

Oedipus as figure

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It is probable, or at the very least plausible, that Western humanity now models itself on two figures or types – two ‘examples’, if you like. They appear to be antagonistic (or are at least supported by antagonistic discourses), but their antagonism also binds together, and founds, their kinship, as each of these figures or types claims to provide an exclusive representation of humanity as such.

The first of these figures is the older and obviously the more powerful in terms of its social, political and historical effects: the figure of the worker, in the sense in which it was expressly designated and thematized by Ernst Jünger, but also in the sense that it is supported by the entire social metaphysics of the nineteenth century, and especially by the thought of Marx in its entirety. Under its influence or impact, the essence of humanity – *humanitas* – recognizes itself, understands itself and tries to realize itself as the subject of production (the modern *poiesis*) in general or as the subject of *energy* in the strict sense: energy that is applied and put to work. In this figure, ‘man’ is represented as worker.

The second figure is less obvious, even though its figural or mythical determination is no less clear. This does not mean that its effects are less powerful, but it does mean that, thanks to a structural necessity, they are concealed: they are inscribed in the element of history and politics (but not society) in a less immediately readable manner. They have a kind of ‘infra’ or ‘hypo’ (‘sub’) status, and therefore pertain more clearly to the order of the *subjectum* in general. I refer, of course, to the figure of Oedipus in the sense that, ever since Freud, ‘Oedipus’ has been the name of desire, and in the sense that the figure of Oedipus represents the subject of desire. Which necessarily means: desire as subject. Desire is not the opposite of labour in the same way that consumption is the opposite of production. That crude opposition has had its day. But the fact that desire, like production, is consumed may mean that desire itself is a form of production or energy. It was probably a mistake to speak of a libidinal economy. I do not know if that was enough to reach the unique root from which the antagonism between desiring man and working man springs, or should spring. And nor do I know if we now have, given the current state of affairs, the ability to find that root. I would, however, like

to take a step in that direction. Just a step, or in other words a very first step.

Heidegger has the distinction of having begun to deconstruct the figure of the Worker.¹ In doing so, he began to deconstruct the figural in general, or to deconstruct everything that modern ontology elevated to the rank of *Gestalt*, figure or type, when, abandoning its claim to be an onto-theology, it transformed itself into an onto-anthropology or, as I have suggested elsewhere, an onto-typology.² This figure or type is, making due allowance for the reversal of transcendence into 'rescendence' (the expression is Heidegger's) that we can observe in Feuerbach and Marx as well as Nietzsche, a strict equivalent to the Platonic *idea*. The figure or *Gestalt* of the Worker is understood by Heidegger as being one of the modes in which the essence of technology is deployed, or in other words as one of the modes of *Ge-stell*. The word designates the unity of coming together of all the modes of *Stellen*, 'formulating' or '(re)presenting' in general, from *Vorstellung* to *Gestalt*. It therefore designates being in its last *envoi*.

No such deconstruction of the figure of Oedipus has been attempted. It is usually ignored as a figure and viewed solely as a structure. The deconstruction of the Oedipal structure was and is still necessary. Just as it was necessary for the Freudian interpretation of the myth to be rigorously delineated. And yet it is perhaps just as necessary to look at the very simple, almost anodyne, gesture whereby Freud appropriates a mythical name and erects it into a concept, a schema or, as I believe, a figure. After all, that gesture is no more innocent than the gesture whereby Nietzsche decides to make Zarathustra the figure of the Will to Power (and the spokesman for the Eternal Return). And it is all the less innocent in that Nietzsche is never very far behind Freud. The question I would like to raise is therefore as follows: what necessity was Freud obeying when he turned to Oedipus and elevated him to the rank of figure? Just what was it that this mythical or post-mythical figure supported that made Freud think of appropriating it?

Freud himself is quite explicit about the many good reasons for recognizing the history or prehistory of desire in the myth. He also makes it perfectly clear that the mythical in general has to be resolutely taken into account. On the other hand, he never takes the trouble to re-examine the apparent spontaneity of his major gesture: subsuming everything to do with his discovery under the name of Oedipus and thus making that name the emblem of psychoanalysis itself because that name can be regarded as the name of the very

subject of the unconscious. And yet the gesture was not without its consequences.

The suspicion – or rather the hypothesis – I would like to put forward is therefore this, and it can be formulated without too many precautions: the reason why Oedipus has become a figure in this way is that Oedipus could take on the status of a figure. A figure is not simply what it signifies or what we say it means. A figure is a figure only because it *imposes itself* as such and because it can have that *position*, or in other words the position of an *idea* that has been inverted or reversed. A figure necessarily has an ontological status in the metaphysical sense of that term. To put it in different terms: the fact that Oedipus is a figure is none of Freud's doing, or not just Freud's doing. It is the result of an ontology that pre-exists Freud, and that may also provide a support for what he always described as the fortuitous outcome of pure research.

The question is therefore: what predisposed Oedipus to take on the status of a figure? What authorized Freud's gesture? And my hypothesis – though it is merely a first hypothesis – is as follows: before becoming, no doubt jointly and severally, the figure of desire and science, Oedipus was already a figure; perhaps not the figure of desire, but certainly the figure of science. Oedipus was a figure in philosophy, and the figure of philosophy. Which probably means that Oedipus was also the figure of a desire: the desire for what philosophy, because of the very name it gives itself, claims to take as its object: 'love'. *Sophon* is one of the words, but not the only word, that the Greeks used for 'knowledge'. And perhaps – who knows? – loving means desiring.

There appears, in other words, to be a prehistory of 'the Oedipus'. A philosophical prehistory of 'the Oedipus'. Oedipus seems to have been considered the philosophical hero par excellence: the man in whom, or the man in whose destiny, all the inner meanings of the West's spiritual quest come together in a symbolic sense; he appears to have been recognized as the initial or tutelary hero of our history and our civilization. Within that history and within that civilization, the West is therefore described as 'Oedipal'. The name 'Oedipus', which is one of his names or at least one possible translation of his name, appears to have been a name for the West.

Just now, I alluded to a determinate moment in our history or in the history of thought. Truth to tell, and although this occurred before the sudden rise of psychoanalysis, Oedipus or the name 'Oedipus' entered philosophy somewhat late in the day. So late, in fact, that his entrance coincided with the moment when

philosophy was beginning to believe that its end was near, that the questions that it had brought into being over two thousand years ago were on the point of receiving a definitive answer, or in short that a certain history, if not history itself to the extent that it was the history of thought, was coming to an end or a finish: the 'programme' had been completed. That is why Oedipus, who, for the Greeks themselves and at the inaugural moment of our history was the incarnation of the archaic, and referred to the darkest realms of a prehistory, became in reality, when philosophy appropriated him, a figure of the end and of completion. Or, which amounts to the same thing, he is, henceforth, the definitive figure of origins: Oedipus is the man in whom and according to whom the destiny of the West was sealed for ever.

This is the moment when philosophy finds its most 'appropriate' name outside itself (and, for instance, no longer recognizes itself, or recognizes itself less and less, in the name of Socrates). This is the moment, that is, when philosophy begins to seek its symbolic mark in its oldest antagonist – myth – and in doing so finds that it can board it for inspection. The moment when philosophy goes in search of a figure is the moment in its history that follows the most serious *crisis* that has ever affected philosophy: this is the moment that follows Kant's *critique* of metaphysics, and it sees philosophy attempting, no doubt for the first time, to find a new self-confidence and to restore itself to what it once was by overcoming the apparently final verdict that Kant had pronounced against it. Oedipus therefore appears at a truly tragic moment – it is the destiny of philosophy, or metaphysics to be more accurate, that is at stake – and, as in the myth, he appears in order to resolve a crisis. He appears like a *pharmakos*, and with all the ambivalence that surrounds that ritual character. It so happens that the crisis is 'symbolic': it is a crisis within thought. But perhaps – who knows? – the social crisis reflected in the myth is no longer a symbolic crisis. Perhaps the symbolic crisis that occurs in philosophy at the end of the eighteenth century is very directly related to the immense political crisis that threw Europe into upheaval after the French Revolution. The Schlegels of this world, at least, made no distinction between the two.

Aristotle

How did Oedipus' entry into philosophy come about? Why and how did philosophy go in search of him or seek him out? What was it that he represented that made him the incarnation of the hope that the crisis

could be resolved, or that a model for its resolution could be found?

Truth to tell, Oedipus was already present within philosophy prior to this late moment – or, perhaps, before this terminal phase in philosophy in the strict sense which, for us, begins with German idealism. The name was already in circulation – and had been for a very long time; at least since Aristotle. I think that we have to dwell on this for a moment; otherwise we are in danger of failing to understand the meaning of the 'Oedipal operation' undertaken by German idealism.

It was indeed Aristotle – and you know how long his authority held sway over thought – who made Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* what might be described as the definitive model for tragedy, the tragedy par excellence, or the tragedy of tragedies. He does so in the *Poetics*, which, as you know, attempts to define the specificity of tragedy within that specific form of *mimesis* known as the theatrical or the dramatic, or in other words the (re)presentation of human actions (the representation of a *mythos*). Aristotle introduces the question of its *telos*, its intended goal or final purpose. In his opinion, *mimesis* itself, which is 'natural to all men' and therefore truly human, has a very specific function: that of teaching us to see and 'theorize' (and here there is an obvious link with 'theatre'). *Mimesis* predisposes us to think and to know; it has a philosophical vocation. But it does not just have a theoretical function; or, rather, that theoretical function is also an economic function (with knowledge, an economy, if not the economy itself which is established): *mimesis* is also capable, according to Aristotle, of making bearable the sight (and this again is a matter of 'theory') of what we would find repulsive in the real world. The representation of, say, a corpse is bearable. In more general terms, the spectacle of death frightens us less than death itself and allows us to look at it (and therefore to think about it). Bataille will use this as an argument against Hegel. This function, which is the direct corollary of the theoretical function, is none other than *katharsis* – purgation or purification, not that the distinction matters greatly here (it is always a matter of driving out evil). *Mimesis* in fact acts like homeopathic medicine; to shift register, it functions like a sacrifice that uses a simulacrum or subterfuge to drive out social violence by spectacularly projecting the violence and murderous desires onto an animal. It is because it is theoretico-theatrical that *mimesis* is cathartic and, if you like, that it can provide a cure. We are within the space of what Jacques Derrida calls 'economimesis'.³

The exemplary instance of economimesis is tragedy, which is in Aristotle's view the highest form of art. And within tragedy, it is illustrated in exemplary fashion by Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. For tragedy is, according to Aristotle, the social or political art par excellence (which should be understood as meaning the art that deals with the essentials of human *praxis*) and its task it to drive out the evil that affects human relations. That is why it plays simultaneously upon the two basic passions implicit, because of their very possibility, in any human relationship: fear, which is the passion inspired by the dissolution of the social bond, by unbinding or dissociation; and pity, which is in contrast the passion that inspires social relations, if not – as Rousseau thought – the primal passion of sociality. The tragic spectacle must discharge – in the sense that Freud will use that term, which derives directly from Aristotle – fear and pity. (This is easy to understand when it comes to fear, but much less so when it comes to pity. But if we reread Freud's *Mas-enpsychologie*, we find that an excess of love poses at least as great a threat to the social body as hatred.) This is why the tragic spectacle must (re)present a myth that can bring about this (twofold) discharge, or in other words the actions of a man who can inspire both fear and pity. The true tragic hero must, in other words, be both – and simultaneously – frightening and touching. He must inspire fear and still, because

sense, comes about, that is, when guilt (responsibility for a sin) and innocence come together in one and the same being; when the myth is based upon the figure of contradiction, oxymoron (innocent guilt) or even paradox (the greater the guilt, the greater the innocence and vice versa). That is why the story of Oedipus, who pays the price for a sin he has committed without knowing it – who quite simply pays the price for his non-knowledge and whose desire for knowledge reveals the horror of his destiny – is the tragic myth at its highest degree of perfection.

All these things are well known. I recall them only to point out that, from philosophy's point of view, what is in play here explains not only why, until Nietzsche and Freud (and even until Heidegger after them), *Oedipus Rex* was regarded as the model for tragedy, but also why philosophy was able to seize hold of the myth, make it its own and promote Oedipus to being the very figure of philosophy. There are two main reasons for this – and they are certainly not the only ones.

On the one hand, the very structure and finality of tragedy, as analysed by Aristotle, this whole theoretico-cathartic mechanism (of knowledge and salvation) and therefore this economic mechanism, predispose tragedy to fulfil the two great functions of philosophy (Aristotle's rival was quite right about this): the theoretical and the practical, or, if you prefer to put it that way, the speculative and the ethico-political.

In that respect, it is not at all surprising that for the young Nietzsche, for example, the insistent recall of the Oedipal motif went hand in hand with the definition of philosophy as 'the doctor of culture' and with the political hope that tragedy would enjoy a renaissance in the modern West (and in Germany).

On the other hand, and what is more important, the fact that tragedy is already politically oriented implies that tragedy is the site for the revelation of the very essence of knowledge and the inspiration behind the desire for knowledge: the

encounter with contradiction. In general. And that, it appears to me, is the basic reason why Oedipus reappears in philosophy at the moment when philosophy, in the person of Kant, reveals the contradictions to which human reason is exposed when it goes beyond its own limits, goes beyond the limits of finite experience and attempts to take up a position beyond the sensible

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he inspires fear, make us feel compassion. He must therefore be a being who bears within him a basic contradiction, if not the basic human contradiction that is the enigma of humanity. He must therefore be, for the same reason and in his very identity, both a monster (the incarnation of evil) and a poor wretch (goodness itself). The tragic, defined in the true

world, or in the metaphysical as such, in order to tell the truth about the world, the soul or God, when, taking the model (or following the example) of the tragic hero, it becomes guilty of *hubris* – insolence and transgression. Oedipus – and this is the last gasp of metaphysics – makes it possible to think contradiction's being-thinkable. It represents a model for the solution of what Kant called the 'antinomies'. And because this kind of 'solution' is what constitutes the dialectic as such or speculative logic, Oedipus will be regarded as the dialectical hero or, which amounts to the same thing, the speculative hero.

Let me attempt to demonstrate this briefly.

Schelling

The singular honour of reintroducing Oedipus – and the question of the tragic along with him – into philosophy falls to Schelling. The gesture is contemporary with the first beginnings of German idealism, and therefore with the moment of the flowering of early Romanticism (the Romanticism of Jena). It is not unrelated to Friedrich Schlegel's philological work on Greek tragedy. It takes place at the time when Hegel, Hölderlin and Schelling were all beginning their philosophical work. The question confronting them was obviously the question bequeathed them by Kant or, in a word, the critical question: is metaphysics, as elaborated from Plato to Leibniz and Spinoza, still possible? Or is the *subject* of thought – the Cartesian *cogito* on which all the metaphysics of the Moderns is based – subordinated to so many conditions as to be denied any truly metaphysical knowledge from the outset?

According to Schelling, who deals with this problem in a little book entitled *Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* (1795), the debate within metaphysics that is initiated by Kant essentially comes down to the problem of freedom. To put it very schematically, Kant's critique declares that the problem of freedom, or the metaphysical problem of freedom, is insoluble, because there is no way of proving either that freedom is possible, or that it is impossible and that the rule of natural necessity is absolute. In order to solve this problem we would have to be able to adopt the position and viewpoint of God. Those are the terms bequeathed us by Spinoza. We would, in other words, have to accede to the Absolute Knowledge which alone can decide whether man is completely subordinate to the order of things and natural determinism, whether he is hemmed in by the sphere of objectivity, or whether he is, on the contrary, capable, in so far as he is a subject, of escaping the mechanism of the world and acceding

to freedom. According to Schelling, the most basic philosophical contradiction is the very contradiction – which Kant took to extremes – between the objective (necessity or nature) and the subjective (freedom). And what is at stake here is, in his view, the possibility of the absolute subject, or, in other words, the possibility of the Absolute as subject.

Now there is a solution to this seemingly insurmountable contradiction. And the solution is given by Greek tragedy in its presentation of the myth of Oedipus. This is how the tenth and last of the letters that make up Schelling's book opens. It is a text to which I have already referred elsewhere.⁴

It has often been asked how Greek reason could put up with the contradictions of its tragedy. A mortal who is destined by fatality to be a criminal struggles *against* fatality and yet he receives a terrible punishment for a crime for which destiny was responsible! The *reason* for this contradiction, or what makes it bearable, lay deeper than where it was being sought: it lay in the conflict between human freedom and the power of the objective world. When that power was a superpower (a *fatum*), the mortal must necessarily lose and yet, as he did not lose *without a struggle*, he had to be *punished* for his very defeat. The fact that the criminal, who was defeated only by the superpower of destiny, was *punished* implied that the recognition of human freedom was a *tribute* to freedom. Allowing its hero to *struggle* against the superpower of destiny was Greek tragedy's way of paying tribute to human freedom; in order not to cross the barriers of art, it had to ensure that he was *defeated* but, in order to compensate, through art, for the humiliation of human freedom, he also had to undergo *punishment ...* for the crime committed by *destiny*. The great idea was to accept that ... [he] could consent to being punished for an *inevitable* crime in order to demonstrate his freedom through the loss of that freedom and to founder thanks to a declaration of the rights of free will.

This is a speculative interpretation of the 'innocent guilt' of Oedipus, as analysed by Aristotle. By struggling against the unavoidable, or in other words against the destiny (the most rigorous form of necessity) that is responsible for his crime, the tragic hero brings about his own downfall and voluntarily chooses to expiate a crime of which he knows himself to be innocent and for which he should, in any case, have paid the price. Innocent guilt or the deliberate, gratuitous courting of punishment: that is the solution to the conflict or contradiction. In the face of the objective world against which he is powerless, and of which he is no more than a part or a cog, in the face of the formidable 'machine' known as destiny, the subject demonstrates

his freedom by accomplishing of his own accord, or voluntarily, what the machine demands of him. He manifests his freedom, not simply by accepting necessity (an old solution which has no 'efficacy'), but through 'the very loss of his freedom'. He knows that he is innocent and is destiny's plaything (he knows that he did not know he was committing a sin), but it is he himself who strives to know who committed the sin and who freely accepts his condemnation by destiny.

We have here the schema and matrix for dialectical logic itself: the negative (the loss of freedom) is converted into the positive (the realization of freedom) thanks to exacerbation of the negative itself (courting punishment, the will to lose freedom). The dialectic deals with the paradox of contradiction or, in other words, identity. Whilst identity presupposes, if it is to exist, being identical to itself, identity is always both self-identity and its opposite. Which also means that alterity – including the most extreme alterity, or contradiction – is potentially an identity. No matter whether the 'supersession' is named or not (in Schelling's text, it goes by the name of the 'barriers' inherent in art, or in other words the conditions specific to (re)presentation, *Darstellung* or *mimesis*), identity, Self-realization is always possible in the form of the work of the negative, or rather, in the present case, its reduplication. And it is because identity is thought of in terms of the Self, ipseity or *Selbstheit* that only a metaphysics of the subject can claim to resolve the paradox of the Same. When, conversely, the paradox remains a paradox, or when extreme difference is preserved, we stray beyond the limits of such a metaphysics in one way or another. This is probably the case in some of Diderot's work; it is also the case, in a clearer way, in Hölderlin. The dialectical operation – and it is an operation – is intended from the outset to safeguard the Self and the subject. That is why it can begin with the problematic of freedom. And that is also why, in its unfolding and as an unfolding, it is no accident, and not by chance, that the speculative dialectic recounts the history – in the twin senses of *mythos* and *Geschichte* – of a subject. Of the Subject itself as *subjectum*: foundation and being. The truth of the dialectic is the subject as possibility of the (re)presentation of identity to the self: self-consciousness, according to Hegel. But the strange thing is that, in the present case, it is another form of representation – *Darstellung* and not *Vorstellung*, or in other words theatricality and *mimesis*, that allows us to think its truth. If, as Bataille thought,⁵ we have here an irreducible necessity, then the dialectic, in so far as it is the truth of the onto-theological, is a determinate

interpretation or a determinate effect of a mimetology that is older and deeper down than the discourse on being. But I cannot follow that line of inquiry here.

Hegel

I am not at all certain that Schelling's first operation explains why, a few years later (and shortly after Hölderlin had in his turn offered a mimetologically inspired interpretation of *Oedipus Rex*, though it is marginal to dialectical-speculative thought in the strict sense of that term), Hegel should have chosen the character of Oedipus to be the very symbol of the act of philosophizing and, in doing so, elevated him to the rank of the figure of the philosophical for our entire era. For Hegel was indeed the first to promote Oedipus to the rank of figure.

The operation – for it is another interpretation – is relatively famous. To put it briefly, as going into detail is out of the question here, the episode takes place in the lectures on history given in Berlin, or in other words in the *Philosophy of History*. Here, Hegel sets out to demonstrate how the subject or Spirit gradually emerges, moment by moment, from its non-knowledge (ignorance, superstition, magic, confused religions and all the forms of the non-knowledge of the self), wrests itself away from or escapes the materiality that submerges it, gradually wins its own essence (which is to be knowledge, intellection – and self-knowledge) by freeing itself from its sensory and corporeal servitude, and succeeds in accomplishing and realizing itself as such. Once more, this is a question of freedom. This history of Spirit is history *tout court*; the meaning of history, in other words, is none other than the realization of Spirit and the accomplishment of the metaphysical. It begins, as we know, in the 'night of time' and its very trajectory is symbolic: it moves from West to East, from Orient to Occident, from an ancient and far off China to the Greece where philosophy (self-consciousness) sees the light of day, after having traversed India, Mesopotamia and Egypt. In a word, its trajectory follows that of the sun: the philosophy of history is a heliology.⁶

In this context, Oedipus intervenes when Hegel attempts to explain, still using the same metaphysical symbolism, how this transition from Egypt to Greece takes place. It is, of course, the transition from symbol to concept or idea that allows Spirit to reach its zenith. Egypt, explains Hegel, is the eve of Spirit's awakening: in its sun worship (heliophilia), Egypt senses the essence of Spirit; in its cult of the dead and its belief in metempsychosis, it senses the meaning of the

immortality of the soul, or the idea that the human subject is the absolute and ‘possesses infinite value’. But this is no more than a presentiment, and it does not succeed in expressing itself. In Egypt, writes Hegel, spirit still remains ‘trapped in stone’, in materiality and in sensuality. Egypt’s discourse on truth, consciousness and man is infirm and is still infantile (*infans*); it does not speak the true language of Spirit, or the *logos*. It expresses itself through symbols carved on

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stones, through statues and mysterious monuments, in representations of the divine that remain half animal. This is why Egypt is the land of contradiction: in Egypt, Spirit struggles against that which enslaves it – the sensible, the corporeal, materiality and animality – but if it is to break loose and free itself, it must take one more step.

It is the Greeks who take that step, and it is the philosophical (metaphysical) step itself. This is inscribed in their mythology, but still in a symbolic form. And it is inscribed there twice. Its first inscription comes about when it transpires that the Greeks have a god who symbolizes the solution to the Egyptian enigma of the divine: in Egypt, the divine is the enigma itself. That enigma is none other than the enigma of truth. Hegel refers here to the inscription that could once be read in the goddess Neith’s sanctuary in Saïs. It read: ‘I am that which is, that which was, and that which will be; no one has lifted my veil.’⁷ Hegel immediately thinks that this is a metaphor for truth, unveiling or *aletheia*. But the inscription goes on: ‘The fruit which I have produced is helios.’ Hegel comments: ‘This lucidity is Spirit – the sun of Neith the concealed night-loving deity. In the Egyptian Neith, truth is still a problem.

The Greek Apollo is its solution: his utterance is “*Man, know thyself*”.’ The (Greek) solution to the (Egyptian) enigma or the solution to the mystery of truth is therefore Spirit as self-consciousness. The leg–end in the sanctuary in Saïs is deciphered by the inscription on the pedi–ment of the temple of Apollo in Delphi, and it will fall to Socrates to make it philosophizing’s imperative. Somewhat earlier than Hegel, as it happens, Hölderlin had a similar intuition in a

short story entitled ‘The Disciples in Saïs’. After a long journey, the hero of this tale of initiation reaches the sanctuary of Neith and lifts the veil covering the statue of the goddess. And what he sees is himself, or his own image. He himself is – the subject in general is – the secret of truth. And this is what Hegel says: the truth about the truth is the Self.

Now this same step is taken for a second time outside Egypt (the Orient) and it is Oedipus

who takes it – at least to the extent that the mythical sequence about the Sphinx is deciphered in a similar way. This is what Hegel says:

Wonderfully, then, must the Greek legend surprise us, which relates that the Sphinx – the great Egyptian symbol [*Bild*] – appeared in Thebes, uttering the words ‘What is it which in the morning goes on four legs, at midday on two, and in the evening on three?’ [You will notice that this too is a solar trajectory.] Oedipus, giving the solution, *Man*, precipitated the Sphinx from the rock. The solution and liberation of that Oriental Spirit ... is certainly this: that the Inner Being of Nature is Thought [Spirit], which has its existence only in the human consciousness.⁸

Oedipus is, then, the man who solves the Egyptian riddle by replying: the truth or the secret is the subject (Spirit as subject). And this, according to Hegel, is the answer given by knowledge in general. The answer is man to the extent that he knows himself, that he is ‘self-consciousness’. And this is why Oedipus articulates the first sentence, or rather the first word, of philosophy: ‘Oedipus ... thus shows himself to be possessed of knowledge.’⁹ That is one of his names; this is one of the translations or interpretations of the

name 'Oedipus'. Oedipus answers only with – gives only – his name: 'I, who have seen, am the one who knows.' That is the name of the philosopher.

It is true that Hegel qualifies this 'Praise of Oedipus' with some serious reservations: 'good philosopher' that he is, he not only remains discreet about the Oedipal scandal (the parricide and especially the incest) but also, and this is a sign of a disturbing 'ambivalence', notes that Oedipus's 'abominations' mean that his figure remains in darkness. In a word, he is not too much of a Socrates to rectify and correct Oedipus's example. But the fact that he is not too much of a Socrates also means that something Oedipal secretly overdetermines the exemplarity of Socrates: Socrates resurrects the figure of Oedipus only because he himself is a tragic figure – the figure of the 'innocent guilty man' – and the hero of a philosophical (re)presentation who borrows at least the dialogical form from tragedy. Socrates is Socrates only in so far as he is the truth of Oedipus. That is why he will repeat Oedipus's 'Delphic' answer and will place the entire philosophical West – until Hegel, that is – under the sign of self-consciousness.

In a note on Gide's *Oedipe* – the Oedipus who Gide has said that, whatever the riddle of the sphinx might be, he is resolved to answer 'man' – Walter Benjamin remarks that something happens to Oedipus between the moment when he appears for the first time on the stage of Dionysus' theatre and when he appears to us, in our era: 'Very little', he says, 'But it is of great importance. *Oedipus conquers speech.*' Recalling the definition of the tragic hero that he has borrowed from Rosenzweig ('The tragic hero has only one language that is proper to him: silence'¹⁰), he then goes on: 'For Sophocles remains silent, almost silent. He is a bloodhound on his own trail, complaining about the harsh treatment meted out to him by his own hand. We find no thought, no reflection, in his discourse.' The tragic hero was, in other words, pure lamentation. He said nothing. He was immured in the riddle of his own pain, and the theatre resounded only with his lamentations and screams. Those are the lamentations and screams that, on a different stage, philosophy transforms into language, into *logos*, in order to recognize in them its own language: the *logos*. But the operation has taken 2,200 years – 2,200 years for the West to discover that it was Oedipal, and for it to be able to speak the discourse Oedipus could not speak. To develop his phrase, or rather to expand his one-word answer into a phrase. Or into his name. And that phrase is the dialectic itself: Absolute Knowledge.

Nietzsche and Freud

But this also means that Oedipus' accession to speech is very late in occurring. Oedipus becomes the figure of philosophy only when philosophy is coming to an end, only when its discourse is becoming exhausted. Paradoxically, Oedipus becomes philosophy's spokesman – and he is a verbose spokesman – only when philosophy is beginning to lose its voice and speaks only in languages that have become detached from it. And it is, perhaps, here that the Hegelian symbolic reaches its limits: it is quite possible that the sun that rises in Egypt – where 'the colossal statue of Memnon resounds at the first glance of the young morning sun'¹¹ – reaches its zenith in the sky of Greece, but then it immediately begins to set and to begin its westward trajectory. That is why Oedipus, who is the figure of a dawning Greek knowledge, is also the figure of a truly Western knowledge: the last knowledge. It is therefore not his hostility towards Hegel that explains why Nietzsche, that 'latecomer', should choose to call Oedipus 'the last philosopher' – who is, as it happens, also the last man.

I am thinking of a rather surprising text by Nietzsche: a fragment written shortly after his study of tragedy. It is a sort of short philosophical prose-poem. Oedipus, who is now alone, is talking to himself – as though he were two people. He is about to die, and it is with the echo of his own voice that he bemoans his own fate, rather as though he were the posthumous (or 'pre-posthumous', as Musil would have put it) incarnation of self-consciousness.

Let me paraphrase part of this text. Oedipus describes himself as the 'last philosopher' because he is the last man. No one but himself speaks to him, and his voice sounds to him like that of a dying man. He requests an hour's communion with the beloved voice, with the last breath of the memory of all human happiness. Thanks to that voice, he can cheat his loneliness and enter an illusory multiplicity and love because his heart refuses to believe that love is dead. His heart cannot bear the shiver of extreme solitude, and forces him to speak as though he were two men... And yet he can still hear the beloved voice. *Someone* is dying outside him, the last man in the world. The last sigh is dying with him, a long alas whispered to him by the most wretched of the wretched: Oedipus.

That the old Oedipus could be the figure of an exhausted self-consciousness that is dying; that this final discourse could take the paradoxical form of an interminable soliloquy in which the psyche speaks to itself (this is the last possible form of dramatic

dialogue) at the very moment of its death; that there should be this voice that resonates almost beyond death and that death should divide the voice of the subject – perhaps it is this (or at least this is the hypothesis I would like to propose) that in some way opens up the space in which Freud *too*, probably without realizing it, encounters Oedipus. What I mean is that perhaps it is this that allows Oedipus to go on representing – beyond or beneath the way consciousness relates to itself through self-presence, or beyond self identity – a desire to know of which consciousness knows nothing, and of which it can know nothing. Perhaps it is this that allows him to reach a place (if it is a place) where by becoming absent from himself, forgetting himself as such, he emerges from himself, externalizes himself within the self, divides and becomes cut off from himself. Strangely enough, Nietzsche evokes forgetfulness in an early draft of this fragment, and speaks of the terrible solitude of the last philosopher, who is paralysed by the Medusa. Vultures hover over him. And he begs nature to let him forget.

But it is true to say that the figure Nietzsche is thinking of is, rather, that of Prometheus, or the figure which, from Feuerbach and Marx to Jünger, and even the Heidegger of 1933, overdetermines the figure of the Worker – and therefore a certain interpretation of *technē* that is not shared by Nietzsche. And still less is it shared by Freud. That Nietzsche should have ‘failed to choose’ between the names Oedipus and Prometheus is not, however, immaterial by any means. This ‘failure to choose’ does not concern only the mythical figuration of the ‘last philosopher’. The last philosopher – like all the mythical figures invoked by Nietzsche, from Dionysus and Empedocles to Zarathustra – concerns the determination of (modern) man in his essence. It so happens that, for Nietzsche, the essence of man could be designated by the name ‘Oedipus’, rather than the name ‘Prometheus’. The implications of this ‘preference’ are perhaps still incalculable.

You can already see the point I am trying to make for the moment: Freud’s Oedipus is always reduced to the problematic of desire. It is said, with some justification, that Oedipus is, in Freud’s view, the emblem of desire’s destiny, and that the myth of Oedipus, as read in what we now know to be a tendentious way (or at least a lacunary way, as is any mythological reworking of a myth), simply supplies the model for the familial structuration of desire – and the tragic structuration of the unconscious. But if we place a unilateral emphasis of this aspect of the way Freud deals with the figure and the myth – and if, in doing

so, we also simplify the way he deals with it – we fail, despite certain of Lacan’s specific caveats – to notice that, for Freud, Oedipus is the incarnation of what he has embodied for philosophy, at least from Hegel onwards: the desire to know (or, to be more accurate and to use the Nietzschean term, the drive – *Trieb* – to know). And when Oedipus is at stake, the status of Freud’s ‘science’ is also at stake.

To take only one well-known example. It can be found in the second of the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (‘Infantile Sexuality’), at the beginning of section 5 on ‘The Sexual Researches of Childhood’. It consists of two short paragraphs:

The Drive for Knowledge

At about the same time as the sexual life of children reaches its first peak, between the ages of three and five, they also begin to show signs of the activity which may be ascribed to the drive for knowledge of research. This drive cannot be counted among the elementary instinctual components, nor can it be classed as exclusively belonging to sexuality. Its activity corresponds on the one hand to a sublimated manner or obtaining mastery, while on the other hand it makes use of the energy of scopophilia. Its relations to sexual life, however, are of particular importance, since we have learnt from psychoanalysis that the drive for knowledge in children is attracted unexpectedly and intensively to sexual problems and is in fact possibly first aroused by them.

The Riddle of the Sphinx

It is not by theoretical interests but by practical ones that activities of research are set going in children. The threat to the bases of a child’s existence offered by the discovery or the suspicion of the arrival of a new baby and the fear that he may, as a result of it, cease to be cared for and loved, make him thoughtful and clear-sighted. And this history of the drive’s origin is in line with the fact that the first problem with which it deals is not the question of the distinction between the sexes but the riddle of where babies come from. (This, in a distorted form which can be easily rectified, is the same riddle that was propounded by the Theban Sphinx.)¹²

There is, then, such a thing as a drive for knowledge, and Freud says of it that it is ‘a sublimated manner of obtaining mastery’ (and it might perhaps in that sense be said to be ‘Promethean’), and that it ‘makes use of the energy of scopophilia’, or in other words theoretical desire itself. Freud, who uses the word ‘theory’ in a rather weak sense, is no doubt pointing out that this interest in sexual problems is not theoretical (even though he notes in truly Aristotelian manner that children’s drive for knowledge is aroused

by them). Even so and even before the problem of the distinction between the sexes arises, it is quite simply the question of origins that stimulates the first search for knowledge: the great riddle of birth, and that is the very riddle that is propounded by the Theban Sphinx.

For Freud, Oedipus is, then, the figure of knowledge – of seeing and knowing; of the theoretical in the true sense. Similarly, in a related register which also concerns the entire psychoanalytic mechanism, tragic theatricality is still the model for the cathartic apparatus. Oedipus, in other words, is the emblem of desire but he also represents the man who solves the riddle of desire and interprets his destiny. For many people – if not the *Massen* – today, the so-called ‘subject of psychoanalysis’ is the form in which the philosopher lives on. Or lives on as a posthumous being, if the ‘last analyst’ really has not been born.

You are not unaware that Freud’s consulting rooms and his desk were cluttered up with Egyptian figurines and statuettes, for which Freud appears to have had a real passion. Today, it is thought that we can simply dismiss this as a survival of some old idolatry; the rather strange attachment of the ‘agnostic’ to these archaic divinities is seen as a symptom of some lingering belief in the world of myth. We have often heard it said, from Lévi-Strauss to Girard, and now by many others, that psychoanalysis is no more than a mythology. But who knows? Perhaps the old Theban scene was in fact being re-enacted in its philosophical interpretation. Who knows? Perhaps this was Freud’s way of symbolizing his determination to solve the riddle. Perhaps he was re-enacting, in his own way, the very scene of the philosopher, of the man possessed by a desire to know. What is at issue is, after all, the meaning of the strange ‘exodus from Egypt’ that was to be Freud’s daily adventure and permanent exile. For there must have been something of an ‘exodus from Egypt’ for a man who, towards the end of his life, identified so strongly with Moses. Was that ‘something’, without him really knowing it (or without him wanting to know it), the decision to pursue the philosophical project, to inscribe in the tradition of knowledge, once more to begin – yet again – the destiny of Greece (which is not without a secret kinship with the Jewish destiny). Or is he taking over from a tradition that is dying out, that has become exhausted? Is he setting himself up as a rival and imaging a possible new beginning that extends beyond? Is he in search of a new discovery, and will he find it if he can find the final and definitive solution to the riddle of the Western

adventure of knowledge? And is he facing up to the risks implicit in this new knowledge, and is he better at doing so than the Greeks? It would take a lot of time and patience to get anywhere with these questions. And perhaps simply asking them is still an Oedipal gesture: King Oedipus (still) has one eye too many.

Having said that, the fact that the Freudian figure of Oedipus (the oedipal) has finally been victorious – as I think we can argue – and has been able to compete, in what is now a worldwide struggle, with the (Promethean) figure of the Worker presupposes that, over and beyond the opposition – if that is what it is – between desire and work, there is something that makes this struggle, this ‘encounter’, possible. Given the current state of play, I have no more than a vague suspicion of what it is. It is based upon some allusive suggestions from Heidegger – who, as we know, never took Freud’s discovery into consideration. For many reasons. But he did, as we also know, at least briefly subscribe to the mythology – the onto-typology – of the Worker, and he did overcome, for the space of a few months, Nietzsche’s inability to choose between Oedipus and Prometheus.

It so happens that there is a Heideggerian Oedipus. A figure of Oedipus can, that is, be found in Heidegger, in a passage from the 1935 *Introduction to Metaphysics* (written over a year after the break with National Socialism). The passage appears in a section where, in a discussion of ‘the limitation of being’, Heidegger reworks the distinction between being and appearance:

For the thinking of the early Greek thinkers the unity and conflict of being and appearance preserved their original power. All this was represented with supreme purity in Greek tragic poetry. Let us consider the *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles. At the beginning Oedipus is the saviour and lord of the state, living in an aura of glory and divine favour. He is hurled out of this appearance, which is not merely his subjective view of himself but the medium in which his being-there appears; his being as murderer of his father and desecrator of his mother is raised to unconcealment. The way from the radiant beginning to the gruesome end is one struggle between appearance (concealment and distortion) and unconcealment (being). The city is beset by the secret of the murderer of Laius, the former king. With the passion of a man who stands in the manifestness of glory and is a Greek, Oedipus sets out to reveal this secret. Step by step, he must move into unconcealment, which in the end he can bear only by putting out his own eyes, i.e. by removing himself from all light, by letting the cloak of night fall

round him, and, blind, crying out to the people to open all doors in order that a man may be manifest to them as what he *is*.

But we cannot regard Oedipus only as the man who meets his downfall; we must see him as the embodiment of Greek being-there, who most radically and wildly asserts its fundamental passion, the passion for the disclosure of being, i.e. the struggle for being itself. In his poem ‘*In lieblicher Bläue blühet*’, Hölderlin wrote keen-sightedly: ‘Perhaps King Oedipus has an eye too many.’ This eye too many is the fundamental condition for all great questioning and knowledge and also their only metaphysical ground. The knowledge and the science of the Greeks were this passion.¹³

The story of Oedipus does not simply symbolize or (re)present the destiny of *aletheia*, or the unveiling of being (in which case, the West is more Oedipal than ever); because his determination is so savage, Oedipus is the figure of the Greek *Dasein* to the extent that it embodies the basic and inaugural ‘passion’ of the West: the passion for knowledge. That is what Heidegger was trying desperately to show the Germans at that time, and that was the meaning of his political discourse: they were his heirs. Now for Heidegger, as he explains at length in his commentary on the famous chorus about man from *Antigone*, it is the word *technē* that originally allowed the Greeks to think about ‘knowledge’. Here, Oedipus is none other than the figure of *technē*. . Now that Heidegger’s political adventure is over, Oedipus occupies exactly the same position as the figure of Prometheus in the Rectorship Address. Heidegger makes the same shift as Nietzsche, but this time it is more explicit: it concerns the meaning of the word *technē*, and the word has at least two meanings. And it therefore concerns the essence of metaphysics. And we can also see how this interpretation of *Oedipus Rex* basically reveals the truth of the mythico-philosophical use – both Hegelian and Nietzschean – of the figure of Oedipus. Oedipus has nothing to do with the subject (self-consciousness), or in other words with knowledge (theory) as subject; but it has everything to do with knowledge as *technē*, and that is the starting point for the whole of Western metaphysics. And that is why modern technology is the Oedipal realization of the metaphysical.

Is this why the two rival figures of our day have something in common? Is the Worker, like Oedipus, a figure and (re)presentation of *technē*? Does the same

knowledge secretly animate both the labouring animal and the desiring animal, and does it run through both political economy and libidinal economy? If that is the case, we require more than a complete re-evaluation of both socialism and psychoanalysis, their metaphysical status and their scientific destination (or pretensions). We must solicit and displace an entire opposition and the interpretation of that opposition. It is, after all, the major antagonism of our times.

It remains, then, for us to ask what ‘knowledge’ might mean from now on. And to ask what the name Oedipus might mean. Perhaps one day we will understand that a certain desire for knowledge – or the desire of a certain knowledge – definitely has something to do with the curious limp that has affected the Western gait ever since the Greeks.

Translated by David Macey

Notes

1. Martin Heidegger, ‘On the Question of Being’, trans. William McNeill, in *Pathmarks*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.
2. ‘Typographie’, in Sylviane Agacinski, Jacques Derrida, Sarah Kofman and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Mimesis: des articulations*, Aubier-Flammarion, Paris, 1975; translated as ch. 1 of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1989.
3. Jacques Derrida, ‘Economimesis’, trans. Richard Klein *Diacritics*, vol. 11, no. 2, Summer 1981.
4. ‘La Césure du spéculatif’, in *L’Imitation des modernes*, Galilée, Paris, 1986; translated as ch. 4 of *Typography*.
5. Georges Bataille, ‘Hegel, Death and Sacrifice’, trans. Jonathan Strauss, in Allan Stoekl, ed., *On Bataille: Yale French Studies* 78, 1990.
6. Jacques Derrida ‘White Mythology’ in *Margins – Of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982. See also Bernard Pautrat, *Versions du soleil*, Seuil, Paris, 1971.
7. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, Dover, New York, 1956, p. 220.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., pp. 220–21.
10. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, New Left Books, London, 1977, p. 108.
11. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, p. 199.
12. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in *On Sexuality*, Pelican Freud Library, Volume 7, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977, pp. 112–13; translation modified to read ‘drive’ for *Trieb*.
13. Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1987, pp. 106–7.