

### ***Sophocles and His Doubles: Artaud***

In this study, I wish to establish some affinities between the aesthetics of Sophoclean drama as presented in *Oedipus Rex* and the theory of the theater outlined by Antonin Artaud in *The Theater and its Double*. An immediate complication for the argument is Artaud's assertion that if "a contemporary public does not understand *Oedipus Rex*, I shall make so bold as to say that it is fault of *Oedipus Rex* and not the public" (p.74.) This problem begins with the fact that the drama is written "in a manner and language that have lost all touch with the rude and epileptic rhythm of our time. Sophocles speaks grandly perhaps, but in a style that is no longer timely. His language is too refined for this age, it is as if he were speaking beside the point" (p.75). Sophocles does not speak to us in our own language, but "through adulterated trappings and speech that belong to extinct eras that will never live again" (p.75). And additional problems exist for even a contemporary linguistic medium in that "an expression does not have the same value twice, does not live two lives; that all words, once, spoke are dead and function only at the moment when they are uttered, that a form, once it has served, cannot be used again and asks only to be replaced by another, and that the theater is the only place in the world where a gesture, once made, can never be made the same way twice" (p.75).

A contemporary aspect of this problem is "a new form of idolatry, the idolatry of fixed masterpieces which is one of the aspects of bourgeois conformism" (p.76), and the problem is made worse by a psychologization of drama that Artaud traces back to Shakespeare. Reminiscent of Nietzsche's critique of Euripides in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Artaud states that psychology "which works relentlessly to reduce the unknown to the known, the quotidian and the ordinary, is the cause of the theater's abasement and its fearful loss of energy" (p. 77). Thus Western theater is limited from its very inception as an outgrowth of

Dionysian rites into which were introduced the discursive quantities that Aristotle, in *The Poetics*, terms "*ethos kai dianoia*," "character and thought." The trespassing of humanity as an individuated *ethos* or identity into what belonged to the god reduces drama as an expressive medium to an extension of the known and the knowable—to the terms of a human persona that perceives, promotes, and sustains the quotidian and the ordinary.

Thus, for Artaud, the problem of theater is its contamination and adulteration by a human language. As the primary organ of human consciousness, language separates us from nonsentient beings. The structures of its grammar, syntax, and lexical indices allow us to organize, systematize, and communicate generalities about ourselves and a world we think we understand. Through our use of language we can reduce the overwhelming totality of possible experience into information that can become common knowledge. Thus, apart from the particular limitations that may arise from dated language and styles is the familiarity and intimacy that language permits, familiarity, that, as in Shakespeare, provides too many answers and dispels too many mysteries.

For Artaud, the problem with dialog is that words trap insight into formulations that are specific to their time, idiom, and bound by the limitations intrinsic to linguistic meaning. Insight is a singular event that requires for its propagation a language unrestrained by the lexical and syntactic requirements of speech. This language of the theater that would constitute the theater as a privileged moment of communication synthesizes "all the means of expression utilizable on the stage, such as music, dance, plastic art, pantomime, mimicry, gesticulation, intonation, architecture, lighting and scenery." (p.39) As in the Balinese theater, true theater will comprise a language of gestures.

There is in such productions,

something of the ceremonial quality of a religious rite, in the sense that they extirpate from the mind of the onlooker all idea of pretense, of cheap imitations of reality. This intricately detailed gesticulation has one goal, an immediate goal which it ap-

proaches by efficacious means whose efficacy we are even meant to experience immediately. The thoughts it aims at, the spiritual states it seeks to create, the mystic solutions it proposes are aroused and attained without delay or circumlocution. All of which seems to be an exorcism to make our demons flow (p.60)

The theater is, in these terms, a ritual or ceremonial process that creates and sustains sacred states of consciousness, and while we may carry them within ourselves, we may not reproduce them in language. The theater structures perceptions and sensations uninhibited by finite linguistic meanings into a new, symbolic language whose expression is an intuitive totality or epiphany of meaning beyond words. Such a singular experience can be communicated only as an intuition or an aesthetic event, and, in this sense any given production is singular and incapable of iteration. Meaning is an effect of the performance, remains tied to circumstances of its perception and does not reduce to linguistic or conceptual definition.

The question here, is how can Sophoclean drama approach a similar state of the signification or presentation of this sort of intuitive totality if it is so clearly and so exquisitely an effect of the meticulous and rigorous intellectuality of its language? Part of the answer lies in the fact that the plot of Sophocles's Oedipus drama, despite the fact that its power derives from its dialog, gives us one of the most effective presentations of doubling in world literature. The release of the affects of pity, fear, and wonder—the non-discursive, emotional and sensational power of the drama—is terrifyingly apparent in the revelation of the divine force of the *daimon*, or destiny, as it compels Oedipus to undo himself. This *daimon* is a double of Oedipus, and its agency is perfectly coincident with the actions and intentions of Oedipus who is trapped by and within it. The other, the *daimon*, works through Oedipus. There is nothing that Oedipus can deliberate, choose, or enact that will not bring him closer to his ruin. And this fact is presented in the thorough overdetermination of the language and action of the drama. Such doubling is, preeminently, the concern of Artaud's theater which would put the double on the stage:

it is certain that this aspect of pure theater, this physics of absolute gesture which is the idea itself and which transforms the mind's conceptions into events perceptible through the labyrinths and fibrous interlacings of matter, gives us a new idea

of what belongs by nature to the domain of forms and manifested matter. Those who succeed in giving a mystic sense to the simple form of a robe and who, not content with placing a man's Double next to him, confer upon each man in his robes a double made of clothes—those who pierce these illusory or secondary clothes with a saber, giving them the look of huge butterflies pinned in the air, such men have an innate sense of the absolute and magical symbolism of nature much superior to ours" (p.62).

Consider the plot of *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus happens to hear the accusation of a drunk that he is not the biological descendant of the king and queen of Corinth, Polybus and Merope. His adoptive parents attempt to disabuse him of the actual truth of this accusation, but he is of such a character, or *ethos*, that he is unable to dispel his suspicions. So he goes to Delphi for clarification, and this brings him to the next in the chain of many unfortunate coincidences intricately structured to lead him to his destruction. There he learns that he is destined to kill his father and marry his mother. Forgetting his previous doubts about his origins in Corinth, he determines to flee into exile to avoid fulfilling the prophecy of his destiny. Of course, this leads him towards his real origin, Thebes, and on the way there he is attacked by a stranger whom he kills in retaliation. Thus unknowingly he kills his father who happened to be heading toward Delphi at just the same time to find out how to save his city from the plague of the Sphinx.

For Oedipus, an imperfect knowledge of circumstance combined with pious hopes and fears related to morality and happiness has been structured into a perfect storm of misfortune. Absolutely every consequence of character, thought and action, absolutely every consequence of who he is and what he does, culminates in the great impiety and unhappiness that fulfill his destiny. All of these coincidences that up to the moment of the reversal elude Oedipus are part of the traditional mythology and are, as such, well known to the viewers. Thus, the production generates an intense irony apparent to the viewers who are compelled to witness the cognitive processes and character states of the protagonist so thoroughly detailed in

the words of the Sophoclean dialog. The irony intensifies throughout the drama proper where Oedipus, now the king, is pushed ever further into the inquest where he, as judge, must prove himself to be the offending party. There is an unsettling sense that the *daimon*, or destiny, is hunting down Oedipus through the very thought processes, affects, and emotional states he employs in his pursuit of the inquest.

There should be a certain randomness to the way events unfold in the world. Generally, purposive sequences of events are directed by the purposes of comprehensible agents whose intentions can be explained by the psychology of character and the necessities of circumstance. There are a limited number of narratives that explain human action and interaction and these are treated fairly exhaustively by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* and in the *Ethics*. Oedipus is attacked viciously, without provocation by a stranger, and given his character, it is not improbable that he will react violently. He does so and gets the upper hand and kills, quite coincidentally, the man who happens to be his father. The Sophoclean plot rigorously individuates the probabilities of character and the necessities of circumstance in which they must act and, in doing so, has nearly all the requirements of a realistic narrative. What it lacks is the probable outcome of events that it would have if circumstances remained inanimate and indifferent to the aims of the merely human agents. The way the coincidences pile up is incredible—it's like spending years at a slot machine and never losing.

The ironic insinuation of the agency of the *daimon* countermands the neutrality of circumstance to human efforts. Except in the animistic domain of mythological thinking, the world does not care what you do, and it neither promotes nor hinders your purposes. But Sophocles's Oedipus drama stages a mythological worldview reacting against all probability and against the sufficient reason of the perfectly rational and explicable historical narrative of Oedipus's life. As the coincidences pile up, the rigorous causal integration of the narrative demands that we credit it as the actual account of the facts of Oedipus's life, while for the exact same reason, despite our astonishment at the coincidences, we are compelled to accept them as an agency whose reality is apparent as an overdetermination. Thus the drama compels us to accept the reality of Oedipus's double or *Doppelgänger*. The probabilities and necessities that motivate the realism of the narrative transport it, even as such, into an inexplicable and magical mythological otherworld. In this way the language and psychology of the Sophoclean dialog accomplish the dramatic purpose

that Artaud reserves for their absence. But, even as such, Sophocles achieves one of the aims of Artaud which is to restore mythic vision to a world that normally ignores its possibility. We might say for the Sophoclean treatment of the Oedipus myth what Artaud says about the plague considered as one of the theaters doubles:

All great myths are dark, so that one cannot imagine, save in an atmosphere of carnage, torture, and bloodshed, all the magnificent fables which recount to the multitudes the first sexual division and the first carnage of essences that appeared in creation.

The theater, like the plague, is in the image of this carnage and this essential separation. It releases conflicts, disengages powers, liberates possibilities, and if these possibilities and these powers are dark, it is the fault not of the plague nor of the theater, but of life" (p. 31).

All page references to *The Theater and its Double* by Antonin Artaud, Mary Catherine Richards, trans. Grove Press, New York, 1958.