GREEK MYTH AS A SEMIOTIC AND STRUCTURAL SYSTEM AND THE PROBLEM OF TRAGEDY

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> "In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet because language itself is poetry. . . . Every original language near to its source is in itself the chaos of a cyclic poem: the copiousness of lexicography and the distinctions of grammar are the works of a later age, and are merely the catalogue and the form of the creations of poetry."
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> — P. B. Shelley,
> "A Defence of Poetry"

I

Marc-Eli Blanchard's recent book on semiotics and literature suggests that the "structuralist controversy" of a decade or so ago has been replaced by a "semiotic controversy."[1] From the point of view of semiotics, culture depends on manipulating complex sign-systems; and the activities of culture, in large part, consist of the continuous transformation and translation from one communicative system to another. Language obviously occupies a privileged place in the semiotics of culture, not only because of its unique communicative power but also because of its unique ability to reflect explicitly on the nature of the semiotic process and the interrelation of the various semiotic networks that make up the totality of a given culture. At the same time semioticians have called attention to the fact — hard for those of us trained as philologists — that language does not have an exclusive monopoly on signification. The question of the relations between verbal and non-verbal sign-systems becomes particularly interesting and important in the study of myth. As a form of *mythos*, a spoken tale or account, myth is obviously inseparable from language, but, some would

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argue, is at least partially independent of language or even transcends language.[2]

The study of myth is both important and difficult for semiotics because myth stands at an intersection of a number of different sign-systems. Myth comprises a system of symbols, verbal, visual, religious. Each myth is built up of already existing symbols and forms, and, like all narrative, reforms and reorganizes those symbols into its own structures. Myth, as Barthes suggests, is a "second-order semiotic system," which creates its own "language," its own system of signifier-signified relations, from the primary significations of cultural values and narrative forms.[3] At one level, myth provides a body of stories and symbols that validate cultural norms. A society's myths are the imaginative distillation of its descriptions and prescriptions about what life is and/or should be. We can easily think of Greek myths that warn about transgressing taboos or marrying within certain degrees of kinship or, more positively, set forth the ideal mode of behavior for husband or wife, son or daughter, old or young.

Viewed with an eye to structure rather than content, myths form a body of interrelated narratives which reveal an implicit system of logical relations. These relations become particularly striking when a large corpus of myths is examined all together, as Lévi-Strauss has done for the Indians of the Amazon Basin. The totality of that corpus of myths, so taken, may be read as a single text that possesses the internal coherence, autonomy, coding processes of Barthes' "second order semiotic system." In reading the whole body of a society's myths in this way, we are constructing the "megatext" of its mythic material (I shall explain the term "megatext" more fully later). This "megatext" is an artificial construct, necessarily invisible and unconscious to the society whose exemplary narratives and symbolic projections of what "reality" is are located within that system.

The first part of this paper attempts to show how Greek myth may be described in terms of this "megatext," or in other words how the inherent systematicity of Greek myth operates in specific texts and narratives. Part II focuses on tragedy as a special form of mythical narration. Tragedy, I shall argue, simultaneously validates and disintegrates the mythic system both as a form of narrative representation and as a reflection of a coherent world-order whose stable, hierarchical interrelation of parts is encoded into the myths.

Myth, though operating primarily through language, also shares common boundaries of content, formal organization, and expression with the visual arts, ritual, music and, in ancient Greece, with architecture also, for the plastic expressions of the myths frequently occur on the friezes and

metopes of temples and other sacred buildings. Because of this overlap no single brief definition of myth can satisfy all of its many functions and aspects. From a semiotic point of view, however, we may say that myth is a narrative structure whose sign- and symbol-systems are closely correlated with the central values of the culture, especially those values which express a supernatural validation, extension, or explanation of the cultural norms. Myth is also a more or less coherent system of symbols expressing relationships between the human world and the forces of nature and the various forms of the unknown: the gods, the dead, the afterlife, etc.

Greek myth is especially interesting from a semiotic point of view for two reasons. First, the presentation of myth in Greek literature shows a high degree of what we may call the metaliterary or metalingual consciousness. Even in Homer the poet is clearly conscious of shaping his work by structuring language and narrative elements. Within the mythic corpus the creative power of language, art, and poetry is itself often a subject of narrative: we may recall the pervasive details of weaving and crafting; the interest in the poet as an actor, a figure in the narrative (particularly in the *Odyssey*); the inclusion of comprehensive symbolic artefacts like the Shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*,[4] and the frequent representation of the heroic warrior himself as a bard, whether literally or metaphorically or, as in the *Odyssey*, both simultaneously;[5] and the magic of poet figures like Orpheus, Musaeus, Amphion and Zethus.[6]

A self-conscious awareness of sign-systems as such, furthermore, pervades early Classical myth in its literary expression. In Aeschylus, for example, the devices on the shields of the Seven warriors who attack and defend Thebes, the attention to the beacons in the *Agamemnon* as a coded form of communication apart from language,[7] the concern with names and naming (as in the famous ode on the name of Helen, *Ag.* 681-98), the interest in omens and prophecies, and in Sophocles and Euripides the puns on names like Oedipus and Pentheus are all indications of an advanced, if not explicit, semiotic consciousness.[8] At a later date this self-conscious awareness of the signifying power of language, or metalingual consciousness, receives theoretical formulation in the work of some of the early Sophists like Protagoras, Prodicus and Gorgias, who are among the first philosophers of language and literature in the West, and in their immediate successors, Cratylus and Democritus. The latter, the most systematic of the fifth-century materialistic philosophers, speculated on whether language existed by convention *(nomôi)* or by nature *(physei)*, i.e., as a secondary invention or as an instinctive capacity of man.[9] This highly sophisticated metalingual consciousness plays an important part in the later phase of

Greek tragedy, especially the late works of Sophocles and Euripides; but it is, I believe, implicit in all of Greek literature.

The second reason for our semiotic interest in Greek myth is that it functions as a complex network of interrelated symbols, patterns, and structures which encode the values of the culture into an extensive and comprehensive system. The total corpus of myths, read synchronically, can be regarded as a "megatext," within which the specific literary narrations of particular myths (the Homeric epics, Hesiod's *Theogony*, the *Homeric Hymns*, the narrative portions of choral poetry, and tragedy) operate as sub-texts, exploiting particular aspects of the megatext, commenting on it, or sometimes making explicit certain networks of interconnection implied but not openly stated in the megatext. By "megatext" I mean not merely the totality of themes or songs that the poets of an oral culture would have available in their repertories, but also the network of more or less subconscious patterns or "deep structures" or "undisplaced" forms which tales of a given type share with one another.[10] The term thus includes the Greeks' own consciousness of the thematic affinities among the privileged narratives that we call myths (e.g., the perception of the common sequence of events in tales of the young hunter studied by Nancy Rubin in this volume.) It also includes the subconscious patterning from which these myths are generated, visible to us through comparative analysis of a large body of myths but not overtly perceived by the Greeks themselves as a pattern (e.g., the ambivalence surrounding the mature female figure studied by Slater or the *pharmakos* pattern in the Oedipus myth pointed out by Vernant or the initiation patterns in legends about the returning heroes of the Trojan War discussed by Bremmer).[11]

The remarkable coherence of the megatext of Greek myth is due in part to the way in which the literary forms in which all extant Greek mythic narrative occurs have already done some of the work of laying bare and developing the implicit logic of the system. Oral narrative in monumental epic, and particularly Homer and Hesiod (as Herodotus pointed out, *Histories* 2.53), further refined and regularized the megatext.[12] Indeed, Homer seems to lay particular stress on the internal coherence of the mythic corpus by linking myths from different parts of the corpus to one another for illustration and paradigmatic analogy:[13] the references to the Theban cycle, the tale of Meleager in *Iliad* 9, the songs of Demodocus in *Odyssey* 8, the cosmogonic myths (whether or not overtly marked as such) in both epics. Even allowing for the originality of an individual genius, Homer is probably developing the systematic coherence already present in the mythic material.

In Greek culture, in any case, the myths come down to us filtered through the nascent semiotic consciousness, or what I have called the "metalingual" consciousness, of the authors on whom we depend for the narratives of these myths. We have no other access to this material. The visual representation of the myths in vase-painting and sculpture presents exactly the same situation. Even the mythological compilations and handbooks of Apollodorus or the mythographers are not innocent of this literary restructuring, for they are themselves drawing upon literary or artistic versions of the myths. To use a linguistic analogy, analysis can reveal some aspects of the *langue*, the synchronic structure of myth as a megatext, beneath the *parole* of the individual works of verbal or visual art which have imposed their secondary aesthetic structure, or to put it differently, have re-coded these structures into their particular "idiolect" of artistic expression.[14]

In the Classical period, with which I am chiefly concerned, Greek myth operates with a set of more or less uniform symbols, culturally defined, whose syntagmatic relations are predominant. The paradigmatic axis remains overlaid by the logical coherence of the syntagmatic. The expression which these myths take in art and literature stays very close to naturalistic representation, wherein the paradigmatic relations are only implicit, rarely explicit. In the balance between the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes that operates in all narrative, Greek art-forms privilege the syntagmatic axis.[15] That is to say, the narrative or the visual depiction stresses temporal and spatial continuity and a well defined series of cause-effect relations among the parts. This "logic" of the syntagmatic relations has, of course, dominated Western art and literature and until recently formed the basis of its naturalistic representation of the world, both in verbal and visual expression.[16] The balance is just the reverse of the iconic form of, say, Byzantine art, where, as Uspensky shows in his semiotic study of the Russian icon, the paradigmatic relation forces itself through the syntagmatic.[17]

The success of the Greeks in promoting the continuous frame of their syntagmatic axis is such that classicists have tended to accept that axis, the naturalistic surface of forward-moving plot-line, as the only legitimate object of study (how many titles like "Plot Coherence in X" or "Narrative Inconsistency in Y" recur in our bibliographies!). Only gradually and recently, partly as a result of structuralist and semiotic analysis, have we begun to stress the paradigmatic level operating through and beneath the syntagmatic axis. Vernant's study of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* or Zeitlin's of the *Seven Against Thebes*, and many of the papers at this conference are

good examples of this recovery of the paradigmatic axis.[18] Reluctantly we have acknowledged that metaphor, image, and symbol contitute "meaning" just as much as the linear progression of the plot.

The special place given to the art of the fifth century B.C., partly as a result of historical and intellectual movements in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (e.g., "classicism"), has also had its share in our collaboration with the Greeks in the assumption of the "naturalness" and inherently "logical" nature of the syntagmatic axis. Archaic art, however, gives a fuller role to the "iconic" aspect of the image and to the paradigmatic relations which accompany it.[19] It relies more heavily than Classical art on a system of relations which are not explained or clarified in the linear or spatial unfolding of the work but become intelligible only through a cross-section of many such works. In some early vase-painting, for example, the hieratic symbol of the goddess of animals, surrounded by her pair of heraldic lions, has been abstracted to a column with a scroll on either side.[20] Or the apotropaic function of the Gorgon-mask in a fairly naturalistic representation of a human face gives way to the eyes alone, represented on the vase with no attempt at subordination into that syntagmatic order of lineaments which would integrate them into a clearly recognized total image of a human face.

I suggest two ways of approaching a semiotic analysis of Greek myth: first through a reconstitution of its symbolic network as a whole; second, through an analysis of certain logical relations in a few characteristic myths.

To take a relatively simple instance of this network, the youth at the transitional point between adolescence and manhood is a recurrent figure in Greek myth: Theseus, Perseus, Telemachus, Orestes, Phaethon, Hippolytus, Actaeon are familiar examples. Their importance obviously reflects concern with the socialization of adolescent energies. These myths have been analyzed anthropologically in terms of rites of passage and psychologically in terms of dependency on a powerful maternal figure (Erich Neumann's "Great Mother").[21] From a semiotic point of view, however, what is interesting is the process of coding which interrelates all of these myths together as common parts of the megatext. In all or most of these myths the youth is a hunter (Hippolytus, Actaeon) or ends up in the wild (Pentheus) or as "hunted" victim (Orestes) or undertakes a journey from home into the unknown, the wilderness, monster-plagued territory (Telemachus, Theseus, Oedipus, Perseus). Structural analysis enables us to decode the form of sequential (diachronic) biographical narrative into a synchronic structure of polarities that underlies the cultural values, an opposition between nature and culture, wild and civilized, bestial and human. The figure of adult male warrior, citizen, and farmer occupies the "civilized" realm as the norm of cultural values, and the not-fully-socialized figures of adolescent youth, child, unmarried woman occupies the opposite pole of the uncivilized or wild. Thus the myth of the young man cannot be viewed in isolation, but is homologous (to use a structuralist term) with the myths which treat the child as a "beast" or view the young girl as an "unyoked" heifer (i.e., an animal not yet fully brought into the realm of domesticated usefulness) or faun or filly that has not yet been ridden. These relations, in turn, parallel the marginal political, religious, and military status of the adolescent figure. In other words, the myths encode that marginality into a number of homologous narrative forms expressing its various aspects in differing, but parallel symbols: place in the wild rather than the city, virginity rather than sexual maturity, adhesion to the mother rather than the father, wandering rather than stability, and so on.

Particularly interesting from a semiotic perspective is the way in which any one of these figures may serve as a paradigm for another. We are dealing here with a coded system of virtually interchangeable symbols. In the story of Pentheus as told by Euripides in the *Bacchae*, for instance, the young man undergoes a failed rite de passage: instead of defending the walls of his city as a stable, disciplined hoplite warrior and proving his rightful place within the city in a patrilinear inheritance, he is made female in his disguise as a female worshipper of the god of madness, brought outside the city walls into the wilderness of the mountains, treated as a hunted beast, defeated by women, reduced to the stage of infancy and even symbolically devoured by his own mother.[22] Not only is there a systematic logical reversal of the positive paradigm of the "megatext," but there is a consciousness of the interrelated wholeness of that text through the example of Actaeon, cited no less than four times as a parallel to Pentheus. The *Odyssey* likewise repeatedly draws elaborate and explicit parallels between Telemachus, who proves his maturity by defending his right to his patrimony, and Orestes, who has defended his patrimony and reestablished the honor of the male line at Mycenae by killing his mother, Clytaemnestra, and her paramour, Aegisthus.

All these youthful figures on the threshold of manhood have a common structural relation such that they become, within certain limits, interchangeable. The parallels between them can be explicit and hortatory (anagogical) as in the *Odyssey*; more or less implicit, as in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* or Euripides' *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae*; or entirely implicit. The

last type is perhaps the most interesting for semiotic analysis, for it reveals the operation of a sub-verbal pattern of narrative structures only.

In Sophocles' *Trachinian Women*, for example, the poet is able to draw on the megatext in order to present the action of the play as suspended between two simultaneous and opposing paradigms, the myth of the *Odyssey* and the myth of the *Oresteia*. We may present their relation to the action diagrammatically thus:

Telemachus ←	Hyllus	→ Orestes
Odysseus ←	Heracles	→ Agamemnon
Penelope ←	Deianeira	→ Clytaemnestra

Deianeira begins as a Penelope-figure, the patiently waiting, faithful wife, but ends up as a Clytaemnestra, the murderous wife who destroys her husband at his homecoming. Heracles seems an Odysseus, off in remote places in the execution of heroic deeds, but he returns as an Agamemnon, a proud and violent man who has destroyed a city and brings back a captive princess as his prize, with little regard for the sanctities of his house or his marriage (note that Odysseus leaves Nausicaa, a potential Cassandra or Iole, on Scheria and returns unaccompanied, his arrival marked by a meeting with the non-sexual, non-seductive virgin, Athena, disguised, in fact, as a male). Hyllus too is strung between the two sets of paradigms. He begins as Telemachus, going off in search of his father as his first step in leaving his mother and the female-dominated household. But he ends up playing the role of Orestes, having to choose between father and mother and in fact asked to collaborate in the killing of his mother in vengeance for his father.

Noteworthy here is that neither Telemachus nor Orestes is ever explicitly mentioned in the play; nor are Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, Odysseus and Penelope. The tragedian can count on the implicit systematicity of the mythic corpus as megatext. Or, to put it differently, he can expect that his audience will be able to re-encode the relations of the characters of his play into the parallel and homologous configurations in the megatext; and he can count on both the interchangeability and the polysemicity of these figures in the megatext. Any individual mythic figure can function as the starting point for a whole nexus of logical relations and subtle modulations between paradigms.

To turn to another set of such relations in this network, a large body of myths deal with sacrifice and especially perverted or distorted sacrifice (e.g., the myths of Atreus and Thyestes or Agamemnon). These myths do not merely justify the rituals, or explain their origins, after the

manner of so-called charter myths or aetiological myths. They must be viewed as part of the same semiotic system, an intricate web of logical relations having to do with the hierarchical ordering of the world biologically (god, man, beast), spatially (Olympus, earth, underworld), eschatologically (immortal, mortal, and dead), dietarily (ambrosia as the food of the gods, grain and the cooked and perishable flesh of animals for mortal men, and the raw food of hunted prey on which wild beasts live).

In such a system an element like "ambrosia," is not just a food, but a symbol with multiple interconnections to a number of other codes, most strikingly to the polarity of mortality and immortality, since etymologically it is exactly cognate with "immortal."[23]

The dynamics of the system, by which an individual mythic figure generates parallels with analogous forms of the same relation elsewhere in the megatext, can be seen from two myths where ambrosia is especially important, the stories of Tithonus, husband of Dawn, and Ganymede, cupbearer of the gods on Olympus. These two myths are correlated as complementary paradigms to the god-mortal union of Anchises and Aphrodite in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*. This early text tells the story of the siring of Aeneas from the union of mortal Anchises and the goddess of love, Aphrodite. Both Tithonus and Ganymede are paradigms for mortal-immortal unions. Taken together with the story of Anchises and Aphrodite, they give that model a further level of meaning and thereby illustrate the over-determination or redundancy characteristic of the encoding of cultural values within this megatext. To put it differently, they encode the message of the subtext (the union of immortal and mortal) into several other sets of terms.

In the narrative of the *Hymn* the interlocking parallels between Ganymede and Zeus, Tithonus and Eos, and Anchises and Aphrodite validate the symmetry between men's separation from the gods by age and death and their approximation to the gods through beauty and the power of eros (a point that Plato will develop in a very different way some three centuries later). Ganymede reaches Olympus and enjoys an eternity of unchanging youth. Tithonus gains an immortality of increasing old age. He is placed not on Olympus but "by Ocean's streams at the limits of earth" (227). Anchises meets his immortal lover, Aphrodite, on the earth, Mt. Ida. He remains mortal, but obtains the equivalent of immortality allowed to mortals, a son who will perpetuate his race from generation to generation, ruling over the Trojans (196-99).[24]

The graduation in the biological code from immortal youth to mortality, heterosexual reproduction, and old age is also encoded into

the parallel codes of space and of food. Ganymede, on Olympus, pours out the gods' immortalizing beverage, "rosy nectar from a golden jar" (206). Tithonus, who gains immortality but not eternal youth, has as his diet an anomalous mixture of "both grain and ambrosia" (*sitōi t' ambrosiēi te*, 232). His abode is neither earth nor Olympus but a place distanced from both, "Ocean's streams at the limits of earth" (226). The anomalous "plus" in the dietary code (*both* grain *and* ambrosia) is symmetrical with a "minus" implicit in the spatial code (*neither* earth *nor* Olympus).

A similar spatial anomaly characterizes the offspring of the union between mortal Anchises and immortal Aphrodite. As the heir to a mortal patrimony, he and his descendants will rule over a city of men. But as the child of a goddess conceived not in a civilized house but in a shepherd's steading on the wild mountainside he will spend his first years of life in the forest, between city and wild, nurtured by Nymphs who live on earth but eat "immortal food" *(ambroton eidar)* and have their long (260) life-span measured by the life of trees in the forest (264-72). Mediating between gods and men as between passionate erotic union and incorporation in regularized civic life, they "follow neither mortals nor immortals" (259), but have as their sexual partners the silenoi (262), who combine the features of gods and beasts, and Hermes, the god of mediation between gods and mortals, Olympus and Hades. Aphrodite's union with Anchises hovers ambiguously between the pure lust of seduction and the sanctions of marriage (cf. 117-42, 150). Luring him by talk of marriage, she makes even legitimate union serve her end of seduction. So too the child born of this union hovers ambiguously between recognition by his parents and concealment by his parents. The mother refuses to allow public recognition of her union with the father, Anchises, and yet like a true mother provides for the child's nurture (*trophē*: cf. 273) and describes prophetically his early years of dependency on her maternal surrogates (273-79). Spatial, sexual, marital, dietary, and biological codes are all correlated in homologies which create a concrete, non-abstract systematicity organizing both natural and supernatural worlds.

The mythical structures of Pindar's Odes lend themselves to similar analysis. In the First *Olympian* the love-relations of Ganymede-Zeus and Pelops-Poseidon in the sexual code are symmetrical with the violated god-mortal relations in the dietary code. Ganymede's successful attainment of Olympus parallels Pelops' dismissal from Olympus. The symmetrical mediations between god and mortal effected by both Ganymede and Pelops (though to different degrees) contrast with the failed mediation of Tantalus. Ganymede is a mortal youth taken up to Olympus by the gods.

Pelops is sent from Olympus down to earth and then, later, allowed to reach the gods through the mortal mediatory forms of eros, ritual, and heroic honors. But Tantalus is sent from Olympus to Hades, beneath the earth, for attempting to bestow the gods' nectar upon his mortal companions. This violation of the god-man boundary in the dietary code is correlated also with the other crime to which the ode alludes, Tantalus' serving his son Pelops as meat to the gods, an act whereby they would be reduced to the subhuman level of cannibals feasting on human flesh (*Ol.* 1.48-54). Stealing and distributing to men the divine prerogative of the immortalizing liquid (*Ol.* 1.55-67), Tantalus evokes another mediating figure in the "megatext," the arch-mediator Prometheus (cf. Hesiod, *Theog.* 535ff.), whose mixture of theft and generosity also involves the establishment of the boundaries and passages between gods and men. Pindar's dense interweaving of paradigmatic analogies both uses and exemplifies the generative order contained in the "megatext" of these myths. He correlates the aesthetic and moral order of truth, poetry, and art with the sexual, dietary, and spatial order in the proper relations between gods and mortals.

In the First *Pythian Ode* that correlation of poetic, spatial, and moral order is made visually concrete in the image of Mt. Aetna as a mythical locus of coinciding opposites, land and sea, fire and water, light and darkness, gentleness and power (cf. *Pyth.* 1.19-26).[25] Constituted as a mythic place, it is a "heavenly column," *kiōn ourania* (19 b), a form of the familiar "cosmic pillar" or *axis mundi*, holding the monster Typhos down under the earth, but also extending upward from Hades through the mortal world of middle earth to Olympus.[26] Here Apollo's golden lyre, "beginning of radiance" (2 a), creates song as a unifying symbol of divine order among men. Drawing probably on the Hesiodic depiction of Typhos as a creature of confused and dissonant voices (*Theogony* 830-35),[27] Pindar sets up an elaborate correlation of cosmic and musical order whose validation and present realization are the musical performance of the Ode itself. In what we may call an auditory or acoustic code, harmony reigns on Olympus through the "beginning of radiance," emanating from Apollo's golden lyre to the voice of the singers and the steps of the dancers (1-4). On earth the song of the poet (Pindar himself) contrasts the praise of lawful rulers with the just blame of bad kings like Phalaris, who tortured his victims by making them roar in a bull of bronze which he had heated by fire (94-98). In the natural order the "heavenly column" of Aetna has its own cacophonous roars as it sends its lava-streams and rocks crashing down into the sea, a sound appropriate to the monster which it keeps down in Tartarus (15, 20-24), but a source of wonder to those who see and hear it (26), for

presumably they have been taught through the Ode's ordering of the meaning of sounds to perceive the moral coherence behind such a monster and prodigy (*teras*, 26).

Pindar's elaborate correlation of song with the hierarchical cosmic order brings the poet's very act of artistic creation into the mythic structure: the "frame" is itself included in the content, the "sender" into the "message." The poet thereby calls attention to his own role as a maker of hierarchies. His own aesthetic ordering of the world is self-consciously drawn into parallelism with the cosmic ordering of Zeus, just as his lyre, the earthly and specific manifestation of Apollo's golden lyre, brings to mortal men the order-bringing, beauty-creating power of the divine lyre on Olympus and makes the festal celebration of the moment transparent to the eternally re-enacted harmony among the gods (cf. 97f. and 1ff.).

Here a strong caveat is necessary. Separating the logical armature of the myth from its function in the literary work risks giving us a thin and partial reading of the text, the skeleton rather than the living flesh. To provide a full analysis of the Homeric *Hymn to Aphrodite*, for example, we would also have to say something about the play of deception which forms the essential nature of the love-goddess as she appears to mortals and acts among mortals. We should say something about the way in which the constellation of lies, mountains, wild beasts, seduction or rape not only forms a part of the cultural codes dealing with marriage and civic life, but also enters into the language of the poem and creates its peculiar tone of playfulness. We should consider how the seductiveness and artful wiles of the goddess are also the seductiveness and artfulness of the poem itself, how the goddess' skillful telling of tales parallels the poet's skillful telling of tales: both of them use a mixture of truth and deception to accomplish their ends and to make of the passing pleasure of the moment something that, perhaps unintentionally, endures within the city and among its descendants. We should also have to pay attention to how these matters impinge upon the formulaic language of early hexameter poetry. We should study the poet's use of and modification of the formulaic attributes and traditional roles of the goddess of love as she appears in her various manifestations in the culture and in earlier poetry, an area where recent work by Gregory Nagy and Paul Friedrich have made important contributions.[28]

II

Greek tragedy is a peculiar form of the megatext, the extended text of Greek myth regarded as a unified corpus. It is simultaneously a commentary on the megatext of the mythic system and the final text of the system; simultaneously the culmination of the system and its dissolution. Tragedy, like epic, correlates paradigms from different parts of the text, as we have seen in the first part of this paper. It specializes in a complicated running together of homologous codes through metaphor and parallel narrative structures (we need think only of the *Oresteia*). More distinctively still, it plays with the logic of the system by working through elaborate reversals of the expected patterns. It prefaces the dynamic syntax of the archaic myths, one could say, with a negative sign. Its semiotic function in the culture may be compared with the concept of the "carnivalesque" in the work of Bakhtin, Kristeva, Toporov or with "liminal" and "liminoid" in work of Victor Turner.[29]

The god of the carnivalesque in Greek culture is also the god of tragedy and comedy: Dionysus. The peculiar relation of Greek tragedy to its mythical material has undoubtedly much to do with the god at whose festival and under whose aegis the plays were performed. Greek tragedy, one might say, places the megatext of myth into the liminal, carnivalesque space occupied by its god. The mediations of opposites which occur in the myths are collapsed together in multiple paradoxes and ironies in the realm of the god whose very nature is a constellation of coexisting contradictions: male and female, young and adult, chthonic and olympian, human and bestial, Asian and Greek, creative and destructive. In tragedy the firm polarities and the clear expression of values in the social order are dissolved in ambiguity, complex inversions and conflicts. Thus the basic moral terms of civilized life become fluid and uncertain or tense with contradictions: "wisdom" and "nature" in the *Bacchae*, "justice" in the *Oresteia* or *Antigone*, "knowledge" in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, "purity" in the *Hippolytus*, and so on.

One reason for this peculiar relation of Greek tragedy to the megatext of myth is the fact that tragedy itself seems to arise at a point when social, political, and moral systems are in crisis or at major crossroads. At such junctures not only value-systems are in flux, but necessarily the modes of discourse that convey, describe, and encode those value-systems. Language and the narrative forms dependent on language inevitably participate in the crisis and the transition. In a recent book on tragedy, Timothy Reiss comments, "In Western history tragedy seems to have appeared at moments that, retrospectively, are marked by a kind of 'hole' in the passage from one dominant discourse to another."[30] The seventy-year period (just two generations) spanned by extant Greek tragedy, which represents its mature creative phase, is clearly such a moment. The passage from one

mode of social discourse to another includes the development of a language of conceptual thought, the languages of history and philosophy which the Greeks shaped for the rest of Western culture, and also a new narrative language of myth: tragedy.

Tragedy pulls the verbal ordering of language and the narrative ordering of myth in two different directions simultaneously: it validates, even if covertly, the established social, political, and religious values of the community, and it also enacts and releases the tensions within and among those values. Because of this double pull inherent in the critical and transitional nature of the mythic discourse in tragedy, it is possible to have a Marxist reading of Greek tragedy as the justification of the Establishment, like that of Peter Rose, and a more deconstructive reading of tragedy as reflecting breaches in the Establishment, like that of Jean-Pierre Vernant.[31]

There is another factor in this transitional moment of Greek tragedy: tragedy develops in Greece at the point of intersection between oral and literate modes of narration and representation. Although writing existed in Greece in early times, earlier narration is primarily oral and audience controlled.[32] With tragedy, I believe, the role of writing becomes decisive in the composition, for tragedy implies a written text, necessary to organize its dense, compact, multimedia performance (dance, music, dialogue, recitation, etc.). Indeed it is possible that the increasing importance of writing in the still largely oral culture of the early fifth century B.C. may have been one of the determinants in the origin of tragedy. The intersection of a literate and an oral culture at this time results in the crossing between two semantic systems and a resultant complexity in the nature of mythic representation.

By the very fact of writing — and I have in mind also *écriture* in Derrida's sense — the poet of a hitherto oral culture is implicated in a system of abstractions which poses a barrier between his text and the univocal "truth" of an oral performance. Whereas the oral poet speaks as a voice of tradition and gives assurance of the validity of that tradition by his authoritative presence as the visible and present speaker or singer, the author of the oral performance of tragedy is absent, hidden behind his text. There is no single voice of "truth." Instead there is a plurality of voices, each with its claim to truth, justice, right, piety, etc.; and there is no authoritative voice which can pronounce unambiguously for any one of these voices, not even the chorus.

As dramatic performance, tragedy represents myth in its most solid, concrete, three-dimensional form, enacted on the stage before us. Yet at

every moment there is a potential division between this surface tangibility and the abyss of illusion, appearances, deception. Tragedy presents a world characterized by a perpetual tension between deceptive surface and hidden truth, between appearance and reality. Poised between full representation and self-conscious fictionality, tragedy simultaneously culminates and dissolves the semiotic system behind the mythical material it uses.

This division between a surface world of illusion and a truth which lies beneath rests in part on the crossing between the two sign-systems in its background, a verbal and a visual, a hidden text of written signs and a public, open oral performance. The poet himself is operating in two different semantic systems, two different modes of communication, one (the oral) involving a social transaction of participation and exchange, the other (written) involving the abstractive distancing of *écriture*. "Writing is the grand symbol of the far," wrote Oswald Spengler.[33] Hence the representation of myth in tragedy hovers between distance and closeness at the same time.[34] In the *Trachinian Women*, for example, Sophocles brings on the stage a woman endowed with the civilized sensibilities of fifth-century Athens, someone whom the audience would have no trouble identifying as a contemporary. Yet she lives in a world where river-gods, Hydras, Centaurs, the primordial monsters subdued by Heracles are still recent and fresh.

Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* is simultaneously the most powerful instance of tragedy's divided world of appearance and reality, illusion and truth, and also the most elaborate example of tragedy's inversions of the coded systems in the "mega-text" of Greek myths. It involves not only the reversal of King and Scapegoat, as Vernant has pointed out,[35] but a kind of *rite de passage* in reverse. The king, recovering the origins of his life, finds his place not within the palace as the legitimate king's son — the usual pattern for the foundling hero like Theseus, Perseus, Cyrus, or Ion — but in the wilderness as the polluted murderer, patricide, and incestuous husband of his mother, the total negation of the ordering power that should attach to the role of sacred kingship. These reversals are correlated with complex reversals in the nature of language and syntax, including the interchangeability of divine oracle and bestial shrieking of the monstrous Sphinx and the intricate double meanings of riddling speech in the celebrated "tragic irony" of Sophocles.

The *Oedipus'* self-consciousness about the logical patterning and its reversibility inherent in the syntax of language is paralleled by an analogous self-consciousness of reversibility in the "syntax" of the narrative structure, which Freud extrapolated as a universal to the "life-plot" of the human condition in general.[36] The coincidences which seem to guide

the plot, accidentally, to its necessary conclusion also image the "coincidences," the coming together of disparate elements *(syntychia)* through which the poet shapes his work, interweaves and interconnects the separate elements of the narrative, the isolated incidents, into a unified design. In the story of Oedipus, then, Sophocles projects upon heroic myth the syntax of tragedy, the "coincidental" coming-together of "accidents" into a fully bound and integrated form that conveys a sense of necessity, of inevitability. Here again tragedy constitutes at the same time both the fullest exemplification of the interlocking system of the "megatext" of myth and the deepest questioning of its coherence.

The very subject of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is polysemicity. No work of classical literature probably pays so much attention to its own semiotic system. It pursues the logic of its inversions with the inexorability that Aristotle, founder of logical systematization, could never admire enough. Like the *Bacchae*, which it resembles in this self-conscious exploitation of logical reversal, it treats kinship as a system of logical relation and logical relation as a form of kinship. It explores the sexual roots of knowledge, the sexualization of knowledge and the intellectualization of sexuality. Oedipus' search for himself is both man's emotional need to grasp origins and man's intellectual need for orientation in the otherness of the world through systems of relational logic like kinship. Confusion in the generational code (incest) is parallel to confusion in the linguistic code (riddle and oracle coming together, the multiple ambiguities of Oedipus' name and its origins as *oidi-pous* [swell-foot], *oida-pous* [know-foot], *oida-pou* [know-where], *oi-dipous* [alas, two-footed]). Incestuous marriage (denial of the father) means the denial of the hierarchizing and differentiating processes that operate both in language and in the social order to create personal identity and personal responsibility. Brought back to his origins by replacing his father, "sowing where he was sown," Oedipus questions the whole enterprise of culture, in which men mark the otherness of the phenomenal world and separate themselves from the nameless, random life of nature.

At the center of a semiotic system which is both too full and yet always threatening to disintegrate into emptiness, Oedipus is a constellation of opposites where the ambiguity of the individual's primal word, his name, implicates the entire denotational, differentiating system of language itself.[37] As a focal point for the equivalency of the codes (familial, sexual, cognitional, biological, spatial, ritual), the myth exhibits and explores its own polysemicity with particular transparency; concurrently it explores its own a-semicity, the precariousness of signification, and the possibility

that language may point to meaninglessness or deceive by the false appearances of meaning.

It is partly for this reason that Oedipus can be and has been interpreted in so many different systems with equal validity: psychoanalytic, linguistic, political, historical, religious, structuralist, etc. The very problem of his existence, as posed in the myth, is the problem of language: language crystalizes self and world into static forms; yet these very forms have the changing aspect of things always in flux. Oedipus himself can be defined by his name only when the play has taken us through a powerful and painful experience which reveals the deceptiveness of language as an interpreter of reality and as a mediator between apparently steady surface and ever-shifting depths, between truth and appearance. Myths like this, which reflect (literally, bend back) upon themselves, on their own narrative syntax and its reversibility in this way, seem to have the remarkable quality of deconstructing themselves. Certain myths, at least — I would put here those of Oedipus and Pentheus — reveal and explore the mechanisms for the deconstruction of the system of myth and the system of language out of which they themselves grew. The simultaneous utilization and questioning of these systems constitute perhaps the most distinctive feature of the recasting of myth in tragedy, carried to its furthest point in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

The *Tyrannus* shows how tragedy, as a secondary elaboration of myth, can tell its story while deliberately calling into question one of the most fundamental elements of mythic narration, the representation of time. Sophocles' play virtually deconstructs the myth by revealing the illusoriness of temporal progression in the story. The forward movement of the hero, driven (like the audience) by a curiosity both intellectual and sexual, both public and intimate, takes a path that is linear (because it marks an advance into the future) and simultaneously circular (because it reveals the present only as a repetition of the past, gripped at every point by the domination of past events which it cannot transcend). The push toward solution and closure becomes, at every point, an increasingly intense involvement in origins, opening wider gaps and larger spaces of the past. Each of the hero's conquests in the forward movement of his life, like each movement of the plot to a new episode, is only a clearer revelation of a hidden past, secrets of birth which prove more elusive the closer he gets. When Oedipus recovers his city and his mother by ignorantly solving the riddle of the Sphinx, he is blind to the real truth of himself. Beneath his alien status as victor and foreign husband he conceals the truth of his origins as legitimate son and heir. The remote past, with the blood-ties that should assure him

an intimate place in both house and city, cancels out the present, in which he possesses wife and kingdom after fulfilling the role of the young conquering hero (like Perseus or Theseus) who arrives from a distant land.

As he uncovers his hidden origins, the tale of the birth of a child is also the discovery of a hushed attempt to murder a child.[38] The discovery of a father is also the discovery of killing a father. Finding his mother becomes the finding of himself as the husband of his mother, father of her children. Each discovery of origins opens upon something that must be immediately closed; the recovery of lost knowledge demands a closing up and concealment of that knowledge. Oedipus becomes the "reader" of a tale who discovers at its end that he is the missing piece which alone can bring it to its conclusion. Yet only the delay, by refusal of that discovery (a refusal that sometimes seems blind and perverse), allows the tale to unfold at all.[39]

At the peripety, blinding himself with the brooches that he takes from Jocasta's robe, Oedipus reenacts the unraveling and unconcealing that pull every forward progress back to dark origins. His act of self-blinding brings with it the implication of baring (again) his mother's body, but it now gives him an inner vision that he lacked before. This penetration, by both feet and eyes, to places that should have remained hidden from him reveals to him the truth of his equivocal status as both the insider and the outsider and the transgressive status of his ambiguously legitimate place within the house and within the city.[40]

The paradoxes surrounding the hero's discoveries parallel the paradoxes surrounding the kind of truth that the tragic poet reveals: this is a truth that intertwines darkness and clarity in our knowledge of ourselves and our place in the world. Spinning a web of pleasant deceptions, *apatai* in Gorgias' sense (82 B 23 DK), the tragic poet reveals behind the delightful surface, the *terpsis* or *hēdonē*, of myth the ugly, painful, or shameful things that we know but cannot or will not speak. In the *Tyrannus* both the hero in his life-story and language in the permutations which it undergoes in the course of the play have their *pathē*, their sufferings. In both, an ultimately sexual mechanism of allure and seduction, the curiosity to see and experience, is transformed into the recognition of a horror that is simultaneously repulsive and fascinating. With the hero we, the audience, are drawn on in increasing desire to see and to know, even as we recognize more and more certainly that there will be pain, not pleasure, in what we will see. Uncovering the body of Jocasta in the intimate inner chambers of the palace near the end is the prelude not to a night of nuptial pleasure, but to a perpetual night of guilty, tormenting knowledge.

In the *Bacchae*, as in the *Oedipus*, tragedy emerges as the form able

to encompass its own contradiction, able to hold a delicate counterpoise between the creative and destructive energies of life and the centripetal and centrifugal forces of all (mythical) narrative. The god of tragedy asks the protagonist of the *Bacchae*, also deluded by appearances and fascinated by secrets that a mother would keep concealed, "Would you then see with pleasure what is bitter to you?" (ὅμως δ' ἴδοις ἂν ἡδέως ἃ σοι πικρά; *Ba.* 815). Here Euripides explores not only the systematic inversions made possible by the reversible syntax of the myth of Pentheus — shifts of active to passive, god to beast, highest to lowest, and so on — but also the relation of these reversals to the form that myth assumes in tragedy, that is, myth in the liminal, carnivalesque space of Dionysus.

The structure here is not a static antithesis, but rather a tensely maintained harmony of opposites, like that described in the celebrated fragment of Heraclitus (22 B 51 DK): "They do not understand how being drawn apart from itself it agrees with itself; a back-stretched harmonious fitting, as of a bow and lyre." The inner dynamics of the play show the capacity of the aesthetic form to absorb the destructiveness of the contents and the power of those contents to call into question and to disturb the beauty of the aesthetic form.

The *Bacchae* maintains this "back-stretched harmony" between the life-giving and the life-destroying power in Dionysus and in the myths about Dionysus. There is a just and an unjust Pentheus, a just and unjust Dionysus, a terrible and a gentle god, a lyrically mystical and a savagely murderous band *(thiasos)* of Bacchants, a play that calls to the remote beauty of ecstatic worship of the life-energies in the world and in ourselves and a play that makes us recoil with revulsion from the release of those energies. Euripides' tragic art makes both sides visible in their simultaneity, complementarity, and inseparability.

The play, by its very existence, marks the place where the destructive side of the Dionysiac energies of both god and story-teller have been overcome by the creative, the place where those energies have resisted desublimation and have been transformed into implements of civilization, into a token of personal reflection on the god and his rites. Coming at the end of the creative phase of Greek tragedy, the *Bacchae* reflects on the origin and nature of tragedy, on that point where art separates out from ritual. The *Bacchae* also reflects on the destructiveness of the rite and dramatizes the emergence of self-conscious suffering and remorse out of the group participation in the Dionysiac omophagy, the emergence of the individual from the group, and with that the emergence of tragedy from myth.

The vicarious representation of the Dionysiac ritual within the city

limits at the Greater Dionysia replaces the celebration of the rites in the ecstatic thiasos on Cithaeron. Were those rites celebrated with full exuberance on the mountain and in the forest, without resistance, without reflection or hesitation, there would be no tragedy, perhaps no civilization. In the participation in the rites of the god in the *oreibasia*, the nocturnal revel on the mountain, there is no residue; everything is used up, joyously, in the moment of fusion with the god and in participation in nature's vital energies. In the performance of the rite in its symbolic and vicarious form in the theater of Dionysus, there remains the tragedy which survives for future ages to ponder. In this celebration the participants sit immobile in their seats; and the action is entirely mental and inward, a complex, many-sided reflection on the rites that were or might be performed with the fullest, most energetic action outside on the mountains.

Tragedy is a form of myth which not only uses, illustrates, and interweaves the codes, but also reflects on the implicit logic of the whole mythical system. In the *Bacchae* Euripides has tragedy act out, in the visual form of dramatic representation, its own illusion-creating processes of masking, robing, and fiction-making. The great scene where Dionysus, god of dramatic illusion as well as of wine, madness, and religious ecstasy, dresses the young king as a Maenad on the stage, visually enacts that process of fictional representation which the poet practices. The scene mirrors back to the audience their own willingness to endow an actor on the stage with the personage of a mythical being merely by virtue of the mask and robes with which the poet clothes him.

At the end of the *Bacchae*, Agave enters in her madness carrying the bloody head of Pentheus. Cadmus asks, "Whose *prosōpon* do you carry in arms?" (1277). His word *prosōpon* can mean "face" or "visage," but it can also mean "mask." It calls attention to the illusionistic process of the play itself, the use of "masks" to represent "faces." It also marks a certain progression in the mimetic representation of the fiction being acted out on the stage before us. There is the "face" of Pentheus, which is really a "mask" (the double meaning of *prosōpon*), over which Dionysus has placed the wig and cap of a Maenad, in which Agave sees the head of a savage lion. — "Do you see that cloud that's almost in shape like a camel? — By the mass, and it's like a camel indeed. — Methinks it's like a weasel. — It is back'd like a weasel. — Or like a whale? — Very like a whale." (*Hamlet* III.iii.393ff.). After playing a number of mutually contradictory roles — king and scapegoat, hunter and hunted, antagonist of the god and sacrificed victim-surrogate of the god, authoritarian monarch and ambiguously female Bacchant, Pentheus is finally reduced to being an empty mask, carried by his mother who thinks that she is carrying the head of a lion.

Tragedy, then, develops the deconstructive potential inherent, perhaps, in all myth and indeed in all narrative. Emerging at a unique historical moment when the traditional values of an oral culture are increasingly subjected to the critical spirit fostered by literacy and when the relatively secure hierarchies of the archaic world-order are tested and reexamined, tragedy experiments with the reversal or violent interweaving of the codes of the social order and deconstructs the system to show the hidden logic of its workings. It can even represent the zero-degree of signification, when the relations are so densely interwoven, the description so "thick" (to use Clifford Geertz's term)[41] that signification itself is called into question, as in the scene of Cassandra's prophecy in the *Agamemnon* (1072-1177). Unlike more static cultures, the Greeks of the classical period were able to incorporate into their narrative systems this process of reflexivity and its ambiguous potential for negating the logic of those narrative systems. It is, however, one of the most remarkable qualities of the megatext of the mythical narratives that it could expand to assimilate its own negations and reversals.

Tragedy stands at the intersection of two opposing relations to its mythical material: the further expansion of the mythic megatext as it generates fresh narratives from the old matrices and the continual questioning, analyzing, and even negating of the mythical models. This elasticity of the myths is perhaps latent in the dynamic potential of the system from the beginning, that quality which could generate the kind of paradigmatic relation so characteristic of Greek mythic literature from its earliest times.

For this metalingual and metaliterary functioning of myth in tragedy, structural and semiotic analysis has much to contribute. It can reveal not only the interlocking of relations in the symbolic systems formed by the myths, but can also help analyze the clash of value-systems, the functioning of the sign-systems, and particularly those metaliterary levels where the text calls attention to its own fragility and artificiality as a construct of signs and symbols. Tragedy is a form of mythical narrative that makes overt its own deliberateness as a device of the human intellect to keep out chaos, or in other terms, to deny death, resist entropy and its symbolic equivalent in language: disorder, incoherence, unintelligibility, non-meaning, meaninglessness. It thereby re-inscribes that potential disorder and chaos into the structured nature of human life with that safe danger whose paradox is the paradox of tragedy.[42]

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NOTES

[1] Blanchard 1980.

[2] See Cook 1980. Intro. and chs. 2 and 11. For the question of narrative discourse in myth and other forms of discourse see Vernant 1974.214ff.

[3] Barthes 1972.113ff.; see also Hawkes 1973.131ff. Lotman 1977.9ff. speaks of "secondary modeling systems," and see also his remarks on "recoding," 35ff.

[4] See Atchity 1978.

[5] E.g., *Od.*11.368 and 21.405ff.; also *Il.*9.186ff. See Rüter 1969.237f.; Segal 198-.

[6] See Segal 1978.106-42. esp. 114-21.

[7] See Peradotto 1969a and 1969b; Zeitlin 1981 and 198-; Vidal-Naquet 1981.129ff.

[8] See Van Looy 1973.345-66; Segal 1982b; and Quincey 1963.142-48 on Aeschylus and Pindar.

[9] E.g., Democritus 68 B 9 and 125 DK. See in general Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1907. ad v. 56; Heinemann 1945.156-62; Guthrie 1969.204ff.

[10] For "displaced" and "undisplaced" narrative forms see Frye 1976.36ff.

[11] See Slater 1968, passim; Vernant 1972.101-31; Bremmer 1978.5-38.

[12] See Burkert 1979.141. For indications of the mythic corpus prior to Homer see Webster 1964, ch. 6 and Dietrich 1974, with the bibliography. For some scholars Hesiod already represents an intermediate stage between oral myth and the systematizing of written narrative: see Havelock 1978.193ff. and Vernant 1974.208f.

[13] See Willcock 1964.141-54; also Braswell 1971.16-26.

[14] Some scholars prefer Chomsky's terms, "competence" and "performance" to Saussure's *langue* and *parole*, as P. Fabbri pointed out at the conference out of which the present volume was developed; but the latter remain serviceable. For discussion see Turner 1975.149-50; Peradotto 1979.5-6.

[15] For a lucid account of syntagmatic and paradigmatic in a classical context see Peradotto 1974.818ff.

[16] For the bias toward "realistic" conventions of narrative see Frye 1976.44ff. *A propos* of Shakespeare's *Pericles* he remarks (44): "The play shows us nothing at all about the relation of fiction to reality: what it shows us is that some conventions of storytelling are more obsessive than others."

[17] Uspensky 1976.ch.1.

[18] See above, note 7; Vernant 1972.101-31.

[19] The shift of emphasis from classical to archaic art-forms, which may be discerned, e.g., in Nietzsche's influential *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), ushers in a new, "modern" phase of critical values: see Silk and Stern 1981.33-37.

[20] In Hirmer and Arias 1962, e.g., cf. the Boeotian "Potnia Theron" (plate 11) or the figure on the neck of the François Vase (plate 46, top), with the lions on the neck of the late geometric Cycladic amphora (color plate V). Cf. the suggestive remarks on the symbolic interchangeability of human form and architectural column by Kaschnitz-Weinberg 1944.22ff., with figs. 15-16.

[21] Neumann 1954.ch.2. For a "decoding" of these myths in terms of cultural, narrative, and historical patterns see Vidal-Naquet 1968.49-64; Fontenrose 1980. For a good survey of modern approaches and cross-cultural comparisons see Brelich 1969.13-112.

[22] See Segal 1982a.ch.6.

[23] For this kind of homology between the biological, sexual and dietary codes see Detienne 1972.passim. esp. chs. 1 and 5.

[24] For further details see Segal 1973/4.205-12 and Segal 1981a.22-24.

[25] on *Pyth.* 1, see Norwood 1945.101-05; Skulsky 1975.8-31.

[26] On the "cosmic pillar" see Eliade 1958.265ff.; on its place in *Pyth.* 1, see Segal 1981a.22. In Aeschylus, *PV* 363-69 too the monster's subjection to Zeus' order spans the "roots" and "highest crown" of Aetna.

[27] Von Mess 1901.167-74 notes the Hesiodic parallels but is not interested in their implications. See Vernant and Detienne 1974.90f., 115f.

[28] Nagy 1973.137-78; Friedrich.1978.

[29] See Bakhtin 1970; Kristeva 1969/78.99ff.; Toporov 1978.333-52; Carrière 1979.22ff.; Turner 1973 and 1974.

[30] Reiss 1980.284.

[31] Rose 1978.77-94; Vernant 1972.13-17, 21-40, and 1974.205f. On the danger of viewing Greek tragedy as reflecting the ideas and values of a ruling class or dominant elite see Saïd 1981.73. From a different point of view, it is possible that tragedy can be seen in this double perspective because of its own never fully resolved tension between a wisdom of limits *(sophrōsynē)* and an admiration for the unlimited aspirations of heroism: see Terzakis 1979.189.

[32] See Havelock 1978, passim; Cook 1980.6ff.; Vernant 1974.196-200.

[33] Quoted and discussed by Goody and Watt 1968.55.

[34] For a somewhat different view of this relation of closeness and distance in the relation of tragedy to myth see Vernant 1974.205f.; also Rösler 1980.312ff. For a fuller discussion of these questions in relation to tragedy and literacy see Segal 1982c.

[35] Vernant 1972.117ff.

[36] Brooks 1977.280-300.

[37] See Segal 1981a.241-44; also 1981b.151-63.

[38] Felman 1977.161f. quotes an interesting passage from Serge Leclair, *On tue un enfant*: "Insupportable est la mort de l'enfant: elle réalise le plus secret et le plus profond de nos voeux. . . ."

[39] Felman 1977.175 has some interesting remarks on the parallelism of the *OT* as a detective story and Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*.

[40] See Hay 1978.104ff., 119, 125; Pucci 1979.130-33.

[41] Geertz 1973.3-30 and 412-53.

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OF MOTIFEMES AND MEGATEXTS: COMMENT ON RUBIN/SALE AND SEGAL

GLENN W. MOST

Twenty years ago, articles of the kind represented by the two under consideration here could scarcely have been conceived. Ten years ago, they would probably have been written in French. Their publication now by American scholars in a special issue of an American journal with the programmatic title "Semiotics and the Classics" is an event of some importance. It suggests that the influx of Continental European, primarily French theoretical speculation and practical innovation which, in American Classics, had hitherto been indicated by scattered articles and by the translation of works by such authors as Detienne, Vernant, and Vidal-Naquet, has reached the point at which its American recipients can assert a new self-consciousness and self-confidence. It is about time: in other fields the wave has long since crested. Classical philology, marked as she so often has been by a kind of Anglo-Prussian dowdiness, has traditionally been more sceptical of fads and trends than her more fashion-conscious younger sisters. Yet the understanding of ancient culture has been greatly benefited in the past by the eventual introduction of concepts and methodologies from other disciplines like anthropology, sociology, and psychology (to name only these), and there is every reason to believe a cross-fertilization with semiotics will flower, here as it has done elsewhere, in refreshed interpretations of familiar texts, in bright light upon what had never before been recognized to be shadows, in new questions and new ways to answer them.

But this is an occasion not only for celebration. Transitions are no less precarious than continuities; indeed, they lack even the minimal safeguards with which habit and inherited experience protect the latter. Caution, too, is called for, lest into the festive exuberance of novelty slip covert errors which will be much harder to eradicate later or hasty claims whose inevitable unfulfillment will frustrate advocates and gladden opponents. The criticisms that follow may occasionally seem stringent: their rigor is dictated by the potential seriousness of their occasion.

I

In essence, the article by Rubin and Sale (hereafter: Rubin/Sale)

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