

*Tiresias and  
the Critic*

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An American author has defined our age as an age of criticism. To many of us, here, it looks more and more like the age of the symposium. And I refer to all those who have dedicated their talent, time, and resources to the success of this meeting. First, I want to thank the Ford Foundation and its representative among us, Dr. Sigmund Koch, whose generosity and understanding are beyond praise. I want to thank Dr. Eisenhower, who has encouraged and aided this enterprise in many ways. I also thank Dr. Charles Singleton, the Director of the Humanities Center, without whose sympathy and help nothing would have been possible. I thank the staff of this university and all our friends on the campus, notably in the natural and biological sciences. I thank all those who interrupted their work to join us here today. And I thank, of course, all members of our *Section on Language, Culture, and Literature* which is publicly born with this event and which will prosper, we hope, in the future. Of all those who helped, I will name only Eugenio Donato and Richard Macksey, the Chairman of the Section and the Chairman of this first meeting. Donato and Macksey are both responsible for much of the form and substance of what we are doing here. During the last two months, Richard Macksey has worked tirelessly, almost alone at times, in the face of many difficulties.

As I survey this room, I feel awed at the thought that I contributed, however modestly, to the presence here of such a distinguished and numerous company, from many a distant shore, intellectual as well as geographical. I am comforted, somewhat, by the thought that very few groups such

as this ever had so many good and even urgent reasons to assemble as we have today.

Quite a few disciplines are represented here. Our philosophical backgrounds are different; so are the methodologies in which we trust. We do not speak the same languages or, worse still, we use the same words but they do not mean the same things to all of us. Yet, we all have one thing in common. We do not like the distance between us, we do not like the indifference; we do not like the division of what we still have to call Knowledge, in the singular form, as if it were one.

As we all know, in a limited number of areas and of institutions, notably at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris, this centrifugal tendency appears interrupted and even reversed. *Les Sciences de l'Homme*, the Sciences of Man, is the current label for the new area of convergence, or at least of dialogue. The *Sciences de l'Homme* cut across what we still generally call the Humanities and the Social Sciences. The very idea of *Sciences de l'Homme* is a direct challenge to this distinction. In order to engage in a fruitful dialogue we must grasp some of the basic assumptions in which the present dichotomies are rooted. As long as we talk in terms of "bridging the gap" between the so-called two cultures, we remain the prisoners of this duality. From the perspective of the *Sciences de l'Homme*, there is no gap to bridge. The sciences of man have altered, for the first time perhaps, a distinction between subject and object which we have inherited from the nineteenth century.

In the formulation of this important methodological and philosophical change abstractions should be avoided, because abstractions mean nothing, except to those who are already convinced. I will try to suggest this change, in a very tentative and imperfect fashion to be sure, through metaphor and myth.

If we believe, contrary to the perspective I will attempt to define, that the observer poses no more of a problem in human phenomena than he does, or rather than he formerly did, in the natural sciences, we refuse to descend, whether we know it or not, from an imaginary pedestal, high above humanity, from which all truth is deployed at our feet, transparent and readily available, free from the limitations of time and space. To this almost invincible (because invisible) illusion, I find a counterpart, as I do to almost every great human situation, in the Oedipus myth and, more specifically, in the beginning of Sophocles' tragedy.

King Oedipus thinks of himself as a man unattached to the city over which he reigns, a perfect stranger to this obscure past which he plans

to investigate. Oedipus, the first Western hero of Knowledge, the researcher par excellence, neglects none of the formalities and precautions which a religious or scientific ritual demand. What more could be asked of him?

If, not unlike Tiresias, we suggest to our investigator that his relationship to the object of his investigation is a little more intricate, perhaps, and a little less distant than he thinks, Oedipus, I am afraid, will not understand this advice. A very conscientious scientist, he will question our own dedication to knowledge. He will read in us a preference for the ethical and the metaphysical over the intellectual. He will suspect a propensity to the irrational and a secret desire to reintroduce what he calls the "subjective element" into the deadly seriousness of his objectivity. And yet, what is urged on him is not a return to a Self whose abstraction and vacuity are predetermined by his own oversimplified definition of objectivity. What is urged on him is not old-fashioned introspection or that verbal debauchery sometimes called existential autoanalysis. Don't we all know that Oedipus is an avid practitioner of introspection and that he receives no light from it? What Oedipus needs is to do away with both his *Self* and his *Other*—equally imaginary, at least in part—through an abandonment of their sterilizing interplay in the constantly reforming structure of his relationships: first to Laios, then to Creon, then to Tiresias himself.

If we try to attract Oedipus's attention to the ambiguous signs from which this structure may finally reveal its outline, he will certainly accuse us of a morbid preference for the vague and the esoteric over our long cherished clear and distinct ideas. He will accuse us of neglecting the *facts* patiently gathered by him in the course of his investigation, unaware that these facts are rendered, if not totally useless, at least not immediately useful, by his false assumption of absolute autonomy, an assumption which predetermines the arrangement, the *découpage* of all possible reality.

The interpretation which Tiresias gives of Oedipus is really a response to the interpretation first given of Tiresias by Oedipus himself. In order to reply to Oedipus in kind, Tiresias cannot simply say: "You are such and such." Oedipus has already located that same being outside of himself, thereby implying that it is not his own. Tiresias must point out the opposition between the real being of Oedipus and Oedipus's opinion of himself. Oedipus, to Tiresias, is a man who, at all times, is what he thinks he is not and is not what he thinks he is. Tiresias must do more than reveal this contradiction; he must put it at the center of his interpretation. In order to be effective he must make it

the core of his reply to his adversary. The words of Oedipus are far from forgotten, therefore; they are rearranged into a new structure within which they mean, ultimately, the very reverse of what Oedipus intended. Knowledge of man—knowledge of other men, that is—has become demystification or, should we say, demythification. Let us note, at this point, that the Oedipus myth is the only one which suggests—mythically perhaps, but still indisputably—its own destruction as myth.

I see Tiresias as a striking symbol of the changes which have occurred in our disciplines over the last decades, an allegory of the types of interpretation which will be under scrutiny at this symposium, a cipher more enigmatic, perhaps, and less one-sided than it appears at the present.

The similarity is indeed remarkable between the approach of Tiresias and these modern disciplines, notably psychoanalysis and sociology, which maintain that language signifies beyond and against the explicit and even implicit intentions of the speaker. At the other end of the epistemological ladder, the neo-Positivists refuse to enter into the linguistic maze which the endless debate between Oedipus and Tiresias is about to create. We can well understand their misgivings even if we deplore their defection.

Interpretation in depth will lead the sociologists to socioeconomic causes and it will lead the psychoanalyst to sexual causes, but this difference looks less significant, in the light of contemporary research, than the identical structure of interpretation. This structure of interpretation is that of the *Sciences de l'Homme* and it was very well defined by Michel Foucault in *Les Mots et les Choses*. When I point to Tiresias as a symbol of this approach I am fully aware that the implications are quite different from anything Michel Foucault had intended.

The *Sciences de l'Homme* are the redoubling of interpretation upon itself. They necessarily include in their significant structures and they contradict, since they reinterpret it, a first and more spontaneous interpretation more closely related to the original phenomenon.

Thus, Claude Lévi-Strauss tells us that the real structure of a cultural phenomenon cannot coincide with the spontaneous account given by the subjects themselves. Thus, the application of structural linguistics to phenomena which are extra-linguistic, at least in the narrow sense, necessarily empties these of their original value, destroying the grip on being itself which they appeared to have within their original context. Thus, we have a literary criticism, nowadays, which seeks to

define not the unity of the work and the organization consciously designed by the author, or at least acceptable to him, but a more comprehensive structure in which the intentions of this author and the generally accepted interpretation of his audiences are viewed not as absolute yardsticks or impassable barriers beyond which the interpreter should not go, but as no more than elements in a total picture, and these elements can always be reinterpreted according to the requirements of the totalization.

At this point, the Humanists are concerned. They have been concerned, perhaps, for quite a while. Do not these interpretations destroy whatever faith we still have in the great creations of our Humanistic past? Do they not hasten the advent of a nihilism which it is our duty to fight? Before answering this question we must be sure we are not mistaking words for realities. The pieties of commencement speeches should not delude us into thinking that nihilism is something we are free to do battle with because it affects other people only. Thus, thinking himself free of the ills that befall this city, Oedipus wants freely to commit himself, and he offers his help to the plague-ridden fellows about him; but Oedipus will soon be disabused. The only way, perhaps, to stop the progress of nihilism is to recognize its presence and its significance within us. If we fear that the great works of Western civilization are threatened as they are submitted to a more searching and ruthless method of analysis, we unwittingly reveal the depth of our nihilism.

This fear—we are now ready to see it—is unfounded. If one point should emerge from the preceding and very fumbling remarks, this point is really not mine: it belongs to the myth and it belongs to Sophocles. I do not know whether Humanism is represented in the myth, I do not know whether Humanism is represented in Sophocles, but I sense the presence, here, of something truly essential to the existence and to the maintenance of Western civilization. As I try to manipulate my Oedipus metaphor and as it manipulates me, I realize how inadequate I am to the task of suggesting the infinite perspective which it opens to us. Far from undermining the relevance of the myth—and of Greek tragedy, as Freud himself, with all his genius, still unfortunately did—by calling it a dream (and Freud saw infinitely more in Oedipus than all Rationalists combined, beginning with Aristotle), the present orientation of research confirms the power of myth and the relevance of early Greek thought to our own experience. We can begin to unveil in the myth more than a coherent structure, a real matrix of diachronically ordered structures whose suggestiveness as

metaphors of our individual and collective predicament—or should I say as *structural models*?—appears almost unlimited.

I am personally convinced that truly great works of art, literature, and thought stem, like Oedipus's own reinterpretation of the past, from a genius's ability to undertake and carry out a radically destructive reinterpretation of his former intellectual and spiritual structures. Unlike lesser works, perhaps, these masterpieces will pass the test of the most radical structural interpretation because they partake of the same essence, to a higher degree, no doubt, than our most searching analyses.

If the myth, and Sophocles, can accompany and illustrate the present changes in modes of interpretation; if the myth still understands us as well and better than even Freud understood it; we have not deviated from the main road of Western thought, we have only moved ahead an inch or two. Apollo's oracle still controls our destiny. The real dangers of the present lie elsewhere and it is the myth, once more, which should be consulted to ascertain their nature.

Our Tiresias symbol seems to settle once and for all the question of the truth. Truth is on the side of Tiresias and of that interpretation in depth which turns the tables on a former interpreter. Are we so sure that this is the end of the road? The truth of Tiresias, in Oedipus, remains a stillborn child, a dead letter which cannot get through to the hero or to anyone else. The blind prophet may well take such pride in having uncovered the illusions of his fellowmen, the demystifier may be so satisfied with his demystification that he, himself, may fall, ultimately, into an illusion almost identical to that of his adversary. At this point, everything Oedipus says of Tiresias will become as true as Tiresias's interpretation of Oedipus. Reciprocity is perfect; reciprocity, in the myth, is always perfect. Tiresias, losing sight of the fact that no God, really, speaks through him; forgetting that his truth, partial and limited, bears the imprint of its true origin which is the heated debates and battles of men as well as the imbrication of converging desires; Tiresias will think he incarnates the truth and he will abandon himself to oracular vaticinations. He, too, will believe that all riddles are solved, that all pitfalls are in the past. That is why Tiresias, too, can be obtuse. Having read the signs of others, at least up to a point, he neglects his own, which are beckoning him, more urgently, more desperately than ever.

This is the failure of Tiresias and it might be our own. It is this failure which drags Tiresias into a painful, sterile, interminable debate with Oedipus. This, of course, should not be a model for us in the discussions to come. Perhaps it is not fitting even to mention such a

deplorable precedent. But, in matters intellectual as well as in matters financial, danger and profit always run together. Whenever a real profit is in sight, and it is in sight, we hope, in the days ahead, there is a risk to be run. We will run this risk, in order to reach the true intellectual challenge which is our common joy.