AWARENESS OF THE TRAGIC AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE PSYCHE:
AN ESSAY

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Abstract: The object of this work is to investigate possible connections between the classical Greek tragic hero and those undergoing psychoanalytic investigation, focusing on the question of achieving awareness of oneself. Initially, some aspects of psychoanalytic theory, as developed by Sigmund Freud, are considered, proceeding then to a characterisation of those aspects of the tragedy and the tragic figure that are relevant to the purposes of this study. The character Oedipus, in Sophocles’ plays *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, is used as a model in this discussion and I also point out the significance of such a model in the origins of psychoanalysis. Finally, I develop a synthesis based on the complex relationship between tragedy and psychoanalysis, highlighting the value of the tragic elements for the apprehension of the human psyche.

Key Words: Psychoanalysis; myth, Greek tragedy, Oedipus, consciousness.

The use of myths as models to understand the functioning of the mind is part of the development of psychoanalysis. The fantastical character of mythological narratives contains the reality of the human psyche, object *par excellence* of the psychoanalytic investigation. In the centre is Oedipus, especially because of the meaning of the complex that takes his name. The Oedipus complex goes beyond strictly sexual aspects and expands to the knowledge of one’s internal reality.

The birth of tragedy added to the myth, not only by the dramatisation of the narrative but also because of the concept of man as a being conscious of responsibility for his own choices. In this work I use the tragedies *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus* as inspiration to reflect on the expansion of one’s consciousness. The development of this character, as presented by Sophocles, provides a representation of the investigative process proposed by psychoanalysis.

Freud and the investigation of the psyche

The passage from the 19th to the 20th century witnessed the discovery of psychological man. Until then, he could be found in literary and artistic works as well as in everyday life, but had never been a subject for observation and systematic studies that would define him by...
his specific characteristics. Schorske (1961), a culture historian, when analysing that decisive period, comments that rational man had to give way to a richer creature. This would be a more dangerous and inconstant one, a creature of feelings and instincts, psychological man, who, since early 20th-century has gained an omnipresent status.

Psychological Man is, at the same time, an object to be identified and investigated. Sigmund Freud, curious and insistent, learned through his first patients and discovered psychoanalysis. As a method of observation and investigation that opens up its own domain, psychoanalysis has become richer. It is nowadays shaping into a respectable theoretical corpus, consistent though incomplete, due to the fluidity of its object as well as to the limitations of the observer.

In 1900, when publishing *The Interpretation of Dreams*, a work he treasured until the end of his life, Freud presented ideas on the psyche that have influenced human thought to such an extent – by acceptance or by rejection – that things have never again been the same. Essentially, he affirmed the precedence of the unconscious in mental functioning. His purpose was not to dwell upon the dreams he studied, but rather to make evident how little man dominates. Yet, he is largely dominated by inner forces unknown to him which determine his way of being and functioning. The unconscious is a concept that has evolved from being a noun to a more functional adjective (Freud, 1923). This displaces the rational side of man to a secondary position and dismantles the belief in power and control of the mind that had hitherto been accepted.

The discovery of psychoanalysis had its moments of insight and evolution. Freud began with his practice and seems to have always focused on the plasticity of the mind, the surprises always ready to unfold under the psychoanalyst’s eyes. His ideas have expanded and, over time, have partially changed. Nevertheless, the initial premise of the division of the psyche into what is conscious and what is unconscious remains essential in psychoanalysis, defining psychological man, or better, psychoanalytic man, as a being who lives in conflict.

Indeed, *man* is a being in conflict with himself and with the world! It is unavoidable. In his early works, Freud already stressed this aspect but he only begins to address these implications in depth and with some bitterness in 1929 in his perhaps more widely read work *Civilisation and its Discontents*. However, frequently, and until the end, he was aware of how fleeting and changeable the psychoanalytic object is.

Freud had many interlocutors in those early, somewhat heroic and somewhat anarchic times, when the basis of what would become the most revolutionary theory about the psyche
in the 20th century was still being defined. With most of these, Freud developed complex and fruitful relationships - albeit passionate and ambivalent - frequently with disastrous, bitter and melancholic ends, resulting in sorrow and resentment on both sides. In his own way, each interlocutor participated in the dawning and flourishing of his ideas either through encouragement or support, through challenge or even by open opposition and rupture. Gay (1988) draws a detailed portrait of these relationships, essentially based upon the correspondence between Freud and his contemporaries. One of the aspects that remains clear is that Freud always stressed his own thoughts and was a strong defender of the conclusions drawn from his practice. At the same time, he valued and appreciated - and often relied on - an exchange of theories and ideas with collaborators. Furthermore, he was a cultured man and his clinical observations led him to establish links to other sources, both poetical and literary. That which would become essential was the myth of Oedipus: the tragedy *Oedipus Rex* written by Sophocles in Greece in the 5th century BC. This would bring about the formation of the key complex named after the tragic character.

The Oedipus complex (Freud, 1910) centres around a configuration of human relationship based upon the construction of the psyche that of necessity includes a triangulation, immediately recognised in the relationship mother-father-son. This, according to Freud (1905), begins between three and five years of age. The child experiences strong feelings of love and desire to possess the parent of the opposite gender and hatred and rivalry towards the parent of the same gender. Repression of the actions that such feelings might unleash takes place due to feelings of guilt and the need for the affection of both parents. The relationship becomes an explosive mix of violent and contradictory emotions that are never completely resolved. Depending on the characteristics of the child’s psyche and the parents’ degree of acceptance of the situation, it evolves satisfactorily and the feeling of reality and renouncement of childish desires will eventually prevail. During this entire process, the child gradually grows apart from the parents, shaping its own identity and developing complex relationships with the environment. It builds its own individuality and discovers its possibilities and limits. It socialises, creating and perpetuating the culture by pointing its talents towards behaviour that favours and contributes to its individual growth and that of the group.

When conceiving Oedipus’, Freud did not make a ‘choice’ in the conscious meaning of the word, that is to say he did not *choose* the myth of Oedipus. Freud had a powerful insight perceiving what he had never previously realised. Perhaps he had not initially noticed
the importance and scope of such a formulation. As Gay (1988) mentions, his ideas germinated slowly and sometimes promises made for the next summer took years to be fulfilled. Although his contemporaries and more recent psychoanalysts have excessively emphasised the sexual content of this concept, there is much more than sexuality at play. The initial impact of psychoanalysis with its disturbing assertions contributed to the poor understanding of Oedipus. Due to distortions and misuse it became vulgarised, transformed into irony and a source of peril. However it is a proposal fraught with contents related to the core of human existence that has progressed and continues to expand.

Perhaps Freud’s insight, for which he is indebted to Sophocles’ intuition, has become a source of nuisance. However, it continues to stimulate new approaches and provides new associations. The analyst uses the method of investigation of psychical functioning based upon observation. He becomes disciplined to keep an open mind for free association and for the unencumbered transit of intuition and sensitivity. He pays fluctuating attention to the transference phenomena. Work in analysis connects existing theory with the psychical reality of both the analyst and the analysand, leaving the way open for new formulations.

Some concepts and theories have shown themselves to be extremely useful and are unquestionably needed by the psychoanalyst to provide a more solid support for his work, in addition to his subjective and most decisive experience. Theories serve to establish a common denominator for analysts to communicate with one another and also with professionals from other areas. Freud began by identifying those elements which provide a solid, lasting basis. Other analysts expanded Freud’s contributions by adding new elements, gradually drafting a deeper framework of the psyche.

Psychoanalysis aims to be an investigative method that strongly relies on intuition, whose purpose is to identify, examine, nominate and describe in appropriate conditions the elements that disclose an individual’s inner dynamics. It proposes that he frees himself from unending repetitive cycles of passed experiences that hinder him from properly fulfilling his potential.

In this broad field one works with trifles. One works with the unraveling of childish fixations into complex ways of functioning, with psychical paths organised to assuage those anguishes, which are learned very early in life. Since they were efficient at the time, they continue to be used in an effort to achieve the same effect. As life and reality relentlessly present new problems, this tenacity becomes unsatisfactory and insufficient. The long process of becoming aware of opening the way to the new and to advance from a childish state to
Adulthood is a painful, oscillating, non-linear and slow moving experience, to be reinforced at every moment. What is experienced as real on the unconscious level may be known and made conscious, allowing the individual to free himself from the power of his own fantasies. He will create new mental habits and new patterns of relationships with himself and with the other. This is the task Freud started and did not consider ended. Analysts after him fine-tuned his observations and contributed to identifying subtle and sophisticated psychical processes acting in an area that psychoanalysis proposes to map.

The map of a region is obviously smaller than the region itself. A cartographic map signals boundaries between places, geographical forms, varying vegetation, barren and inhabited sites, boundaries between land and water, but remains a projection of features. Although diminished, the map is an excellent tool of orientation. That is why everything that is beyond one's immediate sight will be known, as the map specifies the nature of these features. For this reason, everything that lies beyond immediate sight must be considered, as such an area could be the one that is of greatest significance. It is important to note that, at least at the outset, one deals with the map and not with the region it represents. Its making relies on direct contact with the region. To draw a map one must have gone to the field, observed nature, checked what is assumed and planned the map. It becomes a useful representation to help the traveller where he has never set foot before.

In the domain of psychical phenomena, drawing a map leads to an unavoidable diminishment of the varying vastness that is the mind. We seize effluxes that suggest the unknown. Any mapping of the psyche intuitively considers what lies beneath the sensorial surface and necessarily entails clinical observation.

According to the beautiful finite-infinite model proposed by Bion (1965), the content of the conscious is inserted into the finite and the unconscious into the infinite. In a more precise form, he writes: ‘As my model for forms of relatedness operative in an infinite universe, I use forms of relatedness operative in a finite universe of discourse and its approximate realisation’ (pp. 63-4). Therefore this is an imperfect model, albeit a suggestive one. What is known of the mind is based upon the unknown. The infinite of the unknown acts as a magnet, attracting and displacing man from his place, which is limited by the already known. This stimulates a process of evolution and ongoing discoveries.

By his own natural limitation, man only has real access to the world of finite truths. The analyst is in charge of operating in the finite, keeping in mind that he is always facing an infinite universe. To date, there is no other way of operating; we only work in the finite
domain. The infinite is the one that is intuited. Human language is far too limited to express it in its entirety. The analyst faces a highly complex problem. In the first place because of the fluidity and fleetingness of its object; in the second, due to the delicacy and explosiveness of the psychological fabric; thirdly because of the unexpectedness and surprise of the plot, and fourthly, because of the responsibility demanded.

By making use of myth, as depicted in Sophocles’ tragedy, Freud was able to point out more clearly a gamut of those human relationships, crucial in the constitution of the psyche, whose dynamics he observed in his practice. Freud certainly heard whispers and outcries in a way no one had heard before.

The tragedy of Oedipus addresses an archaic myth that survived in the oral tradition over hundreds of years. We can surmise that it expresses human truths with which man from any time can identify. The principles are soundly established. Despite the many restrictions and criticism, it can be confidently stated that Freud used the myth of Oedipus and the tragedy of Sophocles in a manner that helped psychoanalysis more than it harmed the myth.

The tragedy and the tragic

A blossoming of tragedy took place in Athens in the 5th century B.C. when major changes were taking place in the city. (Kitto 1951). Athens emerged as a major power after playing a decisive role in fighting off the invasions of the Persians. The Athenians' self-esteem had perhaps never been so high. Clysthens was completing Solon’s reforms, by instituting democracy, which reached its summit during the ruling of Pericles. The citizen performed public services and held all the civil and political rights. Foreigners were welcomed and contributed to the economic prosperity of the polis. Even the numerous slaves could not be killed by their masters and had the right to denounce them for bad treatment. It is said that aristocrats protested that at a first glance, a slave could not be distinguished from a free man (Jardé 1977). Furthermore, the city became a reference for its beautiful monuments made by some of the greatest bronze and marble artists. The Athenian citizen felt, and lived, as a free being. The polis was responsible for promoting his physical and spiritual development (Jaeger, 1986). This was a totally different standpoint from that found in other contemporary imperial civilisations, where the people existed as a means of sustaining the ruling dynasties, i.e., they lived in the moral condition of slaves.

Tragedy appears in a given historical, cultural and mental context that was politically fostered by Pisistratus, ruler of Athens from 546 to 527. He encouraged trade and industry,
protected literature and embellished the city (Jardé 1977). Under his mild, benevolent and fruitful government, the political, economic and intellectual grandeur of Athens began and included tragedies performed in contests at the yearly Athenian feasts to honour the god Dionysius (Snell, 1960). At such major feasts, the *dithyramb choir* sang, exalting Dionysius, god of dissipation, of illusionism and possession. When Thespis – considered the forerunner and possible creator of the tragedy – presented the masked choir singing in dialogue with the Choreutha, the historical career of tragedy was launched. According to Bowra (1933), this presentation of rudimentary drama took place in the spring of 535 B.C., initiating a new way of artistic expression for the Athenians.

The basis of these tragedies was myth and oral tradition. Later, around the 6th century, they were transposed to the written word in the Homeric poems. The few tragedies that have survived represent the final stages of a long process about which little is known and much is surmised.

The tragedies evolved in a creative process that lasted throughout the 5th century and was never again repeated. This coincided with other remarkable Greek artistic creations together with the long wars that led to the downfall of the Athenian city and the end of Greek splendour. By the end of the century, with Athens reduced in stature, the tragic poet became muted but his heritage remained.

Myths were common knowledge amongst people at that time and were integral part of Greek imagery, familiar to all social classes. (Bowra 1957). However, tragedy is both a transformation of myth and a result of the genius of the great poets. Of some of these outstanding individuals, only the name and fragments of their plays are known. However, a few of the many works written by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were preserved and luckily this was a sufficient number to bear witness to the undying value of their work. Despite the individuality of each poet, there is an overarching unity between them with regard to their central concerns: human actions, misjudgments and their bleak consequences.

What is so innovative in tragedy that is of interest to our purpose? From the outset, tragedy concerned itself with the expression of a new means of conceptualising mankind. Human action is explicitly conceived as the outcome of an inner process, of a subjective choice. There emerges a man aware of himself and of the fact that he is responsible for the consequences of his choices. Of note here is the discovery of his mistakes, of equivocal actions, of unforeseeable and uncontrolled shadows that obscure his discernment and therefore lead him to devastating decisions. Truth travels fast and man will find himself
entangled in happenings triggered by his own actions without being aware of it. This tragic awareness is represented by the hero who is caught up in the inescapable predicament which destiny sets for him. He has no choice but to carry on, without ever losing his capacity to make his condition evident. The tragic man accepts the reality imposed on him but is not a submissive being. He accepts his destiny aware that he finds himself in an inescapable situation in which he can both think and feel the tearing apart of his being with no self-commiseration. He is the victim of his misjudgments but does not victimise himself. In this heroic condition, he never disparages himself. Although the gods break him down he does not belittle himself. He does not forsake his dignity and retrieves his human value even if only crumbs are left of him. From these crumbs will re-emerge his greatness which is, for example, revealed when he takes it upon himself to be who he is in an overt way. He stands out from the rest and clearly denotes his character and individuality which he clings to ferociously. They are the only things left of him. Antigone is a powerful example of this as are Ajax and Oedipus. Human drama is experienced by the hero as a fact which he has to deal with and the aftermath is that he suffers to the last breath. The poet’s capacity to describe the tragic events is decisive in attaining catharsis. This purgation of the intense emotions of pity and awe is felt by the spectator, who follows the errors that lead the hero to destruction, without condemning him. Perhaps no other literary form has revealed man to himself in such a poignant, overwhelming, clear and inevitable manner as the Greek tragedy.

In accord with Lesky (1937), we may surmise that tragedy dwells in the field of the psyche. More specifically, it is the psychical action – the quintessence of the reason for the hero’s behaviour and of his discovery of how involved he is in the direction his life is taking since he faces the issue of choice. Although the tragedy is a major component of a particular culture, it embraces all men when it illuminates the confrontation of the tragic hero with his destiny and the influence of his decisions upon himself. Tragedy is apparent where the individual perceives his subjectivity, his psyche itself. He understands that he is solely and exclusively responsible for his entire actions. The tragic hero is presented experiencing and bringing this reality to the level of consciousness.

Tragedy presents human destiny in its plenitude: it does not criticise, does not resolve nor finalise our condition. It discloses the ever-continuing and inconclusive life. At the same time it unmasks the hero destroyed and rescues him from obscurity. His intense pain and loss are highlighted, with an eternal brightness, splendour and spiritual elevation. This effect, ennobling rather than depressing, but rather dignifying, leads the spectator of the drama to a
profound identification with the character. And everything that the hero, who kindles the tragic, does not disengage from his destiny ends by leading him precisely to the encounter with himself. This is man! Oedipus, or rather Sophocles, knew it.

It is stated that Freud is the father of psychoanalysis. But a father does not generate life by himself, a mother is needed. Together with the interlocutors he had during life, Freud developed psychoanalysis with reference to an original maternal body, the Greek tragedy. Intuitively he sought in its core - and in that which is perfect - a single source that enabled him to bring a new vision of man and his psyche to humanity and contemporary culture. Man himself, tragic man. In this sense, the mother of psychoanalysis is the Greek tragedy. Specifically, it is Sophocles' version of the myth of Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex*.

**Sophocles and Oedipus**

Sophocles lived for almost the entire 5th century BC probably from 496 to 406. He was an Athenian citizen, born in Colonus, one of the small towns near Athens with which it maintained a mutual dependence regarding subsistence and safety. A contemporary of Pericles, he saw and experienced the rise and fall of the Athenian empire. From an aristocratic family, he was a pleasant person, liked by all. Lesky (1971) calls attention to the contradictions in Sophocles as a person: ‘This poet who, as no other was aware of the tragic misery of existence and of all the hidden human suffering, followed the path of his external life protected by a serene light and was viewed by his fellow citizens as a happy man’ (pg. 301). Because of his charm and good looks, he was chosen to direct the dance of the youths when Athens celebrated the victory in Salamina in 480. Here Aeschylus fought as a valiant soldier for his country and at the same time Euripides was born. He wrote some one hundred and four plays, of which only seven survived. However, these suffice to clearly establish his style. He received numerous awards, one posthumously, in the theatrical contests during the Athenian feasts. Sophocles wrote *Oedipus Rex* between 430 and 420 (Lesky 1971), probably soon after 429, a year of plague in Athens, which is possibly represented at the beginning of the play. He therefore reached an age of more than 65 years. His last tragedy was Oedipus at Colonus performed posthumously in 401.

The myth of Oedipus was already old, having been quoted in the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey*. Prior to these, it originated from oral tradition. Sophocles utilised it with profound intuition, giving it new life as a tragic form, creating the drama of the central character in his own version, soon before dying. One can deduce that the Oedipus’ figure was on the poet’s
mind during many years of his life. It may be thought that Sophocles owed this last play to himself and one can only guess how much of the poet himself is in Oedipus’ character.

Sophocles does not change the corpus of the myth, but presents Oedipus as the tracking agent of past actions to explain the present – and without knowing that he was thereby writing his future. Throughout the play, he decides to seek the truth, whatever the cost, although it is hidden by appearances and veiled by ambiguous words (Vernant & Vidal-Naquet 1988). This truth accompanies Oedipus until it finally emerges in an irrefutable manner.

When Oedipus Rex begins, all the recounted events in the myth had already occurred. In the beginning Sophocles places the hero at the gates of the palace in a majestic posture listening to the laments of the choir of the old Thebans, suffering from the evil that ravages Thebes and willing to do what is needed to placate divine rage. In view of the reply that Thebes was being punished because it had not discovered the slayer of Laius, Oedipus intends to make an investigation to resolve the crime without having the slightest idea that he is looking for himself.

Throughout the play, all events from the past are recounted in the dialogues, clearly displaying the current state of affairs. Oedipus gradually approaches his own truth. He begins to be aware of himself as imprisoned by inexorable divine powers. Though awed and vacillating, he continues his search. Upheaval in events is a distinctive mark of this play with the hero passing through various and contradictory emotions, in accordance with the developing events. He seems both afraid and courageous, for instance, in the dialogue with the servant, who finally corroborates his growing suspicions. When he insists upon knowing the origin of the child that was saved, the servant says: ‘Oh, I am at the horror, now, to speak!’ (v. 1169) and Oedipus: ‘And I to hear. But I must hear – no less’ (v. 1170). At this crossing point, when the servant withdraws into himself and the horror is felt, Oedipus cries out: ‘Woe! Woe! It is all plain, indeed! Oh Light, this be the last time I shall gaze on thee, who am revealed to have been born of those of whom I ought not – to have wedded whom I ought not – and slain whom I might not slay!’ (v. 1182-1186).

The truth emerges as both undeciphered and decipherable, since it was so near that it was impossible to ignore it. From this moment on, everything will be new, different. The immensity, the infinite, the unknown, the re-encounter with the past are disclosed, governing the encounter of present and future. Blind, Oedipus exiles himself from Thebes and lives for many years wandering shelterless throughout Greece in ignominious disgrace.
Oedipus – or Sophocles – is plunged into the profound abysses of the mind. He is a paradigm of the investigation of the unknown powers that make man act and discover himself. I believe that Sophocles did not intend to conceive his character as moved by unconscious forces and I am far from wishing to make an analysis along these lines or even to agree with it. The tragic action in this play unveils the deepest meanderings of the unconscious that are not merely suggested or insinuated, but openly experienced by the character. Everything is visible, except to the hero himself. When portraying his hero as overtly ruled by his position as king and soothsayer, but being led by parricide and by incest, Sophocles presents a contrast between the apparent and the occult, both equally visible and recognisable. This is a way of seeing that suggests a bifocal vision, which encompasses the figure as well as the background in the same perception. However, it is not at all feasible to interpret Oedipus’ ‘unconscious motivations’ or anything similar. Such an attitude reveals nothing more nothing less than a distortion and a total misunderstanding of the paradigmatic place occupied by his figure.

In this exemplary place, blindness is in the foreground. Oedipus is clairvoyant and blind at the same time and such a paradox follows him constantly. It is through blindness that he leads himself (or is led) to his destiny and not through light. The light of Oedipus’ blindness is the truth he does not see but which he will have to face eventually.

Blindness manifests itself in a decisive way at the fork of the road along which Oedipus was fleeing from Corinth, believing that he was avoiding the prophecy of the oracle. The fork arises from a path that formerly appeared as a single direction but now splits into two. For Oedipus, from the moment he met Laius at the fork of the road, his path changes to one of blind action, and so it will be until the end. The encounter with Laius is a climactic moment. Before this meeting, Oedipus is one man; afterwards, he is another and will be another still. He changes the path from which he had previously been diverted and the path becomes the only real one, which is of blindness leading him to his destiny. His destiny, however, is to realise the predictions and ultimately to find himself in his actions. As with Jocasta, Oedipus does not see the mother and the mother does not see him. Both see only the outer shells and not who they truly are. There rests Sophocles’ genius that guides his character in a retrospective and at the same time prospective movement, so much so that Oedipus finds himself again at the decisive bifurcation of his past but also at a different point, since a great distance has been travelled. The understanding of the present and evolution in the future lie in this re-encounter with the past.
The act of piercing his eyes is often interpreted as punishment but in fact has a greater meaning. The dazzling experiences lived by Oedipus make him suffer the effects of exposure to a light that is too strong and the physical feeling is less meaningful. Indeed, he already has all the light he needs within him, since he begins to see clearly all that was never seen before. This act that constitutes a modification made by Sophocles of the older myth, places the hero on a new level. It is the new vision conquered by him that will guide him from now on. Oedipus is no longer being guided by the semblance of things, but by the truth of facts. This discovery of himself changes his position completely. His first destiny was sensorial – the primitive destiny of the childhood psyche. The second was that of self-discovery and acceptance of his own reality – the destiny of adulthood.

At 90 years of age, Sophocles revisits his most touching hero. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, we see the equivalent to a true amendment process. After many years wandering throughout Greece, the hero seeks a place that would shelter his body after death. He approaches the city of Athens and meets the king Theseus. A noble soul and a hero himself, Theseus acknowledges the nobility and greatness of the blind man facing him and greets him with respect and deference. A radiance emanates from Oedipus, an expression of the heights attained by his spirit through a life of suffering. At this point of meeting, the sons of Oedipus, involved in the ephemeral games of power and dominance, will search for him. However, his life is coming to an end and he does not fear the violence of men, even when clearly perceiving its effects on others as well as on his own soul.

In this incomparably beautiful drama, Oedipus accepts himself, comes to terms with his own truth without denying the pain and the anguish, but also without being overcome by them. He – or Sophocles – thereby reaches a high level of wisdom while revealing his awareness of the most absolute impossibility to influence anyone whose perception is obscured by desire. Oedipus’ status now is one of a truly wise man able to acknowledge that, practically, life and its events are mostly uncontrollable. Due to this status, Athens – beloved by Sophocles and his fellow citizens – will be protected by Oedipus’ *numen*. It is at the Garden of the Eumeniades³ in Colonus that he will have his mythic disappearance.

One can look at Oedipus’ tragedy as a metaphor for the functioning of the psyche with respect to the meeting of man with himself, with his own truth. Being aware of the place of Greek tragedy in 5th century BC Athens, and specifically in *Oedipus Rex*, the psychoanalyst discovers a representation of the amplified process of conscience together with a model of the existence of the unconscious and the functioning of the psyche. On suddenly
perceiving all of his mistakes, Oedipus is aware of his entire truth. The effect of this unveiling is both awesome and cathartic, since it brings about a complete reformulation in his situation. Things in themselves do not change but their inclusion into consciousness changes the vertex and this aspect is remarkable in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Sophocles redeems his character from the blindness through the conquest of an awareness that leads him to the paroxysms of pain, but also to a change of course. These two tragedies may be seen as representations of the poet’s realisation that to face the truth about oneself is an unwavering step to come to rights with one’s own contradictions and to accept the human condition, or, more specifically, the evolution of the psyche.

In such an inversion, or in the catastrophe experienced by Oedipus, nothing of that which previously characterised the hero is annulled. Everything is maintained but now relativised. He keeps his previous characteristics whilst uncovering previously latent qualities. Oedipus perfectly embodies man as a being that cannot escape from himself. This is his true destiny determined, not by oracles, but by his humanity. Finding himself downgraded and bitterly expiating his guilt, he is given a chance to reformulate the view of man, the man he is, and thus meet with his real self stripped of earlier illusions. In the end, Sophocles presents Oedipus as a hero who needed to learn compassion through extreme personal suffering.

**Oedipus and Freud**

Sophocles’ Oedipus admirably illustrates words by Aristotle (1981: 49): ‘Sophocles said that he represented men as they should be and Euripides as they were’. Here it is worth noting that when comparing the two poets, the philosopher acknowledges that Sophocles’ characters portray the representation of an ideal man, nonetheless a man who is essentially real.

The narrative of Oedipus is not an instrument for the psychoanalyst to carry out his work (Bion 1965). A narrative presents situations that may be understood in terms of cause and effect. The narration of Oedipus is not suitable for psychoanalysis, moreover, because psychoanalysis is indeed less interested in establishing cause and effect relations than in following up and identifying a dynamic in constant change. Tragedy, unlike myth, presents a unique situation in which one sees a being who marches towards an encounter with himself. Aware of himself step by step, he comprehends various moments of life and different experiences. He slowly designs his own silhouette, knowing and recognising the face staring
at him from the shadows. He had turned his back on it, but the silhouette had never stopped following him. One reaches a summit and an outcome, and tragedy serves as a paradigm of this process even though it does not entirely contain it.

Initially, Oedipus only sees what his misguided senses perceive. His perception of reality is clouded by outward appearances. Sophocles places his character on route to an accumulation of insights, for in it all unwinds unequivocally and at once, with the effect of a catastrophe. There is a total inversion in the perception of things so that what is dark is illuminated and what is lit becomes darkened. The majestic and remarkable Oedipus is diminished. The unknown Oedipus, parricide and incestuous, emerges and the character is presented as being fully aware of this change. He is everything he sees, what was before and what is now. This is perhaps the best example of what Bion (1970) calls catastrophic change.

In the realm of fantasy, Oedipal desires have the value of reality and the awareness of this and its subsequent elaboration bring enormous relief and open the way for the development of the psyche. The desirable barrier of contact between the conscious and the unconscious is necessary up to a certain point. When exceedingly permeable, it brings about indiscrimination, and when too rigid, the effect is rupture and lack of communication. Both impoverish and jeopardise the functioning of the psyche. To know one’s own dynamics makes the individual an observer of himself and enables the formation of a flexible proximity between the various components of the psyche.

The Oedipus complex refers to a configuration of relationships that include the influence of unconscious identification processes. Identification between Laius and Oedipus is far from being expressed by Sophocles or even by the myth. The unconscious identification with the father as well as the Oedipal desires belong to the Oedipus complex, not to the myth or the tragedy. To state that such identification is part of the character Oedipus, would be the same as to interpret the myth according to the theory. To ‘psychoanalyse’ Oedipus is an error of focus and a mistaken use of psychoanalysis. His figure is not on a couch and further I do not believe this is his place, he would not even fit on it. The Oedipus complex, as we know it, is a concept that allows psychoanalysts to acknowledge that the identification is formed by a relationship and above all, the dynamics by which the identifying process takes place.

As noted elsewhere, when conceiving the complex of Oedipus, Freud stressed the sexual aspects at play, but did not restrict this concept to sexuality itself, although its role should not be denied nor underestimated. It is precisely by sexual behaviour that the hero discovers himself. In his quest, he discloses a doubly misshapen transgressor of all the rules
and boundaries that facilitate human co-existence. His acts, that lead him to be justly banished from human society, exist in the mind of every man at the level of fantasy and desire. It is to this aspect that the conception of the Oedipus complex in psychoanalysis refers, thereby enabling its investigation and elaboration. The longings exist in the innermost part of everyone, but outside consciousness. This does not make its effect less powerful, since we are always dealing – either constructively or destructively – with the aftermaths of the first identifications experienced in relationship with the parents.

I stated above that the Oedipus narrative is not an instrument for the psychoanalyst in his practice. The analyst applies his intuition in opening the pathway through appearances to reach that which makes the individual what he is. Modern man suffers from the aftermaths of anguish that lead him to keep the desires and fantasies unacceptable to his moral conscience out of his consciousness, producing the most varied symptoms - deformed expressions from their repressed contents. He endures the results of the excessive aggression of the libido on his imagined self, that is to say, the exacerbated enhancement of appearances getting away from his real self. He heavily invests in and inflates the significance of sex, power, material conditions, in such a way that these aspects are often used to replace the good human relationship that he needs, but is unable to establish. While such substitutions are proceeding, the lack of a creative relationship of the individual with himself and with others is disclosed, the true promoter of growth and satisfaction. On the contrary, the narcissism that enhances the ideal to the detriment of the real makes evident the disarray and the pain at stake here.

Psychoanalysis investigates and describes this complex man, distant from his reality, off centre, aiming to help him recover himself, contact his mental life and re-encounter his soul – as Freud would say. It is this same man we see encompassed in Oedipus, and also in other tragic characters, although none but Oedipus displays these conditions so fully. While he recognises himself in his actions, he also perceives how much he does not know, how little he knows about himself. Thus knowing oneself entails perception that a great deal remains, to a large extent, beyond the scope of consciousness. That is when analysis offers a corrective and repairing possibility.

And, just like Oedipus at the gates of Colonus, nothing can be done for a man that does not yearn change. Greek wisdom acknowledges that the longing for transformation, evolution and development is born in the human heart and cannot be inculcated from outside. Oedipus understands that he can do nothing for his sons, since they have chosen the path of mutual destruction moved by unarguably opposed reasons. His wisdom lies in
freeing himself from the individuals they are and in recognising that each makes his choice. Often his attitude is misinterpreted as cruel or insensitive or still opposed to the condition of a wise man who after his death will take the place of a protective numen. Nevertheless, it is the attitude of a man with foresight who perceives the depth of human nature and recognises that what is in the individual is his sole responsibility. This is the point reached by Oedipus. Or by Sophocles.

The therapeutic and transforming function of psychoanalysis derives from the individual’s perception that he is in charge of taking care and being responsible for everything he feels, consciously or not. Based on Freud’s *Formulations on the two principles of mental functioning*, Bion’s work (1962) highlights the significance of the capacity to think which creates a precious mental space between impulse and action. It is through this mental space that the internal and subjective reality will become subject to observation and reflection, subject to continued probing. Resistance to this expansion derives from the unavoidable pain, from fear of not accomplishing the task and from hatred against a reality different from the desire to control.

Further, in analysis, one often observes in adults the need to accept and elaborate pain when perceiving that the time still to be lived can be shorter than that already lived. There remains a lot to be done and one can only care for the present. After all, this is the only reparation possible, because facts do not change. All this is deeply painful and few are willing to face this truth. I strongly emphasise that these words only reflect the evidence of clinical observations and do not involve any appraisal, especially because the mind is a never-ending abyss. No analysis can presume to be the holder of the truth or judge of decisions or postures of any person. This is only one point of view.

The analyst is bound to follow the Delphic maxims. Psychoanalysis did not invent the human mind, even though its propositions may orient a certain way of seeing. It intends to be an intuitive investigational method of the already existant. It elaborates concepts and theories based upon what is observed and perceived, leaving open the fact that we know very little. It is open-ended knowledge aiming to get rid of prejudices and observe human experience from a viewpoint exempt of any moral evaluation.

Indeed, psychoanalysis runs contrary to myth and more with tragedy. Its purpose is to heal through expanding the knowledge of the unknown mind. The individual tends to orient himself in life according to patterns learned in childhood, which soothe the anguish of the unknown. To guide oneself by the known brings about an illusion of security and control of
the facts of life. To point out the illusory aspect of this security and control is the task of psychoanalysis, not as a philosophical and rational activity but by acknowledgement of the emotional experience, associated with the expansion of conscience. In this process, the individual experiences the insight of the loneliness in decision, of clear awareness of this loneliness, the experience of subjective responsibility for his acts and experience of the pain awoken by awareness. Just as in tragedy, the experience is of compassion and of terror.

In other words, Freud himself disclosed this issue and with a thin needle pricked the inexorable, long-cherished illusions, showing how much man swings all the time between forces that lead him in opposite directions. In disturbing studies he exposed the human soul at its most primitive without forgetting the opportunities to evolve, but he seems to have reached the end of life without great hopes (Freud 1937).

The man entering psychoanalysis is one who swings between the consciousness he controls and the unconscious that rules him. Like Oedipus, he is permanently situated between the primitive and the developed. The voice of Man facing the Sphynx howls at the contrast between the savage and the civilised, the cave man and the man of the polis. When crossing the gates of Thebes he carries in his innermost being strong reminders of this world, forgotten under the trappings of civilisation that lead him to action without his awareness. Once discovered, the experience is one of horror, but only thereafter is it possible to reconcile in his innermost self the opposed facets of his truth as it is disclosed. It is in this re-encounter with the beast that the encounter of man takes place and the domain of true reparation is unveiled. It is an unforgettable tragedy because while rupture becomes evident, integration is constructed and everything is consciously experienced, without which this process would be impossible.

Freud sensed these depths. Becoming interested in the probing of the unconscious, he opens the way for the investigation of the hidden Oedipus dwelling in every individual. Yet what does psychoanalysis propose other than to carry out an investigation like that of Oedipus and help the individual to know himself and deal with the lacerations he undergoes because of the internal contradictions that characterises tragic man? Not by chance, the analytic motto is the Delphic inscription: ‘Know thyself’.

Tragic man and man investigated by psychoanalysis are the same man as they share a common condition, while fundamental aspects of human nature – but not the whole of it – are encompassed therein. Every man is enclosed in tragic man, more precisely in the tragic Oedipus, even though this is not the whole man. Within Sophocles’ Oedipus is enclosed the
de-centred man that psychoanalysis investigates, who, on finding himself in his fragility, conquers the centre. It is a non-static or unfinished centre, but one that is always dynamic and is translated by the acceptance of reality. The character Oedipus attains this level, thereby being a perfect model. This is furthermore the condition that orients the analyst engaged in the quest for his self, discovering and perfecting his inner conditions, while he is carrying out the work. Freud as well as Sophocles showed the way. Freud discovered Oedipus in his self-analysis as can be read in his writings. Yet Sophocles… Sophocles wrote *Oedipus Rex!* We can surmise that the happy man he seems to have been managed to search his innermost self and extract his most secret fantasies, elaborating them to reach wisdom.

As such, if Sophocles’ Oedipus is the representation of man ‘as he should be’, we can say that in psychoanalysis, the constant search for this man is carried out, taking into account that the journey is neverending.

We have reached a point where, for the psychoanalyst, the true content of the story of Oedipus is less significant than the investigative attitude of the hero in relation to himself. And this leads us to remember a comment by Bion (1963: 92): ‘Freud used the Oedipus myth and the version of the myth made by Sophocles and discovered psychoanalysis; with psychoanalysis he discovered the Oedipus complex’. By means of myth, one arrives at psychoanalysis and with psychoanalytic tools the mind is so thoroughly investigated that at a certain moment the Oedipus complex is conceived. In my opinion, this focus places myth and tragedy in a highly valuable primary position. It functions as a lever to unleash an investigatory process whose development is expanded towards the infinite of the mind.

When all is said and done, we acknowledge that we are but at the threshold of a complex issue, but we have the conviction that if to know oneself is tragic, not to know oneself is disastrous.

## Conclusion

Psychoanalysis is a new science compared to other humanistic sciences such as philosophy or history. Psychoanalysis has been available to humanity for about a century. We do not even know if it will survive. Time after time, we find proclamations of its demise in the printed press and other media, but this does not stop analysts from continuing their work. Freud opened the doors to unparalleled investigation and one of the strong reasons that keeps psychoanalysis alive is the certainty that its discoveries are still at the beginning and far from ending. In clinical practice, one notices the human relationship that develops and is built over
the analytic process, producing decisive effects on the quality of life of those who benefit from it. It is impossible to know how far modern man will allow himself to expand the possibilities to live the experience of analysis. Certainly, once he takes upon himself to undergo the investigation of the different aspects of the psyche, it proves to be of great assistance in dealing with the divisions endemic in present day society.

Greek tragedy, to which psychoanalysis is indebted, emerged, blossomed and died out in only one century. A tiny gap in time, but sufficient to attest to an undying vigour that extends to the present time. What is true is preserved. Perhaps it may get lost for a certain time, but it always returns in new and beautiful shapes. This may be an idealised vision of human accomplishment but it expresses a hopeful certainty about the psychological development of man. After all, man is an animal able to learn and teach.

We do not have the slightest possibility of knowing how tragic poetry would have evolved if conditions had been different. Indeed, to think about this is idle and useless. We are also unable to foresee what evolution is intended for psychoanalysis. We hope that it survives and progresses far beyond one century and remains as an alternative to human blindness, becoming increasingly accessible to persons interested in knowing their inner reality.

Notes

♣ I am very grateful to Paul Holden for his assistance in editing the text.

1 I use the expression Oedipus complex, or just Oedipus, to signify the Freudian concept to avoid possible misunderstanding.

2 The myth is well known. Nevertheless the enigma sung by the Sphinx must be remembered: ‘There is a biped on earth and quadruled with a single voice, and a tripped, and also those beings that wander on the earth, in the air and in the sea, and is the only one that goes against nature; however, nevertheless, it rests upon a greater number of feet, and speed weakens in his limbs.’ The simpler version: ‘Which is the animal that has a voice, walks, in the morning, on four feet, at noon with two, and in the afternoon with three?’ (Brandão 1987: 261).

3 Beneficial goddesses, ancient Erinyes, formerly avengers of blood crimes, of which Oedipus was clearly guilty.

4 In part this reflects on the fact that Greek civilisation never entered into religious wars or tried to convert others to its gods. Much to the contrary it was receptive to the divinities of other peoples, including them in its Pantheon.

5 Likewise, in the play The Phoenicians, Euripides’ version of the saga of Labdacidas, the arguments of Jocasta and Antigone, and also of the choir, trying to convince Eteocles and Polynices to review their intransigent positions become void and all sufferings are brought on.

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