II

The Sophoclean Hero 2

To those who face him, friends and enemies alike, the hero seems unreasonable almost to the point of madness, suicidally bold, impervious to argument, intransigent, angry; an impossible person whom only time can cure. But to the hero himself the opinion of others is irrelevant. His loyalty to his conception of himself, and the necessity to perform the action that conception imposes, prevail over all other considerations.

These conceptions vary from one hero to another. Antigone justifies her defiance of public opinion and the polis in terms of *εὐγένεια* (38),[1] the claims of noble birth, of *κλέος* (502), her desire for glory, of *εὐσέβεια* (924, 943) her religious feelings. Electra's view of herself is similar, and she uses the same words: *εὐγενής* 257, *εὔκλεια*, *κλέος* 973, 985, *εὐσέβεια* 250. Ajax too cites the claims of noble birth (*εὐγενῆ* 480)[2] and mourns his present loss of glory (*εὔκλειαν* 436, 465) though he does not claim religious reverence.[3] Oedipus *tyrannos* is loyal to his own conception of himself as the man of action,[4] the revealer of truth (132), the solver of riddles (393 ff.). And at Colonus he sees himself as one who fulfills the oracles of Apollo and so satisfies his own desire for vengeance on Thebes and his sons. Philoctetes too has wrongs to revenge; he cannot contemplate the prospect of going to Troy, because it will help the enemies he has hated for so long.[5]

Their motives may differ, but the mood is the same in all of them; they are driven by passion, *θυμός*, a rage of the soul. Plato derives this word from *θύω*,[6] to seethe, to rage, a word used of winds, fire, and the sea. It is the dominant element in the heroes; passionate intensity deafens them to the appeal to reason.[7] Not that they cannot use their minds; on the contrary, Oedipus, for one, has a brilliant intellect, and even Ajax can debate the case for life or death with eloquence and force. But they do not *want* to listen to reason; they obey instead the deep imperative of their passionate natures. "You fool," says Theseus to Oedipus, "passion (*θυμός* 592) is no advantage in misfortune." It may be no advantage, but it cannot be restrained. Oedipus speaks of his *θυμός* in former days as 'boiling' (*ἔζει* 434) and 'running out of control' (*ἐκδραμόντα* 438), but it is still as fierce now, and Creon says bitterly that there is no old age for the *θυμός* (954) of Oedipus but death.[8] Creon speaks of Antigone as a 'spirited horse' (*θυμουμένους* 477), and both Creon and Tiresias speak of the *θυμός* of Oedipus *tyrannos*. "Rage in your anger," says the prophet to him (*θυμοῦ* 344), and Creon calls him "harsh, when you reach excess of passion" (*θυμοῦ περάσῃς* 674).[9] "Ajax," sings the chorus in its ignorance, "has repented of his passion" (*μετανεγνώσθη/ θυμοῦ* 717). "Do not give way to passion when you hear" (*μὴ θυμοῦ* 922), says Neoptolemos to Philoctetes, and Electra is told not to 'gratify her passion' (*θυμῷ . . . χαρίζεσθαι* 331) by her sister, and by the chorus that she generates 'new wars' with her 'harsh-passioned soul' (*δυσθύμῳ . . . ψυχᾷ* 218–219).

Their passionate nature is exasperated by the feeling which all of them have (and with some grounds) that they are treated 'disrespectfully,' *ἀτίμως*. Their sense of their own worth, of what is due them from others, is outraged; they are denied *τιμή*—not so much 'honor,' which in English has a connotation of extra consideration for achievement, as simply 'respect,' the consideration due to the individual's rights and stature as a human being. This word *ἄτιμος* is a recurring feature of the description of the hero's situation. Philoctetes, who, as he

proudly says, sailed a volunteer for Troy with seven ships, voices his indignation at the Atridae with this word: "They threw me ashore, without consideration" (ἄτιμον 1028). So Ajax cries in anger: "Here I lie, without respect" (ἄτιμος 426); "I perish, disregarded by the Achaeans" (ἄτιμος 440). When he thinks in his mad fit that he has killed his enemies, he boasts: "Those men will never treat Ajax disrespectfully again" (οὔποτ' . . . ἀτιμάσουσ' ἔτι 98). Oedipus at Colonus, denied the sanctuary he was promised, calls on the chorus not to show 'disrespect' (μηδέ . . . ἀτιμάσῃς 286); later he claims that he was expelled from Thebes 'so disrespectfully' (οὕτως ἀτίμως 428), and curses his sons so that they may learn "not to treat their father without respect" (μὴ 'ξατιμάζητον 1378).[10] Antigone tells Ismene that Creon has treated their brother 'without respect' (ἀτιμάσας 22),[11] and Tiresias later tells Creon that he has 'disrespectfully' (ἀτίμως 1069) settled a living soul, Antigone, in the tomb. Orestes is appalled at his sister's appearance, so 'ruthlessly misused'[12] (ἀτίμως . . . ἐφθαρμένον 1181), and after the murder of Clytemnestra tells Electra that her mother's fierce spirit will never 'treat her disrespectfully' again (μηκέτ' . . . ἀτιμάσει ποτέ 1427). Even Oedipus *tyrannos*, who is at first treated with all the respect due to a successful and autocratic ruler, accuses Tiresias of 'disrespect' (ἀτιμάζεις 340), and speaks of Creon's supposed conspiracy as an attempt to expel him 'unrespected' (ἄτιμον 670) from the country. Later he fears, as he probes closer to the dreadful truth, that he will lose the respect of others when that truth is known. He comforts himself: "I shall not be held in disrespect" (οὐκ ἀτιμασθήσομαι 1081).

Worse than the general lack of respect for their acts, persons, and attitudes, is the extreme expression of it: mockery, laughter; even if the hero does not experience this face to face he imagines it in his moments of brooding despair.[13] Philoctetes is obsessed with the thought that he is a laughingstock for his enemies, for the Atridae (γελῶσι 258), for Odysseus (γελᾷ μου 1125), for Neoptolemos (γελώμενος πρὸς σοῦ 1023). Ajax' greatest torment is the thought of his enemies' laughter at the ignominious failure of his attempt on them[14] (οἴμοι γέλωτος 367, ἐπεγγελῶσιν 454), especially the laughter of Odysseus (πολὺν γέλωθ' 382); his partisans, the chorus (198, 959, 1043) and Tecmessa (969) harp on the same theme. Electra in her grief at the news of Orestes' death is tormented by the thought of the laughter of her enemies (γελῶσι 1153), and she has actually seen the smile on the face of her mother (ἐγγελῶσα 807).[15] Antigone turns from the chorus with a bitter cry, "I am mocked" (οἴμοι γελῶμαι 839). And Oedipus *tyrannos* in his fall fears the mockery of Creon, who magnanimously disclaims any such intention (οὐχ ὡς γελαστής 1422) but cannot refrain from sarcasm a few moments later (1445).[16] Only the dreadful figure of the blind, cursing, prophetic old man at Colonus is an exception; he neither fears nor inspires laughter in those who face him.[17]

The disrespect and mockery of the world lock them even more securely in the prison of their passionate hearts, fill them with fierce resentment against those they regard as responsible for their sufferings. Their anger takes the form of appeals for vengeance, of curses on their enemies. Ajax in his last speech calls on the Erinyes to punish the sons of Atreus, and then, his wrath widening, he calls on them to feed on the whole Greek army, to spare none (835–844). Electra calls on them too, repeatedly, to avenge her murdered father and herself (112 ff., cf. 276, 491), and Oedipus at Colonus invokes the Eumenides in his curse on Creon and the even more terrible curse he pronounces on his son. Antigone, the guard tells Creon, cursed those who disturbed the dust she sprinkled on her brother's corpse, and at the end, no longer sure the gods are on her side, she accepts her fate, if they approve (925), but prays that if she is right, Creon will suffer the same injustice he has used against her (927–928). Philoctetes mouths curses from one end of the play to the other; he curses the Atridae and Odysseus many times (315, 791, 1019, 1035, 1040, 1112 ff.) and Neoptolemos twice (962, 1286).[18] And Oedipus at Thebes hurls his curse at

the man who saved his life for such a dreadful destiny (1349 ff.). For most of them no more dreadful curse can be imagined than that their enemies should experience exactly what they are suffering in their own persons. Antigone wishes Creon "no more evil than what he unjustly inflicts" on her (927–928). Philoctetes prays that Odysseus and the Atridae may feel the pain of his own sickness (791 ff.) and the long years of his suffering (1114), and that the Atridae may be, as he has been, abandoned on a desert island and given the rags and scant food they left him (275).[19] Ajax prays that the Atridae may die, like him, by their own hands (840 ff.), and Oedipus at Colonus provokes from Creon a furious outcry by wishing him an old age like his own (869–870).

The hero is a lonely figure; he is μόνος 'alone,' ἐρῆμος 'abandoned, deserted.' The consequence of his intransigence is that isolation which has so often been described as the mark of the Sophoclean hero. Antigone is alone in her attitude, as Creon tells her in front of the chorus, which does not contradict him (μούνη 508); she is the 'only one' (μόνην 656) in the city to disobey him; she is finally buried alive, alone (μόνη 821, cf. 887, 919, 941, ἐρῆμος 773). Electra is alone in her defiant mourning for her father and her opposition to her mother (μούνη 119); more alone still when she decides to do Orestes' work, and attack Aegisthus (μόνη 1019, μόνα 1074). Oedipus at Thebes cuts himself off from Tiresias, then Creon, is finally deserted by the chorus (873 ff.) and Jocasta (1071), but pushes on alone to the discovery of the truth. And at Colonus he is at first rejected with horror by the chorus (226), reproved by Theseus (592), threatened by Creon (874 ff.), and ends his earthly career by cursing his sons, before he goes off to die, alone (ἐρῆμος ἔθανες 1714). Ajax' whole career has been that of a man who acts and fights alone (μόνος 29, 47, 294, 1276, 1283), and he goes off in the last moments of his life to find a deserted place, untrodden (ἀστιβῆ 657),[20] to die, alone. Philoctetes is of course the loneliest of all; he has lived for almost ten years abandoned and alone on a desert island (βροτοῖς ἄστιπτος 2), and to the

physical loneliness, imposed on him by others, which he has so long endured (μόνος 172, 183, 227, 286, ἐρῆμος 228, 265, 269, 1018), he now adds the loneliness he deliberately chooses (μόνος 954, ἐρῆμος 1070).

The hero is isolated, but not only from men; he also abandons, or feels himself abandoned by, the gods. Ajax knows that Athena is his enemy: "I am hateful to the gods" (457), he says, and "I owe nothing to them in the way of service any more" (590, cf. 397 ff.). Oedipus *tyrannos* scorns the prophecies of Apollo's oracle (964), and counts himself the "son of Chance" (1080). Philoctetes, faced with the depressing catalogue of the deaths of all the Achaeans he admired and the triumphs of those he hated, finds the gods 'base, evil' (κακούς 452, cf. 1020). Even Electra's faith that the gods will avenge her father falters at the news of Orestes' death; when the chorus calls on the thunderbolts of Zeus and the shining sun she starts to protest and they warn her to say nothing rash: "No big words" (830).[21] Antigone in her final speech doubts that the gods are on her side: "Why should I in my misfortune look to the gods any more?" (922). And even Oedipus at Colonus, though confirmed in his belief that he has come to his destined place of rest, shows signs of bitterness towards heaven; told by Ismene that the gods who were working his ruin before now raise him up, he replies: "It is a paltry thing to raise up in old age a man who fell in his youth" (395).[22]

This isolation is so total that the hero, in his moments of deepest despair, speaks neither to man nor to gods, but to the landscape, that unchanging presence which alone will not betray him.[23] Philoctetes, when his appeal to Neoptolemos meets only with embarrassed silence, speaks to the island, which, as his beautiful last farewell speech shows, he has come to love. "You harbors, headlands, you wild beasts of the mountains, my companions, you jagged rocks, to you I appeal, accustomed presences, for I do not know who else to speak to . . ." (οὐ γὰρ ἄλλον οἶδ' ὅτῳ λέγω 938). "You cleft in the hollow rock, hot in summer, cold in winter, so I was never to leave

you, you will be present at my death"[24] (1081 ff.). So Ajax addresses his last words to the sun, the light, the rock of Salamis, to Athens, and to the streams, plains, and rivers of Troy which have seen his glory in battle. "Farewell, you who raised me. This is his last word, Ajax says it to you" (864).[25] Electra first appears singing her song of mourning (and not for the first time, as she tells us—*πολλὰς . . . ᾠδάς* 88)—to the elements: "O holy light and air, you two equal partners who share the earth between you" (*ὦ φάος ἁγνὸν/ καὶ . . . γῆς ἰσόμοιρ' ἀήρ* 86 ff.). Oedipus at Thebes, when his hard-won knowledge of his identity makes him the loneliest man on earth, speaks to Mount Cithairon, to the three roads and the hidden valley where he killed his father (1391, 1398 ff.).[26] Antigone, just before she is led off to her living tomb, mocked, as she proclaims, by the chorus, addresses the streams and groves of her native city (844 ff.), and a few moments later, the tomb in the rock which is to be her marriage chamber (*ὦ τύμβος ὦ νυμφεῖον ὦ κατασκαφὴς οἴκησις* 891).

In his total alienation from the world of men the hero turns his back on life itself and wishes, passionately, for death. This is the constant refrain of Ajax, the subject of all his intense and brooding speeches. He begs the chorus to kill him (361), invokes Zeus to fulfill his heroic prayer that he may kill his enemies and then die himself (387 ff.), and calls on the darkness of Erebos to give him a home (394 ff.). He decides, in a reasoned discussion of the possibilities open to him, for death (479), and comes to the same conclusion after Tecmessa's appeal for pity has moved him to reconsider (684 ff.). He is a man 'intent on death' (*ὅς σπεύδει θανεῖν* 812), 'in love with death' (*ὧν γὰρ ἠράσθη τυχεῖν . . . θάνατον* 967), his heart yearns for death (*τοὐμὸν ὧν ἐρᾷ κέαρ* 686)[27] and he sees his sword, in his farewell speech, as his greatest friend (*εὐνούστατον τῷδ' ἀνδρί* 822).[28] He calls on Death himself (*ὦ θάνατε θάνατε, νῦν μ' ἐπίσκεψαι* 854), inviting him to come and 'oversee' his suicide. Ajax of course is a man who, given his proud nature and the ignominious failure of his attack on his enemies, can contemplate no other course, but other Sophoclean heroes, gentler in character and in circumstances less urgent, echo his words. Electra, when she believes that Orestes is dead, speaks of the 'favor' (*χάρις* 821) that would be granted her if someone would kill her; she has no desire for life (*τοῦ βίου δ' οὐδεὶς πόθος* 822). When she resolves to act alone, the chorus praises her contempt for her own life; she "cares nothing for death, she is ready to leave life" (*οὔτε τι τοῦ θανεῖν προμηθὴς τό τε μὴ βλέπειν ἑτοίμα* 1078–1080). And in the excess of her mourning over the urn which she believes contains Orestes' ashes, she wishes to join him in death, to share his tomb (1165 ff.). Antigone makes light of the death she risks, dismissing it in a sarcastic phrase to Ismene—"what you call dreadful" (*τὸ δεινὸν τοῦτο* 96)—and accepts it as a glory (72); she even tells Creon that for her to die young is a 'gain' (*κέρδος* 462), and proudly reminds Ismene: "You chose life but I chose death" (555). Oedipus at Thebes, the only powerful and successful figure in the entire gallery of Sophoclean heroes (and the only one who fits Aristotle's definition—a man in high repute and good fortune), wishes for death when it begins to appear that he may be the murderer of Laius (*βαίην ἄφαντος* 832); later he calls for a sword (1255), though he stops short of suicide. In his agony after he has blinded himself he wishes that he had died, a crippled infant, on the mountain long ago (1349), and begs now to be left to dwell on the mountains, to die (1451). Philoctetes, in the spasms of pain brought on by his disease, begs twice to be killed (749, 800), attempts suicide when he realizes he has been trapped by Odysseus (1001), begs the sailors of the chorus for a sword, an axe, any weapon, to kill himself (1207), and when Neoptolemos, restored to his confidence, tries to persuade him to do what is best for him, reproaches his 'hateful life' for keeping him on earth (1348–1349). He too, like Ajax, calls on Death in person: "O Death, Death, why is it that though I call on you continually you never come . . . ?" (*ὦ θάνατε θάνατε, πῶς ἀεὶ καλούμενος . . .* 796). Oedipus at Colonus has come there to die; he recognizes his promised place of rest. And in his last moments on

stage, as he goes off to meet his longed-for end, the speed and sureness of his movements and the urgent exaltation of his language show us a man utterly transformed from the stumbling, complaining old man of the opening scenes.

The hero chooses death. This is after all the logical end of his refusal to compromise. Life in human society is one long compromise; we live, all of us, only by constantly subduing our own will, our own desires, to the demands of others, expressed as the law of the community or the opinion of our fellowmen. We learn this lesson in childhood or, more expensively, later; those who fail to learn it end as criminals or madmen. But in Sophoclean tragedy the hero faces an issue on which he cannot compromise and still respect himself. Surrender would be spiritual self-destruction, a betrayal of his *physis;* the hero is forced to choose between defiance and loss of identity. And in the Sophoclean hero the sense of identity, of independent, individual existence, is terribly strong. They are, all of them, exquisitely conscious of their difference from others, of their uniqueness. They have a profound sense of their own worth as individuals, and this exasperates the anger they feel at the world's denial of respect. In the crisis of their lives, abandoned by friends, ringed by enemies, unsupported by the gods, they have nothing to fall back on for support but this belief in themselves, their conception of their own unique character and destiny.

This point has to be emphasized because much modern criticism of Sophoclean tragedy tends to deny its validity. There has been a reaction, necessary and desirable, against nineteenth-century psychological analysis which in the discussion of Sophoclean characters (and Shakespearian too) went to such excess of depth analysis that it could even discuss, seriously and at length, feelings and motives not referred to in the text, which had to be 'reconstructed,' inferred from a full imaginary biography of the dramatic character.[29] The pendulum has swung back, and of course it began by swinging back too far (the influential book of Tycho von Wilamowitz came close to denying cohesion of character altogether); but it has

still not yet righted itself entirely. In the work of some of the subtlest and most imaginative modern critics the prevailing tendency is still to smooth down the jagged individuality of the Sophoclean characters, and to exclude the modern idea of dramatic character completely. Albin Lesky, whose brilliant critical insight and immense learning have combined to produce what are perhaps the most important modern judgments on Sophocles, has discussed this problem at length and with great subtlety; he quotes with approval two formulas which attempt to find a midpoint between the extreme views of Sophoclean figures, as 'types' and 'characters.' The first is the view of Wilhelm Humboldt, who says of Sophoclean characterization: "Everything too individual is despised and deliberately avoided. Not the individual but the human being is to appear, in the precisely distinguished but simple traits of his character."[30] And the second is Gerbert Cysarz' formulation of the 'classic concept of personality': "Personality instead of just interesting individuality, norm instead of the eccentric and bizarre."[31] Both formulations are at first sight attractive; they seem to exactly differentiate the Sophoclean characters from those of Euripidês, and to fit the Sophoclean figures into the frame of that classic ideal embodied in the sculptures of the Parthenon. They are subtle formulas of compromise between the misguided attempt to construct from the plays what Lesky wittily dismisses as 'mosaic-type character portraits' and the opposing view that Sophoclean heroes, like "most women" in Pope, "have no characters at all."[32] And yet they do not suffice. "Nicht der einzelne sondern der Mensch," is a phrase that does not leave enough room for Ajax' unrepentant glorification of the violence that has brought him to the necessity of suicide, for Oedipus' terrible curse on his son, for Antigone's last speech, which has seemed to many critics to show exactly what Cysarz excludes—'Apartheit und Bizarrerie.' The formulas leave little place for that irreducible center of particularity, of uniqueness, which in the last analysis (and Antigone's speech is precisely that) is the only source of the heroic will to defy the world.[33]

This uniqueness, this sharply differentiated individuality, is something of which the Sophoclean heroes are fully aware, indeed, they insist on it. Ajax has no doubt of his difference from the Greek chieftains. He claims to be "a man such that Troy saw no other like him in the host which came from Greek soil" (οἷον οὔτινα Τροία στρατοῦ δέρχθη 423–425). He has no doubt that Achilles, a rebel like himself, would have recognized his superiority (441 ff.). He is so sure of his rightness and greatness that even in disaster, surrounded by the mangled animals he has tortured and butchered in his fit of madness, he has no other wish for his infant son than this: that he should be like his father. "He must without delay be broken and trained in his father's wild ways, be made like him in nature. My son, may you be luckier than your father, but in everything else the same" (τὰ δ' ἄλλ' ὁμοῖος 551). Later he tells Tecmessa she is a fool if she thinks she can "educate his character" (ἦθος . . . παιδεύειν 595). And others recognize his individuality. "His death," says Tecmessa, "is bitter for me, sweet for his enemies, but joy for him" (αὐτῷ δὲ τερπνός 967). "What he yearned to have, he has got for himself"—(ἐκτήσαθ' αὑτῷ 968)—"the death he wanted." And to his first speech with its resolve for death and its harsh conclusion—"you have heard all I have to say"—the chorus replies: "No one could say that it was not a genuine speech of yours; it was from your own heart" (ὑπόβλητον λόγον[34] . . . ἀλλὰ τῆς σαυτοῦ φρενός 481–482). The speech is 'in character.'

Electra, the most self-analytical of all the Sophoclean heroes, is fully aware of her uniqueness; she can feel shame at the outrageous conduct to which it sometimes drives her (254, 616 ff.), but also a fierce pride in her independence of spirit. She loses no chance to emphasize the difference between herself and her sister: "*You* can cringe and fawn. Those are not *my* ways" (οὐκ ἐμοὺς τρόπους λέγεις 397). "I do not want to live by *those* laws" (τούτοις . . . τοῖς νόμοις 1043), she says when Chrysothemis urges prudence. She casts scorn on her sister for not being herself: "Your reproof of me," she says, "is a lesson you learn from *her;* nothing you say is from yourself" (ἐκ σαυτῆς 344). Oedipus *tyrannos* too is aware of his own extraordinary character and capacities; he announces himself as "Oedipus whom all men call famous" (ὁ πᾶσι κλεινὸς Οἰδίπους καλούμενος 8). He reminds Tiresias that the riddle of the Sphinx, a problem for prophets, was solved instead by an untrained amateur; "But *I* came, know-nothing Oedipus, and put a stop to it" (ἐγὼ μολὼν ὁ μηδὲν εἰδὼς 396 ff.). When Jocasta leaves him with the wish that he may never find out who he is, he proudly proclaims his nature and his identity. The son of Chance. "With such a parentage, I shall never turn out to be someone else, so as not to learn the secret of my birth" (οὐκ ἂν ἐξέλθοιμ' ἔτι ποτ' ἄλλος 1084–1085). Even in the agony of his new-found knowledge and his ruined eyes, he asserts his individual responsibility. "It was Apollo . . . who brought these evils to completion. . . . But the hand that struck my eyes was mine alone" (ἔπαισε δ' αὐτόχειρ νιν οὔτις ἀλλ' ἐγώ 1331–1332). And later he sees himself as one apart, reserved for some mysterious destiny. "No disease, nor anything else can wreck me. For I would never have been saved from death, except for some dreadful evil" (1455 ff.). Antigone too is fiercely protective of her independence and quick to resent any affront, real or fancied, to her personality.[35] She speaks of Creon's decree as a personal insult. "He has made a proclamation to you and to me, yes I say to *me*" (λέγω γὰρ κἀμέ 32), she says to Ismene, and like Electra she stresses at every point the difference between herself and her sister. "You be what you decide, but *I* . . ." (ἀλλ' ἴσθ' ὁποῖά σοι δοκεῖ . . . 71), she says to her, and, "You chose to live but I to die" (555). She later justifies her attempt to bury Polynices with arguments so strange that many scholars have been driven to question their authenticity; she is indeed 'a law unto herself' (αὐτόνομος 821) as the chorus says of her. Philoctetes, a man who has for ten years lived by his wits on a desert island and brooded on his wrongs, is very conscious of his own identity. He is proud of the courage and endurance which have kept him

alive (ὥς τ' ἔφυν εὐκάρδιος 535),[36] and aware too of his uniqueness in those qualities. "No one but me could have stood even the sight of what I have suffered," he tells Neoptolemos (οἶμαι γὰρ οὐδ' ἂν ὄμμασιν μόνον θέαν/ ἄλλον λαβόντα πλὴν ἐμοῦ τλῆναι τάδε 536–537). Deceived and deprived of the bow he cries indignantly: "He would not have taken me if I had my health—not even sick like this, except by treachery" (947–948). He sees that the young man who deceived him is not acting from his own impulse, but contrary to his nature; "Be yourself" (ἐν σαυτοῦ γενοῦ 950), he says to him. And in the final interview between them, when the truth is told him, his resentment at the wrongs done him by his enemies, the idea that he will have to work and fight side by side with them, is too much; he asks his eyes: "How will you be able to stand the sight of me associating with the sons of Atreus?" (1354–1355). Oedipus at Colonus, who begins with little or no personality at all, a resigned humble old man, swiftly rises to such heights of anger, authoritative prophecy, and vindictive imprecation that even his friends and daughters are appalled; not content with proclaiming himself a savior, he obstinately defends not only his present resolution to die on Attic soil but also the fearful actions of his past; he is indeed, to use his own words, a 'dread nature' (αἰνὰ φύσις 212).

They all have the fierce sense of independence of the thorny individual; they will not be ruled, no one shall have power over them, or treat them as a slave, they are free. Electra's complaint is that she is 'ruled' (κἀκ τῶνδ' ἄρχομαι 264) by her enemies, that she is enslaved to them by force (τοῖσδε δουλεύω βίᾳ 1192). Orestes was her hope of freedom, but the report of his death means she 'must be a slave again' (δεῖ με δουλεύειν πάλιν 814), and she appeals to her sister to act with her and 'be called free in future' (ἐλευθέρα καλῇ 970).[37] Ismene tells her father that the Thebans will bury him where he will not have power over himself (μηδ' ἵν' ἂν σαυτοῦ κρατῇς 405), but he protests, "Then they shall never have power over me" (οὐκ . . . ἐμοῦ γε μὴ κρατήσωσίν ποτε 408), and later appeals

to Theseus: "Let no one have power over my life" (μηδεὶς κρατείτω 1207). Antigone is urged by Ismene to remember that "we are ruled by the stronger" (ἀρχόμεσθ' ἐκ κρεισσόνων 63), but she is later described by Creon as wanting "to give orders to those in authority" (τοὐπιτάσσειν τοῖς κρατύνουσιν 664), although she is 'the slave' (δοῦλος 479) of others.[38] Ajax, in his argument for surrender, speaks of the Atridae as "rulers, so we must give in to them" (ἄρχοντές εἰσιν 668), but nothing is farther from his thoughts. Teucer claims repeatedly that Ajax was not under the orders of the Atridae; he was 'commander himself' (αὐτὸς ἄρχων 1234), he was 'in command of himself' (αὐτοῦ κρατῶν 1099).[39] The Atridae admit that they could never rule him. "We shall rule him dead" (θανόντος γ' ἄρξομεν 1068)" . . . we could not control him living" (βλέποντος . . . κρατεῖν 1067). Philoctetes, faced with the brutal "You must obey" of Odysseus, bursts out: "My father brought me into the world as a slave, I see, not a free man" (δούλους . . . οὐδ' ἐλευθέρους 995–996), and tries to take his own life by leaping from the rocks.

The choice, as the hero sees it, is between freedom and slavery. In these circumstances, to give way is 'intolerable.' To go home from Troy without glory is for Ajax 'unbearable' (οὐκ ἔστι . . . τλητόν 466); death is better. Philoctetes reacts to Odysseus' threats in similar terms, "Unbearable!" (ταῦτα δῆτ' ἀνασχετά; 987), and later, when he rejects the arguments of Neoptolemos, asks his eyes how they will be able to 'bear' (ἐξανασχήσεσθε 1355) the sight of him associating with his enemies at Troy. "If I had borne (ἠνσχόμην 467) to leave my brother's corpse unburied," says Antigone to Creon, "*that* would have given me pain." Oedipus at Colonus speaks of his son's voice as the one voice among all those in the world that he could 'bear' to hear only with the utmost pain (ἐξανασχοίμην κλύων 1174). And at Thebes he finds Tiresias' words 'intolerable' (ταῦτα δῆτ' ἀνεκτά; 429).[40]

All of us at times may find the advice of others or the demands of a situation 'intolerable,' may assert our will in the face

of opposition. But the hero does so all the way, to the absolute end of such a defiance, which is death. It is no accident that the plays of Sophocles contain so many suicides. In all the seven plays of Aeschylus which have been preserved there is not one (though the Suppliants threaten suicide and Ajax, in a lost play, certainly committed it); in all the surviving plays of Euripides there are only four;[41] but in the seven plays of Sophocles there are no less than six: Ajax, Antigone, Haemon, Eurydice, Deianira, and Jocasta—and in addition Philoctetes attempts suicide on stage, Oedipus *tyrannos* asks for a sword to kill himself, and Oedipus at Colonus prays for death in the opening scene of the play and goes swiftly and joyfully to it at the end. The world as it is, life as it is lived, refuses them freedom to be what they are, and they are ready to leave it rather than to change.

The Sophoclean hero sets his own conditions for existence. "Your father should have begot you on previously agreed terms" (ἐπὶ ῥητοῖς 459), says the Nurse to Phaedra in the *Hippolytus* of Euripides, "if you will not acquiesce in these laws." The phrase could be applied to the Sophoclean hero too. They will live only on their own terms. They are, to use Ismene's phrase to Antigone, "in love with the impossible" (ἀμηχάνων ἐρᾷς 90).[42]

"The man who is incapable of working in common," says Aristotle in a famous sentence of the *Politics* (1253a), "or who in his self-sufficiency has no need of others, is no part of the community (πόλεως), like an animal, or a god" (θηρίον ἢ θεός). Most of the Sophoclean heroes are referred to in words that implicitly or explicitly compare them to wild animals. Ajax is presented to us in the images used by Odysseus and Athena in the prologue as a wild beast tracked to his lair (κυναγῷ etc. 5, 37; ἴχνη etc. 6, 20, 32) or in the trap (ἕρκη 60); he is repeatedly described as ὠμός 'wild, savage' (205, 885, 930) and himself adopts and glorifies in the word (548) and its implications.[43] Antigone too has this word applied to her by the chorus after her violent dismissal of Creon's decree (γέννημ' ὠμὸν 471).

Philoctetes begs the startled Neoptolemos and his sailors not to be frightened at his 'wild' appearance (ἀπηγριωμένον 226), and later Neoptolemos tells him he has 'turned savage' (σὺ δ' ἠγρίωσαι 1321). So Tiresias tells Oedipus to rage "in the most savage anger you can muster" (ὀργῆς ἥτις ἀγριωτάτη 344), and the chorus in that same play, speculating on the identity of the murderer of Laius (it is of course Oedipus himself) sing of him as a wild bull of the rocks roaming in the wild forest among the caves (ὑπ' ἀγρίαν ὕλαν . . . πετραῖος ὁ ταῦρος 478). Clytemnestra talks to Electra as to a wild animal that has escaped from the cage: "So you are at large and roaming loose again?" (ἀνειμένη μὲν . . . αὖ στρέφῃ 516),[44] and Creon uses the same word of Antigone and her sister: "They must be tied up, not allowed to run loose" (μηδ' ἀνειμένας 579). Ajax, the chorus sings, is "marked as a victim to a hateful destiny" (ἀνεῖται στυγερῷ δαίμονι 1214); the word means literally 'allowed to roam free' like a sacrificial beast that is loosed to graze in a compound until its hour comes.[45] Creon expects to break Antigone's resistance and expresses his confidence in the phrase, "with a small bridle the most spirited horses are broken" (477), and he speaks too of his opponents as men who will not bow their necks beneath the yoke (291).[46]

"A beast," says Aristotle, "or a god" (θηρίον ἢ θεός). The heroes refuse to accept the limitations imposed on human beings by their mortality, resist the strong imperatives of time and circumstance—all things change, but they will not—and this is an assumption of divinity. Only the gods are eternal and unchanging; "everything else," as Oedipus tells Theseus, "is confounded by all-powerful time" (*OC* 609). Ajax is twice emphatically described as one who "does not think according to his limitations as a man" (οὐ κατ' ἄνθρωπον φρονῶν 777 cf. 761). Antigone is reproved by the chorus for her attempt to compare herself with "those who are equal to the gods" (τοῖς ἰσοθέοις 837), with that Niobe whom Electra also emulates and whom she "counts as a god" (σὲ δ' ἔγωγε νέμω θεόν 150). Oedipus at Thebes in one way after another assumes the tone

and language of a god[47] and ends by claiming himself the 'son of Chance,' own brother to the months, the peer of Time (1080 ff.). Philoctetes by his obstinate refusal to go to Troy seems, just before the end of the play, to have changed the course of history, falsified divine prediction, and thwarted the will of Zeus; it takes a god in person, descending from his heavenly abode, to set matters right. And we do not need the hint contained in Theseus' question to Oedipus at Colonus—"What is this more than human suffering you are subject to?" (*μεῖζον ἢ κατ' ἄνθρωπον* 598)—to feel that the blind man is turning before our eyes into something that can no longer be measured in human terms.

Such is the strange and awesome character who, in six of the Sophoclean tragedies, commands the stage.[48] Immovable once his decision is taken, deaf to appeals and persuasion, to reproof and threat, unterrified by physical violence, even by the ultimate violence of death itself, more stubborn as his isolation increases until he has no one to speak to but the unfeeling landscape, bitter at the disrespect and mockery the world levels at what it regards as failure, the hero prays for revenge and curses his enemies as he welcomes the death that is the predictable end of his intransigence. It is an extraordinary figure, this Sophoclean tragic hero, and though it is clear that it was in the drama of Sophocles that it 'found its natural form,' to use Aristotle's phrase, we shall expect to find its source in the work of his predecessors.

It is often stated that the first extant play which introduces to us the figure of the tragic hero is the *Seven Against Thebes* of Aeschylus.[49] Certainly Eteocles dominates the action, but it is hard to find in this play the germ of the Sophoclean conception. Apart from the fact that the bulk of the play, the description of the champions, is not action in the Sophoclean sense of the word at all,[50] Eteocles is not placed in the Sophoclean situation of resistance to persuasion and threat. In fact, he makes his resolution (the decision to fight Polynices), at the

end of the play, and the short scene in which the chorus attempts to dissuade him (677–719) is couched in language which has almost no point of contact with the typical formulas of such a scene in Sophocles.[51] And so in the *Suppliants*, the *Persians*, and the *Oresteia*; the situation of the hero is not the same, and though of course many verbal parallels occur[52] they are even less than might be expected in view of the facts that the two dramatists were contemporaries, competitors in fact, that they wrote in the same high, formal style appropriate to the genre, that they presented in one case the same mythical material in extant plays,[53] and lastly that many of the words we have described as Sophoclean formula are common basic elements of the vocabulary. Nowhere in these plays does one find a real parallel; there is no scene where one recognizes over an extended passage the Sophoclean situation and the language associated with it.

But there is one Aeschylean play, the *Prometheus Bound*, which does show a remarkable resemblance to Sophoclean tragedy. Though the central scenes of the play, the long descriptions of Prometheus' services, first to Zeus and then to mankind, the even longer descriptions of the past, present and future of Io, are not action in the sense Sophocles conceived it, the dramatic framework of all this narrative and prophecy shows a striking resemblance to Sophoclean character and dramaturgy. The hero, like Philoctetes, like Oedipus at Colonus, is fixed, in this case literally, in one place; the action is a sequence of visits by others who come to deceive, persuade, or threaten.[54] The dramatic power of the play has its source in the efforts to break his resolution and their failure. But the resemblance is even more striking. Many of the Sophoclean formulas for this situation appear in the *Prometheus Bound*, used exactly as they are used by Sophocles, and this is the only Aeschylean play of which this can be said.[55]

The hero is isolated, more so even than Philoctetes; Lemnos is sometimes visited by sailors off their course,[56] but Prometheus is impaled on a neighborless, deserted rock (*ἐρήμου* . . .

ἀγείτονος πάγου 270)[57] in the 'uninhabited wilderness' (ἄβροτον . . . ἐρημίαν 2) of Scythia. He is punished 'so that he may be taught' (ὡς ἂν διδαχθῇ 10) to 'acquiesce' (στέργειν 11) in the overlordship of Zeus, so that he 'may learn' (ἵνα μάθῃ 62) that *sophistes* though he is, he is weaker than Zeus. When his tormentors have left him, the hero adresses the landscape: "O shining air and swift-winged breezes, you river springs, the uncounted rippling flash of the ocean waves, Earth, mother of us all, and the all-seeing circle of the sun, I call on you" (88 ff.).[58] He suffers at the thought of his enemies' rejoicing (156 ff.); he wishes (though later he states that it is impossible) for death, "If only he had hurled me below the earth to Tartaros, unbounded realm of Hades, host of the dead" (152–155). And he states his resolve, to keep the secret on which the fate of Zeus depends, "I shall never, cowering before his threats, reveal this" (οὔποτ' . . . καταμηνύσω 175)—a resolution repeated at high points of the action in ever more defiant terms (989 ff., 1002 ff., 1043 ff.). He rejects in advance the persuasion of Zeus (πειθοῦς 172), and the chorus calls him 'rash' (σὺ μὲν θρασὺς 178) and 'too free of speech' (ἄγαν δ' ἐλευθεροστομεῖς 180). He is tortured, he says, 'dishonorably, disrespectfully' (οὕτως ἀτίμως 195), and tells the chorus that when Zeus decided to annihilate the human race no god would oppose him, "but *I* dared" (ἐγὼ δ' ἐτόλμησ' 235). The chorus advises caution but he rejects their advice: "It is a slight thing for one who has his foot set outside of suffering to advise and reprove" (παραινεῖν νουθετεῖν τε 264). Another friend comes to advise him, Oceanus.[59] "I wish to advise you what is best" (παραινέσαι γέ σοι θέλω τα λῷστα 307–308). The advice is couched in familiar terms. "Abandon your present angry temper" (ἄς ἔχεις ὀργὰς ἄφες 315). "You do not give way to misfortune" (οὐδ' εἴκεις κακοῖς 320). "Treat me as your teacher" (ἔμοιγε χρώμενος διδασκάλῳ 322). The hero rejects the advice to 'yield' (οὐδ' εἴκεις 320) with the Sophoclean reply: "Leave this matter alone" (καὶ νῦν ἔασον 332). "Save yourself" he tells Oceanus (σεαυτὸν σῷζ' 374) with the same contempt Antigone shows for her sister.[60]

This confrontation of hero and advisors is followed by the long recital of Prometheus' services to mankind, during which dramatic action comes to a stop, but, in the choral ode which follows, the chorus returns to the attack. They reprove him for his 'self will'[61] (ἰδίᾳ γνώμᾳ 543). Then the long Io scene again suspends the dramatic development, which however reaches its climax with her exit. Prometheus restates his resolve in the strongest, clearest terms he has so far used and defies the power of Zeus (939). Hermes enters at once to threaten and demand surrender. In the dialogue between them the tortured hero wishes his enemies may suffer the same penalties they inflict on him (χλιδῶντας ὧδε τοὺς ἐμοὺς ἐγὼ ἐχθροὺς ἴδοιμι 972),[62] and proclaims again that no force or guile of Zeus will move him from his resolve. His mind is made up, long since (πάλαι . . . βεβούλευται τάδε 998).[63] Hermes pleads with him to 'show good sense' (ὀρθῶς φρονεῖν 1000) and tells him what will happen if he is not 'persuaded' by what is said to him (ἐὰν μὴ τοῖς ἐμοῖς πεισθῇς λόγοις 1014). He ends his description of the new and terrible sufferings which obstinacy will bring with an appeal to reason: "Consider" (φρόντιζε 1034). "Do not count self-will as better than good counsel" (εὐβουλίας 1035). The chorus joins Hermes and repeats the phrase, "He bids you search out the wisdom of good counsel" (τὴν σοφὴν εὐβουλίαν 1038). "Be persuaded" (πιθοῦ 1039). But he will not. And goes down below the earth with a final cry of defiance, "I am wronged" (ἔκδικα πάσχω 1093).

Here, it would seem, is the model for the Sophoclean hero. The *Life of Sophocles* tells us that "he learned tragedy in the school of Aeschylus"[64] (παρ' Αἰσχύλῳ δὲ τὴν τραγῳδίαν ἔμαθε), and this analysis seems to suggest strongly that in fact he found in the *Prometheus Bound* the prototype, already clear in outline, of that tragic pattern he was to make peculiarly his own.

But, of course, it is not so simple. These resemblances to Sophoclean character, situation, and language in the *Prometheus Bound*, are to be found only there in Aeschylean drama; we cannot trace a development of this particular form through Aeschylean tragedy to Sophocles. The *Prometheus Bound* appears to be, in this respect, a totally new departure in the work of the older poet. Such a thing of course is entirely possible—Aeschylus was after all the creator of tragedy, an innovator on the grand scale—but the trouble is that the *Prometheus Bound* seems to be a totally new departure in his work in every other respect too. The play, for all its Aeschylean grandness of conception, seems out of place in the context of the *Oresteia*, the *Seven*, the *Persians* and the *Suppliants*. In vocabulary, in the ease and clarity of its style, in the caution of its imagery, in the shortness and relative unimportance of its choral odes, it does not sound like the work of the poet whose mantic style demands such wealth of explanation as Fraenkel's 832 large pages of commentary on the 1673 lines of the *Agamemnon*. Its content is no less incongruous; the presentation of Zeus in the play can be reconciled with Aeschylean religious ideas only by assuming that the rest of the trilogy showed us an evolution of the supreme god—an idea which it is difficult to buttress by reference to Greek, and above all to early Greek, thought. As if this were not enough, the play seems to show acquaintance with ideas and formulations associated with the sophistic teachers and their impact on Athenian thought; not only the use of the word *sophistes* to describe Prometheus in a context which imposes the derogatory meaning of 'trickster' so common in the later fifth century, but also, as has recently been pointed out,[65] the use of the contrast ἔργῳ—λόγῳ,[66] which is, again, a cant phrase of the last half of the century, but unattested for the first. All this is not enough, as Lesky says in his magisterial discussion,[67] to justify those who deny Aeschylean authorship,[68] but it does constitute a difficult problem, which cannot be lightly dismissed.

The resemblance to Sophoclean tragic practice[69] is then a

new problem added to what was already, in Lesky's phrase, 'the most problematical of all Greek tragedies.' In this problem there is no certainty to be attained, and no agreement to be expected; more than one scholar has publicly reversed his stand on the question. Each reader is thrown back on the hypothesis which seems to explain most of the facts (and in the light of the discrepancies between this play and the other six the simple attribution to Aeschylus must also be regarded more as a hypothesis than a fact). There is one possible explanation of the 'Sophoclean' nature of the play which also explains some of the other problematical features: it is here advanced as a hypothesis, no more. It is possible that the play was written by Aeschylus very late in his career under the influence of Sophoclean innovations in the drama.[70]

The date of the *Prometheus Bound* like everything else about it is a matter for dispute. But in spite of Mette's attractive early dating on the basis of the relationship between Fragments 181, 320, and 334 and the apparent echoes of the *Prometheus Bound* in the *Triptolemos* of Sophocles (468 B.C.), the later the date of the play the more possible it is to explain the acquaintance with sophistic language and thought, especially the clearly Protagorean cast of Prometheus' account of human progress. True, we have no means of determining the date at which such ideas became current in Athens, but, again, the later the date of the *Prometheus Bound*, the more plausible that Aeschylus could reflect them. The latest possible date is after the *Oresteia* (458 B.C.) and before the poet's death in Sicily (456/455 B.C.).[71] If it was written during those years, it was written when Sophocles had already for more than ten years (since 468 B.C.) been producing plays in the theater of Dionysus. Aeschylus adopted from Sophocles the third actor and used him in the *Oresteia*. The *Prometheus Bound*, it is now agreed more and more widely,[72] also requires a third actor for the prologue. If Aeschylus could learn from his younger rival in this respect, is it not possible that he could adopt other features of Sophoclean drama? In the simplicity of the dialogue, the short-

ness and style of the choral odes, above all in the character of the hero, his situation and the formulas used to express that situation, can we perhaps see another Aeschylean adaptation of new dramatic resources he found in the work of his young competitor?

This is advanced as a question, not a statement; we are in the dark here. But even if the *Prometheus Bound* is the germ of Sophoclean tragedy, the originality of Sophocles is still patent, for there is one important difference between Prometheus and the Sophoclean heroes, a difference which affects the essence of their tragic nature, the greatest difference in the world. Prometheus is immortal; he cannot die. "You would find it difficult to bear my sufferings," says Prometheus to Io, "for my fixed destiny (*πεπρωμένον* 753) is—not to die." And he confidently challenges Zeus to hurl the thunderbolt, loose the winds, shake the earth, and stir the sea, "for no matter what he does he will not put me to death" (*ἐμέ γ' οὐ θανατώσει* 1053). The god does not have to face that last extremity which awaits the Sophoclean human hero, death—that leap into the unknown dark at which the flesh even of the bravest recoils instinctively.[73] This difference is like that between the battles of men and those of the gods in the *Iliad*; when gods fight each other we cannot take them seriously, for they risk at most temporary pain or loss of esteem (and in fact Homer's treatment of the battles of the gods is the only comic relief in the *Iliad*).[74] But when Hector, heavy with the foreknowledge of his death, takes his hopeless stand before the Skaian gate, when Achilles hears his horse Xanthos prophesy his death soon after Hector's but still goes out to kill his enemy, the true tragic note is struck. Only the fact of death can make action heroic; heroism and tragedy are the peculiar province and privilege of mortal man.

And in any case the model for both Prometheus and the Sophoclean heroes lies farther back, in the poetry Aeschylus and Sophocles learned as children, the poetry on which the education of both their generations was firmly based, in Homer,

and particularly in the *Iliad*. Achilles[75] chooses early death with glory when he might have had long, but undistinguished, life, is injured in his self-esteem by Agamemnon's insults, threats, and oppressive action, retreats into self-absorbed fury to bring defeat and death on his former allies and comrades and in the end destruction on himself. When they beg him to relent, he refuses harshly and bitterly; even old Phoinix whom he loves cannot move him. His anger which once was leveled at Agamemnon now includes the whole Achaean army; their losses and defeats stir him only to mockery. His stubborn refusal to help them leads to the death of Patroclus and this in turn to the death of Hector which, as Achilles knows when he kills him, shortly precedes his own. And many of the Sophoclean formulas for the hero's situation, mood, and action, have their origin here.

Achilles is 'treated disrespectfully' (*ἄτιμος* e.g., 1.171, 9.648); his passion (*θυμός* e.g., 1.192, 217) and wrath (*χόλος* 1.283, 9.260, 678 *μῆνις* 1.1) make him impervious to supplication (*λίσσομαι* says Nestor 1.283) and appeals to reason (*νόει φρεσί* 9.600). He will not be persuaded (1.296 *οὐ . . . πείσεσθαι . . . ὀΐω*, 9.345, *οὐδέ με πείσει* cf. 386); he will not yield (1.294 *ὑπείξομαι*), he is wild (9.629 *ἄγριον*), terrible (11.654 *οἷος ἐκεῖνος δεινὸς ἀνήρ*), and 'impossible' (16.29 *σὺ δ' ἀμήχανος ἔπλευ*). He warns Phoinix not to argue with him "so that I will not hate you" (9.614 *ἵνα μή μοι ἀπέχθηαι*)—it is the same word Antigone uses to Ismene (93); like Electra, he has no use for life if he cannot have his way (18.90 *οὐδ' ἐμὲ θυμὸς ἄνωγε . . . ζώειν*) and he accepts death at once, since that is the price (18.98 *αὐτίκα τεθναίην*). "Now I shall go . . ." (18.114 *νῦν δ' εἶμ'*), he says, "to find Hector" and sums up his heroic and fatal choice in words which Antigone echoes much later: "I shall lie there, when I die. But now I shall win fair glory" (*κείσομ' ἐπεί κε θάνω· νῦν δὲ κλέος ἐσθλὸν ἀροίμην* 18.121).[76] And like the Sophoclean hero he states his resolve with passionate emphasis, in absolute terms:

> not if he gives me ten times as much and twenty times over
> as he possesses now, not if more should come to him from else-
> where,
> or gave all that is brought into Orchomenos, all that is brought in
> to Thebes of Egypt . . .
> not if he gave me gifts as many as the sand or the dust is,
> not even so would Agamemnon have his way with my spirit.
> (*Iliad* 9.379–386, trans. by Lattimore)

He does finally rejoin the battle, but not as a concession to Agamemnon; it is only because his fury has now been turned against Hector, whose appeal for burial he rejects in the same hyperbolic terms:

> not if they bring and set before me ten times
> and twenty times the ransom, and promise more in addition,
> not if Priam son of Dardanus should offer to weigh out
> your bulk in gold, not even so . . .
> (22.349–352, trans. by Lattimore)

In the baleful wrath of Achilles, his self-absorbed brooding on the affront to his self-esteem, his anger against those who have wronged him and those who would turn him from his chosen path, in the fatal consequences of his obstinacy and in his acceptance of death, above all in that magnificent eleventh book where the three different assaults on his resolve are delivered and repulsed—here is to be found the model and even the formulas of the Sophoclean tragic situation. Sophocles might have taken for himself the Aeschylean claim that his tragedies were 'slices from the banquets of Homer.'[77]

Both poets drew from the same great source but the results are very different. Aeschylus transformed the capricious gods of the Homeric epic into beneficent powers who through suffering brought man and his *polis* (something that hardly exists in the *Iliad*), to a higher stage of understanding and civilization. The Zeus, Apollo, and Athena of the *Oresteia* recall those same figures in the *Iliad* only in their outward characteristics; the gods of Aeschylus are new creations, inspired by the ideals and

aspirations of that Athenian democracy which, barely twenty years old, checked the Persian advance into Europe at Marathon and ten years later stopped it forever at Salamis. But Sophocles writes as if this magnificent synthesis of old and new had never been attempted or achieved; he turns away from the Aeschylean adaptation of the heroic spirit to the conditions of the *polis* and goes back to the irreconcilable Achilles sulking in his tent. In his heroes who assert the force of their individual natures against their fellow men, their *polis*, and even their gods, he recreates, in a community now even more socially and intellectually advanced than that of Aeschylus, the loneliness, terror, and beauty of the archaic world.

To discuss the reasons why he did so brings us into an area where nothing can be proved and even conjecture is presumptuous; the sources of great art lie too deep for such exploration. But there is one important thing we know about Sophocles which does seem to be connected with his partiality for the irreconcilable hero as a tragic subject and which may, tentatively and with all due humility, be cited as relevant to his conception of tragedy.

It is his religion. I do not mean by this the conception of the Olympian gods and their ordering of the world which can be constructed (though not without grave difficulties) on the basis of the seven plays. Not only would the argument smack of the circular, it would also inevitably be too subjective, for the 'religion of Sophocles,' as demonstrated in the plays, varies with the eye of the beholder; it has been confidently identified with the two extremes of literal-minded fundamentalist piety and intellectual humanism, and almost everything in between. Only one thing seems undeniable about the religious view which informs the plays: that Sophocles did not share Aeschylus' belief in a Zeus who worked through the suffering of mankind to bring order out of chaos, justice out of violence, reconciliation out of strife. There was little in the age he lived in to support such a conception. As a youth he had danced in the celebration for the victory of Salamis, a victory of the Greeks

united against Persia, but in his manhood he saw the dissolution of that unity, the growing hostility between Athens and Sparta which moved inexorably towards the disastrous war in which he was to pass the last years of his life. The Olympian gods in Sophoclean drama are enigmatic, masked figures whose will humanity can for the most part only guess at, and only identify with justice by a kind of heroic, defiant faith.

But the Olympian gods were only one aspect of his religion. The cult of these gods was not so much a private as a public matter; they were so closely identified with the city that the gold on the stature of Athena in the Parthenon was 'removable,' and is reckoned in with other Athenian financial resources in Pericles' account of the Athenian war funds. As an Athenian citizen, Sophocles could feel pride in and thankfulness to such a goddess, but it is difficult to see how anyone could have felt a personal religious relationship to her, or indeed to Zeus, of whom Aristotle remarks that there would be something absurd about the idea of loving him. The worship of the Olympians was not enough; men felt also a need for what one of my predecessors in these lectures has aptly called a 'personal religion'[78]—some religious relationship and practice which brought them into a more consoling and intimate communion with God than the Olympians, enthroned in their temples, could ever provide.

In the case of Sophocles we know what this was. He was devoted to the cult of the heroes. It was he whom the city designated to welcome the hero-god Asclepios when (presumably in the shape of a sacred snake) he was brought from Epidaurus to Athens. He was actually a priest of the cult of the hero Halon (about whom unfortunately we know nothing—even the name is a matter for controversy). He established, according to a strange story in the *Life*, a shrine of the hero Heracles the Denouncer.[79] And after his death he was himself honored with worship as a hero by his fellow citizens: an annual sacrifice was officially voted, and a hero shrine was set up for

his worship under the name Dexion, 'the welcomer,' because he had welcomed the hero-god Asclepios.[80] The site of this shrine has been discovered on the west slope of the Acropolis; it is identified by an inscription which shows that the worship of Dexion continued well into the fourth century.[81] There are many puzzling and disputed details in the fragmentary accounts that have survived, but one thing is clear: there is firm and almost contemporary evidence for Sophocles' close connection with, and participation in, the cult of the heroes.

Aeschylus' 'personal' religious connection, our sources indicate fairly clearly, was with the mysteries of Eleusis, where he was born.[82] Sophocles was born in Colonus where there was a grave of the hero Oedipus, and his personal religion was hero cult. There could hardly be a more striking contrast. For though both cults were concerned with death, the mysteries offered a vision of a blessed life beyond the grave, while the worship of the hero was concentrated on the grave itself. The rites of Eleusis were an occasion for joy—the procession, the ribald banter at the bridge, the rapt ecstasy of the initiates who had witnessed the revelation; the rites of the heroes were a grim ceremonial compounded of fear and lamentation—the blood sacrifice offered to the grave, a feast in which the human worshippers did not share. Eleusis was a revelation of light; the hero was worshipped only after the sun was down, in darkness.

These heroes, who were worshipped at the site of their burial (real or supposed), with offerings of black victims, the blood poured into a trench dug in the earth, were of many different kinds: faded divinities, healing powers, historical figures, founders (real or imagined) of cities, even local goblins or earth spirits.[83] But most of them were heroes in the other sense too—the famous heroes of Greek saga and especially of epic poetry. These were men who by the awesome force of their personality, the greatness of their achievement, their suffering, and in most instances their passionate anger, seemed in life to exceed the proportions of ordinary humanity and even in the grave con-

tinued to compel the fear and admiration of mankind. Their graves were holy places, sources of strength and prosperity to the land, or of danger to it if their cult should be neglected. The thing that distinguishes nearly all of them is their irreconcilable temper; the greatness of their passion brought them into conflict with men and even with the gods, and rather than accept the slightest diminution of that high esteem their pride demanded, they were ready to kill and die. Even in death their anger was alive and terrifying; the cult of the hero was a ceremony which aimed to appease his wrath, and the sacrifices were called *μειλίγματα* 'propitiatory offerings.' "The hero cult," says Nilsson, "is more than any other, apotropaic; it is designed to appease the mighty dead who are by no means slow to wrath."[84] And the hero himself might have no other claim to worship than this unrelenting anger with the world. "A hero"—Nilsson again—"is recognized not because of his services but because there stems from him some special strength, which does not need to be of a benificent kind"; the hero's claim has "no relation to moral or higher religious ideas but is an expression of naked power or strength."[85]

The Greek admiration and fear of such natures sometimes led to extraordinary results, such as the cult of Cleomedes of Astypalaea, whose story is told by Pausanias[86] and Plutarch.[87] Cleomedes, a brilliant athlete, had the misfortune to kill his opponent in a boxing match at the Olympic games. He was convicted by the judges of 'wrongdoing' (*ἄδικα εἴργασθαι*) and his victory was annulled (*ἀφῃρημένος τὴν νίκην*). He went mad (*ἔκφρων*) of grief and returned home. There he attacked a school which had about sixty children in it; he pulled down the pillar that supported the roof, and it fell in and killed the children. When the citizens began to stone him he took refuge in the shrine of Athena. He got into a chest which was lying there and pulled the lid shut on himself. The citizens in spite of their concerted efforts were unable to open it. When they finally broke open the planks they found no Cleomedes, alive or dead. They sent envoys to Delphi to ask what had happened to him

and the priestess of Apollo replied: "Last of the heroes is Cleomedes of Astypalaea. Honor him with sacrifices as one no longer mortal." The citizens of Astypalaea must have been relieved to hear that he was the last, but they established his cult as directed by Apollo, and it was still observed when Pausanias wrote in the second century A.D. To the ancient Greek mind there seems to have been something almost divine in passionate self-esteem, no matter how slightly justified and no matter what crimes it led to.

This strange phenomenon of Greek religious feeling is of course very old, but its continued existence in the fifth century (the Cleomedes incident falls between the battles of Marathon and Salamis) and later, and above all the fact that Sophocles was a priest of a hero cult, make it difficult to dismiss as a mere survival of primitive savagery. And, in those same Mediterranean countries where the hero's bones were guarded and his fierce spirit placated and invoked, later centuries were to see similar honors paid to the tombs and relics of the saints, and, for that matter, many of the early saints were as strange, impossible, and awe-inspiring as the heroes, and shared with them the readiness to die rather than surrender. The hero offered the ancient Greeks the assurance that in some chosen vessels humanity is capable of superhuman greatness, that there are some human beings who can imperiously deny the imperatives which others obey in order to live. It is not that the hero is worshipped as an example for human conduct; he is no guide to life in the real city man has made or the ideal city he dreams of.[88] But he is a reminder that a human being may at times magnificently defy the limits imposed on our will by the fear of public opinion, of community action, even of death, may refuse to accept humiliation and indifference and impose his will no matter what the consequences to others and himself.

And there are occasions when the hero *is* an example to be followed. In war, for example, when the virtue demanded of every man is precisely the heroic virtue, that he will value his own life as nothing. And in great crises of the soul, when a man's

whole life work is challenged and threatened, when loyalty to the guiding principle of his life means suffering or even death. When Socrates, whose life of patient intellectual probing for moral definitions seems as far removed from the careers of the heroes as north is from south, seeks in his defense in court for comparisons with his own case, it is Achilles and Ajax whom he cites.[89] Strange authorities for a philosopher—and yet, not so strange. For in his refusal to abandon what he considers his mission, imposed by the god, he shows the familiar heroic stubbornness, and in his ironic but outrageous proposal that his punishment should be that entertainment at the public expense offered to Olympic victors he shows the defiant arrogance which is the mark of the heroic temper. In his deliberate choice of death rather than surrender he enters the ranks of the heroes himself.

It seems likely, then, that Sophocles' close connection with hero cult had a part in his creation of the tragic hero,[90] and certainly the plays reflect this preoccupation. The *Oedipus at Colonus* is a mystery play which deals with the transition of Oedipus from human to heroic stature,[91] and the burial of a hero is the point of conflict in the last part of the *Ajax*. And of course, many of the heroes of the plays were worshipped with these rites in Athens and elsewhere during Sophocles' lifetime.[92]

But this explanation is really a restatement of the problem in a different form. In the Athens of Anaxagoras and Protagoras, where hero cult must have seemed to many of the young an embarrassing survival of the unenlightened past—the Athens of Periclean democracy where the rebellious temper of an Achilles or an Ajax had little relevance to the new democratic ideal of the individual's position in the *polis*—why did Sophocles serve as the priest of a hero cult and fill his tragedies with these recalcitrant, uncoöperative heroes who seem to have stepped out of the *Iliad* to reassert against friends, enemies, city and gods their unquestioning faith in their own superiority? One thing, at least, is certain: Sophocles was not attempting a

historical reconstruction of the heroic age, as many nineteenth-century critics thought (hence their frequent citation of his 'anachronisms'). Sophocles' Ajax is not really a Homeric hero any more than Shakespeare's Richard the Second is a fourteenth-century monarch (as Queen Elizabeth was quick to realize).[93] All great drama must be contemporary in thought and feeling, immediate in its impact on the audience; the hero must be as Aristotle says 'a man like us,' not a historical reconstruction. Sophocles' obsession with the Achillean temperament and situation must stem not from an interest in the past but from a deep conviction that this temperament and situation are the true, the only possible, dramatic expression of the tragic dilemma of his own place and time.

The relevance of the heroic temper to the splendid achievements and brilliant prospects of Periclean democracy can be found only in the great events of the century in which Sophocles played his full part as citizen, statesman, and soldier. His life spans almost the whole course of the heroic saga of Athens' rise to a height where the mastery of the whole Greek world seemed within its grasp, and of its catastrophic fall.

For Aeschylus, the Marathon fighter, who had lived under the tyranny, seen the establishment of Athenian democracy, and taken a soldier's part in its triumphant vindication in the war against Persia, the future was full of hope. The *Oresteia*, produced within two years of his death, is a pageant of man's advance, blind and violent, but still an advance, from savagery to civilization, under the mysterious guidance of a stern but benevolent Zeus. The pattern of the trilogy is the thrust and counterthrust of apparently irreconcilable opposites, ending in their reconciliation, and this reconciliation is the basis for a new and better dispensation. In the democratic institutions of his city, so hardly won and so valiantly defended, Aeschylus saw the prototype of his reconciliation of opposites among men as among gods; force is superseded by persuasion, armed vengeance by the court of law, civil war by debate in assembly. There would be more strife, new opposites to be reconciled, new

suffering to be endured for new progress made, but the strife and the suffering he saw as creative—that 'violent grace' of the gods which the chorus celebrates in the *Agamemnon*.

But Sophocles, in the years of his maturity, lived in a different age. The political power and material wealth of Athens reached a level which Aeschylus, confident though he was of Athens' future greatness,[94] could hardly have foreseen; but the future became darker with the years. Athenian imperial policy enforced membership in what had started as a league of free cities for the liberation of Greece but was now an empire which even Pericles compared to a *tyrannis*, an autocratic, despotic power.[95] Sophocles himself took part on more than one occasion in punitive operations against cities which had once been free allies and were now Athenian tributaries.[96] The fear and hatred of Athens, the 'tyrant city,' grew with the years; all over Greece the cry was once again for liberation, but this time from Athens, and it was achieved in the long and destructive war which Sophocles, now an old man, saw almost to its bitter end. I have argued elsewhere that Athens itself, its heroic energy, its refusal to retreat, to compromise, was the inspiration for the figure of Oedipus *tyrannos*.[97] But, as we have seen, Oedipus is cast in the same mold as the other Sophoclean heroes. The choice of such a heroic figure, the fascination it exerted on the poet's mind through the long years of his career as a dramatist, may owe more than a little to his participation as soldier and statesman in the great heroic drama of his time—the attempt of the small city of Athens to dominate the whole of the wide-spread Hellenic world, to impose its political will, as it was already imposing its art and thought, on all Hellas, the islands, the mainland, even, in a megalomaniac venture worthy of an Ajax, on rich, powerful, distant Sicily. Undaunted by losses and defeats, impervious to advice or threat, finding always fresh sources of energy in its passionate conviction of superiority, Athens pursued, throughout the course of Sophocles' manhood and old age, its stubborn, magnificent course to the final disaster. It was, like a Sophoclean hero, in love with the

impossible.[98] "You must realize," says Pericles to the Athenians, in the last speech reported by Thucydides, "that Athens has the greatest name among men because it does not give in to misfortunes (διὰ τὸ ταῖς ξυμφοραῖς μὴ εἴκειν 2.64, 3), has expended lives and labor beyond all others in war, and acquired a power which is greater than any up to our time; and of this power, even if some day we lose (for all things are born to be diminished) a memory will be left forever to those who come after us." The tone ("for all things are born to be diminished"), the phrases ("does not give in to misfortune"), and the proud acceptance of loss for glory ("a memory will be left") are those of Sophoclean tragedy.

In all these epic events and discussions Sophocles played his part, and no small one, in the battle fleets and the council chamber; this was the context of his life and action, the air he breathed.[99] The greatness and tragic destiny of Athens must have been not only in his mind but also in his heart and soul and every fiber of his being when he created for the theater of Dionysus those imperious, heroic figures who go the same passionate way.

THE HEROIC TEMPER

STUDIES IN SOPHOCLEAN TRAGEDY

BY BERNARD M. W. KNOX

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
BERKELEY AND LOS ANGELES
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, LONDON

1964