

THE THEATRE  
OF APOLO

DIVINE JUSTICE  
AND SOPHOCLES  
DECIDES THE KING  
R. DREW GRIFITH



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The Theatre of Apollo  
Divine Justice and Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*

Literary critics have consistently marginalized the role of Apollo in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*: some declare him to be inscrutable, others ignore him, and still others deny his existence altogether. In defiance of this long-standing critical consensus, Drew Griffith offers a new interpretation of the play by arguing that Apollo brings about Oedipus's downfall as just punishment for his hubris.

By imaginatively recreating the play's original staging and debunking the interpretations of various critics, including Aristotle, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, E.R. Dodds, Frederick Ahl, and John Peradotto, Griffith shows that Apollo is a constant, powerful presence throughout the play. He contends that although we can sympathize with Oedipus because of his sufferings, he is still morally responsible for murdering his father and sleeping with his mother. Apollo is therefore not indifferent and his actions are not unjust.

Griffith focuses on Apollo's commandment "know thyself," a commandment Oedipus belatedly and tragically fulfils, to stress both the need for self-understanding in the study of ancient literature and the usefulness of ancient literature in achieving self-understanding.

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Divine Justice and Sophocles'  
*Oedipus the King*

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R. DREW GRIFFITH

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## Preface

This is essentially a teacher's book. The material arose out of lectures delivered and seminars led in two courses at Queen's University at Kingston (Classical Studies 101 and Classical Studies 312) between 1989 and 1993. The stimulating discussion provided by my students, no less than the onus of finding something new to say about an old play, has been invaluable in shaping the work.

Many of the ideas found here have also received an airing before my peers. A version of chapter 1 was read at a special session on literary theory at the annual meeting of the Classical Association of Canada in Victoria, British Columbia, on 22 May 1990. I am grateful to John C. Fitch for inviting me to contribute to the session and wish to thank those present for their warm response and stimulating questions, especially Desmond Comacher, Hugh Parry, Christopher Brown, and Matthew Clark. A version of chapter 3 was read at the University of Western Ontario on 5 November 1991 and subsequently published in *Phoenix* 27 (1993): 95–104. A version of chapter 4 was read at Concordia University in Montreal on 2 March 1991 and subsequently published in *JCS* 17 (1992): 193–201 after receiving much helpful criticism from Ruth Scodel. A version of chapter 5 was read at the annual meeting of the Classical Association of Canada in Ottawa on 1 June 1993. I am grateful for the encouragement and advice of Eric Csapo, Robert Fowler, and Anthony Podlecki. A version of chapter 7 was read at the annual meeting of the Classical Association of Canada in Sainte-Foy, Quebec, on 27 May 1989 and subsequently published in *Silvius* 16 (1990): 97–106. The above-named journals in each

case have granted their kind permission to reproduce material that has already appeared.

For much discussion of various facets of this work I am indebted to Gloria D'Ambrusio-Griffith, Christopher Brown, John Porter, and Emmet Robbins. Other scholars, notably Charles B. Daniels of the University of Victoria and David Hester of the University of Adelaide, have offered helpful criticism in their correspondence about issues raised in the original articles from which this work has grown. Two anonymous readers for the Aid to Scholarly Publications Program have saved me from numerous errors. The kind assistance of all these scholars in no way indicates agreement with the views expressed herein. I owe my thanks to Ross Kilpatrick for suggesting McGill-Queen's University Press as a possible home for this work and to Frederic Schroeder for sharing his hard-won wisdom about scholarly publishing in Canada. Don Akenson and Roger Martin of McGill-Queen's were a constant source of help and good-natured advice, and my copy editor, Susan Kent Davidson, has spared the reader many obscurities and infelicities of expression.

To my wife, Gloria, who has been exemplary for her loving support and patience during its composition, and to my sons, Matthew and Graham, who have been both constant companions and research assistants, this book is with gratitude humbly dedicated.



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## introduction

The conclusions of this essay would have been uncontroversial had they been published a hundred years ago. In the intervening years nearly every thesis of this book has been so thoroughly critiqued and allegedly refuted that one might suppose no more need be said. In returning to these questions at all, much less in arriving at the conclusions that it does, this book may seem reactionary.

My research in other areas has frequently suggested to me that hypotheses that have apparently been conclusively disproved may in fact have great explanatory value and thus some plausible claim upon our attention, if only they are supported by new and rigorous arguments. Domenico Comparetti's view that Tantalus is, according to Pindar *O.* 1, punished on Olympus rather than in Hades, and Wilhelm Jordan's view that the Homeric phrase "rosy-fingered Dawn" denotes the literal fingers of a personified goddess rather than metaphorically describing the natural phenomenon of morning twilight both appear to me to be hypotheses of this sort.<sup>1</sup> This general category also includes, in my view, the notion that in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* Oedipus is justifiably punished by Apollo for the crime of parricide, into which he has been led by his hubristic self-image as a god. Since 1839, when Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf published his excursus on the play attacking this view,<sup>2</sup> it has been abandoned by scholars as being naïve. Yet the arguments that Wilamowitz and the other (often far more radical) scholars who followed him advance are not unimpeachable, and the "naïve" view, which I espouse, has considerable explanatory power for the interpretation of the play.

The present work advances arguments, many of which I believe to be new, in support of this view.

Since many of the arguments that follow are of the *ad hominem* sort, the structure of the entire essay is not at all moments equally apparent. I therefore offer the following synopsis. Chapter 1 advances a theoretical argument to the effect that the chief question about *Oedipus the King*, as about any work of classical literature, is whether it is true in the sense of being in conformity with lived experience. On the one hand, this claim is advanced in opposition to the claims of historicist scholars, who argue that the aim of classical scholarship is the historical one of recovering the intention of the author, his society at large, or the genre. (My own non-historicist objective is to discuss divine justice and Sophocles' play, not merely divine justice in the play.) On the other hand, the claim is advanced in opposition to cultural relativism, which rightly emphasizes the difference between ancient and modern worlds, but at the cost of causing us scrupulously to keep away from the ancient texts our own deepest concerns. The assessment of the truth of classical texts against the basis of our own experience has as its best result that it will lead us as viewers and readers to know ourselves better.

Chapter 2 presents the stage directions that can be inferred from the text of the play. In addition to its considerable intrinsic interest, this project allows us to see that, although he never appears as a character in the play, Apollo is thoroughly present, in the sense that part of the architectural space of the theatre is demarcated as his precinct. This architectural device is exploited in the stagecraft of the play to create the impression of Apollo's presence far more deftly than any *deus ex machina* could have done.

Chapter 3 addresses the case put forward by Karl Harschbarger, Sandor Goodhart, René Girard, and Fredrick Ahl that Oedipus did not kill Laius, who died instead at the hands of a person or persons unknown, and that Oedipus is therefore to be thought of as a victim of scapegoat-persecution rather than as a legitimately (self-)persecuted felon. (The idea that Oedipus is a scapegoat has been mentioned, independently of the question of his participation in the murder, by, most notably, Jane Harrison, Jean-Pierre Vernant, and Walter Burkert.) I argue that the divergent accounts of the murder offered in the play by Oedipus and the herdsman do, in fact, refer to the same event and that the version of Oedipus comes closer to the truth. I argue that the Corinthian's report about Oedipus's parentage is also truthful. Finally, I suggest that the plague is an unfortunate accident not causally related to the operation of divine justice in the play.

In Chapter 4 I address the claims of Wilamowitz and E.R. Dodds that, although Oedipus did in fact kill Laius, he is essentially morally innocent; and therefore Apollo in punishing him cannot be in any human sense just. I argue that by murdering the belligerent stranger, his superior and elder, along with his retinue, including the sacred herald, while they were engaged upon official religious and state business, Oedipus violated the prerogatives of Zeus of Strangers, the respect due to superiors and elders, and the principle of fitting retaliation; he is therefore guilty of murder. He knew that he was acting in ignorance and yet behaved as though he did not know this; he is therefore guilty of father abuse. To express these two conclusions in one, he is guilty of parricide. He was fated to commit his crime, but it cannot be shown that he was compelled to do so, and certainly not in the way in which he did. These arguments open up the possibility that Apollo may be in some sense just, and I offer Simonides' reactive definition of justice as an all-too-human formula to which Apollo's actions seem to correspond.

The first part of chapter 5 picks up the suggestion of John Peracotto that Apollo does not exist in the real world, existing in the world of the play only as a smoke and mirror illusion brought about by the occurrence of striking coincidences as well as by the fact that these coincidences conspire to bring to fulfilment the Pythia's prophecy. All these plot-events, opines Peracotto, subvert what we know to be the important role of chance in the world we actually live in and create a vision of an incredible, deterministic universe. I use two thought-experiments to show that the play contains many coincidences, not because the whole plot would disintegrate if it did not but because so many signs point to Oedipus's story as incestuous parricide that in the random workings of the world only a very few need surface for the truth to be revealed. I also argue that neither Apollo's prophecy nor its delivery, not to a disinterested third party but to the protagonist himself, in any way adds a deterministic element to the world of the play.

The second part of chapter 5 defends the justice of Apollo against the problem of evil constituted by the incest by characterizing the pain involved as the prepaid price for Oedipus's subsequent empowerment both as hero (in the Greek sense) and as one who has attained self-knowledge.

Chapter 6 picks up the issue of Oedipus as a reader of signs and illustrates how he greatly overstates his own capacity in this regard. Among numerous signs that he misreads (which may even include the Sphinx riddle, of whose decipherment he is so proud) is his own name. His recognition that his name refers to a deformity of his feet

rather than to his skill at solving, riddles amounts to the adoption of a new name marking a fundamental change in his character.

The first part of chapter 7 argues that, while Oedipus is punished for the crime that he has actually committed and not just for his character, nevertheless the crime arises from his state of mind. Two facts shed some light on that state: that he twice in the play appears to suppliants in answer to prayer, thereby usurping a function of the gods; and that he listens unblinkingly to the priest of Zeus speaking of "your altars," a phrase that suggests not merely "altars of Oedipus" but also "altars to Oedipus." These facts suggest that Oedipus is hubristic (in the ordinary English sense of the word) – that is to say, that he thinks of himself as a god.

The second part of chapter 7 argues that in the play's recognition scene Oedipus recognizes himself by means of a deformity of the feet. Recognition scenes often involve feet; yet feet are of two types, perfect and deformed. Perfect feet are possessed by the gods, deformed feet by heroes (Achilles, Heracles, Belerophon, etc.). Thus, in recognizing his own foot deformity, Oedipus finally finds a sign that he can interpret correctly and reads upon his feet the mark of his mortality.

The Conclusion briefly suggests that the reader of a work of literature collaborates with its author in creating meaning and that this act is parallel to that whereby one creates a meaningful pattern out of the jumbled data of lived experience. In this way, what we learn about when we read any work of literature, as when we think about the world, is ourselves. Since I have argued that *Oedipus the King* is an exhortation to self-knowledge, the act of interpreting the play, no matter what our interpretation, accords with the text, since it is obedient to its essential commandment.

Throughout this book I make frequent references to recent developments in mathematics and physics. In a work of classical philology these may seem out of place, and I venture here an explanation. I see them not so much as parables elucidating Sophoclean complexities by means of homely analogies (in which capacity they would certainly fail) but as attempts to fulfil the anti-historicist promises of chapter 1 by relating the play to present-day concerns. I also see them as participating in the same mathematical discourse as Oedipus's tragic dilemma ("What has four legs, two legs, and three legs?" and "Can one murderer be the same as many?").

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# 1 Poem as Fact: The Historical Method in Literary Criticism

Classicists often refuse to theorize about their aims and methods. 'There is no one correct way to gather apples, says Basil Gildersleeve,' nor, says A.E. Housman (eager not to be outdone in the quest for Ix-nausic examples),<sup>4</sup> is there one correct way to catch fleas; why, therefore, should there be a single correct method of classical scholarship? This reluctance to discuss method may in general be a good thing. It is not so good, however, at a time when classical studies are in a state of crisis, and it is my belief that the present is such a time. It is not that classics fails to attract students, but rather that it no longer exerts any influence upon, or commands any respect from, the deans, principals, presidents, and ministers who govern our culture and education, most of whom seem determined that every funded academic should be off somewhere committing a social science. In Anthony Crafton's words, "What is done at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* is studied avidly by so many who pay no attention at all to the *Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*."<sup>5</sup> Given this sense of crisis, it seems fitting to open, yet again, the questions of how we actually read ancient literature and how we might go about doing so in the future.

Although rooted deep in antiquity, it was in the nineteenth century that the discipline of classical studies received the distinctive character that marks it to this day. In keeping with the spirit of the times, classicists in that century organized the various sub-disciplines that make up classical studies – epigraphy, textual criticism, literary criticism, philosophy, and so on – so that one particular branch stood ahead of all the rest. That branch was history.<sup>6</sup>

Aristotle defines history as the study of *tá gēnōμενα*, or past events (*Poet.* 9.2, 1551<sup>b</sup>). So understood, history can use ancient literary texts, which are obviously not themselves past events, only as documents illustrating events external to themselves, namely the intellectual operations or intentions of the authors who created them.<sup>5</sup> This is, in fact, exactly how many classicists seek to use these texts. To cite only one of many exponents of this position, Adolf Köhnken wrote in 1983, "What we are trying to find out by analyzing the text is the intention of the author, not what [his] audience (of which we know very little, anyway) may or may not have thought. The individual members of this audience (like ourselves) may have craved about the significance of words and phrases . . . and it is our task to establish the truth (i.e., the significance intended by [the author] and embodied in our text)."<sup>6</sup>

Pedants by treating poems as documentary facts in this way, scholars hope to objectify them, but the etymology of the two words suggests that "facts" are every bit as made-up as "poems."<sup>7</sup> A more serious problem is that literary texts are highly defective as documentary evidence for their author's intentions.<sup>8</sup> At least four reasons for this inadequacy can be advanced. First, a poem's content of intended meaning is difficult to separate from its literary form<sup>9</sup> and is not easily paraphrasable.<sup>10</sup> This is true even in what are, from the intentionalist critics' point of view, best-case scenarios. For example, we know Vergil's *Aeneid* to have arisen from a *praeis* *praeis* (now lost),<sup>11</sup> which presumably embodied the author's intentions, yet no one has been able to reconstruct this *praeis*; or again, Pindar's *Second Olympian* begins with a *programmatische* *exordium* in which Pindar himself declares that the poem's subjects are Zeus, Heracles, and Thebes,<sup>12</sup> yet no one believes that this declaration completely exhausts the implications of the poem's remaining ninety-three lines. Secondly, since language is a social code, its products exceed the boundaries of a single individual's control, and chance plays an important role, as for example with Homeric formulae, whose position is determined by metrical necessity rather than by sense (we will be examining Sophocles' *wealthy* respect for chance in chapter 5). Thirdly, as the archaic Greeks were acutely aware (e.g., *Il.* 1.188-9),<sup>13</sup> the individual is himself divided by internal fissures that often prevent him from having a single unified intention. Fourthly, since people rely upon language as their primary means of communication,<sup>14</sup> to the undoubtedly large extent that a linguistic text fails to communicate, communication (as distinct from inspired, empathic guesses) cannot take place.

The inadequacy of literary texts as documents of their authors' intentions appears to tally with several ancient notions about life and

literature. For the ancients themselves tradition outweighed originality (cf. Arist. *Metaph.* A 3, 985<sup>b</sup>23),<sup>15</sup> the public good outweighed private interest (cf. Isoc. 18.60, Lys. 31.5–7),<sup>16</sup> and the effect of an action outweighed the intent (cf. *R.* 19.137–8).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the poets abdicate their own intentionality by appealing for guidance to the Muses, without whom “we hear only rumour and know nothing” (*R.* 2.486). This appeal is no mere *figura de parler* but, as Plato saw (*Ap.* 22b–c; *Meno* 99d), accounts for the poets’ inability to explain the beautiful poems they compose. This is no peculiarity of antiquity, for we note even today that great poets and great interpreters of poetry are virtually never the same people.

More sophisticated classicists recognize the limitations of using literary texts as documents of their author’s intention and generalize the intention, positing its locus outside the author, either in the *Weltanschauung* of his society at large<sup>18</sup> or in the rules of the genre.<sup>19</sup> The great advantage of this modification is that the opinions of society can be learned from other texts and artifacts of that society. Yet two problems remain even here. On the one hand, people often take the very ideas most familiar to them so much for granted that they do not express them.<sup>20</sup> On the other, those works great enough to have been preserved from antiquity may well, as Longinus observes (*Subl.* 14), say things beyond the comprehension of their own time.

This brings us to the question: if literary texts are such defective documents of the intentions of their authors, or more generally of the societies and genres in which they were composed, why has anyone bothered to preserve them all these years? The answer is that using poems as historical documents is like turning screws with a dime: it can be made to work in a pinch, but it does not reflect the true excellence of the instrument. Works of literature find their ἀγέρη outside the study of history as Aristotle defined it.

Another facet of this problem is that this view of history suggests a qualitative difference between ourselves and the authors we study. It almost invites us to see ourselves as living after the end of history: if history were, in Jules Laforgue’s words, *un vieux cauchemar brunié*, “a gaudy old nightmare,”<sup>21</sup> then we must have just awakened from it. If we were outside of history, we would be looking back upon it from our privileged vantage-point, like Zeus surveying the Trojan War from Mount Ida (*R.* 14.292–6). Yet for us, as for Zeus, this panorama might prove deceptive.

Believing that they stand outside of history, many classicists feel that they can use some mental time-warp to transport themselves back to a desired moment in the past. This objective can be traced back at least to Machiavelli<sup>22</sup> and receives its classic formulation

from Gottfried Hermann, who wrote in 1834 that "only he will be able [to interpret ancient texts] rightly who has been so well versed in ancient letters and so properly nourished by them, that he has been made almost an ancient [*quasi ... antiquus*]. In this way, having been led to the same meaning as the ancients he might bring it back and convey it to others."<sup>23</sup> This idea has been carried even further. I quote a text from 1934: "We must not only enter into the place, the time, the class – we must even become the man himself, even more, we must become the man at the very moment at which he writes a certain poem."<sup>24</sup> I regret to report that the author of these remarks is the normally lucid Milman Parry. In this statement Parry is guilty of a sleight of hand unworthy of his high intellect. One can indeed create a *fictitious person* who explores his own concerns in the context of some other age; the proof of this claim is the existence of historical fiction. Becoming a *real person* who actually lived at some other time differs from this not merely in degree but in kind: it is an impossible and absurd retrograde metempsychosis.<sup>25</sup>

We often laugh at the excesses of the *quasi-antiquus* scholars at Heinrich Schliemann for breaking his son's nose to obtain a more Greek profile;<sup>26</sup> and at J.K. Oesterreich for chewing a pound of hay-leaves in an attempt to recapture the inspiration of the Pythia.<sup>27</sup> We laugh at Borges' fictional character Pierre Menard, who attempted in the 1920s to recapture the *Zetigkeit* of Cervantes. "The initial method he conceived," writes Borges, "was relatively simple: to know Spanish well, to re-embrace the Catholic faith, to fight against Moors and Turks, to forget European history between 1002 and 1918, and to be Miguel de Cervantes."<sup>28</sup> But it is their quest itself, and not the excesses to which it has occasionally been subject, that is disturbing. What is so disturbing about these scholars is, first, the impossible nature of their quest. Their quest is impossible because the cardinal feature of the ancient authors whose work we study is their creativity. We cannot at once renounce creative activity and settle, in August Boeckh's phrase, for *Erkenntnis des Erkanteten*, "the understanding of what is known,"<sup>29</sup> and at the same time claim that we are emulating the discoveries of new knowledge. The exact repetition that these scholars seek is impossible: one cannot step into the same river twice (Heraclitus 22 B 12 Diels-Kranz).

The second, more disturbing aspect of this approach is these scholars' astonishing indifference to the concerns of the present. These concerns have a powerful hold over us, for we too are inside of history, and if history is a dream, it is one from which we will never awaken. For this reason I would replace Aristotle's view of history with that of Hegel, who writes that, "whatever happens,

every individual is a child of his time: so philosophy too is its own time apprehended in thoughts. It is just as absurd to fancy that a philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as it is to fancy that an individual can overleap his own age, jump over Rhodes."<sup>30</sup> It is true that Hegel is speaking of philosophy and not philology, but this distinction blurs at the point where philology becomes not merely "the love of words" but "the love of the Word."

Hegel's sophisticated view of history, in which the modern and the ancient worlds confront one another in a relation of dialectic, is not an invitation to the cultural relativism (cf Ikt. 3.384) that Alan Bloom has recently shown to characterize the American mind<sup>31</sup> and that must *a fortiori* mark the "multicultural" Canadian consciousness of the present writer. Classicists have developed several versions of the "distinct society clause" to protect ancient texts from our modern pre-suppositions. They advise: "What is not mentioned in the [text] does not exist";<sup>32</sup> "Explain Homer from Homer";<sup>33</sup> and "The critic must not impose the taste of his own age or that of [the ancient author]."<sup>34</sup>

If so far as these precepts prevent ethnocentrism from distorting our view of the ancient texts,<sup>35</sup> we must approve of them. But too often they have caused us scrupulously to keep away from the ancient texts our own deepest concerns. To the extent that this has happened, the cultural relativists are no further ahead than the *quasi-antiquus* scholars.

Indeed, there is a disquieting sense in which the history of classical scholarship is the history of our flight from the texts to the study of which we have devoted our lives. Modern commentaries on Homer still record the lines that Aristarchus athetized on the random chance that someone might find this information useful, but they mention, if at all, only as quaint curiosities the attempts by Crates of Mallus, Heraclitus, and Porphyry to test Homer's statements against their own ideas and experience – and thereby to take them seriously.<sup>36</sup> Since the time of Horace we have been willing to admit that a poet may err on occasion (Hor. Ars. P. 359 – Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Criticism" 160),<sup>37</sup> by which (since we know enough not to judge his work by our own ethnocentric tastes) we mean that he does not succeed in saying what we presume he intended to say. We grieve with silence, however, the question of whether the poet might err by failing to tell the truth, although this is the one area where we might actually catch an author nodding – and the one area where it really matters. We are so busy looking for evidence of the intention of the poets, who (by invoking the Muses) expressly declare that their poems do not reflect their intentions, that we do not bother to test the claim, on which they repeatedly insist (e.g. Pind. Ol. 4.17, Nem. 7.48),<sup>38</sup>

that their poems are true and in some way approximate real lived experience of the world.

In so far as critics are obliged by the etymology of their name to sit in judgment, the truth is the only valid criterion for judgment that they possess. What then, in the words of a famous judge (John 13.33), is truth? We may adapt the scholastic definition, *veritas est adequatio rei et intellectus*,<sup>39</sup> and say that a poem is true in so far as it corresponds to the data of that essential, universal experience that the more straightforward philosophers assure us exists (Arist. *peri hermeneias* 1.6a). An interpretation of a poem, in turn, is correct in so far as it at once fails to violate anything that we know of the particular, accidental features of the poem's cultural context (without necessarily therefore conforming to any a priori theoretical construct alleged to represent those features, such as for example a theory of "shared culture") and at the same time reveals the essential universal experience in the presentation of which the poem's truth consists.

To involve our own experience in evaluating the truth-claims of the poets is not necessarily to invite readerly solipsism. The physicist Erwin Schrödinger writes that "this life of yours which you are living is not merely a piece of the entire existence, but is in a certain sense the whole; only this whole is not so constituted that it can be surveyed in one single glance. This, as we know, is what the Bramins express in the sacred, mystic formula which is yet really so simple and so clear: *but tvaṃ asi*, 'this is you.'<sup>40</sup> Schrödinger is quoting the *Chandogya Upaniṣad* (6.8.7), but we find a similar idea in Greek thought in Plotinus's statement *παντα ενω*, "the sum of things is within us" (3.8.6.40). One who shares the vision of Schrödinger can indeed fulfil Perry's ambition – not by launching himself backward in time like a "chrononaut" but by watching the past rise up veriginously to meet him.

Interpretation thus has two moments: the scholarly moment, consisting in the recognition of difference and otherness in the particular accidental features of a poem's cultural context, and the phenomenological moment, consisting in the recognition of sameness in the context of that difference and thus of a ground of shared experience between the poem and ourselves. For example, as the first moment, one might show with Bernard van Groenigen that the archaic Greeks were "in the grip of the past" in the sense that they, unlike ourselves, looked to the past rather than to the future as a validation of knowledge and a perfect expression of reality.<sup>41</sup> Interpretation is not complete, however, until one realizes that the sense in which the Greeks were in the grip of the past is trivial compared with the sense in which they, like ourselves, were future-oriented. The Greeks, no less

than we, feared their non-existence after death but felt no terror in contemplating their non-existence before conception, although the difference between these two states is evidently only the difference of past and future." In this more profound sense they (like us, and like people everywhere) are in the grip of the future.

If we fail to notice the poets' truth claims, or if we dismiss them as hollow convention or naïve error, then despite all our careful strategies our reading will go astray, lose its true object, and dissipate in a welter of trivial detail. I say "lose its true object" because the obligation that we, like Socrates, owe to the god at Delphi is to acquire self-knowledge. It is the promise of self-knowledge that packs students into "Psych" and "Sosh" courses; yet classical literature teaches us that the true path to such knowledge is not through Analysis or through watching rats in a maze but through dialogue with the great texts of the past. Confrontation with these texts, more surely than any other activity, will forge order in the chaos of your experience and enable you in Pindar's words to "become what you are by learning" (*Pyth.* 2.72).

To the encounter with one of the most deservedly famous of ancient texts – and one that most clearly calls upon its audience-members and readers to know themselves – let us now turn.

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