Ethnographica Moralia

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Fragments of Oedipus: Anthropology at the Edges of History

Neni Panourgía

The Oedipus is essentially a critical analysis. Everything is already there, so it needs only to be extricated. This can be seen in the simplest action and in the briefest segment of time, even if the events themselves are still very intricate and dependent on particulars.

—Letter from Schiller to Goethe, October 2, 1797, quoted in Karl Kerényi and James Hillman, Oedipus Variations: Studies in Literature and Psychoanalysis

This paper was originally written differently, argued differently, and presented differently, before the clouds and drums of the unspoken and undeclared war and occupation that surround us now. However, this same war, whose absence produced a different discourse, makes imperative the reflection on what follows. The events of 9/11 forced upon us the radical reevaluation of the ways in which we engage in critical discourses. Not that we need to invent new ways of addressing the events around us, because, as Schiller already noted in his letter to Goethe, “everything is already there, so it needs only to be extricated.” Instead, because it has forced us to reconsider the assessment by the empire’s sovereign that criticism after 9/11 is tantamount to treason as nothing but the perverse distortion of the thought that is behind Theodor W. Adorno’s melancholy phrase that “writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbarism.”

We tend to rest comfortably on the notion that the project of humanity is to understand the world around us; I would actually argue, with Yiorgos Cheimonas, for the opposite: that we, humans, are trying to make ourselves understood by the world that surrounds us, that each of us is crying out to be heard, agonizes over the process of translation of this cry, a process that often takes a violent form—the more violent the more desperate. And I would further argue that if that is the project of humanity, then the project of anthropology is to make this translation process intelligible.

It is in this context that a reading of the myths that have participated in the construction of “Western” systems of subjectivities—reading, interpretation, and representation—demands itself anew, and there is hardly a
Myth

To say that the space of signification occupied by Oedipus has been colonized by the Freudian analysis would be a truism at best. To say that the myth has been reduced to its bare bones by both Freud and Claude Lévi-Strauss would be a platitude. To say that what has become of the myth is the slaying of a father and the coupling with a mother would be more than self-evident. So, to start at the beginning, we need to go back to the myth itself, always keeping in mind what Lévi-Strauss told us (but never did himself), namely, the fact that the myth of Oedipus which first appeared before the Homeric texts is still being produced today. In other words, I take Oedipus as a myth, portions of which belong to antiquity, other portions to modernity, and yet other portions to postmodernity; hence Sophocles and the medieval scholiasts; Freud, Ernest Jones, Edward Westermarck, and Bronislaw Malinowski; Lévi-Strauss, Jean Cocteau, and Pier Paolo Pasolini; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Judith Butler are all part of the production of the myth, not its elaboration, explanation, interpretation, theorization. So, let’s do what is rarely done: take a look at this myth.

Oedipus, after leaving the Delphic oracle, killed a man at a crossroads. This is the crucial event of the myth. The myth tells us that Oedipus did not know who the man at the crossroads was. As a matter of fact, when he killed the man at the crossroads, he knew as little about anything in his life or outside of it as could be possible. Before arriving at the oracle Oedipus knew that his father was Polybus and his mother was Merope, the royal couple of Corinth. But that (ephemeral) knowledge had been shaken when, as a young man, Oedipus was taunted by a drunkard who told him that he was not his father’s son. He asked his parents if that was true, and they, outraged, denied it. But Oedipus was not satisfied. So, without telling them anything, he set off to Delphi, to the oracle, to ask the god who exactly he was. Apollo sent him away saying nothing about his lineage but delivering the famous oracle: “You are fated to couple with your mother, you will bring a breed of children into the light no man can bear to see—you will kill your father, the one who gave you life.” From there he ran
away—as far away as he could from Corinth; he wandered around until, on his way to Thebes, he came upon a crossroads, where in self-defense he killed a man on a carriage coming from the opposite direction. A little farther away he came upon the Sphinx.

The Sphinx was a monster known from Egyptian mythology who had the body of a bull, the nails of a lion, the wings of an eagle, and the head of a woman. In Egypt, the Sphinx was male; in Thebes, female. In Greece, the Sphinx herself was the product of the unconventional and incestuous union of two natural elements who were, structurally, a mother and a son: Echidna, the chthonic worm or snake, and her son Orthus, the dog of the monstrous hound Geryon. According to Hesiod, the Sphinx was the daughter of Chimera and Orthus (Dawn). According to Apollodorus (in the version presented here by Athena Athanasiou), the Sphinx was the daughter of Echidna and Typhon. In either case, she was the sister of the Nemean lion, which had been slain by Hercules. According to yet another version of the myth, the Sphinx is the illegitimate daughter of Laius (born before Oedipus).

Myth

The Sphinx was sitting on a stele on top of Mount Phicium (Sphinx Mountain) and posed the famous riddle, taught to her by the Muses, to everyone who passed by: “There walks on land a creature of two feet, of four feet, and of three; it has one voice, but sole among animals that grow on land or in the sea, it can change its nature; nay, when it walks propped on most feet, then it is the speed of its limbs less that it has ever been before?” Oedipus guessed correctly. “Anthropos,” he said, which means human—man and woman—and the Sphinx flung herself from Mount Phicium. Upon his arrival in Thebes, Oedipus was proclaimed the savior of the city and was given Jocasta to marry. He and Jocasta eventually had four children: two boys and two girls—Polynices, Eteocles, Antigone, and Ismene.

Jocasta had recently been widowed; her husband, Laius, had been killed—reportedly by a band of thieves at a three-road crossroads on the way to Delphi. Jocasta was the daughter of Menoeceus, one of the sons of Cadmus, the founder of Thebes, who was also the ancestor of Laius. Laius
was the son of Labdacus, grandson of Cadmus, and king of Thebes. When Labdacus died, Laius was still young and his existence was threatened by his uncle, who became the viceroy. According to Pausanias, Laius was given safe passage by “those who had in their best mind not to allow the genos of Cadmus become unknown to the coming generations.” Laius was offered safety in Corinth as the guest of the king of Corinth, Pelops. While in Corinth, Laius fell madly in love with the son of Pelops, Chrysippus, whom he abducted and brought to Thebes, where Chrysippus, ashamed, committed suicide. Pelops placed a curse on Laius either to die childless or to be killed by his own son.

After the death of his uncle, the viceroy of Thebes, Laius assumed the throne of his dead father and married Jocasta. Because Jocasta failed to become pregnant, Laius consulted the oracle in Delphi and received a warning: “Better off without children,” the oracle said, “because if you do have a son he will eventually kill you.” Laius kept the oracle secret from Jocasta (who didn’t much believe in oracles and seers, anyhow), but after a night of revelry and desire, coupled with her and got Jocasta pregnant (or Jocasta got him drunk, coupled with him, and became pregnant, unknownst to Laius). When she gave birth to a boy, Laius pierced the ankles of his son with a pin and gave him to Jocasta to dispose of. She gave the boy to a shepherd to expose on Mount Cithaeron, but the shepherd took pity on the child and instead of exposing he gave him away to another transhumant shepherd from Corinth, who took the baby to his master, Polybus, and his wife, Merope, who were childless.

It is to Corinth that Oedipus was taken when saved from the mountain, a generation after his father had been taken there to be saved from the usurpations of the sovereign, and it was from Corinth that Oedipus fled when he came full circle, back to Thebes, unknowingly retracing the steps of his father, through the fateful encounter at the crossroads. One day, however, when Oedipus was the king of Thebes, a plague broke out in the city, and despite the purification rites that everyone performed, the plague did not go away. So Oedipus fetched the old blind seer, Teiresias, as Jocasta’s brother, Creon, consulted the Delphic oracle. The oracle came back with the command to rid Thebes of the miasma, Laius’s murderer.

As Oedipus vowed to find the murderer and drive him out of the city, Teiresias identified Oedipus as the murderer after a messenger from Corinth came to say that King Polybus was dead and that Oedipus was the rightful heir to the throne. But Oedipus refused to go back to Corinth out of fear of fulfilling the old oracle about marrying his mother. Oh, he shouldn’t worry about that, the messenger said, since Merope was not his
real mother; she had been given the baby by this same messenger who had received it from a shepherd on the mountains of Boeotia. The moment comes when Jocasta is convinced and convinces Oedipus also, despite the logical objections he raises initially, that he is the son she had abandoned. She runs to their chamber and hangs herself as Oedipus runs after her. When he sees that she is dead, he brings her body down and with her garment pins strikes his eyes again and again. According to the myth, he remains as king in Thebes, where he dies and is buried with great honors. Sophocles, however, in the Athenian version of the myth, a version that owes to the experience of the Peloponnesian War, gives us another ending: thus blinded, Oedipus is allowed to live in Thebes until, many years later, Creon expels him and his own sons make no attempt to keep him there. Outraged at the indifference of his sons, Oedipus curses them to die from each other’s hand. He leaves Thebes blind but a seer now, with Antigone as his guide, and wanders around until he arrives in Athens. There he finds refuge in the garden of the Furies and is given asylum after he foretells the future for the city. He dies there and is buried in a secret place that only Theseus, the king of Athens, knows.

Parergon 2

The Sphinx’s sexual indeterminacy is not the only example of sexual indeterminacy in the narrative. Equally confusing is the constitution of Teiresias, who, although born male, was transformed into female when, as a child, he watched two snakes copulating at a crossroads on Mount Cithaeron. He killed the female with his shepherd’s staff and was immediately transformed into a woman. Teiresias spent seven years as a woman, during which time she had intercourse with men, until she witnessed two snakes copulating again. She again killed one of them—this time the male—and was transformed back into a man. Teiresias was asked to testify during a quarrel between Zeus and Hera about which one of the sexes experienced greater sexual pleasure. The woman, opined Teiresias, and not by a little but ninefold. An enraged Hera, determined to prove to Zeus that women had been shortchanged in their sexuality, blinded Teiresias, but Zeus gave him his unique powers in divination and prophecy and seven times the life span of mortal men.

The question of why Hera would be outraged with such an answer has been raised in the past, most notably by Nicole Loraux. Loraux notes that what enraged Hera was the fact that Teiresias’s response (based on personal experience and not mere speculation) went against the position that
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Hera (as “guardian of the orthodoxy of marriage” in Loraux’s words) held, namely, that women ought to be content with the level of sexual pleasure afforded to them within the context of marriage and reproduction. Loraux further argues that the specific response given by Teiresias underlined the fact that women, experiencing nine times the sexual pleasure that men did, paid more attention to the qualities of Aphrodite than to the demands of Hera. Loraux’s reading of Teiresias is a highly unorthodox one. Rather than following the myth given above regarding the blinding of Teiresias, Loraux focuses on a version developed by the Hellenistic librarian and poet Callimachus. In Callimachus’s version, Teiresias was blinded when, as a child, he accidentally got a glimpse of the naked body of Athena as she was undressing to bathe in a stream. In either case, Teiresias is blinded as a man for having witnessed the scene of the woman. It is through the Callimachus reading that Loraux can place the soma of the woman within the field of vision of the man as the dangerous object that will cause the deprivation of sight and grant the gift of seeing, thus complicating not only the already existing analyses about female sexuality in Athenian social life but also (and, perhaps, more importantly) the question of knowledge.

What possibilities does this myth animate, then?—the myth of Oedipus, in fact the character of Oedipus, this paradigmatic man who looked for a truth and accepted many, whose courage, perseverance, and intelligence guided his peripatetic life and made him a native and a stranger everywhere he went, the man who loved his wife more than he loved his mother and strove to find humanity in law and structure. What possibilities become apparent when this character is invoked in cases and under circumstances when all humanity seems to be all but forgotten, and how could this character be usefully appraised as a paradigm for anthropology?

**Question**

Oedipus, then, is the emergent point of the interdisciplinary reflections that follow. Oedipus is a mythical character who has constituted the pivotal moment not only of the modern subject, as read through Hegel and Nietzsche, but also of anthropology as an interdisciplinary project. The myth of Oedipus, received by Freud (through Nietzsche, even though Freud never acknowledged that he had read any of the circulating discussions on Oedipus) and transformed into the universalist Oedipal complex...
with the aid of Jones, Sándor Ferenzci, and others, made the debate between Malinowski and Westermarck, on the one hand, and Freud, on the other, imperative. It also authorized fieldwork as the anthropological method that would become the nodal point on which a theory of humanity, a meta-knowledge of human action, could be articulated in the triangulated relationship of knowledge, truth, and method.

I do not argue that this is the beginning of fieldwork. What I argue is that this is perhaps the first time that specific ethnographic knowledge was presented as a critique of a theory and method (a theory of human behavior that emerged through the methodology of psychoanalysis) that used anthropological and ethnographic material to support itself (as Freud had done in *Totem and Taboo*) and the theoretical conclusions that he arrived at through the theory of the Oedipal complex. James Boon, in discussing the process of translation from ethnographic experience to anthropological writing, has mapped out the difficulties that are there on how to read, navigate through, negotiate, the unmanageable contradictions, self-contradictions, self-cancelations, deep questionings, and trenchant aporias (that ought to be) present in the exercise of fieldwork. Boon moves back and forth looking at the certainty of fieldwork as “empirical” (naming this certainty “fallacy”) to the view (“mistaken”) that “cross-cultural interpretations happen empirically.” Centering on the process of translation, he sets the object of anthropology (one assumes by engaging with fieldwork, but not only and exclusively with it) as being able to “make explicitly exotic populations appear implicitly familiar and explicitly familiar populations appear implicitly exotic.” Freud’s Oedipalism and the Malinowskian matrilineal “facts” against the Freudian Oedipal universality (and all who got caught up in the battle of the two) engage in the exact opposite: they maintain the exoticism of the exotic and the familiarity of the familiar.

I approach the myth of Oedipus from a number of different perspectives, attempting to articulate a discourse on the political commensurate with the gestures of Oedipean specificity: questions on the fragments of the body, the emergency of biopolitical power, technologies of self and technologies of alterity, the problem of autonomy. The nexus of this interrogation of Freud’s Oedipus is located in a specific tortured place: the concentration camps for Marxists, Leftists, and Communists in Greece after the Second World War.

Oedipus, as a persona, as a character, and as a text, is (still and again) appealing to the extent of authoring new renditions, translations, and adaptations of the play and the myth, continuing to appear in the beginning of the twenty-first century. In a time when the knowledge and truth
sought in the modernist experience gets progressively translated into apocalyptic and messianic terms (not least of all in the current discourses developed as responses to 9/11 and in the articulations of the new Empire), what are the key issues being managed and negotiated in this text that make it relevant to us now? What is the type of knowledge sought through *Oedipus* nowadays, and how can it be culturally situated and epistemologically located to make *Oedipus* of interest to anthropologists and to anthropologically informed productions of knowledge? *Oedipus*, as a comprehensive text that spans space and time from its pre-Homeric formulations to the present, constitutes a reflective moment on the human condition that coincides with the project of anthropology. The knowledge and the aporias negotiated in *Oedipus* correspond to the fundamental principles that guide the process of anthropological investigation. In this respect, Oedipus is the first anthropologist, insofar, and only insofar, as this mythical text contains the basic questions that have come later to be associated with and posed by the discipline of anthropology. Enveloped within this fictional encounter with the Oedipean text is also the gesture of anthropology as it attempts to answer questions always already formulated outside the epistemological confines of the discipline. With my reading of the *Oedipus* myth as a narrative (hence, as a text that exists in a dialectical relationship to its storyteller), I look for the sites where discourses on technologies, philosophical investigations, anthropological epistemologies, and their interstices can be located and where formulations such as kinship, divinity, fate, experience, and sovereignty can be revisited. *Oedipus* has engendered vocabularies that have produced critical discourses in thinking about the political and the social, such as the question of the sovereign in reference to cultural praxis (in the encounter between Oedipus and the oracle). Furthermore, the philosophical foundations of the anthropological project become transparent through the questions that the Oedipean project has set for us (and as we have inherited it from Sophocles through Hegel, Sir James Frazer, Malinowski, Luce Irigaray, or Judith Butler), as do the idioms that anthropology has inherited from the epistemologies that surround the character of Oedipus, such as categories of kinship, friendship, the monstrous and the human, and understandings of the divine.

*Aporia*

One of the fundamental questions that *Oedipus* sets for us is that of the constitution of the social subject as a product of the dialectical tension
between the self and the other. In other words, the fundamental question that *Oedipus* asks us to consider is not *whether* we know who we are but *how* we know who we are, how we know who the other is, and how we negotiate these categories as they participate in the processes of identity production. When this question is posited as part of the attempt to define and delineate cultural and political formations, it acquires the urgency of political praxis. “Who is an American?” we have been asked daily since 9/11; and why some Americans are recognized as such whereas others are not is the disturbing question posited by the relatives of the 1,500 interned Americans of Middle Eastern descent who were summarily interned after 9/11, some of them still in custody or unaccounted for.

My inquiry, then, is not concerned with the Freudian analysis of *Oedipus*, not only because the inordinate volume of work devoted to it has managed to dislocate the centrality of the myth, but also because the psychoanalytic emphasis on *Oedipus* has limited the scope of other analytical possibilities to which the text lends itself. The anthropological literature on *Oedipus* has thus far, with minor exceptions, dealt with responses not only to Freud’s claim of the centrality of the Oedipal complex to the process of identity formation but also to Freud’s claim of its universality. Although responses to this analytical aspect of *Oedipus* are still being produced, they are not of the present concern. The latest such undertaking is by Suzette Heald.\textsuperscript{15} Heald engaged in a critique of the Freudian theorization of the Oedipus complex by presenting alternative material from the Gisu ritual male circumcision. Heald’s gesture is not unlike that of Malinowski, who tried to prove that the complex presupposes a patrilineal descent system and foreclosed its possibility within a matrilineal one, or of Anne Parsons, who, in 1969, proposed the triangulation of Freud’s and Malinowski’s positions by presenting yet another complication in kinship structure, the one that she saw in Naples (Italy). Unlike Freud’s late-nineteenth-century Vienna, where the patrilineal family rested on the distance between the parents, on one hand, and the son and the father, on the other, or Malinowski’s early-twentieth-century Trobriands, where the matrilineal family rested on ignorance about the father’s contribution to reproduction and the closeness to the mother’s brother, Parsons showed that in working-class Naples, kinship was experienced through the proximity between the mother and the son and through the distance between them and the son’s wife. Melford Spiro’s work on *Oedipus* in 1982 tried to synthesize all the existing anthropological responses to the Freudian universalist model by crediting Malinowski for having singularly managed to teach “every (anthropological) schoolboy” that the Oedipus complex
“is not found in the Trobriands and, by extrapolation, in other societies
whose family structures do not conform to that of the Western type.” Allen Johnson and Douglass Price-Williams attempted an anthropological
approach (which became a folkloristic enterprise) to the Freudian position
on Oedipus, supplying folktales from around the world that deal with in-
cest. The main problem with this collection, of course, is that instead of
looking at the myth of Oedipus as a culturally specific narrative and engag-
ing in its analysis as a cultural text, the two authors (the former an anthro-
pologist-psychoanalyst and the latter a psychiatrist) took Freud’s reading
and looked for other folk tales around the world that refer to incest, thus
reducing Oedipus to something that is far more restrictive and narrow
than what even Freud has produced. The problem, however, with both
Freud’s use of the myth and the responses to it (from Malinowski to Par-
sons to Lévi-Strauss) is that none looks at the myth or the play in its
entirety, as a narrative. The only responses to both Freud and Lévi-Strauss
that critique this solipsistic look at Oedipus are those articulated by the
French classicists Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet when they
argue (convincingly) that if the Oedipus complex exists it does not come
from Oedipus. Of particular interest is Lacan’s comment on the Freudian
Oedipus, in *Seminaire I*, that the Oedipus complex cannot be sustained if
the myth is considered in its totality, precisely because the complexity of
the myth is such with multiple details that the question of what becomes
the complex is overshadowed. Certainly this position by Lacan is not au-
tonomous from the importance that he himself placed on the questions of
visuality and verbality. But what I am primarily interested in is the corpus
of theoretical responses to Oedipus produced outside the space occupied
by psychoanalysis: notably, the philosophical debates produced by the
reading of the text and their importance in engaging in anthropologically
informed analysis. In other words, the anthropological response to ques-
tions posited by philosophy.

This myth that has been central to the theory of psychoanalysis and to
the early practice of the methodology of anthropology, however, has not
been addressed exhaustively either in psychoanalysis or in anthropology.
Both disciplines have eschewed the study of the myth and have engaged
in mythic analyses. It is particularly startling for anthropology, a discipline
uniquely positioned to engage in the analysis of myth as a cultural text,
to note that starting with anthropologists in the late nineteenth century
(principally Frazer) and ending with the structuralists (not only Lévi-
Strauss but also his critics, from G. S. Kirk and Clifford Geertz to Peter
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Munz), anthropology has looked at Oedipus rather reductively, only responding to the challenges posed by Freud’s interpretation. It is interesting to note that both the Freudian Oedipalism and the Lévi-Straussian structuralism of Oedipus rest on a scant four pages of analysis each. The usual practice has been to look at single, isolated mythemes in it and to approach them ethnographically. The few attempts toward such a direction have centered on the following three topics: (1) *kinship*, first by Frazer and his evolutionism alongside his mythic analysis, prompting a critique by functionalists such as A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, and later as part of the structuralist study of myth by Lévi-Strauss, which prompted the consequent critique by Munz and Geertz; (2) *fate*, first by Meyer Fortes in his analysis of notions of fate in *Oedipus* and Job, in West Africa, and in Terrence Turner’s analysis of time and structure; and (3) *incest*, primarily by William Arens and Richard Fox. Fox is the only anthropologist to actually engage in an analysis of two of the plays of the Theban cycle, namely, *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, but still within the parameters of the triangular formulation of kinship, incest, and parricide.\(^{19}\) In a text as rich as that of *Oedipus*, however, there might very well be found as many thematic approaches as there are epistemological, methodological, ideological, and analytical problematics. *Oedipus* manages to complicate everything that is taken for granted and demands that it be reconsidered. Undoubtedly, the issue of incest and that of parricide\(^ {20}\) is emblematic of the analysis of the myth. *Oedipus*, though, asks that we acknowledge and void the collusion of political power and the responsibility it demands. In other words, it demands the preservation of the responsibility that ought to be constitutive of political power. It is a reflection and a complication on the issue of the native/autochthonous and the stranger/foreigner; of home and away; of illness/disease and wellness; of dream analysis; of memory and time; of the development of the subject and its struggle with the divine; of ambivalence toward adoption; of the relationship to death and the dead; of class relations; of vision, truth, and authenticity; of the relationship to the state; of inheritance; of violence on the body, as in infanticide, parricide, suicide, rape, self-mutilation, and execution; of the violence done in power relations; of selfhood; of truth and reality; of fate, chance, and destiny; of catharsis/miasma; of purity and danger; of the construction of the biological and cultural category of the father and of the mother; of the role of the body in the formation of subjectivity; of private and public; of personal and political.

Above all, *Oedipus* is a metaphor on responsibility and accountability. *Oedipus* is a text that betrays society’s abstraction of the process that has
constituted it as such. In this sense I read *Oedipus* not as the symbolic text facilitated in structuralism (from Freud to Lacan and the feminist responses to it, from Spivak to Irigaray and Butler) but as a metaphorical text that emerges as it participates in the process of its own metaphorization and that manages to complicate everything that it metaphorizes. What *Oedipus* shows us is not that “culture” (as that social formulation that engages in myth making) can think but that “culture” actually thinks on the level of the conscious, producing its own metaphors. I focus on this particular dimension of *Oedipus* as a text that constitutes a reflective moment upon the relationship of the mind and body, upon problematizations of categorical thought on life, self, other, enemy, friend, kin, authority, truth, chance, structure, the divine, the bestial, and the human. In this time of global cultural postmodernity, a time of movement of vast numbers of people, a time that repeatedly challenges the constants of our subjectivities, movements that are translated to different technologies of being by producing different technologies of the body—it is at this particular moment that Oedipian questions on the political emerge. Who is constituted as self and who is constituted as other? is the question that *Oedipus* asks us to ask constantly; and it is a question that has had a pressing importance in the history of modern Greek articulations of the political self and that right here, right now, in the shadow of Guantánamo Bay, in the darkness of the Patriot Act and the articulations of the neo-imperialist project, demands to be revisited anew.

The question that emerges, thus, is that of the fundamental coinciden-tality of the experience of the fragmented body with the multiplicity of idioms that the (Oedipan) subject is: adored yet exposed, sovereign but fugitive, dispossessed in his hubris and autonomous in his suffering, willing but unwitting savior, Hegel’s first philosopher, Nietszche’s last philosopher, Freud’s paradigmatic ego. And also Freud’s remnants, all the points in the myth and the play that Freud ignored (consciously or unconsciously, knowingly or unknowingly): the plague in the city, the Sphinx, Oedipus’s intentionality and lack thereof, the importance of actions taken and gestures made in the midst of a state of emergency, namely, the pestilence that demands that the foreign body—the miasmatic regicide—be removed from the city.

*Parergon* 3

John Ross traces Freud’s discovery of Oedipus to the famous letter that Freud sent to Fliess in 1896, ten days after the death of the old Herr
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Freud—what became the famous four pages in *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900. Ross rightly brings into the discussion of the Oedipus complex what Freud refused to consider, namely, the responsibility borne by Laius for the actions of Oedipus. Ross looks at the myth and its background and brings about all the details that have been largely ignored by the psychoanalytic and anthropological approaches to the myth. He considers the history of the place (Mount Cithaeron) and the “crimes against nature” that had been committed there long before Oedipus was born, by women in the line of Cadmus: Semele, who gave birth to Dionysus (himself “orphaned and forced to wander Greece,” as Ross notes), and her sister Agave, who dismembered her son Pentheus in a Maenadic frenzy, thus committing the “first filicide at a mother’s hands.”21 Oedipus, Ross notes further, escaped the fate of Pentheus only to fall in the hands of an “indifferent” mother and an “ignorant, weak, authoritarian, and . . . homosexual father.”22 Ross concludes that before the Oedipus complex is considered, one ought to examine what he calls the “Laius complex,” the complex of a father who is narcissistic, self-centered, self-serving, hubristic, self-denying homosexual pedophile, jealous, misogynist, and superstitious.

In Ross’s deft hands Oedipus has nothing to do with Jonathan Lear’s unthinking and impertinent mythic hero but is the virtuous contrast of his father, bearing, alas, all the markings and effects of this father: “neglect as an infant, a sense of discontinuity as an adult, lost origins, identity confusion.”23 Ross manages to bring into the open the question that the Oedipus myth posits in accounting for kinship: kinship as responsible not only for the person as a social entity but also for the dialectical relationship between the social person and the polis, in other words, for the constitution of the social person as a political entity. It is in this discussion of the horrors of an altered body, a pestilent polis, and their historicity, where biopolitical alterity is instantiated, that the (predictably failing Aristotelian and Durkheimian) discourses of cohesiveness of the social body are interrogated.

Conceit

Lear has called our age “the age of Oedipus,” a time that is marked by the sense of abandonment and the certainty of “knowingness,” both of which he sees developing in the myth of Oedipus.24 To the Socratic conceit of “the only thing I know is that I know nothing,” Lear erects what he sees as the fallacious idiocy of Oedipus in thinking that he knows everything,
all the while misrecognizing the fact that “the only thing I know is that I know nothing” and “I know” are nothing but the opposite announcements of the same. Lear is a most astute thinker, so it is impossible that the Socratic conceit eludes him as such or that he really considers Oedipus as someone who “knew it all.” One must think that Lear is offering this reading of Oedipus (and the accompanying admonition to the Chicago graduating class of 1998 to be as Socratic as possible, steering away from Oedipus) only as a “teaching moment” in his attempt to get the graduating students to acknowledge the fact that a first university degree does not really give them but fragments of the knowledge that they need in order to continue. And one could have been such a generous reader had this not been Lear’s sustained argument on Oedipus from his 1997 paper (that he presented at a conference organized by the New York Psychoanalytic Society) to his 1998 Open Minded, where he later included the paper.

Lear sees in Oedipus a text that transcends the Freudian complex, as he does not concern himself with the questions of parricide and incest. And rightly so. Lear dives in to the fundamental question of Oedipus, which is the question of knowledge, and comes up for air announcing that there is no real knowledge in this text, just the performativity of it. Hence the heights of hubris that Oedipus achieves by claiming throughout the play “I know.” And it is through the exposure of hubris that Lear sees in Oedipus a text that can help us understand the politics of today when he attempts a reading of the Clinton era through the text of Oedipus. But as much as he names his reading a cultural one, it is a fundamentally psychoanalytic reading, a reading based on talking and listening. He mentions that he has “found a way to reinterpret the Oedipus myth” by “listening to the culture,”25 a reinterpretation of the myth that he is able to do in order to analyze the pathologies of modern politics. But there is nowhere in his text even a nod to the fact (or the possibility of such an existence, a glimpse of which he might have seen) that there is an explicit or implicit reference to Oedipus in modern politics. Lear might say that such a reference is not necessary to be present, which is precisely what makes his reading a psychoanalytic one.

But if Lear feels compelled to see psychoanalysis through culture (a most welcome gesture), he does so by walking though the Oedipus complex as if it wasn’t there (another most welcome gesture) and exposes the possibilities that Oedipus has as a cultural text through a profoundly wrong reading of the questions of the myth. The political, in Lear’s hands, becomes a matter of manhandling political power that begins and ends with the hubris of the sovereign, be that Bill Clinton’s White House scandals
or the certainty of Oedipus that he knows the answers to the questions posed to him. But there is no adequate explanation in Lear for Oedipus’s contrition, an explanation that would show that it takes into consideration that “the psyche of the individual and the psyche of the city are not to be separated” in Oedipus as they are so glibly separated in modern politics. And in his haste to follow the ever-so-common and trite reading of Oedipus as the embodiment of hubris, Lear refuses to recognize Oedipus for the deeply wounded human that he is exactly at the cleavages where his existence exists: human but exposed to nature as an animal, wounded as a child by the actions of his parents that bear the imprimatur of prior barmatiai/errors; kin to a half-human half-animal creature; wounded as the supplicant who is denied the knowledge of the divine; wounded as the sovereign who seeks relief for his people that cannot be found outside of himself; and self-wounded at the moment of knowledge of his having wounded nature and culture.

Anti-Myth

Exiles on the Greek islands where concentration camps were established for the Leftists in 1947, as the Civil War was raging, saw Oedipus from a different light, so to speak. Beaten, tortured, and pressured to sign declarations that they were not what they maintained to be (Leftists) but something that they were not (Christian nationalists), they found themselves somatically in the place of Oedipus: with swollen feet from bastinado, gouged eyes from strikes on the head, being asked to answer the unanswerable question, are you (with us) or are you not?—all the while being told the same thing, you will become human (antropoi) or you will die. So “in order for them to make us human they first made us into King Oedipus,” says Yiorgos Yiannopoulos, a pediatrician who was confined to the islands for over three years. The riddle of the Sphinx is reversed in this context: Who is human? asked the liberal state engaged in the first acts of the Cold War, to construct itself as the only correct answer: human is that animal that recognizes the power of the state as the maker of the human. What is the point where the torturers of the Greek Leftists could not hear the response that they were given: we are already humans, we are already antropoi. Where did the mythological break down in that most unmythological, nay anti-mythological, existence?

The establishment of the modern Greek state, predicated upon the ideality of an unbroken organic history of Greece that spans ten millennia,
has produced a historicity of political forms of life that in the early twentieth century demarcated the possible and the desirable from the impossible and the undesirable. The Left, from the moment of its inception as an Agrarian Party to its eventual materialization as a Communist Party, and all the hues of the Leftist spectrum in between, fell under the second category of the impossible (within the context of the Greek psyche) and the undesirable (within the context of the Greek imagination). During the Civil War (1946–1949), the torturers on the islands (Makronisos and Yaros for the men, Trikeri for the women), engaged in a program of returning the (considered as) wayward and lost Leftists to the common imaginary of Greece as a capitalist entity. The bamboo sticks that fell on heads, backs, arms, legs, feet, testicles, carried the voices of the torturers with them from the first moment that the Leftists arrived on the islands: you will become human or you will never leave this island alive (thā ginetai ἄνθρωπος i den thā fygete apo ‘do zontanoi). Human or dead became the dialectics of existence on the islands, where the wounded bodies (some of them permanently), the wounded minds (all of them permanently), and the wounded psyches of the Leftists made the metaphor of Oedipus, in the hands of Yiannopoulos, a possibility. No, this is not naked life (either in Walter Benjamin’s or in Giorgio Agamben’s sense). This is a tag of war for the recognition of the human.31

What makes Oedipus recognizable to Yiannopoulos, then, is what ought to make Oedipus recognizable to the anthropologist: a text on ἄνθρωπος, the human, and how this human makes itself intelligible to the world.

MAN
This is my father! And he is not alive. His own people slaughtered him during the civil war because he went out with a woman from the opposite side who danced zeibekiko like a man and her own people slaughtered her too because she went with my father, and I don’t know, if you ask me, who is Zeimbeko—as I found out later that they called her—but my mother she is not, I was six years old then.

—MARIOS PONTIKAS, 2004, Laius’s Murderer and the Crows32