irony is “practiced upon ourselves as audience as much as upon the characters of the play”.

- <sup>v</sup>Vernant 1990b, 42. Goldhill (1986, 211) echoes Vernant directly when he writes: “Language, rather than being an instrument of order, becomes a network of imperfections and gaps.” Consider also Buxton’s (1990, 110-11) description of how the language of the *OT* marks the transition from partial to complete insight – or, in my terms, “false” to “true” interpretation – with inarticulate speech-sounds: “The same exclamation is uttered by Jocasta (*OT* 1071) and Oedipus (*OT* 1182) when they see ‘how the pattern fits,’ *ἰού ἰού* marks a sudden release of energy, when the irony of partial knowledge is instantaneously discharged. It denotes the transition from blindness to insight.” The passage from articulate speech into noise thus simultaneously marks the revelation of truth and the dissolution of meaning.
- <sup>vi</sup> This viewpoint aims to bring out what Goldhill calls “the dark undertow, the sense of necessary failing” (2009, 36) in Sophoclean tragedy that addresses our critical effort of evaluation, organization, and resolution no less than the similarly structured intellectual task faced by Oedipus.
- <sup>vii</sup> There are a few antecedents to this line of inquiry into the *OT* worth mentioning here. Beer 2004, 97-113 contains many helpful observations on the organization of stage space in the *OT*, in particular the role of the theatrical *eisodoi*, which bear fruit when examined in relation to the language and action of the play. Goldhill 2009, 35-39 explores the complex dynamics of *hopou* in the *OT* as a way to challenge traditional accounts of dramatic irony, and thereby offers the single most significant antecedent to the reading I present here; I draw on its finely

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etched insights both explicitly and implicitly in what follows. Rehm 2002, 215-235 focuses on the interaction between the immediate space of stage action and the imagined or remembered spaces represented in the language of dialogue, but ultimately his approach seems more invested in the role of memory and imagination than in questions of space or place as such. Segal 1995, 199-212 reads the *OT*'s vocabulary of earth, land, or country as developing a tension in the drama between what Segal calls the “usable,” “visible,” “political” connotations of land (*chōra*) and the “numinous,” “hidden,” and “religious” connotations of earth (*gē* or *chthōn*); although Segal marshals a plethora of evidence, the dichotomy he argues for does not ultimately carry conviction, since the terms in question are often applied without apparent regard for the conceptual scheme he presents. None of these antecedents to the present discussion, at any rate, pay attention to the relationship between the language of place and movement in the *OT* on the one hand and the activity of interpretation explored in it on the other.

<sup>viii</sup> Precisely because I am focusing on these characteristics of language as it is used during the immanent process of interpretation, the present discussion will inevitably concentrate on the language of the play prior to Oedipus' final interpretive breakthrough at *OT* 1182. Much recent scholarship of enormous value has been devoted to the last third of the play, but for reasons of space and scope I must largely pass over both that portion of the text and recent critical attention to it in silence.

<sup>ix</sup>For another striking example of this 'inaudible' language, see Euben (1990, 103): “The play suggests that in the end and for all our efforts the most carefully wrought boundaries are breached by the men most responsible for building them. ... The outside is also inside. The wild cannot be banished for it lies, if not in our being, then in our politics” (see also Euben

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1990, 98 and 102).

- <sup>x</sup>The concept of a double perspective is a mainstay of Jean-Pierre Vernant’s powerful and influential readings of Greek tragedy. See especially Vernant 1990a, 27.
- <sup>xi</sup> As Goldhill again trenchantly argues, “Even if we agree that *locus* is a thematic focus of the *Oedipus*, we might disagree whether therefore every use of spatial vocabulary becomes charged with such thematic weight. ... Like a Sophoclean character, each reader is faced with the question of how far to go” (2009, 39, 46).
- <sup>xii</sup>An uneasiness that becomes virtually neurotic at *OT* 924-926, where the Messenger’s entrance speech is marked by a series of puns involving *pou*, a Greek particle that can mean “where?”, and Oedipus’ name (*Oidipous*). For more on this passage, see Goldhill 1986, 217; Euben 1990, 103-104; Segal 1981, 223; Knox 1980, 99-100.
- <sup>xiii</sup>Gould (1990, 210-11) offers a similar assessment of Oedipus’ statement upon entering the play: “His opening words, the first of the play, form a question as to the meaning of the ritual he sees before him. They are followed by a statement of other ritual sounds and smells which fill the *polis* that he cannot see, and of his concern to learn their sense.”
- <sup>xiv</sup> For a different but complementary view of this passage, see Knox 1957, 23.
- <sup>xv</sup>The description of the Sphinx at 508 as a “winged maiden” (πτερόεσσ’ ... κόρα) proves even more provocative in this context, only to turn savagely ironic when considered in light of Oedipus’ extraordinary power of movement.
- <sup>xvi</sup>On the language of hunting, see Knox 1957, 111-112; see also the discussion of *zētein* and related terms on 117-120. While my reading of the hunting-figure here remains relatively straightforward, Richard Goodkin (1982) develops a fascinating Derridean reading of the *OT*, as well as an Oedipean reading of Derrida, by articulating the complex, half-disavowed

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intertextual debt owed by Derrida to the *OT* in the former's widely influential concept of the trace. In Goodkin's hands, Oedipus embodies and enacts the hunt for an origin of writing, an original for the trace, which slowly and inevitably erodes the very origin it seeks. From this perspective, the hunting-figure employed by Sophocles becomes the central motif of the play's language and reveals its legacy in the nomenclature of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*.

<sup>xvii</sup>Goldhill constructs a fascinating intertextual reading that pairs the famous “Ode to Man” from Sophocles’ *Antigone* with Oedipus’ various poetic roles as ship’s captain, ploughman, and hunter at various points in the *OT*. All three of these roles take on paradigmatic significance for man’s power over and knowledge of nature in the passage from the *Antigone*, while Oedipus’ performance of each role proves both exemplary and perverse (Goldhill 1986, 205-207; see also Knox 1980, 97-99 and Knox 1957, 107-116).

<sup>xviii</sup>Compare the English idiom of the “stumbling block.”

<sup>xix</sup>Oedipus uses precisely similar language in widely varying contexts: *qv.* 227f. in the edict, and 445f. in his vituperation of Teiresias. The contrast between Oedipus' mobility and the city's inertia may be fruitfully combined with the discussion of Knox 1957, 15-18, where the group of terms associated with Oedipus' sheer swiftness of search, discovery, and reaction is briefly but masterfully explored.

<sup>xx</sup>‘Naive,’ because it has kept our interpretation of the words and events of the play as much as possible in line with that of the characters directly involved in them, and has resisted whatever meaning we may see in them that derives from our superior or retrospective knowledge of their circumstances. Gould (1990, 215-216) makes an impassioned plea for this kind of reading in the exchange between Oedipus and Teiresias, which makes for a productive, if underused, method in interpreting the *OT* because it does not allow us to privilege the process

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of our own interpretation over that of the *dramatis personae*.

<sup>xxi</sup>Although elaborating this point further would take me well beyond my present scope, it is worth noting that at the end of the tragedy, the Chorus characterizes the cause of Oedipus' fall as both a force of madness that “walked toward” (i.e. overtook) him (τίς σ', ὦ τλήμων, / προσέβη μανία; 1299-1300) and as a hostile spirit (*daimōn*) that leaps “beyond the utmost limits” to pounce on Oedipus' life (τίς ὁ πηδήσας / μείζονα δαίμων τῶν μακίστων / πρὸς σῆ δυσδαίμονι μοίρα; 1300-1302). The mirror-image symmetry of these images, which appear very late in the play, with those in 124-125 at the very beginning of the play, is unmistakable.

<sup>xxii</sup>This phrasing, both in its wording here and in its cognates, bears connotations of both aggressive attack and sexual intimacy at once.

<sup>xxiii</sup>Jebb similarly, and perhaps consciously, compares the drunken insult to “a random missile” (Jebb 1893, 784 n.).

<sup>xxiv</sup>As Dawe notes (2006, 139:786n.), this densely elliptical phrase could also mean something like “it crept under [sc. ‘my skin’] a great deal.” Either way, the emphasis is on the creeping or crawling *movement* of a nasty rumor.

<sup>xxv</sup>This is Jebb's turn of phrase, but is still as close to perfect as an English translation can get at rendering οὐ μὴν ἴσην γ' ἔτισεν (lit. “he was not compensated in equal measure”) with the proper tone (Jebb 1893, 111 trans.).

<sup>xxvi</sup>This surprisingly important, though not frequently discussed point in Oedipus' decision-making process has been acknowledged in scholarship since at least Bowra 1965 (164-165, orig. published 1944); see also the discussion in Segal 1993, 81f.

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<sup>xxvi</sup>Jocasta uses precisely the same verb, and nearly the same phrasing, later in the play when Oedipus is on the verge of discovering all and she is vainly trying to dissuade him: “Take no heed of anything” (μηδὲν ἐντραπῆς 1056; lit. “turn towards nothing”; ἐντραπῆς [subj.] > ἐντραπέπω, ‘to turn towards’).

<sup>xxviii</sup> Budelmann 2000, esp. 19-60; Slings 1992; Long 1968. Additional bibliography in this direction, as well as much helpful discussion, can be found in Budelmann 2000, 1-18; my treatment here, for better or worse, is subject to the criticism Budelmann articulates in his introduction (6-7) concerning the focus on ambiguity in tragic language in scholars like myself who follow Vernant and Goldhill.

<sup>xxix</sup> On this point see the lucid and incisive statement of method by Budelmann (2000), 22-23; my example here has significant links with Budelmann's discussion of pragmatic “change of direction” in 40-50.

<sup>xxx</sup>I read the close proximity of πλέον (“more”) and τῶνδε (initially: “than they”) as immediately suggesting to the auditor a comparative phrase rather than the more remote possibility of an adverb and an objective genitive. After all, the auditor only hears ἦ, the alternate particle of comparison (which excludes the possibility of a comparison with the genitive; cf. Smyth §1433), several words after this initial interpretation has already been established, i.e. in the middle of the next verse and well after the main verb φέρω (“I bear”). It is worth noting that both the major commentators I have consulted – Jebb and Dawe – by and large only admit the possibility of this initial, ‘aberrant’ reading of 93-94 negatively, i.e. by explicitly seeking to steer their readers away from it and toward the final, ‘true’ reading I identify here. The initial, ‘aberrant’ reading of these lines that I develop here is not intended to

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supplant the final, ‘orthodox’ reading formulated by the commentators; rather, it is designed to supplement the latter by demonstrating how the enunciatory character of the Sophoclean text unlocks simultaneous highly resonant layers of meaning which a more straightforward philological treatment, interested as it is in the resolution rather than amplification of textual ambiguities, can overlook. For a brilliant treatment of how this abiding tension between philological and literary approaches informs our attitudes towards the language of ancient literature, see Robert Alter's (2004, xvi-xliv) incisive statement of the issue.

<sup>xxxi</sup>Segal's (1981, 229-230) brilliant reading of *OT* 73-74 is comparable, though not identical, in its method.

<sup>xxxii</sup>In comparison to the auditor of the performed drama, the reader of Sophocles' dramatic text – especially the contemporary, philologically-inclined reader whose native language is not ancient Greek – has a decisive disadvantage in perceiving this kind of semantic shift. John Gould (1990, 207-208) is one of the few critics to acknowledge the differences in properly literary experience between the auditor and the reader of the *OT*: “It is a play of which the theatergoer's experience is very different from that of the reader of the play-text. For the latter, it seems all too easy to restructure the play in the memory according to a logical or chronological sequence which is quite different from the one Sophocles has given it, and then to draw inferences from the remembered structure that are quite alien to the play as Sophocles wrote it for performance.” Is it not worth considering that the gaps, ambiguities, and shifts in meaning we perceive in the text might not merely be a symptom of our inadequate efforts to resolve them *qua* philological problems, but rather an integral part of the text's literary design, as an experience that unfolds contingently in and through time, rather than an experience the meaning of which only coalesces when it is finished?

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<sup>xxxiii</sup> Zeitlin 1990 points out how Oedipus' movement, on the broad view, only ends up tracing a broad and perverse circle: "Every advance Oedipous makes toward uncovering the identity of Laios's murderer, every new figure who enters upon the stage in the forward movement of the plot, only leads him further in a retrograde direction, until, with the last and critical entry of the old herdsman, he returns to the very moment of his birth" (154). Compare also on this point Knox 1957, 167-168; Segal 1993, 71f, 84ff, 91, 153.

<sup>xxxiv</sup>I would like to thank Ross Chambers, Dean Hammer, Patty Keller, Vassilis Lambropoulos, Marjorie Levinson, Jim Porter, and Nicholas Theisen, whose conversation and comments on early drafts of this article, when it formed part of a chapter in my dissertation, were crucial in the formation and expression of my ideas for this as for so many other parts of my work. Gratitude is also due to Jill Frank and Allen Miller, who read and commented on later drafts of this piece with great care and generosity. Most of the rewriting of this piece in preparation for publication was done at the University of South Carolina, with the support of a postdoctoral fellowship through the Classics in Contemporary Perspectives Initiative.