Boundary Violation and the Landscape of the Self in Senecan Tragedy

In Memoriam David S. Wiesen (1936–1982)

I

T. S. Eliot’s remarks on self-dramatization in Seneca’s tragedies anticipated and encouraged more recent attempts to reevaluate the rhetorical texture of the plays.¹ Again and again, through a variety of rhetorical figures, the actor calls attention to the importance of his or her emotions. This technique, as Eliot pointed out, has contributed to Seneca’s popularity at periods of cultural crisis and transition, like our own. Medea superest and “I am Antony still” are related by more than just literary influence.²

At periods when the traditional values are called into question and the social rewards and accepted marks of esteem are no longer felt as satisfying human needs and desires, men and women are likely to look inward and to define the meaning of life in terms of the self, in terms of internal and private rather than external and public things. The size and scale of the imperial bureaucracy (dwarfed, to be sure, by our own), the precariousness of public life under a Caligula, a

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² Eliot (note 1) 113.
Nero, or a Domitian, the riskiness or illusoriness of freedom, all contributed to this inward focus. Tacitus' *Dialogus* sharply juxtaposes the traditional rewards of the Roman public man—power, influence, prestige, wealth, the gratifying crowd of clients at the door, the admiring finger pointing out the successful advocate in the forum—with the quasi-pastoral seclusion and quietude of the man of letters (*Dial. 7–10 and 11–13*). Seneca himself, in the *Thyestes*, dramatizes the disaster resulting from the protagonist’s failure to follow his own good instincts and mistrust the “false names” of greatness in the world (*Thy. 446f.*). When these “great things” are perceived as delusory, men turn to the inner standards of value, ultimately to the value of the self alone. The wisdom, courage, and proudly won autonomy of the Stoic sage can then constitute the true index of personal worth. The external trappings of power and wealth are *adiaphora*, “indifferent things.” “Stoicism,” as Eliot remarks, “is the refuge for the individual in an indifferent or hostile world too big for him”; its theatrical equivalent (or “version of cheering oneself up,” as Eliot calls it) is a self-dramatizing, rhetorically ostentatious individualism.3

Senecan “self-dramatization,” for all its literary artifice, rests upon such a view of the importance of the self. It is, among other things, an expression of individual alienation from the central values of the culture. Seneca often dramatizes that alienation as the inflicting or suffering of physical violence, the most obvious form of violating the self. These are the terms that the last half-century has made all too familiar to our own age. The enormities and distortions of Senecan rhetoric no longer seem beyond the reach of our experience.

Stoicism is not the only response of Seneca’s contemporaries to this condition of alienation; it is but one of several forms of individualism which develop out of the moral, social, and political crises in Roman society from the late Republic on. Seneca’s stoicism seems to have provided him with a more or less consistent point of view, a stable intellectual basis suited to his rhetorical technique of projecting personal emotion into a cosmic frame. The Senecan dramatic assertion of the self takes two different but complementary forms. There is the I-statement of self-dramatizing emotion, like Phaedra’s *me, me profundi saeve dominator freti / invade et in me monstra caerulei maris / emitte* (“Me,

3. Eliot (note 1) 112; both quotations come from this page.
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me, make the object of your attack, cruel ruler of the deep sea, and against me send forth the monsters of the blue sea,” *Pha.* 1159–61). And there is the involvement of the entire world in the hero’s suffering, a responsive sympathy between individual and cosmos. The hero dramatizes his suffering through a bold network of imagistic correspondences between man and nature. These express, according to C. J. Herington, “a moral and physical unity from the depths of the universe to the individual human soul.”4 Thyestes calls to the sea and earth, to the gods of the lower and upper worlds, to listen to the atrocities inflicted on him (*Thy.* 1068ff.).5 Jason sees Medea, murderer of their children, flying off into the aether and shouts that there, where she is going, there are no gods (*Med.* 1026ff.). The Senecan hero places himself at the center of the world’s stage and cries out, Look, my suffering is that of the entire universe. “Enwrap the whole world in fearful clouds,” says Thyestes (*nubibus totum horridis / convolve mundum, Thy.* 1078ff.). In himself alone, says Oedipus, Nature has overturned all her laws and so should devise equally unnatural modes of punishment for his guilt (*Oed.* 942–45).

This grandiose version of the pathetic fallacy is actually but an indirect or displaced form of the *I*-statement of self-dramatization described above. The hero’s perception of the magnitude of his pain virtually causes the trees to turn pale, the waters to cease to flow, the air to thicken with mist, and so on (cf. *Ag.* 34ff., *Thy.* 197ff., 260ff.).

To this double strategy in the hero’s assertion of his individual magnitude in suffering—*I*-statement and cosmic projection—correspond the two sides of the philosopher’s wisdom. The Stoic sage abandons external power for the realm of the soul. To rule over the “evils of the heart” makes the true king (*Phoen.* 104ff., *Thy.* 348ff., 380ff.; cf. *Nat. Quaest.* 6.32.4ff.). The sage also identifies himself with the world soul: he is the proper beneficiary of the gods’ care and the appropriate spectator of the majesty and order of the universe (cf. *Ad Helv. de consol.* 8.3ff.; *De otio 5; De vita beata* 8.4ff.).6 This latter

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attitude, as one would expect, is less suitable for tragedy, although the author of the Octavia has Seneca himself, as a dramatic character, discourse at length on this topic (385ff.).

Seneca’s combination of the Silver Age rhetorical magnification of experience and the subjectivizing forms of expression in Roman poetic diction creates a new vision of tragedy. The unbearable suffering possible in a world of uninhibited violence resonates with an intensity of personal agony which is comparatively rare in Greek tragedy. In the latter, formal structure and a fuller intellectual vocabulary help to contain the expression of suffering in more clearly demarcated limits. Euripides, for example, makes us hear the screams of the blinded Polymestor in the Hecuba; but how un-Senecan and how characteristically Euripidean is the subsiding into long rationalistic-historical debate (Eur., Hec. 1056–1254).

Senecan tragedy clearly does not create the towering heroic figures of Aeschylus or Sophocles. Such figures—Prometheus, Ajax, Antigone, Philoctetes—are so defined that their nature involves a hopeless struggle against the very conditions that are necessary to their existence; and in this struggle they are doomed by the greatness that they themselves possess, by their commitment to justice, nobility of nature, absolute values in a corrupt and imperfect world. In Seneca the tragic element operates in a struggle that is almost entirely inward, in a battle against the passions rather than in a head-on conflict with divine powers, universal moral principles, or an unyielding world order. Admittedly, this inward turning of the dramatic focus creates something that is often closer to the pathetic than to the genuinely tragic. Seneca’s protagonists struggle much more with themselves than with essential laws of the universe or the basic conditions of life and society. But to the extent that such characters as

117f. In pointing to some links between Seneca’s tragedies and Stoic philosophy, I do not mean to imply that a strictly Stoic interpretation exhausts the meanings of the plays or that their purpose was simply to illustrate Stoic doctrine. For a recent discussion and bibliography of this much discussed issue see A. L. Motto and J. R. Clark, “Art and Ethics in the Drama: Seneca’s ‘Pseudotragedy’ Reconsidered,” ICS 7 (1982) 125–40. Joachim Dingel, Seneca und die Dichtung (Heidelberg 1974) 97ff. and 116ff., has suggested for Seneca a “negative Stoicism,” like Lucan’s (Phars. 7.445ff.), stressing the remoteness, incomprehensibility, and inhuman harshness of the divine powers and fate.

7. See, for example, Brooks Otis, Virgil: A Study in Civilized Poetry (Oxford 1963) chap. 3.
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Phaedra, Medea, Clytaemnestra, Thystes, or Hercules engage with the evil and violence in themselves—and therefore potentially (if less exaggeratedly) in us all—they do exemplify a quality of genuine tragedy. They suffer guilt, take responsibility for their defeat by their own uncontrolled emotions, and suffer the physical and moral consequences of their actions.8

In Seneca the ultimate truth of human character is revealed in moments of tremendous violence, where even reason is pressed into the service of intensifying every possible means of suffering, as in Oedipus’ self-torturing cry that he should use his “native cleverness” in punishing himself (utere ingenio, miser, Oed. 947). Overwhelmed by emotions beyond his control, the Senecan tragic hero becomes alienated from an aspect of his own humanity, from the rational moderation of desire, hatred, love, fear, hope, despair, and guilt.9 No wonder our own age of decentered emotionality has rediscovered these works.

Seneca’s limitation of vocabulary, rhetorical figures, and concentration on the flow of emotional movement rather than on structures of action or events create a kind of artificial echo chamber where

8. For a good survey of discussions about the tragic element in Senecan drama and a defense of the plays as tragedy, see Motto and Clark (note 6) passim, and Ilona Opelt, “Senecas Konzeption des Tragischen,” in E. Lefèvre, ed., Senecas Tragódie, Wege der Forschung 310 (Darmstadt 1972) 92–128, especially 93f. In contrast to the Greek tragedy of fate (Schicksalstragödie), Opelt argues, Seneca exemplifies a “tragedy of evil” (Tragödie des Bösen), where the protagonist consciously, not blindly, takes guilt upon himself (92). This form of tragedy, she believes, is foreshadowed in the Xerxes of Aeschylus’ Persians and in late Euripidean plays such as Hecuba and Troades. Her analysis of nefás, however, does not really clarify “the tragic” in the plays. I suggest that the tragic dimension lies in the conflict between good and evil in the individual soul. In this conflict evil sometimes wins, and the hero is engulfed in his or her own inner monstrosity (e.g. Medea, Clytaemnestra, Atreus, and momentarily Hercules in both HF and HO), or after yielding to evil in the form of passion and emotional violence turns against himself in remorse, retribution, and mental or physical self-punishment (Phaedra and the Hercules of HF), or suffers both physically and emotionally as a result of an inadequate or mistaken moral decision (Agamemnon, Thystes, Oedipus). In all cases, however, as many have pointed out, Seneca’s emphasis falls on the inner, emotional, and psychological dimension of the action and the suffering.

9. On Oedipus’ self-punishment see Regenbogen (note 5) 193. Compare Atreus’ helplessness before the obsession of limitless, inexhaustible vengeance in Thy. 255f.: nil quod doloris capiat assueti modus; / nullum relinquam facinus et nullum est satis (“I am plotting nothing which any moderation of ordinary resentment can contain; I shall shun no crime, and none is enough”).

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human suffering, and all the emotional responses it involves, are
magnified to a new level and therefore appear with a new pictorial
expressiveness, what has been called a “psycho-plastic portrait of
emotional affect.”

Here the real action occurs in the spaceless and
timeless realm of the emotional life. The vast geographical hyper-
boles serve to set off that inner world as a distinctive reality of its
own. Seneca’s originality, as Otto Regenbogen has pointed out in a
justly celebrated essay, lay not in the invention of new thematic
material but in the vivid, imagistic depiction of this enclosed inner
space of pathos, suffering, vehemence of feeling.

The focus on character and emotional reactions rather than on
events per se also creates an impression of staticity, of purely verbal
happenings. The world of nature depicted in the tragedies is, in one
sense, as artificial as the dramatic situations themselves. It exists less
for its own sake than as a foil or objective correlative for the emo-
tional reality of the protagonists. The forests of Hippolytus’ hunting
in the Phaedra or the remote seas of the Argo’s travels in the Medea are
another form of this self-dramatization. They have their full existence
in tension with an inner landscape of the soul. These expansive land-
scapes serve to set off the narrow, self-imposed limitation of hatred
or vengeance in which an Atreus, a Hippolytus, or a Medea becomes
enclosed.

The two recurrent motifs of enclosure, entrapment, constriction
on the one hand and all nature on the other are opposite but comple-
mentary poles of the sympathy that links microcosm and mac-
rocosm. The Oedipus correlates the “inverted nature” (natura versa est,
371) of the entrails examined by Manto with the inverted nature
made manifest in the hero’s life (leges ratas / Natura in uno vertit
Oedipoda, “Nature overturns her established laws in Oedipus alone,”
942f.). Those laws are revealed to men in the microcosmic scrutiny of
the viscera laid bare beneath the flesh as the priestess peers into the
dark secrets of the sacrificed heifer’s vitals and sees the monstrosity of

10. Regenbogen (note 5) 207. He goes on to remark that this emotional-rhetorical
coloring is closer to Tacitus than to Greek tragedy.
11. See Owen (note 1) 312f.; Jo-Ann Shelton, Seneca’s Hercules Furens, Hypom-
nemata 50 (Göttingen 1978) 30.
12. Regenbogen (note 5) passim, especially 204–14.
13. Cf., for example, the chorus of Medea 301–79, and contrast the death of Pelias
through Medea’s magic arts, angustas vagus inter undas, 668.
an unborn fetus “not in its rightful place, filling its parent” (*alieno in loco/implent parentem, Oed. 374f*.). But they are also revealed in the macrocosm through the “sympathetic” response of polluted air and parched earth (632ff.), which follow upon the horror of a “mother heavy once more in her accursed womb” (*utero rursus infausto gravis, 637*). The repetition of *gravis*, “heavy,” from the account of the plague-bearing wind’s “heavy breath” (*gravi flatu*) a few lines earlier (631) stresses the link between the interior pollutions of the incestuous womb and the deadly plague of the polluted natural world outside. The relation between the two is metaphorical or analogical as well as causal. From the corrupted liver to the irregular course of the stars, the message is the same.

Teiresias’ unlocking of the enclosures of the “deep Styx” and the “Lethean lake” (*profundae claustra laxamus Stygis, Oed. 401; claustra Lethaei lacus, 560*) is the cognitive equivalent of Oedipus’ revealing the hidden uterine secrets of the dark places from which he came and to which he has returned. Seneca deliberately exploits this interplay between the visceral horror of the entrails and the womb on the one hand and the havoc in nature wrought by the plague on the other. Teiresias’ determination to “unloose the gates of deep Styx” (401, quoted above), stands in sharp contrast with the bacchic hymn that begins with the “sky’s shining beauty” (*lucidum caeli decus, 405*). The tension is resolved when Oedipus accepts the dark horror of his begetting and expiates it by the self-imposed darkness of self-blinding (cf. 998–1003). He thereby restores vitality to the upper reaches of nature and brings back a “gentler condition of the sky” and “life-filled draughts of air” (*mitior caeli status, 1054; vividos haustos, 1056*), just as Laius’ ghost had foretold.14

Here, as in the *Thyestes*, Seneca intensifies the sensation of physical suffering by playing off images of the open air against images of enclosing or penetrating the hidden cavities of the body. Thus the macrocosmic effect in the natural world of Oedipus’ atonement is achieved through the visceral imagery of his self-blinding. He digs out (*scrutatur*) his eyes with “hooked fingers” (*Oed. 965*), tears them “from their furthest roots deep within” (966). His hand is “fixed

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depend inside” (fixa penitus alte, 968f.) and “tears the hollows and empty recesses” (recessus . . . inanes sinus, 969). The uterine and visceral associations of most of these words become unmistakable fewer than a hundred lines later when Jocasta atones for her unwitting crime by the grim poetic justice of penetrating with her incestuous husband’s sword “the spacious womb which bore both sons and husband” (uterum capitum qui virum et natos tulit, 1039). Aside from the grim, even grotesque physical horror, Oedipus’ language depicts the feelings of guilt, remorse, emotional suffering, the physical as well as the psychological wrench of anguish, through images of somatic violation, images of being trapped within himself and being pushed back within himself (952–79, 1024–41). The “rain that pours forth” and “waters” Oedipus’ cheeks (subitus en vultus gravat / profusus imber ac rigat jlu genas, “Look, the sudden storm pours forth and makes heavy his face and with weeping waters his cheeks,” 925f.; cf. 978) is the “eye’s moisture” of his body (955); but it also foreshadows the healing macrocosmic effects at the end (1054ff.), restoring the parched and dying crops (50–52; cf. 649ff.).

In the Phoenissae, Oedipus’ self-dramatizing exaggeration of guilt goes further than the nails reaching into the eyes’ hollow sockets: he would even reach through the eye into the brain itself (nunc manum cerebro indue; / hac parte mortem perage qua coepti mori; “now dip your hand into brain; complete your death in that part where I began to die,” Phoen. 180f.). The physical gesture has a direct psychological correlate in Oedipus’ sense of guilt as he reaches back into his prenatal existence in Jocasta’s womb (intra viscera materna, Phoen. 249f.). He feels his place there as an already sinful penetration of his mother’s body, into which “a god has driven him [igitur], pushed back in concealment [abstrusum, abditum], doubtful of existence,” the perpetrator of “an unspeakable crime” (Phoen. 251–53). When a few lines later he describes how “his father cast him away” (abiecit pater, 258) to die in Cithaeron’s forests with its “wild beasts and savage birds” (255f.), he establishes a symbolic link between the cruelty of his fate both in the hiddenness of the womb and in the expulsion to the wild. The symmetry of accursed concealment within the womb of the mother and harsh expulsion by the father to a hostile mountain expresses the psychological meaning of Oedipus’ crimes. He reenacts, as it were, the experience of losing the intimacy of womb / mother, which he regains by returning there as husband; he relives metaphorically the
hatred of the father who “threw him forth” (abiecit), a deed he avenges by killing Laius.

The son’s illicit penetration of the mother’s womb even in being born (Phoen. 245–47) is answered by the father’s penetration of the son’s feet (Phoen. 254), an act of symbolic castration. The pattern of Oedipus’ life is already present, quite literally, from the first beginnings: wrongful placement inside the mother followed by the physical violation and penetration of his own body.

The explicitness about the psychological dimension of Oedipus’ suffering is Seneca’s characteristic reinterpretation of the material of Sophocles’ Oedipus plays. It is most marked, perhaps, in the apparition of Laius’ ghost in the Oedipus (619–58). The ghastly apparition, surrounded by all the paraphernalia of subterranean horrors that are Seneca’s hallmark (Oed. 559–98), is like the bad dream of a guilt-tormented mind. The murdered father has not a word of charity, compassion, or understanding for a son who acted in ignorance. He is virtually a foreshadowing of the Freudian superego, a harsh, demanding, guilt-rais ing father figure, a projection of the son’s own conviction of his inherently evil nature. Through the eyes of this tristis imago (Virgil’s phrase for another demanding father, Aen. 6.695), Oedipus sees himself as indelibly stained with the worst possible crimes of civilized humanity. He is a “bloody king” who holds both his scepter and the wife of his bedchamber as the rewards of the infamous double outrage of parricide and incest (Oed. 634–37):

... rex cruentus, pretia qui saevae necis
sceptra et nefandos occupat thalamos patris,
invisa proles, sed tamen peior paren
quam natus, utero rursus infausto gravis...

The Medea uses a different aspect of this relation between the macrocosm of nature and the microcosm of the individual’s emotional and physical being. Medea’s revenge dwarfs the vast reaches of sea and earth explored by the Argo (cf. 301–79) and cancels them out through the interior bonds of the womb, her weapon against the leader of the expedition. At the climax of her revenge she, like Oedipus, would reach into her vitals to extirpate in her womb the traces of motherhood that tie her to Jason (in matre si quod pignus etiamnunc latet, / scrutabor ense viscera et ferro extraham, “In the mother
if any pledge still lies hidden, I will search my vitals with the sword and with iron draw it out,” 1012f.). As pignus is a common term for the “child” who constitutes a “pledge” of love and fidelity between husband and wife, Medea’s lines combine the literal and the metaphorical rooting out of her tie to Jason: she would excise the fetus that may be growing in her womb from their union and from the bond of love which should have insured its growth, safety, and birth. Medea soon uses that sword not on herself but on her remaining child; and the visceral imagery of 1012f. conveys the interior darkness of her insatiable vengeance. Lady Macbeth’s “Unsex me here,” with all the thickening of blood and change of milk to gall, spares us this uterine rooting out of motherhood.15 In a reverse but complementary movement, Medea would make her fertility itself a symbol of her vengeance. She envies Niobe, with fourteen children to sacrifice to vengeance (954–56), and complains that she has been “sterile in respect to [exacti ng] punishment” (sterilis in poenas fui, 956). “If this hand of mine,” she goes on later, “could have been sated with single slaughter, it would have sought none; though I kill two, still is the number too narrow for my grief” (1009–11).

After this paradoxical interplay of fertility and sterility, Seneca opens out another contrast in moving from the enclosed space of womb and vitals to the “open path to the heavens” where her serpent-drawn chariot will carry her “among the winds” (1022, 1025). The violated interiority of her body and the violation of nature’s limits in the Argo’s distant explorations and in the magic of Medea’s aerial car are complementary aspects of the same theme, the pushing beyond limits, beyond civilized behavior, into the barbarian and the monstrous. At the frontiers of the civilized world where Medea’s passion has its origins, we veer between the violated innocence of the Golden Age and the pitiless ferocity of inhuman savagery.16 Calling

15. Shakespeare, Macbeth I.v.38–52; pallid too by contrast is the visceral imagery of Racine’s Thésée who describes his paternal misgivings at condemning Hippolytus in these terms: “Malgré ton offense, / mes entrailles pour toi se troublent” (Phèdre IV.iii).

up the primordial monsters of the earth’s remotest places (674–704), Medea also releases her own interior monstrosity, suppressing the life-giving side of her motherhood and envisaging a Niobe-like fertility of death.\footnote{17}

II

This interaction between the enclosed depths of the soul and the expansive frame of nature obviously has its philosophical roots in the Stoic correspondence of macrocosm and microcosm and the ideal of living in harmony with the universe. But its literary effectiveness lies in another area, one where even Seneca’s most grudging critics have acknowledged his power, namely his depiction of morbid states of the soul, anxiety, fear, obsession, vindictiveness, the lust for power. “La psychologie est peut-être ce qu’il y a de plus remarquable dans le théâtre de Sénèque,” wrote Léon Herrmann sixty years ago, and few would disagree.\footnote{18} The powerful symbol of the underworld, corresponding to the darker hell of the soul, finds a place in nearly every Senecan tragedy.\footnote{19}

When Oedipus hears from the old shepherd the truth about himself in the simple four words, \textit{coniuge est genitus tua} (“that child was born

\footnote{17} Note, for example, the alliterative play on \textit{Medea / malum} and \textit{Medea / monstrum} (e.g. 362, 674f.) on the one hand and \textit{Medea / mater} on the other (171, 289f., 933f., 950f.). See Alfonso Traina, “Due note a Seneca tragico,” \textit{Maia} 31 (1979) 273–75, and C. Segal, “Nomen Sacrum: Medea and Other Names in Senecan Tragedy,” \textit{Maia} 34 (1982) 241–46.


\footnote{19} E.g., Owen (note i) 296f., 307, 311f.; Shelton (note 11) chap. 4; B. Walker and D. Henry, “The Futility of Action: A Study of Seneca’s \textit{Hercules Furens},” \textit{CP} 60 (1965) 14f. and 21f.
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of your wife,” Oed. 867), he replies with a heavily alliterated invocation to Earth and the powers of the nether world (868–70):

\[ \text{dehisce tellus, tuque tenebrarum potens,} \]
\[ \text{in Tartara ima, rector umbrarum rape} \]
\[ \text{retro reversas generis ac stirpis vices.} \]

Yawn open, Earth, and you, powerful ruler of shades, carry back into the lowest depths of Tartarus these inverted exchanges of the race and its stock.

The “yawning of the earth” at the appearance of Laius’ ghost earlier (subito dehiscit terra, 582; cf. dehisce tellus, 868) now changes from supernatural magic to emotional reality. It becomes an expressive indication of the horror in Oedipus’ soul as he makes his terrifying discovery. Now the destructive darkness over the city which Oedipus described in the play’s opening lines (1–5; cf. 44–49) is traced to its origin in himself. With that revelation of the truth the earth really does seem to open beneath him, as it did in 582, and show the infernal realms of shades and darkness beneath the plants and trees (the mild agricultural metaphor of stirps in 870 is active here). The chiastic repetition tenebrarum potens / rector umbrarum (‘ruler powerful of dark shadows’) and the idea of “gaping” in dehisce provide a stylized but adequate verbal equivalent to Oedipus’ split-second realization. At once he knows that his world is turned upside down, that the ground is no longer the same beneath his feet. The very nonrealism of the representation conveys the horror: the remote, fabled realm of Tartarus is the anguish that he is now living. Sophocles’ Oedipus cries out iou iou and addresses the light that he sees for the last time (OT 1182–85); Seneca’s Oedipus utters an initial word, dehisce, which suggests his open-mouthed speechlessness, and then addresses the darkness. The darkness of the lower world that opens before him (cf. 582f.) and the abyss of darkness within himself become visible, as it were, at the same time. This is an Oedipus who, in the course of minutes, is ready to call himself “the crime of the age” (saeculi crimen, 875). The sudden glimpse of the dark hell within in the

\[ \text{20. With this passage in Oed. compare Phaedra 1238–42: the figurative reopening of the lower world for Theseus corresponds to his recognition of the subterranean violence in himself, unleashed in his curse on his son. Cf. also Tro. 519f.} \]
cry *dehisce, tellus* confirms in metaphorical terms the inner violence that the action has revealed in Oedipus' soul: his readiness to torture by fire and use "bloody ways" of interrogating (861f.), his acknowledged "savagery," and his loss of self-control (*si ferus videor tibi / et impotens . . ., "if I seem to you savage and out of control," 865f.).

III

With his feeling for the emotive quality of visual scenes, Seneca often creates an objective correlative for these psychological events through images of place or landscape. The *locus horridus* of gloomy forest or strangling trees expresses the nightmare world of fear, anxiety, despair. Bruno Snell observes that Seneca "likes to surround his characters with what one could call a cloud of their milieu." The power of that milieu, however, often derives from images that give a physical sense of helplessness in the face of emotions. "Anxiety" means, literally, the constriction of heart, diaphragm, and stomach when we encounter dread. Lucretius' *anxius angor* calls attention to the root meaning of the word and its physiological effects (cf. *DRN* 3.993).

Seneca, like many ancient writers, conveys the physiological concreteness of emotions in metaphors like that of the mind "swelling" with anger or the "seething" of grief and pain (*tumet animus ira, fervet immensus dolor*, of Oedipus, *Phoen.* 352). But he often pushes this physiological correlate of emotion much further. In particular, he develops two complementary types of physiological sensations for

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21. For the motif of enclosure in the *locus horridus* see Rosanna Mugellesi, "Il senso della natura in Seneca tragico," in *Argentea Aetas: In Memoriam E. V. Marmorale*, Pubbl. dell' Ist. di Filologia Classica di Genova 37 (Genoa 1973) 43ff., 63–66, who comments on "la nuova sensibilità pittorico-visiva di Seneca" (63). For this kind of "atmospheric" effect of landscape in Roman poetry, see also C. Segal, *Landscape in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, Hermes Einzelschrift 23 (Wiesbaden 1969) 5ff. The essay of Pierre Thévenaz, "L'interiorità in Seneca" (1944) in Alfonso Traina, ed., *Seneca, lettere critiche* (Milan 1976) 91–96, is concerned not with spatial "interiority" but with the internalization of values, the importance of "the things under our control" in Seneca's philosophy.

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emotional disturbance: entrapment, enclosure, engorgement, or implosion on the one hand and dismemberment, invasion, penetration, or mutilation on the other. In quite a literal sense his language grips us in our vital places.

The “wide realm of Diana,” as Snell describes the “cloud” of Hippolytus’ milieu at the opening of Phaedra, contrasts with Phaedra’s image of herself as she enters immediately after. She is “weighed on” by a “greater grief” (maior incubat . . . dolor, 99), has an illness growing inside her, and feels her passion as the steam of a volcano burning and seething within (101–3). As she describes her condition of desperate, neurotically obsessive fixation on Hippolytus, she uses other images of enclosure, the “dark house” of the Labyrinth where Daedalus “shut in” the monstrous bull (qui nostra caeca monstra conclusit domo, 122). The reference to the Minotaur locked in the Cnossian Labyrinth suggests her own metaphorical entrapment in the dark heredity of her mother, Pasiphae, of which Phaedra is painfully aware (e.g., 127f., 242). Later the Nurse describes her love madness (furor) as something burning inside, “shut up within” (inclusus, 362), which, though concealed, is betrayed by her face and bursts forth as fire from her eyes (360–64). Entrapment in an inner fire of uncontrollable passion as in a burning building is combined with another image of radical alienation from the self: Phaedra’s physiological sensation of the strangeness of her body as in a hopeless, feverish disease (spes nulla tantum posse leniri malum, / finisque flammis nullus insanis erit, “there is no hope that so great a suffering can be soothed; the wild flames will have no check,” 360f.). Both images become more powerful by the contrast with her fantasy wishes of the outdoors, woods, hunting, the feeling of the wind in her hair (394–403).

Through such descriptions Seneca manipulates those anxieties, present in all of us, which have to do with what psychologists call primary boundary anxiety, the concern with the autonomy of our physical being, our corporeal integrity in its most fundamental sense. Such anxieties have their roots in the infant’s first experiences, his inchoate sense of his separateness from the mother, his fear of being engulfed and swallowed. Such concerns surface in the language and

23. The modern reader may perhaps forget how real and present was the danger of being trapped in a burning building in Imperial Rome: e.g., Juvenal 3. 197–202 and in general A. G. McKay, Houses, Villas, and Palaces in the Roman World (Ithaca 1975) 85ff.
imagery of other Latin authors: Ovid and Ammianus Marcellinus, for example, have been fruitfully studied from this point of view. The spatial imagery of the Phaedra exploits both forms of boundary anxiety: Phaedra is entrapped in the cavernous hell of her hopeless desire, Hippolytus is dismembered. In both cases the self suffers a direct physical violation, an irreparable breach in ontological security. Phaedra, nurturing the evil within, becomes unrecognizable to herself. When the monster, called forth by Theseus’ prayer to Neptune, emerges from the sea (1025ff.), Hippolytus initially holds out against panic (1066ff.), but the nightmarish apparition cannot be checked by rational control (cf. the simile of the pilot, 1072–75) and soon overwhelms his hold on reality in the most elemental way, leaving him scattered in pieces over the woods that were once his secure and peaceful refuge from women and sexuality. By exaggerating the details of the monster in Euripides’ play (Hipp. 1173–1248), Seneca shifts the event from the plane of mythical reality to the plane of nightmare fantasy, an externalization of a dream world of unconscious terrors. The Euripidean text, to be sure, already contains that element, but it is intensified by the secondary elaboration of Senecan rhetoric and artificiality. Seneca’s play, in this respect, is a psychological reading of Euripides’: the mythic and theological issues are reinterpreted as psychological states and symbols.

For Seneca’s Hippolytus, as for his Oedipus, reality dissolves into nightmare. Oedipus’ world opened to reveal the hellish depths in himself as saeculi crimen, “the criminal of the age” (the hero of the Hercules Furens undergoes a similar experience). Hippolytus’ death turns him into exactly the opposite of what he has wanted to be, so that he is in a sense disintegrated from within as well as from without. Convicted of incestuous rape, he is mutilated and castrated (cf. 1099) by a creature that evokes both the castrating father imago (cf. 1046ff.) and his own neurotic distortions of the sexuality that he has repressed in himself.

In the Phoenissae, as I have remarked above, Oedipus images his guilt as a kind of uterine penetration of his mother’s “entrails” (intra

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viscera materna, 249f.) and also as entrapment in the guilty concealment of the womb: in its recesses he is “pushed back and hidden away” (abstrusum, abditum, 251). That sense of being helplessly entrapped, enfolded, or compacted has its psychological dimension in his feeling that it is not only the sky, gods, or crimes that he cannot escape, but himself. His very body is a prison, a corporeal equivalent of the confinement within his own guilt. “It is myself I flee,” he says (me fugio), “my breast [pectus], guilty of every crime, and this hand of mine, and this sky and the gods and the dread crimes that I, though innocent, performed” (Phoen. 216–18). The sensation of entrapment, whether in the womb or in the corporeal / psychological prison of his own body, depicts a self experienced as something that he wants to escape but cannot. Correspondingly, he experiences his unremitting burden of guilt as a boundary violation, the penetration or mutilation of his body.25 It is not enough, as in the Oedipus, that he digs his fingers into his eyes; now he would reach through more “boldly” into the brain (nunc manum cerebro indue, “now dip your hand into the brain,” Phoen. 180). In his next speech, as he traces his guilt to the womb and to his birth, he uses an image of cruel penetration to convey the malignancy of his fate: “With hot iron my father pierced my tender feet” (calidoque teneros transitus ferro pedes, 254).26

Seneca’s most effective manipulation of primary boundary anxiety occurs, as one might expect, in the Thyestes. It is not so much the imagery of eating and digestion which, in the last analysis, brings home to us the horror of Atreus’ revenge as the vivid sense of being stuffed, crammed full, impacted. As Atreus unveils his triumph, he seems to soar in the vast celestial spaces of boundless euphoria (885f.): “I walk the equal to the stars and beyond all men, with my proud head touching the lofty vault of heaven” (aequalis astris gradior, et cunctos super / altum superbo vertice attingens polum). But images of his

25. The heavy emphasis on Oedipus’ feelings of guilt that he can never escape in Phoenissae (e.g., 216ff.) is one of the most interesting aspects of Senecan characterization and certainly underlies Oedipus’ cries to the dead Laius, a figure who has virtually the status of an apparition (cf 39ff. and 166ff.) and is treated almost explicitly as a hallucination produced by neurotic anxiety.

26. Seneca has elaborated this detail from the description of the pierced feet in Euripides’ Phoenissae 26, sphurôn sidêra kentra diapeiras mesôn (“passing the iron spurs through the midst of the ankles”). Sophocles’ version leaves these details vague (OT 717–19, 1032–34, 1349–55). See in general P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, “The Interpretation of the Name Oedipus,” Maia 27 (1975) 37–43, especially 38f.
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own satiety follow almost at once, as he contemplates “filling the father full of the death of his sons” (890ff.). When the vengeance comes, it pushes this fullness to the point of horror, in striking contrast with the free movement of Atreus’ opening lines. The horror is quite literally visceral as Thyestes cries out (999–1001):

quis hic tumultus viscera exagitat mea?
quid tremuit intus? sentio impatiens onus
meumque gemitu non meo pectus gemit.

What is the disturbance that tosses around my entrails? What trembles within? I feel a burden that will not endure me, and my breast groans with a groaning not my own.

The polyptoton meum . . . non meo (“mine . . . not mine”) conveys the speaker’s confusion of personal boundaries, his alienation from the physical substance of his own body. The situation is analogous to the sensation, in excruciating pain, of uttering a scream that one does not recognize as one’s own.

It is fruitful to compare the scene in Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus where Oedipus, emerging blinded from the palace, cries, “Miserable that I am, where on earth am I carried, unhappy, where does my cry fly about me, borne aloft?” (1308–11). Comparison between the language of Seneca and Sophocles is instructive: Sophocles’ language has none of Seneca’s corporality. It is the lightness, the fluttering, that predominates (diapōtatai phoradēn, “the cry flutters carried around”). Aside from the Sophoclean hero’s unobtrusive ethical dative, moi, in 1309, there are no personal pronouns. Far from being alienated from himself in the extremity of pain, Sophocles’ Oedipus recovers a deepened sense of self as he plunges into a suffering of which he is the self-chosen agent, not the victim (OT 1331ff.).

Seneca’s imagery of corporeal heaviness, the burden stuffed within, gains an added dimension of psychological suffering when Atreus reveals the truth. Thyestes says (1040–44):

hoc est quod avidus capere non potuit pater.
volvuntur intus viscera et clusum nefas
sine exitu luctatur et quaerit fugam.
da, frater, ensem (sanguinis multum mei
habet ille); ferro liberis detur via.
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This then is what the greedy father could not hold. My entrails roll around within; the closed in evil struggles, with no way out, and searches for escape. Give me a sword, brother (that sword of yours has much of my blood); with steel let a way out be given to my children.

This is the acme of the horror: Thyestes is trapped in the evil of his own body. The nightmare of the boundary violation is all the greater as the foreign matter, the source of evil (clusum nefas), is stuffed within himself as both alien and fearfully his own. The victim is bloated and distorted in his own flesh by being crammed full of a poisonous feast that he cannot disgorge and must assimilate. The scene’s outrage works through its evocation of the primary processes over which we have no conscious control, the digestive absorption of alien substance converted into our very being.

Seeking to grasp and dramatize the horror, Thyestes reaches out to the remote geography of “the Caucasus’ harsh rock” (1048) but cannot throw off the sensation of being “pressed down” (premor, 1050f.): genitor en natos premo premorque natis (“a father, I press down my sons, and by my sons I am pressed down”). The shift from the active to the passive form in premo...premor expresses the movement from outside to within, from an external to an internal heaviness. This movement, in turn, is another aspect of that fundamental alienation from self conveyed by “mine... not mine” (1001f., quoted above).

As Thyestes calls to the seas to bear witness to the crime, he describes the waters too as “closed in” (clausa litoribus vagis/audite maria, “Hear me, you seas enclosed in your wandering shorelines,” 1068f.), so that the inwardness of the “closed in evil” (clusum nefas, 1041) of the sons trapped in his belly colors his perception of the natural world as well. Atreus repeats the notion of constriction when he uses the verb angit, “chokes,” metaphorically, of Thyestes’ alleged bitterness that he did not prepare such a feast for Atreus first: “I know

27. Compare also Theseus’ reabsorption into the dark hell of his own violence in Phaedra 1203: addressing Avernus and Tartarus he cries out, (me) impium abdite atque mersum premite perpetuis mali (“hide me, the evil one, away and press me down, submerged, in eternal suffering”). Here too, as in Thy. 1050f. and Phoen. 251f., the imagery of weight and oppression express feelings of overwhelming guilt and remorse. Theseus’ language, however, does not develop the visceral equivalents of this heaviness, as in the passages discussed in the text.

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why you are lamenting,” Atreus tells his brother; “you grieve be-
cause I anticipated your crime; it chokes you not that you took in the
unholy banquet [nec quod nefandas hauseris angit dapes], but that you did
not prepare it” (1104–6). The alliteration and repetition in the play’s
last line, Atreus’ te puniendum liberae trado tuis (“I give you over to be
punished by your sons”) continue the sense of entrapment in one’s
own flesh (te . . . tuis). The fresh pastoral woods that Thyestes reluc-
tantly gave up to enter Atreus’ palace (412ff.) are never more hope-
lessly distant.

This reduction of suffering to primary physical boundaries and to
elemental digestive processes is more than just rhetorical sensa-
tionalism or the love of the grotesque. It corresponds to a large moral
design. It is no accident that the ghost of Tantalus opens the play with
his torment by the emptiness of hunger (1–6). His ever “greedy
mouth” and “gaping hunger” are both a contrastive and a comple-
mentary image of the corruption of the house: such corruption will
reduce men to their lowest and most basic functions. In his first
appearance onstage Atreus contemplates his vengeance in images of
fulness that anticipate the condition of Thyestes at the end. His lust
for revenge takes the form of an insatiable hunger that makes him
virtually a living Tantalus (252–54):

non satis magno meum
ardet furore pectus; impleri iuvat
maiore monstro.

My breast burns with a madness that is not great enough. My joy is to
be filled with a greater monstrosity.

When he unfolds his plot, he describes his breast again as “shaking”
and “revolving deep within” by a “disturbance” that will be closely
echoed in Thyestes’ physical trouble later (260ff.):

Atreus. tumultus pectora attonitus quatit penitusque volvit.

Trouble astonished shakes my breast and rolls it around deep within.

We may compare Thyestes at 999f.:

quis hic tumultus viscera exagitat mea?
quid tremuit intus?
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What is this trouble that tosses my entrails? What has trembled within?

or at 1041:

volvuntur intus viscera.

My vitals are rolled around within.

A few lines later Atreus’ growing lust for revenge is something in his mind (animo) that “swells” (tumet, 267f.) beyond normal limits.

In Thyestes’ case the imagery of inward fullness, swolleness, turgidity shifts at the end from “breast” and “mind” (pectus, animus) to “entrails” (viscera). Yet the parallels show Atreus as already drawn into his victim’s suffering, already as degraded spiritually as his victim is physically. His own malaise about the insatiability of his vengeance contrasts with the horrible satiety that he has brought to Thyestes (889–91): “It is well, it is abundant. Now it is enough even for me. But why enough? I shall go on, even though the father is filled up with the death of his children. . . .” And yet the very terms that he uses of his all-devouring vengefulness link him with his victim (cf. satur est, “he is sated,” 913). His metaphorical ascent to the broad heavens at the culmination of his revenge (884–88) is soon enclosed in the narrow terms of satiety, filling, and constriction (889–900). The torturer is inextricably fused with the tortured and in his own way victimized by the very violation that he inflicts on the other. The monstrosity that swells in Atreus’ soul (267f.) is more deeply corruptive than the monstrous food in his brother’s stomach. Though physically defeated and degraded, Thyestes retains a dignity of spirit which eludes the successful and exuberant criminal, Atreus.28

This language of the body, especially of the viscera, functions in a manner analogous to metamorphosis in Ovid.29 It is disturbing because it reminds us of our physicality, of our inevitable reduction to


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being mere body. We are reduced to those primary bodily processes like digestion over which we have no conscious control but on which we nonetheless rely for our lives. By reminding us of our visceral physicality too, such descriptions indirectly evoke the inevitability of death. We are forced to see ourselves in the context of the corruptible entrails of animals. This ultimate reduction of our being to physical matter, to the fate that we share with all living (and dying) things, is profoundly disquieting.

Like the Phaedra, the Thyestes combines the internal boundary violations of the victim’s imploded body with the external violation of the agent’s delight in mutilation. When he has Thyestes before him stuffed with the impious banquet, Atreus gloats over the details of how he cut the sons limb from limb, chopping and breaking the individual members (1057-68).

Psychology aside, the sadistic violation of human flesh by mutilation, decapitation, and crucifixion was an all too familiar reality in the amphitheaters of Seneca’s contemporaries. The anxiety reflected by the tragedies in this area of experience had a basis in fact. One does not witness such acts without some damage to the spirit; and Seneca’s plays bear witness, if only indirectly, to the corruptive effect that torture has on those who permit or condone it.30

There is even archaeological evidence for the vivid impressions that the executions, gladiatorial games, and crucifixions left on more sensitive spectators. The Italian archaeologist Umberto Fasola describes a graffito on a shop wall near the amphitheater at Puteoli. The crude but gripping drawing is clearly the work of one who “was certainly a witness of such torture and was deeply impressed” by the suffering of the transfixed, dying man.31 It is as if Seneca represses the knowledge of the actual tortures in the public spectacles of his day but allows the reality of their psychological effects and their emotional impact to surface in the remote, mythical, and bizarre violations of the human body depicted in his plays: the butchering of Thyestes’ sons, the tearing out of Oedipus’ eyes, the dismemberment of Hippolytus’

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body. In Seneca, as in Lucan, Petronius, Tacitus, Juvenal, and other Silver Age writers, the proximity of violent death, torture, and helpless subjection to physical violation produces a corresponding extremism of violence in the style.32 The stylistic equivalents of the psychological impact of violence were, perhaps, one way to come to terms with experiences that, two millennia later, are no more easily assimilable to reality. However remote, stilted, and incredible Seneca’s rhetoric of violence and violation may look, it has a modern descendant in the atmosphere of unreality and nightmare which pervades the novels of Kafka, Canetti, and Wiesel and a still living cousin in the element of the surreal and the incredible that attaches to the ( alas) nonfictional accounts of the tortured from Argentina to Algeria, from Auschwitz to the Gulag.

32. See Regenbogen (note 5) 211ff., especially 215f., citing Seneca, Ad Helv. matr. de consol. 20.1–3.