Anamneses of a Pestilent Infant: The Enigma of Monstrosity, or Beyond Oedipus

Athena Athanasiou

I have to build everything from the beginning, homeland, ancestors . . . to invent them, to discover them.

—André Gide, Oedipe

The revolutionary is the first to have the right to say: “Oedipus?” Never heard of it.

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia

Prologue

The brash skeptic and the defunct hero, the abandoned infant and the triumphant sovereign, the autonomous and the dispossessed, the Hegelian inaugural philosopher, Nietzsche’s last human, the Freudian emblematic figure. How do the multiple figures of Oedipus enact and inflect the philosophical, anthropological, and psychoanalytic aporias of modern Western episteme? In this essay, I attempt to tackle this question by thinking through the cleavages of heteronomy and autonomy, belonging and errancy, sovereignty and liminality, the body of the sovereign and the future of the body politic. I suggest a (literally) symptomatic reading of Oedipus’s body, one that illustrates a corporeal topography (but also, tropography)—that is, the injured feet, the self-mutilated eyes, and the misplaced sex—that bespeaks the politics of bodily disorder.

The entry points of my inquiry are two threshold moments of Oedipus’s itinerary that have remained elided within the Freudian appropriation of the myth: namely, Oedipus’s encounter with the Sphinx, the feminine monstrosity, and the eruption of the plague, which served as the prologue of Sophocles’ tragic play. In discussing the horror of the pestilence, whereby the polis encounters its own finitude at a moment of a state of emergency, and the mystery of the Sphinx, whereby the masculine hero encounters the sacred enigma about the human condition, as instantiations of the constitutive force of the biopolitical alterity, I will attempt to read the latter as a binding condition for affectability that ensures the cohesion
of the social body, while, at the same time, leaving open the necessary possibility of disruption and dismemberment.

*The Optics of Memory*

In the narrative of Oedipus, the tropes of memory and vision are presented as two interconnected forces synthesizing a “complex” that is dramatized on the horizon of the embodied self, its limits, and its unprocessed traumas. Associated with the symptomatology of hysteria, the optical unconscious is addressed as a dark realm that needs to be surfaced and managed by the normalizing forces of the conscious. In psychoanalytic thinking, memory picture is a significant prompter through which the psychic material emerges out of its latent interiority. Freud has argued forcefully for the psychoanalytic relevance of examining the memory pictures that occupy the patient’s inward eye:

Once a picture has emerged from the patient’s memory, we may hear him say that it becomes fragmentary and obscure in proportion as he proceeds with the description of it. *The patient is, as it were, getting rid of it by turning it into words.* We go on to examine the memory picture itself in order to discover the direction in which our work is to proceed. “Look at the picture once more. Has it disappeared?” “Most of it, yes, but I still see this detail.” “Then this residue must still mean something. Either you will see something new in addition to it, or something will occur to you in connection with it.” When this work has been accomplished, the patient’s field of vision is once more free and we can conjure up another picture. On other occasions, however, a picture of this kind will remain obstinately before the patient’s inward eye, in spite of his having described it; and this is an indication to me that he still has something important to tell me about the topic of the picture. As soon as this has been done the picture vanishes, like a ghost that has been laid.¹

The memory picture haunts like a ghost the patient’s inward eye. Optic recollection that emerges from underlying latency comes to alleviate the patient’s suffering and its embodied enactments. Yet can there be such a thing as a “cure” that does not take into account the multiple and intense interaction of the embodied self with the interrelated fields of social and discursive formations, as well as with the other that constitutes the self by being excluded by it? What follows is a meditation on this question. Taking my cue from Oedipus as “the specimen story” of psychoanalysis,² I
discuss the specularization and the spectralization at the heart of the affective encounter with the other, whereby the discourse of the other dislocates the sovereign position of the knowing and self-knowing self. I will do so by reading a story written on the marked body of Oedipus—a body floating in the circuit of castration and dismemberment, sovereignty and exile, bare life and power.

*Recollecting the Self: Narrative, Memory, Representation*

The role of remembering, especially remembering painful and unrepresentable events, is fundamental in the “talking cure” known as psychoanalysis. This remembrance occurs in language and in relation to language; it is a restoration of the historical relation to language. As *parole analytique*, the psychoanalytic process of curing spirits and bodies is founded upon the power of language.

This linguistic, narrational articulation of the psychic material constitutes the *arche* (as both authority and beginning) of the very genealogy of psychoanalysis. “Talking cure” bespeaks the “impure origin” of the psychoanalytic method, its proximity with hypnosis and suggestion. One can trace the therapeutic effects—on both spirit and body—of psychoanalytic narrativization back to the *infancy*, the first steps, of the psychoanalytic paradigm in the era of hypnosis, when the therapy of the “dissociation of personality” aimed at restoring the patient’s “real” identity by recovering memories of past traumatic experiences through hypnotic suggestion.³

What is significant in our inquiry, however, is the suggestive relevance of psychoanalytic infancy to the infancy of the psychoanalytic hero. In light of the polis affliction (the pestilence that constitutes the inaugural gesture of the tragic play) and the deaths of others, that is, at the very limit of relation to the Other, Oedipus is called upon to refigure his own infancy—the infancy that he has suffered. Such self-figuration would encompass not merely his infancy per se (as lack of speech) but also his passage beyond it to his birth to language—a language that precedes and exceeds him. The entry into language is inevitably founded upon an incomplete and immemorable death: the death of infancy, which marks indelibly every speech.⁴

What is demanded firmly of Oedipus by the plagued body politic is the task of managing his own “dissociation” from his primal experience; what is expected of him is the responsibility of restoring his own real identity and exposing it to the consciousness of the polis’s sight and language. In
other words, what is demanded of Oedipus is to reconstitute himself in the Symbolic; to restore his relation to language and his relation to the relation between kinship and death. Oedipus is called upon to reinaugurate his unconscious—to recognize what has remained misrecognized—by speaking his life and its most intimate, immemorial, and unspeakable folds. This self-articulation in the polis’s language would be a biopolitical undertaking that, if accomplished, would guarantee the polis’s life and future. The sovereign is expected to give birth to the body politic through his own birth into language and meaning. The moribund present state of Oedipus’s city—the city’s radical exposure to finitude and death—becomes the prompter of the sovereign’s precarious enterprise of recollecting his own self. Such connection of the dissociation of the subject with a mortal biopolitical exigency of the polis has been important to the literature regarding “multiplex personality”: in 1889, the American psychotherapist Frederic W. H. Myers defined dissociation as a “city blockaded, like a great empire dying at the core.”

It is precisely this dying polis that implicates Oedipus in an impetus to “see.” He is enjoined to a performative of making himself present to himself and the community. His restoring the narrational relation to his own self emerges then as restoration of his responsible and responsive relation to the polis: to give himself to the unnarratable adventures of self-narration is to give himself to the body politic. The afflicted polis seeks to gain access to Oedipus’s zoē and its traumatic enigmas, dissociations, and wounds that have lain dormant for a long time. Zoē is never merely one’s own.

But isn’t this reflective narrativity always a traumatic experience experienced by a certain delay, as Freud has taught us? Isn’t this structural necessity for time lapse a critical component of the Oedipal scenario? Oedipus’s passage from the exposure of infant temporality to the total exposure of self-blinding occurs step-by-step, in the pace of someone whose feet are wounded and steps are hindered. Oedipus’s anguished retrieving of his traumatic origin of language and desire takes place in the common ground of the polis’s historicity. Such a search for his own positioning within the family implicates him in a new topology. He steps beyond the grounds of the polis, beyond the limits marked by the mandates of the Law that regulates desire, sexual alliance, and kinship relations. Oedipus is recalled to the ultimate touching of his sight that is the site of the community’s knowledge and memory. The absolute revealing comes about as absolute occluding. In the realm of being-in-language, the advent of illumination is in the shape of obscurity. Suddenly, what was invisible becomes too
visible, too present. Oedipus’s self-blinding, the blinding flash of obscurity that marks the last scene of *Oedipus the King*, signals the moment when the hand (which is specific to humans, according to Martin Heidegger) and the eye (as the navel of episteme in the Western discourse of light and illumination), the haptic and the optic, become coterminous in the human history of the West.

Oedipus is also interpellated by the polis in an impetus to “remember.” Insofar as forgetting amounts to absence from the self, Oedipus is urged to “come to himself,” to give “its whole meaning to his history,” that is, to accede to a state of conscious restoration of the traumatic truth and its historicity. This is a process that resonates with psychoanalytic rememoration and Freud’s theory of reintegration of the mnemonic traces that the unconscious consists of. The curative power of recollection is the driving force of Oedipus’s enterprise to convert forgetting into a narrative of self-figuration—indeed, a journey that takes place in a state of suffering and at the limits of language. This is about integrating the dissociated traumatic event into conscious knowledge, memory, and signification. Freud defined this “latency,” the time period during which the effects of the traumatic experience are not yet fully assimilated, as a period of repression and forgetting, a time gap between the traumatic event and its ensuing partial return in the form of neurotic symptoms. The trauma’s first occurrence is forgotten; after a period of latency, it comes to life again as an outbreak of neurosis (“traumatic neurosis”)—an unwitting reenactment of the repressed material. As Cathy Caruth puts it, the historical significance and force of the traumatic event “is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all.”

The traumas of Oedipus’s narrative were not fully and immediately perceived as they occurred, but rather were experienced only in the very belatedness and unintelligibility of their occurrence—in the very othering that constituted their occurrence. Hence the historical and political co-implication of Oedipus’s personal traumas to the polis’s suffering. The assembly’s call is for Oedipus to find Laius’s murderer (the miasma), but really, the call is for the sovereign subject to “find himself” and to reembody the body politic. Through the discovery of the “name of the father” (the *nom* and the *non* of the father), the son will pass the Oedipal scene as named subject and enter the paternalistic symbolic order.

The polis attempts to overcome the resistance of the amnesiac Oedipus. Oedipus and the polis are implicated in an inextricably mutual demand for insight (Oedipus asks to know about his origin, the polis asks for cure).
The analysand, Oedipus, is urged by the polis—which operates here just like the psychoanalyst who manages the subject’s mnemonic restoration—to revive memory traces of his early family life, of the moment that he, as a child, acceded to language and self-other separation. Oedipus’s destiny is tied to the law of the city and its authority.11

The assembly of the polis is the constitutive background of the Oedipal drama. Taking stock of the cultural master narratives of gender, sexuality, affectivity, kinship, and identity, the polis addresses an Oedipus who is “blind” to the extent to which his own life history is implicated in the polis’s affliction. The apolis Oedipus—the one whose origin is abandonment—stands before the polis. Significantly, Oedipus’s trauma—or rather, the latency of his trauma—is staged before the polis; it is played out in the topos of suffering that the polis has become. The cure is “suggested” by the convulsions of the body politic. A process of suggestion that “opens his eyes” is underway.

What motivates this process in the Oedipus tragedy, however, is the amphiboly at the heart of discourse, the very uncertainty and misrecognition of its founding moment. It is important to bear in mind in this connection that Delphic oracles are always vague and divergent in the Sophoclean tragedy; no clear and direct response has been given by the mystical authority. Indeed, the force of the oracular language is the openness to its own decentering. The oracle that Laius (Oedipus’s biological father) received, or rather, the way he read it—προμικρός παιδ/ομικρός θανειν (“your son will kill you”)—signifies the relation of death and kinship that Oedipal generationality impels us to consider. Laius’s reading of his own oracle was akin to the way Oedipus read the oracle he had received as foreseeing his murdering his Corinthian (foster) parents Polybus and Merope. In both literalist readings of a phrase that does not necessarily imply literal “murder” (it could have been interpreted as “your son will close your eyes,” “will outlive you,” “will continue his life after your death”), the child figures as a metaphorical murderer of the parent. In what both Laius and Oedipus read as an ominous prophecy, the child figures as an outliving figure that is ultimately overpowering and murdering.12

The Oedipal genealogy of life and death signals the catachrestic readings and recognitions that can erupt within the culturally intelligible familialist and heteronormative “elementary structures of kinship” that organize the reigning model of the unconscious. The agony around the proper object of affectivity and desire (i.e., not related by blood, belonging to the “opposite” sex) plays an utterly important role in depositioning and repositioning the selves in Western culture; and it is upon this agony that
both psychoanalytic and biopolitical constructions of pathology and normality are centered.13

Let us now turn to Oedipus’s own exposure to the biopolitical alterity at the very heart of kinship.

*Monsters and Plagues: The Traumas of Biopolitics*

The monster and the plague, those specters of abjection that remained residual to the force field of Freudian psychoanalysis, constitute arguably the structuring motifs of biopolitics. The mystery of the vermin Sphinx and the horror of the pestilence evoke limit-manifestations of bodily affectability, which, in introducing a sense of disorder, chaos, and catastrophe, embody the spectrality of a dystopian biopolitical futurity. By interrupting the intelligibility of living organicity, and since human organicity is understood as the very matter of the future, they make the future—or rather, particular manifestations of the future—impossible and implausible.

But how is the polis’s stillborn future inextricably connected with Oedipus’s traumatic personal past? As a metaphorical reminder of the inaugural trauma, the infant Oedipus’s earliest traumatic experience of pierced feet indicates the nature of the prototypical trauma: the Greek *trauma* refers to an injury inflicted on the body (etymologically coming from *titrosko*, to pierce).14 Therefore, the bodily trauma emerges as constitutive of the subject rather than an external force that befalls the subject. The textuality of Oedipus’s scarred body echoes not only the grounded-yet-suspended position of the human but also the traumatic origin of the human. It also impels us to rethink a fundamental relation in psychoanalysis, namely, the relation between the return of the repressed and the temporal delay and repetition. Freud’s *Trauma* signifies an injury inflicted upon the mind, having left the body unharmed. (Freud’s exemplary scene of trauma is the shocking occurrence of a train collision: the victim leaves the site of the accident apparently unharmed.) What does the textuality of Oedipus’s body teach us regarding the relation of the traumatic event to temporality as the condition of the very possibility of narrating?

Indeed, the tragic narrative and the mythic intrigue of the Oedipus narrative are punctuated by configurations of bodily agony whose seriality echoes the repeated flashbacks through which the traumatic event returns. Traumatic events are not fully grasped as they occur, Freud taught us, but return later in a series of repetitive phenomena: the abandonment of an
injured infant, the killing of an old stranger at a crossroads, the trauma of inadvertent patricide and incest, the plague epidemic that hit Thebes, the encounter with the Sphinx and the ensuing suicide of the monster, and finally, the self-blinding of the aged and dispossessed Oedipus.

The metaphor of the infectious disease emerges as a key element in all of this, and Thebes, in conditions of the *epi*-demic, emerges as the *demos* par excellence: divided, injured, assaulted, besieged; hit by internecine war, hubris, and curse. The plague epidemic that hit Thebes—a dramatic reenactment of the epidemic that hit Athens in 429 B.C.E., a short time before the writing of the tragic play—constitutes the prologue of the play: the pestilence operates as the inaugural moment of dramaturgy, considering that Aristotle (in *Poetics*) made Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* the definitive exemplar for tragedy. The plague (Greek, *plege*, blow) is also the condition that binds together Oedipus and his polis; it becomes the symbolic language through which the sovereign’s unconscious speaks. The sovereign subject’s commanding his own memory and bringing it to language occurs in light of confrontation with the finitude of the polis’s mortal body; the management of social suffering emerges as the condition of the sovereign’s affirmation of subjectivity and power.

As the afterlife of the riddle of the Sphinx, the plague embodies monstrosity at work. It figures as a symptom of the unrepresentability of trauma; it stands for the trauma that is performatively constituted by the breakdown of referentiality. Here is Freud elaborating on “traumatic neurosis,” whereby the victim of the railway accident walks away from the site apparently unharmed, only to suffer symptoms of the shock in the course of the following weeks: “The time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms is called the ‘incubation period,’ a transparent allusion to the pathology of infectious disease.” Similarly, the assembly of the plagued polis is a symptom of the trauma’s delayed transmission. It dramatizes the trauma’s “contagion” of the ones who listen to the crisis of a trauma, as this infectious traumatic horror, in its unrepresentability and belatedness, necessarily implicates others and is manifested at the related levels of speech and listening. The survivor becomes the “foreign body” that must be expunged, banished. Oedipus is the symptom in the body of the polis, a body foreign to the body of the polis.

In the Oedipus narrative, the inaugural moment of the plague represents the “acting out” of the past traumatic events (of what has not yet been fully known as loss and abjection) incorporated as the “living dead.” The polis reenacts the originary trauma that caused its current diseased
condition; it seeks to retroactively symbolize it, to represent it, to listen to it. The polis emerges here as analyst whose therapeutic listening intends to awaken the survivor to a new possibility of intelligible narration. The survivor is encouraged to negotiate a narrative delay and to integrate the unrepresentable into the representational order.

The pestilence figures as the lethal threat that has befallen the city’s body, and at the same time, somewhat paradoxically, it operates as the constitutive other that substantiates—and sublimes—both the unity of the subject and the cohesiveness of the social body. Entailing the horrors of disintegration and effecting a provisional rupture in the fabric of the polis, the pestilence forms the political realm where Oedipus’s self-figuration takes place. In its various forms of death, infertility, and stillbirth, the plague is the biopolitical panic that puts the bare life of the polis in a state of exception.

Despite its etymology (ex-capere, “emergency”: Greek ek-taktos, external to the order), Giorgio Agamben proposes, the exception is not exceptional. The state of exception (a temporal, “temporary” suspension of the law, rather than deviation) is a central structure of the law itself; it is, in other words, the rule of the law that is decided by the sovereign. Drawing on Walter Benjamin, who employed the term “state of emergency” as the very legitimization of power, Agamben writes: “The state of exception, which is what the sovereign each and every time decides, takes place precisely when naked life—which normally appears rejoined to the multifarious forms of social life—is explicitly put into question and revoked as the ultimate foundation of political power. The ultimate subject that needs to be at once turned into the exception and included in the city is always naked life.” Thebes’s social body is assembled, diseased, traumatized, but above all, homogenized by the commitment to put blind trust in the sovereign power, which is founded on the prerogative to proclaim the state of exception.

The Master and the Monster

We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity.

—JULIA KRISTEVA, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection
(translated by Leon Roudiez)

Oedipus’s victory over the monster is the heroic trial that leads to the hero’s union with the king’s woman (usually daughter; here, wife). Oedipus’s victorious confrontation with the Sphinx reads like a hero’s experience of alterity. In inhabiting both animality and humanity, the
undetermined nature of the Sphinx’s monstrous body form upsets the sociopolitical order of bodily intelligibility. The Sphinx is like and unlike a human; like and unlike a woman; originary and derivative, primeval and liminal, both at once: both an archaic mythological figure and a product of technocultural mutation. By being both Same and Other, the sexually indeterminate monster (teras: both horrible and wonderful) is, indeed, a “shifter, a vehicle that constructs a web of interconnected and yet potentially contradictory discourses about his or her embodied self.” Signaling the para-ontological eventuality of hybridity, the figure of the Sphinx defies categorical taxonomies and pushes past the intelligible order of subjectivity. For all “its” categorical liminality vis-à-vis normal human subjectivity, the Sphinx was, in fact, associated in mythology with death—the figure of “psychopompos” (guide of souls) posited as guardian of tombs—but also with undomesticated sexuality; as Marie Delcourt mentions, a popular word in Late Greek to designate a prostitute was “sphinx.”

The Sphinx’s heuristic fiction of not being-one is assigned to the pre-symbolic, the prelaw, the precultural, the preoedipal, located at the site of the “pre,” before gender and sex, before identity formation, before unity and knowledge. The Sphinx is a presubject whose excess remains ungrounded; hence the ensuing suicidal fall, an event utterly paradoxical for a flying entity, an insect, that the Sphinx is: an insect that commits the incest of repetition and discontinuity, of essence and accident. Insects, having been cast as sexless in Aristotle and sexually ambiguous in Pliny, emerge in contemporary critical thinking not only as the exemplar of becoming-molecular (i.e., in Gilles Deleuze’s philosophical nomadology) but also as intensely sexualized “queer” beings that disrupt collective constructions of sex and death (i.e., in Elizabeth Grosz’s feminist philosophy).

The Sphinx is a winged animal, a bug, that falls. She sat on a high rock near Thebes and posed a riddle to all who passed. As soon as Oedipus responded to her riddle, she flung herself from the citadel and perished, a move that bespoke the ultimate deferral of meaning. The Sphinx’s descent into the abyss of groundless nonessence echoes Nietzsche’s “dance on the edge of the abyss,” a scene that epitomizes the dissimulation aligned with the figure of the woman, as the privileged agent of antimetaphysics; truth is not self-presence. The volatile figure of the Sphinx represents the precariousness that marks the woman’s relation to truth-as-presence in Western metaphysics. She falls into the abyss, a chora to which women are typically relegated. Furthermore, the tropologies of temporal regression through which homosexual identities are conceptualized in
Freudian psychoanalytic theories of sexual difference are eloquently staged with the Sphinx’s suicidal fall, a spectacular turning away from the Oedipus situation, and hence history, sociality, and culture; a returning to the pre-preoedipal—the abysmal semiotic. Diana Fuss has addressed the gravitational tropology in psychoanalysis and, more specifically, the psychoanalytic emphasis on the subject’s “fall” into sexual difference:

In Freud’s reading of identification and desire, homosexual desire is not even, properly speaking, desire. Rather, homosexuality represents an instance of identification gone awry—identification in overdrive (or, one might say, oral drive). This overdrive is also implicitly a death drive: cadere (Latin for “to fall”) etymologically conjures cadavers. For Freud every fall into homosexuality is inherently suicidal since the “retreat” from oedipality entails not only the loss of desire but the loss of a fundamental relation to the world into which desire permits entry—the world of sociality, sexuality, and subjectivity. . . . What Freud gives us in the end is a Newtonian explanation of sexual orientation in which falling bodies are homosexual bodies, weighted down by the heaviness of multiple identifications, and rising bodies are heterosexual bodies, buoyed up by the weightlessness of desires unmoored from their (lost) objects.28

The fall of the threatening alterity displaces its subversive potential. The abject other must fall before it flies to acts of subversion; it must be overthrown before it overthrows established order.

But the abject other is not an it. The limit-representation of the human requires the medium of female grotesque. The phallic master in the economy of desire summons the woman in the form of the monster. The monster’s femininity emerges in the realm of the face—the location of speech but also our visible exposure in the light of the other: “The face, more than any other bodily part, is for the other. It is the most articulate sector of the body, but it is mute without the other’s reading.”29 In the (r)opology of Western metaphysics, the face embodies the uneasy dialectic of interiority and surface, recognition and misrecognition, appearance and reality, but above all, self and other. As we know from Emmanuel Levinas, the face is the site of ethics, but also, as “the only location of community, the only possible city,” it is the site of the political.30 One recalls another classical myth, the Medusa myth, whereby the hero Perseus decapitates Medusa, the monster with the castrating gaze.31 In his essay about Medusa’s head, Freud connects the undecidable interplay of fascination and abjection, which psychoanalytic theory takes as fundamental to desire, to the
sight of female genitalia. Overwhelmed by castration anxiety, the male gazer decapitates the monstrosity that embodies the feminine object of abjection, this “dark continent” of classic psychoanalysis.

The Sphinx occupies a special position in the monstrous imaginary, however; “she” is the emblematic daemon, the face of otherness: daemon as dianomeas, the one who divides and distributes, but also—according to the Homeric “daiomai”—as the one who dismembers and swallows. Thus, the daemon inhabits an in-between zone: nomos and para-nomia, diamerismos (as division, distribution) and diamelismos (as dismemberment, devouring). Above all, embodying the ambiguous semantic intimacy between nomos and nomadism in Greek language, this polysemy causes us to pose anew the question of how to be a nomad in the house of nomos; how to be a stranger to the nomos of the House, and finally, how to host the economy of difference that you are. The Sphinx is a reminder that the monster does not occur “out there” but within the instability of the intercorporeal relation between same and other, within the zone of indistinction between the sacred and the profane, law and life, life and death. As a figure of woman’s monstrous excess, the figure of the Sphinx embodies the perennially abject other in Western metaphysics, the beast in the cave—to recall Deleuze’s deconstructive reading of difference as monstrosity. The monstrous figure of the Sphinx resonates with the excess of materiality and the persistence of alterity embodied in enslaved black female flesh. The Sphinx, the emblematic native inhabiting the cave on the fringes of civilized humanity, exemplifies the monstrosity of becoming-woman: woman’s becoming a phantasmic site of fascination and horror, an eternal irony—and an internal enemy—of the community. The place of the Sphinx is the place where woman is kept in place:

And so they want to keep woman in the place of mystery, consign her to mystery, as they say “keep her in her place,” keep her at a distance: she’s always not quite there . . . but no one knows exactly where she is. She is kept in place in a quite characteristic way—coming back to Oedipus, the place of one who is too often forgotten, the place of the sphinx . . . She’s kept in the place of what we might call the “watch-bitch” (chienne chantreuse). That is to say, she is outside the city, at the edge of the city—the city is man, ruled by masculine law—and there she is.

The Sphinx inhabits the obscure edge of the polis; she is captured within the polis by being expelled by it; she thus becomes Oedipus’s passageway, where the nēpos Oedipus exceeded his insouciance and conquered human speech by differentiating from the other (animal, female,
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foreign) body. At the passageway of the Sphinx, Oedipus entered the phallic-dominated Symbolic; he was constituted as “man.” It was monstricide that inaugurated Oedipus as a Cartesian cogito, a self-knowing masculine human. Through the encounter with the Sphinx, the wound of his infancy (the pierced feet, the suspended body) assumes its political meaning in this co-implication of being in place and being in the place of the father. His response “Man” performs the very meaning that Jacques Lacan assigns to the phallus: “The function of the phallic signifier touches here on its profound relation: that in which the Ancients embodied the Νοῦς and the Αἴγος.”

Things are more complicated, however. I would like to argue that the Sphinx, the questioner, strangulates, dismembers, and devours not those who merely ignore the “answer” to her riddle but rather those who do not heed the performative call of her enigmatic discourse, those who mistake responsiveness for the quietude of fixed meaning. Let us unravel, then, the devouring figure of the Sphinx as the call of the stranger (the strangeness before the self and within the self): as the performative calling into question the self’s claim to unity and knowledge. Devouring here echoes the threat of self-splitting, and this is a threat with profound sexual and racial connotations.

The female monster’s oral insatiability bespeaks the Freudian conceptualization of gay sexuality in terms of cannibalistic oral intercourse (i.e., Freud’s “oral or cannibalistic phase”). As an organ of sexual desire, the oral orifice invokes infantile sexuality and sexual perversion in Freud’s sexual typology. Orality is a “fixation” that, if not relinquished, is implicated in an ensuing homosexual identity formation. As an organ of sexual desire, mouth must be given up in favor of phallic sexual activity for full sexual maturity to be attained. Recall that Freud associates Leonardo da Vinci’s earliest memory of orality—in which while he was in his cradle a vulture opened his mouth and struck him many times with its tail against his lips—with a later homosexual fantasy of fellatio. In Freud’s thinking, both “the homosexual” and “the primitive” are developmentally arrested in the oral-cannibalistic stage, understood as the earliest phase of libidinal organization. “Perverse orality” provides the site where the classic psychoanalytic association of homosexual oral eroticism with primitive (i.e., cannibalistic) humanity is symbolically constituted. Furthermore, in Hegel’s discourse, Oedipus’s answer to the Sphinx represents “the solution and liberation of that Oriental Spirit. . . . The Inner Being of Nature is Thought, which has its existence only in the human consciousness.” Thus, the Sphinx, the sexually ambiguous serial killer, becomes the very incarnation of the
emblematic anthropophagite: she embodies the Western fantasy of cannibalism, the fiction of savage anthropophagy that has all too often been deployed as the rationale for biopolitical acts of “humanistic interventions.” As Oedipus’s passageway, the racialized and sexualized figure of the Sphinx embodies not only the passage (the continuous transition) between human and animal, but also between Greece and Africa.49

“The name ‘Oedipus,’” as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe put it, “appears to have been a name for the West.”40 Oedipus, the rational and civilized respondent, resolved the enigma in what constituted a scene of avowal and disavowal, confession and concession, at the same time—above all, a scene of identification through monstricide and matricide.41 Oedipus is beset with an urge to grasp and a desire to answer, but above all, with an impulse to eliminate the strangling monster-m/other, in order to protect himself from his infantile fear that he will be eaten by the maternal breast (the first sexual object of Freud’s libidinal development). Oedipus’s was a response articulated by a paradigmatically human subject (male rather than woman, child, or animal) and thus destined to inscribe itself in Western history as the thick narrative that weaves together not only sociality, sexuality, and subjectivity but also primordiality, wilderness, man-eating myth, and perversion. Oedipus, after all, is a man: “he who comes . . . Prince Charming. And it’s man who teaches woman (because man is always the Master as well) to be aware of lack, to be aware of absence, to be aware of death.”42

What the encounter between Oedipus and the Sphinx stages is a mix-up of doubles, a palimpsestuous convergence of identifications and misidentifications, and above all, the blurred space between the self and the other; an intimate and disruptive encounter with a forgotten, yet familiar, stranger. It is a filial and amorous encounter between two different species as well as between two different genders—different to one another and different to themselves at the same time; it is, after all, an encounter between strangeness and intimacy, heimlich and unheimlich. Freud’s theorization of the uncanny derives famously from his night-train journey, when he mistook his own reflection in the looking glass for an intruder in his wagon-lit train compartment. That moment of misrecognition induced in him sentiments of dislike rather than fear: “Is it not possible, though, that our dislike of them was a vestigial trace of the archaic reaction which feels the ‘double’ to be something uncanny?”43 At the heart of this disquieting uncanniness, however, there lies the spectrality of delayed recognition.

It was by virtue of the eeriness of sudden recognition that Oedipus’s answer killed the Sphinx. Perhaps, as I propose, not merely the response per se, but rather the way Oedipus signed his response, the way in which
the Oedipus narrative metaphorized the question as an obstacle to be conquered and the answer as signification to be fixed. What impelled the Sphinx to fall and not fly was Oedipus’s drive to outwit unknowability and to harness the nomadic dissemination of meaning—his impulse to reply to a performative address with a cognitive closure. In confirming the primacy of ontology and the dissolution of the undecidable, Oedipus’s answer inaugurates the metaphysics of the solution, whereby difference ceases to represent an opportunity and is swept underground, into the abyss. The encounter between the stranger and the strangler stages the hero’s necessity to subdue the monstrous and enigmatic feminine alterity in order to demarcate his masculine subjectivity and proclaim his sovereignty.

The end of the myth shows that the Sphinx, this encrypted figure of the other, was hardly defeated by Oedipus, however. The answer was hardly at the disposal of the knowing subject Oedipus and his free agency. The question she posed, the problem of time and the human—or the human’s time—came to be fundamental to Oedipus’s drama, especially when the riddle returns in the form of the plague. The riddle of the Sphinx articulated the utterly complicated and painfully mundane problem of embodied human time: “What is it which in the morning goes on four legs, at midday on two, and in the evening on three?” (One notices that the emphasis of the riddle is on the low extremities, the legs, thus rememorating infant Oedipus’s injured legs and hindered steps.) Questioning is at the heart of the teratological discourse, whereby the other others the same. The Sphinx, the specular other that opposes and constitutes the self, becomes the narcissistic mirror in which Oedipus’s cadence of self-discovery takes place.

In the end, at Colonus—where Oedipus’s psychoanalysis ends, according to Lacan44—the blind Oedipus in exile inaugurates a new tradition of lineage, after wandering urged by the question of origin. Oedipus’s becoming into a founding hero (founder of a tradition of kinship as well as a tradition of the unconscious) is induced by the discourse of a teranthropomorphic figure that emblematically defies any question of origin. In the following final section, I will devote my attention to the question of the question.46
The Oedipus as Question

This is, then, the first Oedipal stake of analytical interpretation, whereby the analyst’s reply to the analysand is not an answer concerning the initial sexual or incestuous relations of the subject (the Oedipus as answer, as a meaning), but a search for the initial question of the subject (the Oedipus as question, as the constitutive speech act of the patient).


The Oedipus narrative illustrates, above all, a quest for origin. In Freud’s discourse, the drive for knowledge is intimately associated with “the sexual research of childhood”: the riddle of where babies come from. In Freud’s conception, sexual difference seems to play a significant role in the very structure of the fundamental question that preoccupies psychoanalytic interpretation. And Freud notes in parentheses: “(This, in a distorted form which can be easily rectified, is the same riddle that was propounded by the Theban Sphinx.).”

The Sphinx occupies a parenthetical space in Freud’s theory of sexuality. In Freud’s language (including, of course, its slips of the tongue), the riddle of life is spontaneously associated with the riddle of femininity, which is introduced in Freud’s text as a question (“what is woman?”). We have already seen that in the Oedipus narrative, the riddle of human life, a question of platitude and cryptography at once, is represented by a questioning figure of monstrous femininity: the return of the abject. The handling of the question of human nature is figured by the difference articulated in the form of the subhuman, ambiguously female monstrosity in the Oedipus narrative.

Through his appropriation of the Oedipus, Freud attempted to articulate an answer to the question of desire. Shoshana Felman alerts us to the way Lacan understands the significance of Freud’s discovery of the Oedipus complex as the ultimate meaning of human desire; Lacan reconstructs the psychoanalytic specimen story not as an answer but as the structure of a question: “What Freud discovered in the Oedipus myth is not an answer but the structure of a question, not any given knowledge but a structuring positioning of the analyst’s own ignorance of his patient’s unconscious.”

It is through the dynamic of question and answer that Felman herself understands the analyst’s responsibility vis-à-vis the analysand’s address: “What [the analyst] gives,” she writes, “is not a superior understanding,
but a reply. The reply addresses not so much what the patient says (or means), but his very call. Being fundamentally a reply to the subject’s question, to the force of his address, the interpretative gift is not constative (cognitive) but performative: the gift is not so much a gift of truth, of understanding or of meaning: it is, essentially, a gift of language.”50 If psychoanalytic interpretation is a gift of language offered in the form of reply, the question then becomes how to read the question—and the quest—that the Oedipus narrative consists in. What is at stake, in other words, is not only the literary narrative within the Oedipus myth but also the différence involved in the narrativity of any insight or interpretation (the psychoanalytic included).

I would like to argue that one of the fundamental issues that the Oedipus narrative impels us to consider is that of response and responsibility to the Other; that of response-ability to the discourse and affect of the Other. Oedipus conquers the autonomy of language by responding to a question posed by an ostensibly perilous alterity: the return of the repressed other, difference, a foreigner, his own unconscious. “The unconscious is,” Lacan writes, “this subject unknown to the self, misapprehended, misrecognized, by the ego.”51 In this sense, “the Oedipal question is thus at the center of each practical psychoanalysis, not necessarily as a question addressing analysands’ desire for parents but as a question addressing analysands’ misapprehension, misrecognition (méconnaissance) of their own history.”52

Oedipus’s assumption of his response-ability to the discourse of the Other takes place in light of death: not only the father’s death that preceded Oedipus’s assumption of his own consciousness, not only his own death as “Oedipus the King” (“Oedipus is no more”53) and his biological death that he awaits at Colonus (a death that remains “afonis,” unconfirmed and unburied, and undefined, indefinite, and indefinitive), but also his polis’s death, for which he is responsible. Lacan—himself exiled, withdrawn from the Freudian limitation and expropriated from the International Psychoanalytical Association—urges that we shift our reading to Oedipus the exile: “You will have to read Oedipus at Colonus. You will see that the last word of man’s relation to this discourse which he does not know is—death.”54 Explaining that whereas Freud identifies with Oedipus the King, Lacan identifies with Oedipus the exile, Felman reads Lacan’s elliptical admonition thus: “What, now, happens in Oedipus at Colonus that is new with respect to the recognition story of Oedipus the King (besides the subject’s death)? Precisely the fact that Oedipus is born, through the
assumption of his death (of his radical self-expropriation), into the life of his history.”

Oedipus’s birth into responsibility emerges from the site of his own finitude: “It is from the site of death as the place of my irreplaceability, that is, of my singularity, that I feel called to responsibility. In this sense only a mortal can be responsible.” In discussing the Heideggerian originary responsibility of Dasein, Jacques Derrida points out that Heidegger had signaled that death is the place of one’s irreplaceability; the origin of responsibility in Heidegger is not reduced to a supreme being, whose onto-theological definitions Heidegger rejects. One is reminded of Levinas’s objection to Heidegger with respect to responsibility toward others in their death. Levinas “reproaches” his teacher because his analysis of Dasein privileges its own death. In the ethical discourse of Levinas, responsibility is, in the first place, responsibility of oneself for the other, before the other, for the other’s death (or potential death). Implicitly alluding to Heidegger’s Dasein, he writes: “My ‘in the world,’ my ‘place in the sun,’ my at homeness, have they not been the usurpation of the places belonging to the other man already oppressed and starved by me?” At the time of his death, and after having confronted his own borders, a blind and exiled Oedipus who is not at home in the world asked Theseus not to disclose the place of his burial to anyone. He thus chose an unmourned and encrypted death; he is exposed to a death that no sanction and no rite can redeem. At the nonplace of his death, Oedipus is confronted, once again, with the question of being in place as being in the place of the other.

In a strange way, however, Oedipus and the Sphinx have been in each other’s place. It is this life of the exile and this unredeemed death that signal the ambiguous and indissoluble intimacy that eventually ties together the two poles of this fatal encounter: Oedipus and the Sphinx. The heteronomous relation to others that Levinas has written about is figured in the Oedipus narrative as contamination of discourses between Oedipus and the Sphinx and therefore as contamination between the question and the response. In a scene of the self’s reencounter with the abject (the abominable alterity that makes subjectivity possible), a scene that embodies the irreconcilably mutual constitution of the other’s foreignness (the other as foreigner) and our own foreignness (the stranger-within-us, our own unconscious), Oedipus reiterates the question of the Sphinx. The old enigma announces itself in a state of emergency, whereby the humanist identity and the national language of the logos are at stake. The Sphinx addresses herself to the other in the language of the other, in the language
of the foreign component of his own psyche; she gives in the law of naming, or she “gives in-to the name of other.” The Sphinx’s questioning is already a response. The Sphinx is a speaking animal; the teras is human. And Oedipus, having passed from his answer “Hu/man” to the questioning of his “I,” assumes the position of the teranthropomorphic other—his ontological counterpart—and announces, “That stranger is I.”

To put it differently, the Sphinx, the ironic questioner (whereby “question” does not refer to the core concept of enlightenment, the origin of thinking, but rather to the force of the call, the calling forth, and the calling into question), made possible Oedipus’s response (which preceded the question—the question of the human). In the manner of the sovereign Oedipus, however, the answer made the force of the question disappear. Oedipus, the demystifier, the authority of literalist response, terminates the deferring of truth and effaces the strangeness of the other; he needs to obliterate difference in order to enforce the (paternal) Law and determine an essential ground for representation and intelligibility.

In all their structural dissymmetry, however, Oedipus and the Sphinx partake in an ethical encounter as a critique of the will to knowledge. Both inhabiting the same realm of expulsion from the community, they are spectrally co-implicated in the calculable difference and deferral of the self-other metaphysics. Ultimately, the dispossessed Oedipus who finds autonomy in heteronomy and the Sphinx who dwells in the polis by being excluded by it inhabit the same biopolitical realm, where all life becomes sacred and thus perishable and all politics is reduced to the sovereign exception, which ties together bare life and power; they not only abolish each other, but they constitute each other by simultaneously including and excluding each other.

To conclude, then: if read as an affective encounter with the other whereby the other dislocates and disfigures the sovereign position of the subject, the multiple aspects of the Oedipus narrative impel us to question the specular logic that structures the regulatory ideal of the human as male civilized citizen in Western metaphysics. In this essay, I suggested a way to reconceptualize the crucial position that the gendered, sexualized, and racialized monstrous alterity—both alterity within and alterity without the self—occupies in the constitutive fictions (including Oedipal-psychoanalytic ones) of “sexual identity” (having versus not having the phallus), “representation” (gazing versus being gazed at, as well as blinding versus illuminating), but also “signification” (signifier versus signified) and “discourse” (question versus answer).
The enigma of the Sphinx, although answered, remains always open; it persists as a spectral presence, constantly posing anew the disquieting ethical and political question of the stranger, the one who cannot be recuperated within representation and remains outside—or beyond—the representational order of Oedipus's triumphant answer, “Hu/man”:

Long afterward, Oedipus, old and blinded, walked the roads. He smelled a familiar smell. It was the Sphinx. Oedipus said, “I want to ask one question. Why didn’t I recognize my mother?” “You gave the wrong answer,” said the Sphinx. “But that was what made everything possible,” said Oedipus. “No,” she said. “When I asked, What walks on fours legs in the morning, two at noon and three in the evening, you answered, Man. You didn’t say anything about woman.” “When you say Man,” said Oedipus, “you include women too. Everyone knows that.” She said, “That’s what you think.”