



The Blindness of the Seeing Eye: Scenes from the Climate Crisis

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In recounting the treatment of Lucy, one of the patients who figured in *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud reported asking her: “But you knew you loved your employer, why didn’t you tell me?” She replied: “I didn’t know—or rather I didn’t want to know. I wanted to drive it out of my head and not think of it again; and I believe latterly I have succeeded.” In a footnote, Freud added: “I have never managed to give a better description than this of the strange state of mind in which one knows and does not know at the same time.” He referred to this as “the blindness of the seeing eye.”¹

When John Steiner took another look at Sophocles’s *Oedipus*, he drew attention to the same mechanism. Oedipus, Steiner argues, both knew and did not know that he had killed his father and married his mother. By turning a blind eye, he evaded the truth.² I use Steiner’s interpretation as a starting point. It highlights the psychological work that must be done—and which cannot be done once and for all—if we are to draw the conclusions that flow from a realistic appraisal of the climate crisis.

I follow with three texts. The first, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, appeared in 2016.³ An Indian novelist, Ghosh issued a short and wide-ranging indictment of a blinkered imagination—a failure to see what needs to be seen and the catastrophic consequences of that failure. The second is Daniel Sherrell’s *Warmth: Coming of Age at the End of Our World*, published in 2021.⁴ In his part memoir, part love letter to an unborn child, Sherrell, a young American climate activist, resists the temptation to turn away from the anxiety and grief that goes along with living in the reality of climate change. The third is Andreas Malm’s *How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire*, which also came out in 2021 and became a major motion picture.⁵ (The connection between the two, aside from the title, is hard to discern. Nonetheless, it is a gripping thriller.) In an impassioned plea, Malm, a Swedish scholar of human ecology and a prolific author, asks why climate activists have not moved beyond peaceful protests. He takes a hard look at the possibility and/or

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria* (1893-1895), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated under the general editorship of James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 2: 117, 117n1.

² See John Steiner, “Turning a Blind Eye: The Cover up for Oedipus,” *International Review of Psychoanalysis* 2 (1985): 161-172. See also, Judith M. Hughes, *Guilt and Its Vicissitudes: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Morality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 69-72.

³ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

⁴ Daniel Sherrell, *Warmth: Coming of Age at the End of Our World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2021).

⁵ Andreas Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire* (London and New York: Verso, 2021).

desirability of sabotage. To view or review these books is to catch the growing alarm of the climate movement.

I. John Steiner: Oedipus Revisited

The usual view of Oedipus is of a man struggling with his fate: he had no knowledge of who it was he had killed and who it was he had married, This traditional reading of the play hardly qualifies it as a tragedy: it is little more than an account of a disaster falling on an innocent man. If, however, Oedipus was aware, then the tragic qualities of the drama become more understandable: the fascination of the work derives from the exposure of a cover-up rather than the exposure of a crime.⁶ Steiner claims that the two interpretations can co-exist: “We are meant to accept the idea that . . . [Oedipus] knew and at the same time did not know. It is this which I mean to convey when I suggest that he turned a blind eye to the facts.”⁷

Once we are alerted to the possibility, it is easy to see that Oedipus must have realized that he had killed Laius and married his widow. He arrived in Thebes having just killed a man who was evidently important . . . and must have found the city buzzing with news of the death of the king. It is true that both he and everyone else was preoccupied with the threat of the Sphinx, but it is impossible to think that he did not connect these events. He solved the riddle of the Sphinx and accepted the hand of Jocasta because . . . the desire to enjoy Laius’s throne and Jocasta’s bed made him a poor logician. . . .

Did Oedipus also realize that Laius was his father and Jocasta his mother? This is perhaps not so obvious, and yet the play is riddled with hints that could . . . have been followed up. In order to maintain that he is the son of Polybus and Merope, Oedipus turns a blind eye to the fact that he went to consult the Oracle precisely because he had doubts over his parentage which the Oracle did nothing to allay. With the prophecy ringing in his ears he kills a man old enough to be his father and marries a woman old enough to be his mother.⁸

As the play moves toward its climax, we see Oedipus struggling—his is a gradual and hesitant journey toward the truth. There is a brave but brief acknowledgment:

O, O, O they will all come,
all come out clearly! Light of the sun, let me
look upon you no more after today!
I who first saw the light bred of a match
accursed, and accursed in my living

⁶ Steiner freely acknowledged drawing on Philip Vellacott’s *Sophocles and Oedipus: A Study of “Oedipus Tyrannus” with a New Translation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1971).

⁷ Steiner, “Turning a Blind Eye,” p. 164.

⁸ John Steiner, *Psychic Retreats: Pathological Organizations in Psychotic, Neurotic and Borderline Patients* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 120-121.

with them I lived with, cursed in my killing.⁹

With these words, Oedipus heads into the palace, seeking Jocasta. We, the audience, wait outside with the Elders. When a messenger appears, we finally learn what has happened: Jocasta's suicide and Oedipus's self-blinding—all described in terrible detail.

How are we to understand that self-mutilation? For a moment, and only for a moment, Oedipus took full responsibility for his actions and faced his guilt. But Sophocles, Steiner insists, “goes on to show us that it is impossible to sustain that degree of self-knowledge.” The self-blinding “seems to be a partial retreat from truth.”¹⁰ Oedipus attacked his eyes—and, he declares, he “would not have stayed” his hand, if he could have “choked” his ears.¹¹ He assumes that he can escape his mental anguish, if only he can destroy his sight and stop his hearing.

In *Oedipus at Colonus*, written roughly two decades later, Sophocles takes the story up again. The Oedipus of this drama is far different from the figure of the earlier tragedy. In what seems like an absurdly illogical series of denials, he asserts that he is not culpable because he did not know that the man he killed was his father, that the man struck the first blow so that he killed in self-defense, and finally that since his father had tried to kill him as an infant, he was perfectly right to avenge himself. As Steiner puts it: “We no longer see a man who could acknowledge his guilt and who is shattered . . . ; instead we meet a haughty, arrogant man who makes repeated and devious excuses.”¹² In Steiner's judgment, the change in Oedipus amounts to a retreat from truth to an unreal world of manic omnipotence.

II. Amitav Ghosh: A Blinkered Imagination

On the afternoon of March 17, 1978, the weather took an odd turn in north Delhi . . . [D]ark clouds appeared suddenly and there were squalls of rain. Then followed . . . a hailstorm. . . .

When the hailstorm broke, I was in a library. I had planned to stay late, but . . . after a few minutes I decided to head straight back. . . .

I had just passed a busy intersection . . . when I heard a rumbling sound somewhere above. I saw a gray tube-like extrusion forming on the underside of a dark cloud: it grew rapidly as I watched, and then all of a sudden it turned and came whiplashing down to earth heading in my direction.

Across the street lay a large administrative building. . . . Spotting a small balcony, I jumped over the parapet and crouched on the floor.

The noise quickly rose to a frenzied pitch, and the wind began to tug fiercely at my clothes. Stealing a glance over the parapet, I saw, to my astonishment, that my surroundings had been darkened by a churning cloud of dust. I saw an extraordinary panoply of objects flying past—bicycles, scooters, lampposts, sheets of corrugated iron, even entire tea stalls. . . .

⁹ Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, trans. David Grene, in David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, eds., *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), p. 63.

¹⁰ Steiner, “Turning a Blind Eye,” p. 168.

¹¹ Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, p. 70.

¹² Steiner, *Psychic Retreats*, p. 126.

I buried my head in my arms and lay still. Moments later the noise died down and was replaced by an eerie silence. When at last I climbed out of the balcony, I was confronted by a scene of devastation such as I had never before beheld. . . . I walked away in a daze.¹³

What had happened? It took two days for the newspapers to fasten on the proper word to describe this extraordinary weather event: tornado. Ghosh had witnessed “the first tornado to hit Delhi—and indeed the entire region—in recorded meteorological history.”¹⁴ And somehow, he had found himself in its path and the eye had passed directly over him.

“No tornado,” Ghosh writes, “has ever figured” in any of his novels. Why, he asks, did he fail, despite his best efforts, “to send a character down a road that is imminently to be struck by a tornado?” What, he wonders, “would have been his response if someone else had inserted such a scene in a work of fiction?” He would have thought that the author had run out of ideas and in desperation had fallen “back on a situation of such extreme improbability.”¹⁵

The novel, Ghosh claims, was “midwived into existence around the world, through the banishing of the improbable and the insertion of the everyday.”¹⁶ “Therein lies the rub. The repertoire of realism is ill-equipped to imagine ‘the real’ in the Anthropocene. When nature is not inert, when the human/non-human divide is breaking down, when events and actors are no longer confined to slices of place and time, and when the seemingly enclosed and orderly world is interrupted by external uncanny powers, the modern realist novel is at a loss, unable to represent the world.”¹⁷

To introduce . . . [for example, an unheard of weather event] into a novel is in fact to court eviction from the mansion in which serious fiction has long been in residence; it is to risk banishment to the humble dwellings that surround the manor house—those generic outhouses that were once known by names such as “Gothic,” “the romance,” or “the melodrama,” and have now come to be called “fantasy,” “horror,” and “science fiction.”

It is as though, Ghosh quipped, “in the literary imagination climate change were somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel.”¹⁸ What does this “tell us about culture writ large and its patterns of evasion?”

In a substantially altered world, when sea-level rise has swallowed the Sundarbans and made cities like Kolkata, New York, and Bangkok uninhabitable, when readers. . . turn to the . . . literature of our time, will they not look, first and most urgently, for traces and portents of the altered world of their inheritance? And when they fail to find them, what should they—what can they—do other than to conclude that ours was

¹³ Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, pp. 11-13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁷ Fa-Ti Fan, “JAS Round Table on Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 75 (2016): 945.

¹⁸ Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, pp. 24, 7.

a time when most forms of . . . literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight? Quite possibly, then, this era, which so congratulates itself on its self-awareness, will come to be known as the time of the Great Derangement.¹⁹

III. Daniel Sherrell: To Mourn and to Organize

The time is long past, Sherrell implies, when climate activists can assume that marshalling the facts, presenting a strong and rational argument, will suffice to silence skeptics and deniers and to galvanize a popular movement. By now, many—and particularly Americans—accept the fact that our way of life is destroying our environment and that this has got to change. Knowing this “inconvenient truth” turns out not to be enough. In *Warmth*, Sherrell seeks to fashion a narrative that would allow him to write about his feelings and would shake readers out of their torpor.

Initially Sherrell tried to find stories that might make sense of the climate crisis—what he calls, somewhat cloyingly, “the Problem.” He “looked mainly in the fiction section of bookstores,” the aisles he “gravitated toward naturally,” but came away disappointed. Then he lit on “the next best thing,” a book that explained why he had found fiction wanting: *The Great Derangement*. Ghosh’s argument that extreme weather events were too improbable to make it into realist novels persuaded Sherrell—and depressed him as well. “[I]f it was too boring to write about the trends, and too artless to write about the events, then what *were* we supposed to do.”²⁰

What Sherrell fashioned has been labelled—by reviewers—a climate memoir. “Jettisoning a linear progression,” he “winds through moments and memories of his middle-class upbringing and his gradual political awakening: childhood experiences in nature; the campaign for divestment from fossil fuels at Brown, where he was an undergraduate; a meditation retreat; the residency that allowed him to write” his book.²¹ Yet it is not a novel, nor a diary; it is a letter. *Warmth* is addressed to an unborn, and not even conceived, child—a child whom Sherrell is not sure he will ever have.

I . . . wanted to craft something out of scattered notes. . . . Prior to the Paris withdrawal [from the 2015 Agreement], I’d still been able to entertain long-shot fantasies that the trendlines might be reversed before you grew old enough to read them. After the withdrawal, these fantasies became harder to sustain. It felt increasingly clear that the Problem would be there, waiting for you, worse than it is now, and that I would need to find a way to talk to you about it. Not only talk but advise, or console or hand you something with which to face . . . [it]. This seemed suddenly like an intergenerational responsibility.²²

The more he thought about his unborn child, Sherrell writes, the more he felt that he owed this creature an honest account of why he was composing the letter, that is, what he thought about, what he felt, and how he mourned.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

²⁰ Sherrell, *Warmth*, pp. 71, 72 (emphasis in the original).

²¹ David S. Wallace, “Can We Find a New Way to Tell the Story of Climate Change?” *The New Yorker*, September 15, 2021.

²² Sherrell, *Warmth*, p. 141.

[Grief] was a weight I kept private, unsure of whether or how to share it. Even with my closest friends, discussions of the Problem tended to stumble into the arid gully of knowing commiseration. “We’re so fucked” is what we let ourselves say, on the rare occasion the conversation wasn’t quickly diverted into light terrain.

But alone, it rose up like a whale from a depth, almost invisible until the moment it breached. . . . And like with a whale, the breaches seemed to come at random, when I least expected them. I cried about it on line at the grocery store and in the bathroom at parties and by myself in the shower. Never loudly, just a few tears, messy and quickly stifled.²³

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At the beginning of 2017, just weeks before Trump’s inauguration, Sherrell and his fellow staffers at NY Renews came together to plan a sit-in at the New York State Capitol, “occupying for as long as possible the hallway to the governor’s office.” Once they had a solid cohort committed to the action, they brought in a trainer--“a woman who helped found ACT UP back in the ‘80s—to conduct a workshop on nonviolent direct action.”

Nonviolence is not pacifism, she tells us. Nonviolence is like ju-jitsu, where you use your opponent’s momentum against him. It lures the violence out of the system, forces it to show its face in public. The point you’re trying to dramatize here, she says, is that the administration would rather have twenty young people placed in handcuffs than support legislation to protect their future from the Problem.

The morning of the action, those coming from New York City meet at a van rental lot in Manhattan.

It takes two hours to drive to Albany. . . . We spend most of the time calling the reporters we haven’t already tipped off, letting them know what we are about to do. At the capitol, the two dozen of us meet up in the basement, squeezing as inconspicuously as possible into the appropriate elevators. When we finally step into the governor’s wing, the hallway is silent and empty. . . . The lone security guard gives us a quizzical look. . . . [W]e walk past him as a pack and sit down in front of the entrance to the hallway.

As soon as we sit it is like an invisible button has been pressed on the marble floor, and a series of interlocking systems spring to life around the building. More security guards show up, rushing down the hall, then the press photographers, then the capitol police. . . . The corridor is shut down to the public. . . .

One by one we get up to speak, talking honestly about our fear, demanding that the governor take action commensurate with the scale of the Problem. The shutters on the cameras click. The police shift from foot to foot, hands clasped by their waists. . . .

After about half an hour the police begin arresting us. The official charge is disorderly conduct. One at a time, they motion for us to stand up and strap plastic handcuffs around our wrists. They take us by the arm and walk us down to a converted conference space in the basement of the capitol, where we sit in folding chairs waiting to be processed. The whole procedure is polite and pro forma. On the

²³ Ibid., p.18.

way down, each of us has to have our picture taken with our arresting officer. . . “This feels just like prom,” someone says and everyone in the room laughs.²⁴

In the end, it took an election and the defeat of those blocking progress on climate legislation to bring about success. “NY Renews pushed like mad to get the bill to the top of the agenda.” And in 2019, two years after the sit-in, the measure became law. “New York State would be required to decarbonize its economy over the next three decades, supporting workers and low-income families across the transition.”²⁵

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To mourn and to organize: grief and resistance are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, Sherrell insists, “the former is necessary to the latter, . . . honest sorrow is perhaps *the only thing* that makes a real fight possible.”

To mourn without fighting is to tap out at the exact moment we need to step in, but to fight without mourning is to grapple with a ghost, to try to stop something you’ve never really actualized. Because how can you solve a Problem you do not take as real? And how can you take the Problem as real without feeling like a dam has finally broken inside you, like a flood is overwhelming that city you call your self?²⁶

IV. Andreas Malm: Facing Reality

Some years ago, John Lanchester wrote in the *London Review of Books*: “It is strange and striking that climate activists have not committed any acts of terrorism.”

After all, terrorism is for the individual by far the modern world’s most effective form of political action, and climate change is an issue about which people feel as strongly as about, say, animal rights. This is especially noticeable when you bear in mind the ease of things like blowing up petrol stations or vandalizing SUVs. . . . So why don’t these things happen? Is it because the people who feel strongly about climate change are simply too nice, too educated, to do anything of the sort? (But terrorists are often highly educated.) Or is it that even people who feel most strongly about climate change on some level can’t quite bring themselves to believe in it?²⁷

Malm sets out to provide a response by asking a couple of questions. “Will absolute non-violence be the *only* way, forever the sole admissible tactic in the struggle to abolish fossil fuels? Can we be sure that it will suffice against this enemy?”

[I]magine . . . : a few years down the road, the kids of the Thunberg generation and the rest of us wake up one morning and realise that business-as-usual is still on, regardless of all the strikes, the science, the pleas, the millions with colourful outfits

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 92-95, 97.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 119.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 245-246.

²⁷ John Lanchester, “Warmer, Warmer,” *London Review of Books*, March 22, 2007.

and banners—not beyond the realm of the thinkable. . . . What do we do then? Do we say that we’ve done what we could, tried the means at our disposal and failed? . . . Or is there another phase, beyond peaceful protest?²⁸

Malm argues that the insistence on non-violence has been reinforced by a peculiar reading of history, in which its power has been fetishized. The new climate movements, he writes, look to “historical precedents—people winning against hopeless odds, great evil suddenly put to an end—that can break the hold of apathy.”

If they could prevail, the reasoning goes, so can we. If they changed the world by all means but violent ones, so we shall save it. . . . Note that the argument is not that violence would be bad at this particular moment. . . . Instead, . . . [it] holds that violence is bad in all settings, because this is what history shows. Success belongs to the peaceful.²⁹

The roster of historical examples begins with slavery—eliding the fact that slavery in the United States was only ended with a civil war. “If abolitionists could turn the tables on that nefarious institution, so long taken for granted as a natural part of modern economics, through boycotts, mass meetings and thundering denunciation of iniquity, then we will do the same; just like us, they were first disparaged as crackpots and unreasonably impatient radicals, until righteousness gained the upper hand. Morals and strategy here blend.” Malm waxes indignant. “Granted, among a host of other facts, the efforts of petitioners, demonstrators and legislators contributed to the ending of slavery, but to reduce the process to their efforts—or even to make them the gist of the story—is about as accurate as the belief that yoga is the sole path to human happiness.”³⁰

Turning to the civil rights movement, Malm brings his argument closer to home. “The civil rights movement won the Act of 1964 *because it had a radical flank that made it appear as the lesser evil in the eyes of state power.*”

Over the course of the 1950s and ’60s, the benchmark of moderation shifted rapidly, as the radicals of yesteryear—the civil rights leaders who incited people to break the law—came to look reasonable and restrained. Next to the threat of black revolution—Black Power, the Black Panther Party, black guerrilla groups—integration seemed a tolerable price to pay. Without Malcolm X, there might not have been a Martin Luther King (and vice versa).

In short, Malm claims, it is not possible “to locate *even one minimally relevant analogue to the climate struggle that has not contained some violence.*”³¹

So, what is it that Malm would have the climate movement do—or rather, its radical flank? To start with, announce and enforce a prohibition of all new CO2 emitting devices. Damage and destroy all new ones. “Put them out of commission, pick them apart, demolish

²⁸ Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, pp. 24, 25 (emphasis in the original).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 40.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 49, 50, 61 (emphasis in the original).

them, burn them, blow them up. Let the capitalists who keep investing in the fire know that their properties will be trashed.” And, then, to press on, “existing, young and old CO2-emitting devices would have to be deactivated. The science is eminently clear on this point. Because so much valuable, irretrievable time has been lost—as a matter of fact, not much time is left—assets have to be stranded. Investments must be written off too early for capitalist taste.”³²

The purpose of this campaign—a campaign of sabotage—would be twofold. First, to establish a disincentive to invest in CO2 emitting property. To communicate the risk, not all devices would have to be disabled, just enough to broadcast the hazards of further investment. Second, to twist the arm of the state. The aim would be to force the state to proclaim a prohibition on CO2 devices and “begin retiring the stock . . . No one in his or her right mind would think that bands of activists would burn all or one fifth” of the global energy infrastructure to the ground—or that such a fire would be desirable. “At the end of the day, it will be states that ram through the transition or no one will.”³³

The alternative: a study from 2018 estimated that committed emissions from already-running power plants “would be enough to take the world beyond 1.5°C” and that existing and planned coal infrastructure alone “would crash the 2°C budget. Something along these lines is, as the saying goes, in the pipeline.”³⁴

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The German movement Ende Gelände posts a slogan: “We are the investment risk.” Since 2015, it has had remarkable success in mobilizing direct action against Germany’s brown coal mines and smoke-belching power stations. Malm was an active, indeed enthusiastic, participant in the 2016 action that “targeted the mine and railway tracks around Schwarze Pumpe.”³⁵ (It and four similar facilities were owned by Sweden. In 2014, the Greens pledged that if they entered the government, they would cut emissions radically. Once in the government, they did get rid of the facilities, not by closing them, but by selling them to a consortium of capitalists from the Czech Republic.)

Up on the railway tracks, no wagons running, the blockade in full effect, my affinity group itched for more. So did hundreds of others . . . We marched away from the tracks, towards the power plant itself. In the patch of forest surrounding it, we encountered a fence. Walking, half-running in the front, my affinity group tore it down, broke it apart, stamped on it and continued with the rest of the march up to the perimeters of the plant. They were marked by another, sturdier fence, also pulled down. The few private guards caught off-hand and completely outnumbered, we rushed into the compound. . . . We streamed through the area, as amazed as the guards that we had entered and with no plans for how to proceed; we checked some gates here, entered a tower there, . . . unsure how to complete the shutdown, until police forces arrived and chased us away with their batons and spray.

³² Ibid., pp. 67, 68.

³³ Ibid., p. 69.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 29, 30.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 67, 158.

The action enforced the suspension of all electricity production, “something that had never before happened at a fossil-fueled power plant in Europe.” And less than a year later, the new Czech owners gave up their plans to expand the mine that served Schwarze Pumpe. “Ende Gelände claimed partial victory.”³⁶

For his part, Malm vouchsafes, during all his years in the climate movement, he had never felt greater exhilaration. “For one throbbing, mind-expanding moment, we had a slice of the infrastructure wrecking this planet in our hands.” And “if destroying fences was an act of violence, it was violence of the sweetest kind.”³⁷

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In January 2022, *The Nation* invited Sherrell and Malm to address the question: “Should Environmental Activists Sabotage Fossil Fuel Infrastructure.” Sherrell answers no; Malm replies in the affirmative.

Sherrell begins by dispensing with the “moral question.” “There is no great moral controversy,” he claims. “If it were likely to reduce average global surface temperature even a few tenths of a degree—thus saving millions of lives and keeping millions more out of penury—destroying fossil fuel infrastructure would not only be justified; it would be morally necessary.” The real consideration is prudential. Blowing up pipelines “would likely backfire and weaken the climate movement’s ability to win policies that would draw down temperatures.”

Let’s play out the scenario in the United States. . . . In 2022, a widespread campaign of pipeline or power plant destruction would immediately draw condemnation from both sides of the political aisle, as well as mainstream news sources. If an accident were to result in even a single injury, the condemnation would grow tenfold. . . . The right would gleefully cry “Ecoterrorism!” and leverage those fears to accelerate their creeping fascism.³⁸

Malm thinks that the argument about political backlash ignores “the temporality of the crisis.”

It will keep getting worse, which should—if there is any rationality left in the world—mean that the public appetite for fossil fuel property destruction will rise. . . . Only by ratcheting up the struggle in a crisis hardwired to worsen do we stand a chance to remain relevant and, yes, win people over. Our task is to make the impassive part of the public realize that fossil fuel property is not something indestructible like the moon.³⁹

Malm also has a decidedly bleak view of advances—if any—that have been made to date:

The progress that people talk about is often cast in terms of investment in renewables and expansion in the capacity of solar and wind power. This is an addition of one kind of energy on top of another. It doesn’t matter how many solar panels we build if we

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 159, 160.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 159, 161.

³⁸ “Should Environmental Activists Sabotage Fossil Fuel Infrastructure? *The Nation*, January 27, 2022.

³⁹ Ibid.

also keep building more coal power plants, more oil pipelines, and on that crucial metric there simply is no progress. I struggle to see how anyone could interpret the trends as pointing in the right direction.⁴⁰

The most striking difference between them is, perhaps, in temperament and/or sensibility. Sherrell describes himself as “basically happy.” Malm has a pessimistic cast of mind. The drama of the sit-in, Sherrell writes, provided a context into which he and his fellow activists could “finally pour out our anger and our disbelief and—scariest of all, because we guard it so closely—our flickering but still unextinguished sense of hope.”⁴¹ Malm—his moment of exhilaration notwithstanding—is far less sanguine. He told an interviewer for the *New York Times* that his “daily affective state is one of great despair about the incredible destructive forces at work in this world.” Still, he adds, he has “a strong sense of duty or obligation”; he has “to do” what he can “to intervene . . . when the world is on fire.”⁴²

So where do I stand? Logic—or facing reality—leads me side with Malm. Fear holds me back. The thought of sabotage—with its attendant chaos—scares me. Maybe there is still time for political leaders to come to their senses. I am not sanguine.

V. Concluding Remarks

In *Oedipus at Colonus*, we see Oedipus’s headlong retreat from truth, a retreat to manic omnipotence. What warning does this hold for us? Denial—the blindness of the seeing eye—has been central to the development of the climate crisis. And magical thinking—a manic belief that, somehow, we will be saved by feats of geoengineering—is not far behind.

Facing reality means not giving up. If we fail to keep warming below the longtime goal of 2°C, well, 2 degrees remains better than 2.5. And 2.5 is far preferable to 3. And humanity would be much better off with 3 than with 3.5. And so on. There is no point at which passive acceptance makes more sense than fighting on.

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⁴⁰ David Marchese, “How This Climate Activist Justifies Political Violence,” *New York Times*, January 16, 2024.

⁴¹ Sherrell, *Warmth*, pp. 7, 95.

⁴² Marchese, “Climate Activist.”