

# JUNG AND THE MYTH OF OEDIPUS

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For both Freud and Jung, the myth of Oedipus lay at the heart of depth psychology; and since it concerned the very nature of the Unconscious, they gave it opposing interpretations. For Freud, the Unconscious is a product of repression, consisting of contents once in consciousness and then put out of it—for good reasons, Freud would say, since primitive Man is not a pretty sight. Therefore he took particular delight, as we read in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, in showing how a dream, say of a flowering branch, concealed an ancient story, the twin desires of primitive man for murder and incest, all of which he found confirmed in the Oedipus myth; and when in our culture, which is much more kin to Freud than to Jung, we speak of an Oedipus complex, that is what we mean. The only thing was to make the whole Unconscious conscious: “Where was Id, there shall ego stand.”

All this was the psychologising of a tradition which stemmed from the first arrival of the patriarchal culture—from which point on, nature was demonised and itself went, in the psyche of man, into opposition. *Homo homini lupus*, said the Romans, man is a wolf to man. Who can deny it, said Freud, in face of the evidence of history and his own life? Religion wholly agreed: all man’s instincts are evil until redeemed, it said; and since religion had failed to redeem them, answered Freud, science would. So instead of the concept of Yahwe, he gave us the super-ego, the voice of the father and all the fathers of the tribe. But *Homo homini lupus?* said Jung. Wolves behave far better than humans. Jung said it long before science itself showed it to be true—something he said long before the ethology of such as Konrad Lorenz showed it to be so. Here is Jung speaking of the animal, in *The Visions Seminar*, in 1931:

“We have a prejudice when it comes to animals. It is difficult to say to anyone, you should assimilate your animal, become acquainted with your animal. Because people think of a sort of lunatic asylum, they think of the animals as jumping over walls and raising hell all over town. Yet the animal is a well-behaved citizen in nature, it is pious, it follows the path with great regularity, it is doing nothing extravagant... So if you assimilate the nature of the animal you become a peculiarly law-abiding citizen, you go very slowly and you become reasonable in your ways... You are something quite different from what you assume the animal to be. Have you ever seen an animal getting drunk on cocktails? That is man, only man can do that. We have an entirely wrong idea of the animal.”(1)

It was a radically different idea of nature and a radically different idea of the Unconscious—which were for Jung, the same thing. The Unconscious was no more than the inwardness of nature. For Freud it was the reject-matter of civilization, and the whole purpose of his psychology was to enable men to reject it more firmly. For Jung, the Unconscious was Mother; and the Oedipus myth was concerned with man’s troubled relationship (for he has to leave her) to that great, unconscious source.



If we go back to those hundreds of thousands of years of hunter-gatherer culture, we find that the shamans went into her.

So where the Unconscious was for Freud a precipitate of the growth of civilisation, made up of what had to be rejected if culture were to be built, for Jung it was infinitely prior to all culture and all consciousness, an ocean in which consciousness germinated, from which it crawled up onto the strand as land-life first crawled up from the ocean. In short the Unconscious was Mother, and that was where the Oedipus myth came in. It could not all be made conscious, any more than the sea could be emptied out with an acorn-cup. We could however, relate to it, enter it, penetrate it, conceive from it, create consciousness with it. That would require the whole person, with all their faculties—and was something which only an individual could achieve—was utterly beyond the comprehension, the law-making capacity of the collective, so that its pursuit would inevitably put a person in conflict with the collective. And Sophocles' position was remarkably similar. In the great trilogy, Oedipus is a king, utterly identified with the city-state, that first flowering of civilisation, marked off from the wildness of nature by its city walls and that most powerful possible *tabu* against the matriarchal world, the ban on incest. As King, Oedipus held all that together. Yet by another law, that of his own nature, he was wedded for ever to the ancient enemy, and there was no way he could escape that destiny. The conflict tore him apart and that was his passion; and still, he held. Four centuries before Christ, he was a Christ figure, and Sophocles gave him one of the greatest deaths in all myth and theatre, comparable with the departure of Elisha in a chariot of fire, and the ascension of Christ.

The great death was dismissed by Freud as, I quote, “a late, uncomprehending re-working of the material in the interests of religion.” That meant that if we could get back to the original myth, in the mists of the pre-literate, oral tradition, we would find that it was just incest. Who was right, Jung or Freud? I call two witnesses. The first is an anonymous mythographer from the Bororo tribe in the basin of the Amazon, whose story was picked up by some Jesuit fathers in the 1830s and taken from their records by Lévi-Strauss, in the last century, and put into his great, though highly over-rational, study of South American myth.(2) It is relevant because we can't get to archaic origins in Greece: they are behind the great written culture that came later and no fragments of them remain. But there are incest myths in other primal, pre-literate, oral traditions. And this is one.

## A Bororo Folk-Tale

“In olden times the women used to go into the forest to gather the palms used in the making of the *ba*. These were penis sheathes which were presented to adolescents at their initiation ceremony. One youth secretly followed his mother when she went to collect the palms, caught her unaware—and raped her.

“When the woman returned from the forest, her husband noticed feathers caught in her bark-cloth belt similar to those worn by youths. Suspecting that something untoward had occurred, he ordered that a dance should take place in order to find out which youth was wearing a similar adornment. To his amazement he discovered that his son was the only one. He ordered another dance with the same result.

“Wishing to be avenged on his son, he sent him to the nest of souls with instructions to bring back the great dance-rattle, which he coveted. (The nest of souls is called in many shamanic cultures the ancestors.) The young man consulted his *grandmother* who told him of the mortal danger that involved, and advised him to get the help of the *hummingbird*. The hummingbird came with him, and when they reached the watery region of souls, he waited on the shore while the hummingbird stole the great dance rattle by cutting the cord by which it was hanging. The instrument fell into the water making a loud noise, and alerted by this noise, the souls fired arrows at the bird; but he flew so fast that he reached the shore safe and sound with the rattle and gave it to the boy, who took it home and gave it to his father.”

So far it has the classic form of folk tale everywhere; and the folktale tradition itself is rooted in shamanism, and all its stories are veiled accounts of the foray into the hidden world of the Great Mother. There is the Grandmother, who because of her female sex and her great age knows the ways of that world. There is the helpful animal, who represents nature itself and is her emissary. In this case it is the hummingbird; there is the hostile father who forces him into it, like the wicked king in many a tale from Grimm and many a Greek myth, who sends the hero to the underworld to get the golden fleece or golden hairs from the Devil’s head, or something else from that world that this outer world of king and tribe needs. And there is the motif that the father isn’t satisfied. The boy always has to go for more. In this case, what is needed first is the Great Dance Rattle. Dance rattles are part of the ritual by which the shaman breaks the boundary and goes down. The dance and the shaking of the rattles, and smaller rattles on the anklets of the dancers, and the clapping that goes on and on



and on provide the energy by which he does it when, exhausted, he or she falls into the trance-state. The father wants the Great Rattle; the world of the tribe wants it. Maybe the father is jealous of the son who has crossed the great boundary, broken the *tabu* which protects the tribe from the vast inward reaches of nature. The shamans were strange, weird, bisexual creatures, and the ordinary tribes-people would be both ashamed of them and awed.

*Bororo Dance Rattle*

There followed demands to fetch the small dance rattle, and then to fetch bells made from the hoof of the wild pig, and worn as anklets in the dance. *Always the boy is helped by some animal, so that the tasks are achieved.* Eventually comes the crowning test. The father takes his son to catch macaws on a high cliff. His Grandmother gives him a magic wand which he can cling to if he falls. When they arrive at the rock, the father puts a long pole up against it and orders his son to climb. When he gets to the top, the father knocks the pole away, but the boy sticks his wand into a crevice and remains suspended. He notices a creeper and pulls himself up to the top. Then he goes to look for food. He makes a bow and arrows out of some branches and hunts for lizards. He shoots very many and hooks the surplus onto his belt, and to the strips of cotton which are round his legs and ankles. The lizards go bad and make such a stench that the boy faints. Then the vultures fall upon him and devour first the lizards and then the boy's buttocks. Having eaten their fill, they take hold of his belt and deposit him gently at the foot of the mountain. The boy regains consciousness "as if," the story puts it so beautifully, "he were waking from a dream." He is hungry and picks wild fruits, but he finds that his hindquarters are completely missing so that the food passes through, without being digested. He remembers his Grandmother telling him of how a certain character in their myths solved that problem by moulding an artificial behind out of dough made from pounded tubers. Always the Grandmother is an active participant in the tale—but advisory. The ego needs to do things.

After re-making his body in this way, he returns to his village; but it is abandoned. He spots foot marks which he recognises as those of his Grandmother, and follows the tracks. Not wanting to reveal himself, he takes on the shape of a lizard—whose antics greatly amuse the old woman for of course, she must know who it is. Then he turns himself into four birds in turn, and a butterfly and eventually, proudly, reveals himself.

Now this story is an account of the making of a shaman.

1. The Great Dance Rattle. "Each class of spirits," says Mircea Eliade in his book *Shamanism* (which all analysts should read), "is represented by pebbles of different kinds. The shaman puts them in his rattle and thus can invoke them at will."

2. The Grandmother. She lives on the boundary which the shaman has to pass. If she backs him, then it means that nature backs him. All the animals will back him—which is, as you know, the theme of nearly every folk tale ever told.

In the matriarchal stratum of culture, no hero ever does anything by his own strength. He is the opposite of the patriarchal hero, who is ranged against nature. For him, helpful animals do the work and his only essential activity is to approach them properly—just how Jung conceived the fruitful relation of the ego to the Unconscious.

3. The Macaws. Their bright, coloured feathers were an important part of the shaman's costume and held within them, like the pebbles in the rattle, the charge of psychic energy or *mana*. No better symbol can be imagined for the spirit than these feathers, whose function is to take the bird into the region of the spirit, the sky, and which are so brightly coloured.

4. The Long Pole. An essential part of the shaman's powers was to climb the pole, or shaman's ladder, or tree—which joins different levels together.

5. The Great Stench given off by the decaying lizards. This is the experience of death. When he faints he becomes like carrion and is devoured by vultures. We can think of Inanna who becomes a piece of rotting flesh hung on a hook in the underworld; also of the *putrefactio* in alchemy. Prometheus chained to a mountain, his liver daily devoured by eagles is very like these vultures. Here, they eat

their fill and then pick him up gently, and deposit him down on the ground. Vultures are sacred to the Mother, who brings back her children in death; and these have the tenderness also of the Mother.

6. New Buttocks, new digestive system, new body. As much as Odysseus in Homer's song, who, when he returns from the Underworld is greeted by Circe as the twice-born, the twice-made-man, this boy has been made again. He can now, again like Odysseus, go home.

7. The Series of Transformations: lizard, four birds, finally butterfly. The ability to do that, which he shows off to his mentor, his Grandmother, is the classic sign of a fully qualified shaman.

When Freud spoke of the desire to penetrate the Mother, Jung replied: Don't concretise. Symbol and metaphor are the language of the psyche; its greatest symbol is Mother, for she is the great pregnant darkness, the source and origin. What the poets have always known, what Homer knew, and Sophocles knew, and Keats and Coleridge knew, modern folk must learn or they will not read the psyche. So with the symbol of incest.

Freud's reply was given in a note to the 1933 edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

"None of the discoveries of psychoanalytic research has evoked such embittered contradiction, such furious opposition, and also such entertaining acrobatics of criticism, as this one... An attempt has even been made recently, in defiance of all experience, to assign only a symbolic significance to incest."(3)

That psychic incest spills over into actual incest is beyond doubt. It happens when an individual cannot distinguish between the realms and falls victim, therefore, to the law which governs the relation between psyche and reality: that what is not dealt with psychically comes upon us, from outside, as fate.

Once upon a time there was a King and Queen of Thebes, but they had no child. (The theme is sterility, a barren couple, a barren situation, a barren culture. What to do about it? That is always what the folk tale is about. For fertility is not just what nature does, it is what nature is. If there is a hold-up in the process, it is a problem for existence itself.)

The King goes to the oracle at Delphi, and is told that if a son is born to him, he will kill his father and marry his mother. This means, in psyche-talk, that's the way through. That's what must happen. He would have a son, maybe his own new self, who would in some metaphoric way kill the father and marry the mother. Maybe the father is something rigid in the man's own psyche; and maybe the mother is always nature. And that if he didn't do that in the realm of psyche, it would go into the realm of the concrete, and his son will do it, for real. For sons take on the problems which the father has not solved. The King takes the message literally, and from that the whole tragedy stems. He determines to avoid his fate by not sleeping with Jocasta, the Queen; but nature is too strong, and he's in incest himself with her; and a son is born. Instead of nurturing him as a future artist and prophet, as he might have done if he had read the oracle aright, he gives him to his shepherd, with orders to leave him out on the mountain. First he puts a spike through his ankles to make sure that he can't crawl. But nature is again too strong. The shepherd pities the child, and gives him to another shepherd who takes him home to his own city of Corinth, and gives him to the King and Queen there, who have no son and bring him up as their own. And they call him Oedipus, the Lamé One, because his ankles never healed. But Robert Fagles, the most recent translator, makes a far more interesting suggestion: that Oedipus is related to the verb *oido*, to know. He says that Sophocles makes word-play on this throughout the plays.(4) But perhaps both explanations of the name are parts of each other. Oedipus is lame, and through that he knows. He bears the unstanachable wound of Chiron, the healer; and the only healing is to know.



*Remains of the Temple of Apollo on the side of Mount Parnassus at Delphi (photo by Adam L. Clevenger)*

When Oedipus is grown, it starts. A young man who has drunk too much mocks him with being a foundling. He goes straight to his parents, who deny the story. But that can't stop him: it is his nature to know. He sets off to ask the oracle at Delphi—where you go whenever there is something you want to know. It is of course the Unconscious itself, which knows everything. He gets back the same answer as Laius received: that his fate, his *telos*, his destiny is to kill his father and marry his mother. Like Laius, he takes it literally, resolves never to see either parent again, and sets off in the opposite direction from home. But soon he comes to a place where three roads meet, and meets a man on a big cart, pulled by mules, with a band of servants accompanying him, and a herald who walks before and proudly commands Oedipus to stand aside. Again, nature takes over. Oedipus falls into a rage and when he comes round again, he finds that he has killed them all, except for one, who ran away.

He goes on and comes to a great city which is in mourning for its king, killed in some obscure fracas on the road to Delphi—but menaced far more gravely by a Sphinx, a monster with the head and breasts of a beautiful woman, the body of a lioness and the feet and wings of a vulture. The plague is raging; people are dying all over the town. The only salvation is for someone to answer the Sphinx's riddle. Many have tried, failed and been instantly devoured. So it is proclaimed that anyone who can do it shall marry the queen and become king.

Oedipus goes out at once. He finds her perched on a pinnacle of rock.

"What is it," she asks, "that goes on four legs in the morning, on two at midday, and on three in the evening?" Nature again takes over. The answer comes from somewhere deep within him. He sees it in a flash.

“Man,” he says; “for when he is young he goes on all fours, when he is in his prime he walks upright, and when he is old he uses a stick to hold himself up. Man comes from the earth, his mother, and goes back to her. Yet in his arc out and back, he is like the sun who crosses the heavens and sees everything. He knows.”

At that the Sphinx utters a loud shriek and falls onto the rocks below. Oedipus goes back to the city, marries the queen and amid great rejoicing becomes king. For many years he rules well. The city flourishes and his wife bears him four healthy children, two boys and two girls. Then the plague comes again. It is at this point that Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* opens.

We are before the royal palace at Thebes. At centre stage are double doors; behind them columns, a pediment, an architrave, all the signs and architecture of the state. Before them is an altar. A procession of priests enters left. They are broken and dejected, and they carry branches which they lay on the altar as symbols of themselves. Guards assemble; the doors open. The King appears. He is in his prime, majestic except for a tell-tale limp. This is Oedipus, the lame one. The audience know the story and await its end, as the crowd at a bull-fight wait for the great, beautiful beast to suffer the fall which is its destiny.

Slowly Oedipus views the people. The first image is the city-state itself, with its stone buildings, its law and engineering—and the single human being who represents it and keeps it in being. And in that first image, another is implicit: the blind and bloodied beggar, pushed out of the gates at the end of the play. The priests have come to beg him to save the city. It is of course his job, and he has started. He has sent to Delphi. Even now he awaits the return of his emissary, his wife’s brother Creon; and indeed Creon is seen, off-stage, approaching, and soon he arrives with his message. It is that the killer of Laius is still alive in the city. He must be found and banished. Until that is done the plague will continue. The simple brilliance of the play is that Oedipus is the detective, the good cop, the symbol of consciousness—and sets out on a trail which will lead inexorably, to himself.



*Oedipus and the Sphinx*  
by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, painted between 1808 and 1825

We learn the earlier parts of the story in the course of the investigation. Bit by bit, the scattered images are brought together, and in the end they make a whole. The simple cross-roads where Oedipus kills his father is amplified into a narrow pass where three roads meet, with a copse of trees at the intersection, the oaks crowding in. Oedipus kills his father at the very exit from the womb—in one of those acts of passion which come out of that dark world, linked with the lust with which Laius conceived the child, the tenderness with which the shepherd spared him, the drunkenness with which the youth blurted out that Oedipus was not his parents' child, the frenzy of the woman who was the mouthpiece of the god at Delphi, and now the rage with which the young man had killed the old one—



*Shepherd carrying Baby Oedipus: still from Pasolini's film, Oedipus Rex*

all those many points at which the story moves on, not by conscious, deliberate actions but a flaring up of passion. The tragedy of Oedipus is the tragedy of the whole rational hypothesis. Sophocles makes him a modern man, his discourse sprinkled with references to mathematics, logic, empirical evidence, reason. And yet his fate is to know the reality of the Sphinx.

The Sphinx, we have learnt, has the upper part of a woman, the body of a lion and the wings and claws of that undertaker of the ancient world, the vulture, who takes all dead things back into herself. She is nature and asks the question that nature always asks: What are you who come out of me and now confront me? To be human is to be conscious, and there is nothing to be conscious of, but her—who is ourselves. If we know that in us the world is conscious of itself, the Sphinx is no longer a threat. She doesn't really fall shrieking from her pinnacle. Nothing in the psyche ever dies, it merely passes under the horizon, gestates more questions for later. But she is gone for now. Next time she will ask: Who killed the old King?

In the play, Oedipus sends for Tiresias and asks him, literally, who killed the King? The blind seer, the Merlin of the Greek world, is himself like the Sphinx and like the Oracle too, crosses all boundaries, is man and woman too, human and animal. He knows that it was Oedipus. He has always known but he won't tell because he knows that Oedipus can't handle it, yet—and kings are dangerous. So he keeps his mouth shut. And when, in the end, Oedipus wrings it out of him, indeed he can't handle it. The just, reasonable, all-benevolent King becomes at once like a petty tyrant. Tiresias is a fraud, he rants; Creon must have bribed him. Like all men who cannot face a truth about themselves, he becomes a raging infant.

It is when Jocasta comes to reason with him and calm him down, as women do when violence is breaking out, that we find ourselves looking in on the secrets of a marriage. Together, they consider the accusation that he killed her first husband, and that their very marriage bed has been soaked in blood. If it was Tiresias who told him that, she says, then he can put it right out of his mind. For prophets *don't* know, and she has proof of it. Long ago, the Oracle at Delphi told her first husband that he would be killed by his own son. But Laius, as everyone knows, was killed by a band of robbers at a place where three roads meet. And as for the child, he had been flung onto the mountain. So much for prophets!



It is in Jocasta's proof that prophets don't know that Oedipus knows that they do know. In the image of the three roads meeting, he knows suddenly that it's not all nonsense. And then there is the time to choose. Consciousness brings choice. Until he had, like Eve before the apple, he was not an ethical being. He had huge intuitions but they just came to him. Now he must choose. He could quash the investigation, nothing easier: kill those who know too much, send it all back into the *Unconscious*. Kings were tyrants, and nearly every tyrant in the world would do that. Instead, he follows the trail, knowing now that it will lead inexorably to himself. First he sends for the man who escaped the massacre, and who, when he had come to Thebes had seen Oedipus already on the throne, and begged Jocasta to send him as far away as possible, *out of sight*—into the *Unconscious*. Oedipus now sends for him. It is like the *anamnesis*, the bringing back into consciousness what has been forgotten.



*Jocasta (Silvana Magnano) and Oedipus (Franco Citti): still from Pasolini's film, Oedipus Rex*

While they wait for him, he tells Jocasta, and us who are the audience, the whole story—how, at home with his parents Polybus and Merope, a youth had said one night that he was not his father's son; how he had gone secretly to Delphi and received the prophecy that he would kill his father and mate with his mother—and so abandoned Corinth, set off in the opposite direction—only to come to that very place where the great king died. Every detail of that encounter he tells her. His only hope is that the shepherd will confirm that it was a band of thieves who killed the king and not one single stranger. But he knows it is a forlorn hope. He still has no suspicion that the man in the cart was also his father; and salvation from that part of the prophecy suddenly seems to come—a messenger from Corinth with the news that Polybus is dead, and the people are calling for Oedipus to return and be their king. If Polybus is dead, then the prophecy, as Jocasta says, is indeed all nonsense.

He breaks into a sort of hymn of relief:

*...So Jocasta, why, why look to the prophet's hearth,  
The fires of the future, why scan the birds  
that scream above our heads? They winged me on  
to the murder of my father, did they? That was my doom?  
Well, look, he's dead and buried, hidden under the earth  
And here am I in Thebes, and I never put hand to sword.(5)*



*Oedipus (Franco Citti): still from Pasolini's film, Oedipus Rex*

But the relief is short-lived. The messenger from Corinth turns out to be the shepherd who brought him down from the mountain and gave him into the hands of King Polybus, who had no son. As he tells his story, Oedipus has to face the probability that he is indeed a foundling, that he is not of royal blood, probably slave-born. Is he

to publicise that? It is another *crisis* in the true sense of the word, which means a judgement, from the Greek, *krisis*. Jocasta cannot bear that people should know it. She begs him to stop. The shepherd, too, begs him to stop. The interests of State *require* him to stop. (How many times has that argument been made?) But at this point he is discovering his humanity, and that is much more important than the requirements of State. Whatever he is, he must *know* it. It is then that he makes that wonderful cry:

*Let it burst! Whatever will, whatever must!...  
I count myself the son of Chance,  
the great goddess, giver of all good things –  
...She is my mother!*

And then he goes on to the claim that the moons are his brothers—returning thus into the ancient, matriarchal world, long before the city state, when the moon was the measure of all time, and thus of all worldly reality:

*The moons have marked me out, my blood-brothers,  
one moon on the wane, the next moon great with power.  
That is my blood, my nature. I will never betray it  
never fail to search and learn my birth.(6)*

The chorus are very willing to accept that too.

*Oedipus — they chant,  
son, dear child, who bore you?  
Which of the nymphs who seem to live for ever  
Mated with Pan, the mountain-striding Father?...  
Or was it Hermes, king of the lightning ridges?  
Or Dionysus, lord of frenzy*

As Oedipus goes on, it is as if the palace crumbles in front of us and both the pretensions and the touchy arrogance of kingship crumble with it, and from the ruins emerges a majestic man—the highest nobility of nature. (In this, as at many other points, Oedipus is a forerunner of King Lear.)

But Jocasta is now terrified. She knows something that Oedipus does not yet know, that the trail leads also to her. She begs him again and again to stop the investigation, then rushes desperately off stage—while Oedipus continues with putting the final piece in the jig-saw puzzle in place. The shepherd who escaped from the massacre is brought in. At once he is recognised by the man from Corinth as the same as the one to whom, long ago on the mountain, he had handed over, a child. The vital question is now: who did he get the child from? He comes out with it at last. He had him from the Queen, with orders to kill him. There was a prophecy, that he would kill his father. But he had pitied him and given him to the man from Corinth. So there is now no longer any doubt.

As the drama continues, the horror mounts; yet also the grandeur. Oedipus, no other, can carry it, and his stature grows as he takes on what is, as we have said so often now, his own name and nature, *to know*. What we have in Sophocles' Oedipus is a Christ-figure, despised and rejected by the tribe but also its longed for healer, for there is no healing except in consciousness. Jung spoke of that, late in his own life, after a near-death experience from which he had not wished to return. Only then, he said, did he recognise "how important it is to affirm one's own destiny... an affirmation of things as they are, an unconditional Yes to that which is—without subjective protests... an acceptance of my own nature, as I happen to be." Oedipus does this.

He does not do it all at once. He can accept that he might be slave-born, or born of a nymph and Pan himself; but the final revelation, that he bred children from his own mother, is too much for him:

*Dark. horror of darkness,  
my darkness, drowning, swirling around me  
crashing, wave on wave, unspeakable, irresistible,  
head-wind, fatal harbour! Oh, again,  
the misery all at once, over and over,  
the stabbing daggers, stab of memory  
raking me insane.(7)*

It is the experience of terror when the ego touches the utter strangeness at the root of nature, the utter incommensurability of the Unconscious. The children are healthy, his wife loves him, he has ruled well. Nature can tolerate, as we know, a good deal of incest. The gene-pool is sufficient, and was so in this case. We can even think of Myrrha's plight, in the tale from Ovid, The heifer can have her father mount her. Goats mate with the she-goats they have sired. Happy creatures, she sighs, that are permitted such conduct! Morally speaking, he was innocent for he did it unconsciously, did everything he could to avoid it. And on the psychic level, the daughter who is also your sister, the son who is also your brother, the father whom you kill, are truths beautiful rather than otherwise. The father and son "tangled all together" is the actual situation, whether they are aware of it or not. But these are rationalisations. The terror is in touching those vast energies of the psyche which go so far beyond them.

Dreams are horror-laden when the ego is not ready for them. In the nightmares of childhood, monsters chase the child but when the ego grows strong enough, they melt away. It is the child's own nature that pursues him. Oedipus is pursued by his destiny to know. But when he does, it is too much, he cannot bear it.

*All come true, he says, all come to light.  
Oh light, now let me look my last on you*

He is determined to leave the world of the light and go into the darkness, in which these things may show their own rationality. He rushes off stage to the marriage chamber where, above the bed, swings the body of Jocasta—from which, as we hear from a terrified servant, Oedipus takes



*Oedipus (Franco Citti): still from Pasolini's film, Oedipus Rex*

golden pins and plunges them again and again into his eyes. Maybe in the darkness he will learn what he cannot learn by day.

The second last image of the play is the blind and bloodied king standing on the steps of the palace as he had stood in the days of his glory. The last of all is Oedipus with his two young daughters to whom he is saying farewell, before being pushed out of the gates of Thebes for ever.

The common choice for those who stumble on a truth that is too much for them is between madness and suicide. Oedipus chooses neither, goes consciously into that dark world, blinds himself, moves into another way of seeing, that of Tiresias in whose realm that incest takes place in which what is consciously willed and what happens are joined in a deeper intentionality. They met before in Jocasta's proof that oracles are nonsense, which showed him that they were not nonsense at all, in Laius's precautions against being killed by his son which brings it about, in Oedipus's decision not to see his father, which takes him to exactly the place where he meets him. Such moments are *themselves the incest* with which this play is concerned. In them, human intent merges with the dark pattern of the Mothers, and becomes one. Such considerations reverse even our sense of time. Like Christ in the Christian myth, Oedipus takes the cup that the angel offers. For him there is no way of knowing.

If it be the nature of man to know, then Oedipus is Everyman and so is Sophocles. Opposite both stands the Sphinx, that nature which he must know—whose riddle is all there is *for* him to know. His destiny is shot through with nature in every possible guise. She is the mother who bears him and gives him up to be killed, the mother who is given him and takes him as her own, the slave-woman who suckles him, the wife who marries him but is also that same mother, the daughters who love him and will, as we will see, lead him by the hand in his blindness. And she is the Sphinx who is all of them together, who asks him the dread question. And at the end of his life she is the dread goddesses to whom he returns in the sacred wood at Colonus.

Those whose nature it is to know are already scapegoats for the rest of society, for the world does not want to know. In Hebrew myth, a goat was loaded with the sins of the people (all those accommodations with nature which they make every day) and then either stoned to death or driven out into the desert to wander. By that act the people felt purified. What had really happened was that any small beginning of consciousness had been successfully voided.

# OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

Oedipus wandered the stony roads of Greece, and people gave him food, for pity, but drove him on for fear of the curse that was on him. His sons wanted no contact with him. They were jockeying for the throne of Thebes, and contact with a cursed man would spoil their chances. His daughters went out to find him. Antigone stayed with him and acted as his caretaker and his eyes. Ismene went back to the city, but came to find them whenever there was news to tell. Slowly his fame began to spread as a man who had suffered extraordinary misfortune through no fault of his own and was not only cursed but sacred.

At this point Sophocles' last play starts. The scene is the grove of the Furies at Colonus. Athens can be seen in the distance. On stage are various rocky outcrops, and at the centre a stone altar. From the left a broken, blind old man shuffles painfully on stage, led by a young woman. They sit down in the shade.

The theme of acceptance comes in Oedipus's first words. It is, he says, "the great lesson suffering teaches." It is, in its deep, spiritual sense, home, and they have come home. "This," says Antigone, "is holy ground."

*You can sense it clearly. Why, it's bursting  
With laurel, olives, grapes, and deep in its heart,  
Listen... nightingales, the rustle of wings —  
They're breaking into song.(8)*

*Oedipus the King* ends with the blind king thrust out of the city. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, he arrives at a green place, with bird-song and damp earth, which is also the entrance to the underworld,

*the brazen threshold of the earth,  
the hill of Demeter, the steep descent,  
the threshold rooted deep in the earth  
by the great brazen steps.(9)*

Psychologically, it is the place in which he committed both murder and incest, the same narrow place where three roads meet, with the oaks crowding in—but it is now transformed, become holy ground.

Today Colonus is a dusty bus-terminal. All the buses in Athens go there in the evening to sleep. But then it was a sacred grove. We meet that sacredness in any natural, untouched piece of woodland, in any part of the world. In all the changes of vegetation the same rich note sounds, and we don't know whether it comes from us or from the place itself, or from both together, inner psyche and outer responding like two birds calling. Throughout the myth of Oedipus the note sounds, at once personal and impersonal; but what earlier shrieks of the great crime speaks here of the last resting place.

Soon a local man appears. He tells them they must move on, for this is sacred ground, forbidden, untouchable. "Sacred to what gods?" asks Oedipus, and the man replies,

*The ones that watch the world, the Kindly Ones,  
The Eumenides — that's what people call them here.  
In other places other names are proper.(10)*

And at once he knows that he must not move on, must not move on ever, for this is his promised resting place.

*When the god cried out those life-long prophecies of doom  
He spoke of this as well, my promised rest.  
After hard years weathered  
I will reach my goal, he said, my haven  
Where I find the ground of the Awesome Goddesses  
And make their home my home...  
And now I know it, now some omen comes from you, my queens,  
Some bird on the wing that fills my heart with faith  
Has led my slow steps home to your green grove.(11)*

This is his end, on the very hearth of the Terrible Mothers, the daughters born of primeval darkness, who are now terrible no longer. So when the villagers try to move him on, he moves a short distance, and asks that the king be told of his presence. The King is Theseus, of nearby Athens. The people are sure that he will come, when he hears that the famous man of sorrows has arrived in his kingdom; they leave him in peace and settle down to wait.

While they wait, Ismene arrives. She has terrible news. One brother has driven out the other, and there is war in Thebes. But there is another piece of news as well. The oracle has changed its message on Oedipus. It now says that he is no longer a curse but a blessing; so each side wants to get him. It is like those mediaeval cities that a thousand years later will fight over the relics of a saint. Oedipus knows this, and knows that it is those, namely his sons, who have most distanced themselves from his fate, who will now try to benefit from it.



Oedipus at Colonus, by Jean-Antoine-Théodore Giroust, 1788

Then Theseus arrives. He greets the old man gravely, and promises his protection, and that no-one shall force him away from Colonus. Then he returns to the city, and emissaries start to arrive from the warring sides. First comes Creon. When Oedipus refuses to go with him, he tries to force him—then seizes both girls and makes off with them, but does not get far for Theseus's men arrive in time and bring them back. Then comes Polynices, the elder son, exiled from Thebes and now returning with allies from Argos, to sack the place. He begs his father to go with him.

Oedipus now goes into Fury mode; it is as if he becomes the Terrible Sisters, the inexorable justice not of any king but of nature herself, which returns the poisoned chalice to whoever poisoned it. He curses his son because he had no care for him, and has been caught instead in the self-destructive whirlwinds of power. And Polynices knows the curse is just and inevitable but cannot change: he is gone in too far. Outwardly, rationally, he could call off the war, but inwardly he cannot do it, cannot tell his soldiers that their cause is doomed and that they should go home. He has lost his freedom. Antigone begs him to call it off; but “a good leader,” he replies, “repeats the good news, keeps the worst to himself.” Knowingly, he returns to his death, and that of so many others, asking only that she will do her duty as a sister, and bury him.



*Oedipus Cursing his Son, Polynices, by Henry Fuseli, 1786*

Then a peal of thunder is heard, and Oedipus knows that the time has come. In these closing passages of the play, as well as the astonishing numinosity of the death, there is much stress on kindness:

*Stop, my children, says Theseus, to the sobbing girls. Weep no more. Here where the dark forces store up kindness both for living and the dead there is no room for grieving—it might bring down the anger of the gods.(12)*

Oedipus has passed beyond the world of separation, into the ultimate unity which was also the beginning—and he has done it in consciousness. In the great ending there are the two males, both kings, and the two females, Antigone and Ismene, who perform their female priestly duties, wash him in water, clothe him in white linen and do the other rites of burial. As they finish (yet still the little family clings together), the thunder comes again and a great voice is heard, calling:

*"Oedipus, when are you coming,  
we wait too long, we must move on, move on!"*

It is Zeus himself calling. Antigone and Ismene hide their eyes, and Oedipus, accompanied part of the way by Theseus, the only other human being allowed to witness this end, since he is a king and himself, by that office, a priest, mediating between the realms, walks into the darkest part of the wood, and disappears. It is the place of birth, the dread threshold, which a man crosses at his birth and to which he returns at death; the place of change and transformation, where he meets his father and by that meeting kills him, the place of the birth of time itself.

Thomas Carlyle, in his first of two lectures *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*, says:

*"The essence of our being, the essence in us which calls itself "I" – ah, what words have we for such things? – is breath of Heaven. The Highest Being reveals himself in man. This body, these faculties, this life of ours, is it not all as a vesture for the unnamed?"*

What does the Oedipus myth look like in real life? A father does not literally drive a nail through his son's ankles, but he can lame him by making him feel unloved, inadequate and foolish. The reason is always that the father cannot stand to be displaced, cannot grow old, cannot stand the great showing forth of time. For such a man, his wife is always his mother, and his son is always the rival. From the moment he comes out of the womb, the boy is subject to persecution by a giant figure who turns out to be his own father. He may well be driven inwards by it, as the only place to escape to—driven into the great reaches of the imagination. There he will find everything of which he is deprived in the outer world, find it in an eternal form. Thus the father's weakness is used by nature to make consciousness in the son. But what is fulfilled creatively in the son, is suffered passively by the father, for he is stuck in immaturity and seethes with the anger of the unfulfilled and the blocked. In such a man, disease of some sort or another will break out. The Sphinx waits for him, as vultures wait for what needs to return into the dark.

## NOTES

1. C.G.Jung, *Visions Seminar*, Spring Publications, Zurich 1976, vol. 1, p 70.
2. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, London, Cape, 1970, p35ff.
3. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, revised edition 1931, tr. Brill.
4. Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, tr. Robert Fagles, Introduction to Oedipus the King.
5. "...never put hand to sword" *Ibid.* line 1055.
6. "...and learn my birth" *Ibid.* line
7. "...raking me insane." *Ibid.* line 1450.
8. "...They're breaking into song." *Oedipus at Colonus*, line 15
9. "...by the great brazen steps." *Ibid.* line 1800.
10. "...In other places other names are proper" *Ibid.* line 50.
11. "...to your green grove." *Ibid.* line 118.
12. "...the anger of the gods." *Ibid.* line 1974.

[Publishers, dates, line numbers, etc. needed for Notes (3) – (8);  
Reference to Freud quote, p2  
reference to Mircea Eliade quote p5  
Jung quote, p11  
Thomas Carlyle, p17]