Chapter 1

Mimesis and the portrayal of reflective life in action: Aristotle's *Poetics* and Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*

The purpose of this essay is to show how art can be understood as a form of enlightenment, with particular interest in the ways in which this can be accomplished in literature, music and painting. In order to give an appropriate scope and clarity to this venture, my exposition will include a discussion of theories that are highly respected and familiar, concentrating in particular on the concept of mimesis as it is formulated in Aristotle's *Poetics*. As an introduction to this, some remarks involving Plato's theory of Forms will serve to establish the general position from which the argument will proceed.

The concept of mimesis in Plato's *Republic*

While it has had a profound influence upon thinking about art, as an inspiration to artists and philosophers, the theory of Forms is not primarily a theory of aesthetics; its importance arises from its influence as a metaphysical theory of knowledge. In this respect it is concerned with the psychological basis of understanding itself, particularly in the possibility of our knowing ourselves and the world in the face of continuous change and the fallibility of language. The theory provides Plato with a way of justifying the universal significance of ideas, without which meaning and significance would be impossible, and, at the same time, of proposing a reality that is not subject to the fragility of continuous change but can be seen as immutably real, permanent, intelligible and perfect. In this, the world of Platonic Forms is both a philosophical interpretation of the stability of language and ideas, and

the path to a transcendent world of intellectual clarity in which we can fulfil our spiritual nature as rational beings. Thus it is attached to the intellectual disciplines of dialectic and mathematics, which are seen as reliable means of understanding the true nature of things. Art, which merely copies or imitates the illusion of things as they appear to us, is excluded from the realm of knowledge. In this discussion I do not present a critique of the theory of Forms as such, but argue, in accordance with my overall purpose, with some of the ideas it has engendered concerning the cognitive value of art.

Plato's famous elaboration of this theory of art, in Book 10 of *The Republic*, includes the following exchange between Socrates and Glaucon:

> *'We are agreed about representation, then. But, tell me, which does the painter try to represent? The ultimate reality or the things the craftsman makes?'*
>
> *'The things the craftsman makes.'*
>
> *'As they are, or as they appear? There is still that distinction to make.'*
>
> *'I don't understand,' he said.*
>
> *'What I mean is this. If you look at a bed, or anything else, sideways or endways or from some other angle, does it make any difference to the bed? Isn't it merely that it looks different?'*
>
> *'Yes, it's the same bed, but it looks different.'*
>
> *'Then consider – does the painter try to paint the bed or other object as it is, or as it appears? Does he represent it as it is, or as it looks?'*
>
> *'As it looks.'*
>
> *'The artist's representation is therefore a long way removed from truth, and he is able to reproduce everything because he never penetrates beneath the superficial appearance of anything. For example, a painter can paint a portrait of a shoemaker or a carpenter or any other craftsman without knowing anything about their crafts at all; yet, if he is skilful enough, his portrait of a carpenter may, at a distance, deceive children or simple people into thinking it is a real carpenter.'*

My argument fundamentally opposes the assumptions that are implicit in Socrates' conception of the cognitive purpose in works of art. His view that the painter fails because he merely represents an aspect of the appearance of an object depends upon the idea that, in painting, the cognitive purpose is primarily to represent the object. Compared with an informed and

comprehensive attempt to represent an object the painter is able to convey nothing more than a certain way in which the object might appear to us. Moreover, compared with a craftsman the painter produces no real knowledge of the object or how it is made. However, an alternative purpose for the painter is not to represent the object, but to represent reflective life in action. (It will become clear that Plato's mimetic conception of the representation of human actions in poetry – elsewhere in *The Republic* – is not what I mean by reflective life in action.) This means that the aspect of an object that appears in a painting, say the angle at which a bed is presented in the image, contributes to how the image as a whole represents human experience. Rather than being simply the representation of an object, like a table, the anatomy of a leopard, a social or political order, a remembered occasion or imagined event, or such abstract qualities as beauty and justice, art represents experience of oneself and the world for a certain kind of being. This is not to say that the interest of art lies simply in consciousness or in subjective experience, though the representation of reflective life in action must include these; the relevant distinction is between the portrayal of objects (or human actions) and the portrayal of an experience of life in which objects necessarily appear.

Fundamental to the emergence of anything that has significance of any kind is the relation between (a) objects of experience and (b) experience of oneself and the world. The theory of Forms, and in particular its psychology of transcendental knowledge, does not allow for the ways in which our experience of an object contributes to our perception of it, and so passes over the interaction between (a) and (b) in our apprehension of things. Fulfilment of our nature in the understanding of pure ideas, and its insight into the true nature of things, implies that (b) is merely instrumental to our apprehension of the object, and that everything else is subject to illusion and error. However, it can be shown that this conception of our nature fails to establish a true connection with the ordinary understanding upon which all theories of knowledge are necessarily based. If we compare the 'experience' of a grasshopper with that of a person there is obviously much that the two have in common: for example, allowing for certain physical differences both respond to light and are burned by the sun. However, the memory of a hot day at the beach cannot possibly be an experience for a grasshopper, and this is because such an experience is not created in a grasshopper by the interaction between objects of experience and experience of oneself and the world. Such a phenomenon, and the interaction upon which it depends, is of no consequence to the theory of Forms, as it reveals nothing about the Form of things; the theory excludes knowledge in which the object and experience

of oneself and the world are intertwined. But this kind of experience might contribute to a rich vein of insight into the nature of reflective life.

Though it may seem that the memory of a hot day at the beach provides us with little that will enable us to interpret the nature of reflective life, it possesses the basic elements of such an interpretation. It is not characteristic of even our slightest memories to be merely transient images that simply come and go without having any meaning or importance for us. For example, the memory of a hot day at the beach might, in terms of purely visual recollection, be quite fragmentary and tenuous, and yet possess other kinds of psychological significance that make it important. This is because the body of a memory of this kind lies partly in its sensuous detail, but more substantially in knowing events of the past as part of one's own experience and its meaning and purpose. A seemingly simple memory could be compelling because it recalls intentional action that is close to our spontaneous feelings of self-recognition; that beach in the late afternoon, suffused with heat and resonant with light, and scattered about with vestiges of earlier crowds of bathers, may come alive in memory with unarticulated significance. The drifting away of a moment of concentrated social life echoed in the imminence of vanishing light could be filled with anxiety about making something of our involvement in a common life, or of possibilities slipping away from us. In memory, aesthetic depth is enhanced by our psychological detachment from the original experience of the object, and imagination may contribute to the creation of a new object. (In Chapter 4 we will see how the intertwining of object and experience of oneself and the world can be discovered in the meaning and significance of various paintings.)

From this modest example it is possible to appreciate something of how interaction between the object of experience and experience of oneself and the world pervades the inner life and perception of a reflective being. The key to its importance has been deliberately suggested by presenting the example in a way that draws attention to the connection between common experience and the fundamental need for a reflective being to make something of its involvement in a common life. This need defines reflective life, in so far as it is implied in the possession of a life that is valued in itself, and not simply as a medium through which other things are valued. The interdependence of these ideas is evident: a life that is valued in itself implies that something has to be made of our involvement in a common life, the value of which is essentially expressed in *our* actions, character and experience. And since we must act upon objects of experience in order to make something of our involvement in a common life, new objects are constantly being created by

the interaction between object and experience of oneself and the world. Thus the foregoing illustration describes reflective life in action, and not simply an object of experience to which a transcendental form must apply. For it is not only the objects themselves that interest us here, we are equally interested in the transition between them. The theory of Forms is a theory concerning the nature of objects and therefore excludes the psychological significance of reflective life in action. This has implications for the understanding of ourselves and the world, for the nature of objects (as the illustration shows), and also for the nature of such abstract objects as beauty and justice.

The concept of reflective life

It is not difficult to substantiate the idea that we live reflectively in the sense that I have indicated in these opening paragraphs. The experience of a life that is valued in itself is constantly suggested by ways in which our experience is organized. A reflective being is, for example, one for which a life that is valued is evident in the rituals of a civilization. A non-reflective being may grieve the loss of a fellow but it does not observe the loss by means of a funeral, nor does it engage in other ceremonies that recognize the value of life in itself, such as those which celebrate birth and marriage. Moreover, when we consider these rituals, the corollary of valuing life in itself is also apparent. For it is only by engaging in it, and indeed by inventing it so that we can engage in it, that a form such as a ritual can have any purpose. Therefore, our taking action, and making something of our involvement in a common life, is complementary to the life-defining forms which give shape and substance to a life that is valued in itself.

However, the life-defining forms of a civilization range far beyond those that we might describe as rituals, and we can regard them as life-defining precisely because they define for us the ways in which we can experience life as something of value, and therefore as the means by which we are able to recognize the value of life and give it purpose. This does not imply, of course, that every person is equally successful or positive, or even that life cannot be lived reflectively in a relatively passive way. The important distinction is one between a life that is lived according to forms that are simply dictated by nature and a life in which it is necessary to decide between various life-defining possibilities. In general, a person decides to become a mother, a politician, an accountant or a soldier, and very often the decision is made after considerable reflection. Whatever might be said about exceptions, reflective life is evidently characteristic of all human cultures, and active participants make decisions of this kind in accordance with the life-defining forms of

their community. There may be differences that make it difficult for us to understand the customs and values of another culture but there are no cases to which the general form of reflective life does not apply.

The implications of this fundamental distinction for our understanding of the cognitive value of art turn on what is involved in our living in accordance with life-defining forms. This is related to the effect of personal inclination on judgement and understanding, and on other forms of apprehension. Since in order to live reflectively we must be receptive to a world of life-defining forms, this implies a need to see things as they are and not as we might otherwise be inclined to see them. The life-defining forms which determine our development can only be effective if we respect the true nature of learning: how to acquire a skill; or how to behave decently and with a proper consideration for others. This fundamental need to see things as they are is necessary to our survival and development in obvious ways. More pertinent to this enquiry, we must be receptive to the human world in which we participate, and to the significance that is placed upon its various activities and social forms. In this respect we must be naïve in seeing things 'as they are'. It is only with the benefit of thought and experience that we are able to question the beliefs and attitudes of the community to which we belong.

Moreover, as mentioned, life as something that is valued also requires us to make something of our involvement in it, and this creates a complication for our need to see things as they are. Generally we are not born into the part that we play in life, we must choose, and even where there is no great difficulty in satisfying the demands made upon us by our choices, there is inevitably some bias created by the way that we decide to live. A talented footballer will exaggerate the importance of football, a talented accountant will exaggerate the value of financial self-enhancement. In so far as the way we decide to live is the expression of a life that is valued, we cannot avoid conceiving of that way as being of special value in relation to reasonable alternatives. To a man who devotes himself to football the values represented by cabinet making or biochemistry might be completely obscure, and this kind of bias is equally true of the cabinetmaker and biochemist. (There are, of course, other ways of approaching life. For example, a person can see work as simply a means to further other things that are more deeply valued, such as the interests of a family or some leisure activity.) In every judgement concerning our sense of ourselves our need to see things as they are is qualified by personal inclination, since life has significance for us chiefly in relation to our making something of our own involvement. Responsibility to a life that is valued (i.e. morality) has meaning to us, in particular, because nothing can be made, by anyone, of

a life that is hopelessly corrupt. Hence personal inclination affects judgement and understanding, and inclination is based upon a need to see things as they are qualified by the decisions that we actually make in living reflectively. It is also significant that for a meticulous person the need to see things as they are implies attention to the value of everything, whereas to a lighter spirit an acceptance of life with all its flaws might be sufficient.

We should also note that the effect of personal inclination on judgement and understanding is influenced by other factors. Our making something of our involvement in a common life means that each individual lives reflectively in competition with others. For example, when a person fails in his or her vocation, or is forced to concede his place to another, his evaluation of the vocation might be severely affected, so that what had been regarded as important is now seen as futile. In this connection judgement and understanding can be influenced, in a number of ways, by rivalry, ambition and self-affirmation, and also by benevolence and solicitude. Significantly, they can be affected, interpersonally and en masse, by the pressure of values and attitudes that are commonly held. However, we also know, from observation of ourselves and others, that these various influences can be resisted by the desire to see things as they are (for example, by our moral will). It is also important to recognize that personal inclination is not simply identified with personal desire; judgement and understanding can also be affected by fear, anxiety, superstition and uncritical conformity to the will of others.

The effect of personal inclination on judgement and understanding, and other forms of apprehension, will be seen as an essential element in the portrayal of reflective life in art, and therefore an important aspect of what distinguishes this theory from those of Plato and Aristotle. But before I discuss Aristotle's theory of mimesis there is a further distinction to be made concerning the nature of life-defining forms. The preceding argument broadly indicates the scope which is suggested for these forms, since it is implied that they are generally relevant to the common life to which we belong. A list could be continued indefinitely and cover the entire social and psychological spectrum of reflective life according to the information at the disposal of the compiler.

Of particular significance to this enquiry are life-defining forms which may be described as transcendent. The concept of reflective life that I have elaborated here implies the existence of life-defining forms that go beyond the simple forms to which I have so far referred. A life that is valued in itself also opens up the possibility of forms through which it is possible to represent and interpret that life. Therefore, there are forms which enable a reflective being

to examine, record, analyse, investigate and evaluate the nature of a life that is valued in itself. History, religion, science and philosophy are clearly among the life-defining forms that can be described as transcendent in this sense.

According to both this argument and Aristotle's theory of mimesis, art can be included as another transcendent life-defining form. But there are two connected points that distinguish the ideas in this discussion from Aristotle's theory. In the first place it is important to recognize that the interpretations of transcendent life-defining forms are no less conditioned than other life-defining forms by the effect of personal inclination on judgement and understanding. Any investigation or evaluation of the life to which we belong must draw some of its substance from the ways in which life is valued by a reflective individual with his or her own approach to making something of that life. Second, art is distinguished from other transcendent life-defining forms by representing reflective life *in action*, and this (as we will see) has implications for its capacity to illuminate the effect of personal inclination on judgement and understanding, and other forms of apprehension. The significance of this connection will emerge from the following refutation of Aristotle's theory, which is focused on an interpretation of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.

The concept of mimesis in Aristotle's *Poetics*

As a way of introducing the idea of art as true to the representation of reflective life, an examination of Aristotle's *Poetics* will help to clarify other important issues. For while Aristotle's rejection of the theory of Forms frees him from any commitment to the notion that art must be understood as being at a third remove from reality, Plato presents, in his middle dialogues – *Phaedo* and *The Republic* – more vigorous objections to the idea of art as a source of knowledge and insight. For the Plato of these dialogues the world of ordinary experience, the world as bound by sensuous impulse and apprehension, is seen as illusory regardless of how our understanding might be rectified, and therefore images and ideas which do not incline us to knowledge and insight are likely to create even greater confusion. Whereas dialectical thought and mathematics can offer both certain knowledge and a spiritual 'catharsis' which frees the mind from sensual attachments, the pleasures of art tend to produce emotional excess and intellectual disorder. This is especially true of music and drama, which characteristically achieve their effects by stirring the feelings of the audience.

In so far as Aristotle's theory, in the *Poetics*, is a response to Plato's condemnation of art, it combines a metaphysical revision of ideas from the

middle dialogues with an attempt to show that the emotional impact of works of art can be essential to their serious purpose. In opposition to the concept of knowledge as a purely intellectual domain Aristotle rejects all attempts to establish a transcendental foundation for human understanding. Seeing our apprehension of things as determined by our participation in nature as natural beings, he rejects the possibility of our possessing a form of understanding that transcends our natural limitations. Hence, there is a strong tendency in his thinking to associate human thought with the self-assertive apprehension of things which he considers to be characteristic of the natural impulses in all animals. This makes it possible to discover a place for feeling and emotion in the kind of knowledge that can be found in art. Thus there are two aims in the following examination of the *Poetics*: to show how a theory of art is related to a conception of knowledge that is rooted in our nature as rational beings, and to assess Aristotle's theory for its sensitivity to the true representation of reflective life.

Like Plato's conception of art, Aristotle's theory is closely related to a theory of knowledge. His rejection of transcendental entities such as the Forms is based on a belief that we can only know the world as it appears to us, as natural beings, with certain limited faculties of thought and perception. Therefore, the fundamental idea that governs his thought in the *Poetics*, the idea of mimesis, is seen as the way in which we naturally learn; it is both the way that we begin to learn about ourselves and the world, and an immediate source of pleasure in beings whose nature is to learn about things and form an understanding of them.

> *It can be seen that poetry was broadly engendered by a pair of causes, both natural. For it is an instinct of human beings, from childhood, to engage in mimesis (indeed, this distinguishes them from other animals: man is the most mimetic of all, and it is through mimesis that he develops his earliest understanding); and equally natural that everyone enjoys mimetic objects... This is why people enjoy looking at images, because by contemplating them it comes about that they understand and infer what each element means, for instance that 'this person is so-and-so'. (Poetics 4)*

This idea of mimesis is opposed to both of the main tendencies in Plato's conception of art. The idea that art moves in a world of illusion that distorts and perverts understanding is countered by Aristotle's belief in a form of understanding that is natural to us as rational beings. And, correspondingly, the pleasure that we take in mimetic representations implies that feeling,

sensation and emotion play an essential part in understanding, and cannot be purged from the process of learning by reason on its own.

Aristotle's method in the *Poetics* is to confine the demonstration of his definition of art to a discussion of the formal characteristics, history and psychological significance of tragedy, illustrating his theory mainly by reference to Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and *Iphigeneia in Aulis* by Euripides. Thus the first half is primarily concerned with showing what is meant by the idea of mimesis as revealed in the formal characteristics of tragedy, and then, from Chapter 13, an attempt is made to relate our experience of tragedies to our experience in general, and thereby show what makes it significant to us as rational beings. In the course of this discussion I will indicate a disparity in the conception of tragedy expounded in these two arguments in order to expose certain weaknesses in the theory itself. Hence I will examine more closely what Aristotle intends by the idea of mimesis.

Part of the meaning of this concept is conveyed in words like mime and mimicry, especially when they are associated with how we learn and with the natural pleasure we get from experiences of this kind. But an exclusive emphasis on this meaning, in translations of 'mimesis' as imitation or copy, is inadequate in relation to literature, and this is significant when we consider the weight given to tragedy in Aristotle's theory. It is obvious that the action of *Oedipus* is not the imitation of an object, in the way that a picture of a table or an impression of a person might be; drama is mainly the work not of imitation but of imagination. For this reason similar words, such as resemblance and likeness, do not capture the full meaning of Aristotle's intention, while 'representation' is insufficiently precise. It is true that a painting of a boat is a representation, and that a drama represents human life in its various aspects. However, the specifications for building a boat are also a representation, as are the plans for a building or a city; 'representation' simply means something that is presented to the mind. The word appearance is more in keeping with Aristotle's use of the idea of mimesis, if we understand 'appearance' in the sense of a resemblance that is a revelation.

When we consider that in the *Poetics* drama is understood as the work of imagination: the ideas of resemblance and revelation are clearly interdependent, as the creation of resemblance is significant only in so far as something is revealed to us, while such revelation occurs only by means of resemblance. Thus we can express Aristotle's theory of mimesis as the appearance of an object or action in an effective medium, employing its modes in an appropriate way. Mimesis as appearance is therefore true both to the conception of art as related to learning through resemblances, and to

a theory of knowledge that is based upon the apprehension of phenomena as they appear to a rational being. Since Aristotle believes, in a general sense, in the truth of our understanding of phenomena as they appear to us, and that this is the only possible basis for a true understanding of them, he does not question the validity of art as a means of constructing a revelatory resemblance of things as they appear to us in ordinary experience.

However, the obvious response to this basic formulation of the theory is to ask in what way art can be revelatory, if it is nothing more than a resemblance, or appearance, of things as they are experienced by us. An example of the natural pleasure that we take in images is exemplified by our perceiving a likeness, as when we recognize that 'this person is so-and-so'. However, this is a modest contribution to our understanding of things; at most it could be used as a technical aid for seeing into how things are organized and how they work. Aristotle's answer to the question 'What does mimesis reveal?' is the central idea of the *Poetics*, and is presented in his conception of the nature of tragedy.

> *Tragedy, then, is mimesis of an action which is elevated, complete, and of magnitude; in language embellished by distinct forms in its sections, employing the mode of enactment, not narrative; and through pity and fear accomplishing the catharsis of such emotions… Since tragedy is mimesis of an action, and the action is conducted by agents who should have certain qualities in both character and thought (as it is these factors which allow us to ascribe qualities to their actions too, and it is in their actions that all men find success or failure), the plot is the mimesis of the action – for I use 'plot' to denote the construction of events, 'character' to mean that in virtue of which we ascribe certain qualities to the agents, and 'thought' to cover the parts in which, through speech, they demonstrate something or declare their views. Tragedy as a whole, therefore, must have six components, which give it its qualities – namely, plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle and lyric poetry... The most important of these things is the structure of events, because tragedy is mimesis not of persons but of action and life; and happiness and unhappiness consist in action, and the goal is a certain kind of action, not a qualitative state: it is in virtue of character that people have certain qualities, but through their actions that they are happy or the reverse. (Poetics 6)*

This definition of tragedy is developed in a way that emphasizes the centrality of plot at the expense of characterization. From this point of view the

emotional effect of mimesis in tragedy comes from the skill with which the dramatist can manipulate the unfolding of events, by means of devices like recognition and reversal, rather than from our interest in relations between (moral) character and experience. Therefore, in this part of the work Aristotle is more concerned with a definition of what makes a tragedy formally complete, in terms of a logical and aesthetically satisfying sequence of events, than with the psychological interaction between characters or the possibility of revealing the psychology of characters through the course of the action. Thus, when he is in a position to respond to the question of how tragedy can reveal life in a distinctive and significant way, his argument is hampered by an unfortunate bias towards the mechanics of plot.

In Chapter 9 he compares tragedy and history as ways in which life can be represented, and asserts the former to be more philosophical and more serious because it is concerned with universals. On the surface the comparison is reasonable, in so far as a simple chronicle of events does not interpret the forces behind them in order to indicate their universal significance.

> *It is also evident from what has been said that it is not the poet's function to relate actual events, but the* kinds *of things that might occur and are possible in terms of probability or necessity. The difference between the historian and the poet is not that between using verse or prose. No, the difference is this: that the one relates actual events, the other the kinds of things that might occur. Consequently, poetry is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars. 'Universal' means the kinds of things which it suits a certain kind of person to say or do, in terms of probability or necessity: poetry aims for this, even though attaching names to the agents. (Poetics 9)*

Aristotle makes this point by contrasting the simple reporting of what a person has said or done (what contingently has happened) with the imagined world of the dramatist, in which what happens is either probable or necessary. In tragedy it is possible to shape speech and action by means of the general characteristics of the medium. Thus the representation of a complex and unified sequence of events in which speech and actions are consistent with character, and the action as a whole convinces us of its truth to life, can reveal features which are universal to human life. In relation to tragedy, moreover, the revelatory aspect of mimesis lies partly in the assembling of characters and events in a coherently unfolding narrative, such as we could never encounter in ordinary life. This extension of the idea of revelatory resemblance follows from Aristotle's emphasis on the importance of plot.

At this point the definition of tragedy as the appearance of an action in an effective medium, in which 'appearance' combines resemblance with revelation (mimesis), has been given its complete formulation in the *Poetics*. But while it is clear that tragedy possesses certain distinctive powers in the representation of life, Aristotle's conception is a limited one, and while he shows how tragedy can be seen as representing universal truth its being universal does not, in itself, make it profoundly interesting.

A skilful dramatist, like a skilful mimic, can create an appearance based upon resemblance in which a plausible sequence of events and language which is appropriate to character draws us into a world of imaginative revelation. But this in itself does not make the revelation universal in any significant way, and it is not obvious that an appearance that is amusing but superficial should be regarded as more philosophical and more serious than history. It is only when the representation of life is serious and of a certain magnitude that tragedy can be more serious and philosophical than history. And even this is not a strong affirmation of the cognitive value of drama, since the serious representation of human life is not solely the province of art. Aristotle merely points to the formal advantage of a medium for which the events represented are probable rather than actual – in such a medium it is possible to organize the different aspects of what is represented in a manner which is more convincingly lifelike.

However, it could be suggested that rather more than this is implied in Aristotle's very brief and sketchy remarks about the universality of what is conveyed in tragedy. The representation of what is probable and necessary, in the mimesis created by a drama that is serious and imposing, has the power to assemble appearances on a scale that goes far beyond the modest example that is given in Chapter 9. In addition to making a character's style of speech appropriate to the type of person portrayed, the dramatist is able to assemble appearances by creating a world of dramatic interaction in which the qualities of one character are revealed by the behaviour of another, or that of several others; and can make the play itself represent a social world by the totality of characters whose actions constitute the work as a whole. This means that the dramatist can both create appearances that are convincingly lifelike, in that different aspects of character and behaviour can be harmonized in the mimesis of a human action, and assemble appearances in a way that represents the form that is taken by human life and experience.

There are many ways in which the form of human life can be seen in relation to the concept of necessity, as, for example, in the most obvious kinds of biological necessity. Nourishment is necessary to the survival of any living

creature, and so are light and oxygen. The processes of growth and decay are biologically necessary, and necessity of this kind is relevant to Aristotle's argument: growing younger by the day, for example, is not possible by the standards of either probability or necessity. However, when we consider reflective life these concepts can be more decisively placed in relation to each other. Thus, the circumstances of Oedipus, turning upon his being required by the oracle to discover Laius' murderer and so end the famine in Thebes, are perfectly acceptable by standards of probability. Also, as the action of the drama progresses Oedipus' insistence on acquiring a knowledge that is increasingly menacing to his own and his family's welfare is within the bounds of probability, and has a psychological realism that makes the action dramatically compelling. At the same time this realism owes its power to a less obvious conformity to standards of necessity. It is significant that the famine occurs at the moment of fulfilment in Oedipus' life, when his ambitions are fully realized. Dramatic intensity is created, therefore, by the necessity for him to take action if he is to continue in his success. It further conforms to standards of probability that the only alternative to successful action is ruin, and so the very nature of reflective life (as it is realized in the world of the play) makes it necessary for him to take action.

If, by virtue of its power to assemble appearances, tragedy can represent the form of human life then Aristotle's theory might show this representation as an expression of serious and philosophical interest. His theory assumes that, as beings with a desire to learn about the world to which we belong, we naturally possess such an interest, but this raises a question concerning the disinterested pursuit of insight and learning. Any interest that we take in the form and significance of human life is unavoidably influenced by what life means to us as individuals, and therefore our beliefs are determined by feelings and inclinations, such as our hopes and fears, desires and aversions. For this reason Aristotle is concerned with questions of how and under what conditions we are able to respond to dramatic representations of human life, with respect to both the form and structure of tragedy, and the nature of its insight. In Chapters 7 to 12 he considers how the formal organization of tragedy must be related to the psychology of the audience or reader if the play is to excite our interest, and consequently affirms the need for it to conform to certain dramatic principles, such as those of narrative unity or narrative technique (for example, the structural devices of recognition and reversal). In Chapter 13, he considers the material that is suited to tragedy in relation to our psychology, and this is significantly related to our psychological capacity

for responding to serious and disturbing representations of human life and experience.

> *Next, after the foregoing discussion, we must consider what should be aimed at and avoided in the construction of plots, and how tragedy's effect is to be achieved. Since, then, the structure of the finest tragedy should be complex not simple, as well as representing fearful and pitiable events (for this is the special feature of such mimesis), it is, to begin with, clear that neither should decent men be shown changing from prosperity to adversity, as this is not fearful nor yet pitiable but repugnant, nor the depraved changing from adversity to prosperity, because this is the least tragic of all, possessing none of the necessary qualities, since it arouses neither fellow-feeling nor pity nor fear. Nor, again, should tragedy show the very wicked person falling from prosperity to adversity: such a pattern might arouse fellow-feeling, but not pity or fear, since the one is felt for the undeserving victim of adversity, the other for one like ourselves (pity for the undeserving, fear for one like ourselves); so the outcome will be neither pitiable nor fearful. This leaves, then, the person in-between these cases. Such a person is someone not pre-eminent in virtue and justice, and one who falls into adversity not through evil and depravity, but through some kind of error; and one belonging to the class of those who enjoy great renown and prosperity, such as Oedipus, Thyestes, and eminent men of such lineages. (Poetics 13)*

There is an important qualification to be made of this conception of the tragic hero in Aristotle's theory. In Chapter 15, he states that 'first and foremost' the characters in tragedy must be 'good', and in Chapters 1 and 2 we are told that in elevated forms such as epic and tragedy the characters are 'better than ourselves'. This is obviously consistent with 'those who enjoy great renown and prosperity', but such a condition does not imply that the characters are morally better than ourselves. The tragic experience depends upon a change from prosperity to adversity, and so the prosperity of the hero is essential to the unfolding of the action. However, the moral superiority of the tragic hero is consistent with Aristotle's moral thought, and seems especially relevant in the case of Oedipus. Oedipus is not better in being morally sensitive, in being superhumanly just, honest or compassionate, but his social position and responsibilities expose him to dangers that raise him above the lives of ordinary men. It is consistent with Aristotle's moral thought in the Eudemian Ethics and Nichomachean Ethics, in both of which politics is regarded as supreme among the practical sciences, that such exposure entitles Oedipus

to be regarded as better than ourselves. This is especially relevant because politics is at the heart of the play and Oedipus is at the heart of the politics. For Aristotle the hero of Sophocles' play must be more than prosperous and renowned, he must be a person of moral substance.

These ideas express what is, for Aristotle, the essence of tragedy as the mimetic representation of human life. They enable us to see what he means by 'an action which is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude and through the arousal of fear and pity effecting the catharsis of such emotions'. His aim is not simply to counter Plato's objections to the power of art to arouse feeling by showing that feeling can play a significant part in the revelatory process of tragedy; it is a basic tenet of the theory that feeling should determine what tragedy can reveal. Thus, while it is possible for a dramatist to represent the transition of a morally perfect man from prosperity to adversity, this would not have the revelatory power of tragedy because it would not arouse fear and pity in us; though the action itself could be intelligible and psychologically revealing such a play would fail to engage our sympathy, and therefore our interest and attention.

The insistence upon a deep connection between our response to the action and what is revealed in it may show us what Aristotle intends by the concept of catharsis, and it is certain that, contrary to its familiar use, he does not intend it to describe an emotional state (Nussbaum 2001). To make sense of how an intense imaginative experience of fear and pity might be necessary for an act of understanding we must assume that the idea of catharsis refers to the purging or overcoming of feelings which normally inhibit our capacity for such understanding ('through fear and pity accomplishing the catharsis of such emotions': see earlier quotation from *Poetics*, Chapter 6). Fear and pity can be seen as likely to inhibit our contemplation of experiences that are painful and disturbing, and Aristotle is clearly suggesting that our inhibition can be overcome, in tragedy, by the arousal of those very feelings when our interest is engaged by an appropriate kind of mimesis. In other words, when our natural interest in human life is aroused our normal anxieties can be removed by intensely sympathetic feelings of fear and pity, and we are able to contemplate experience that is of universal significance; 'catharsis' is used by Aristotle to describe a psychological mechanism which makes it possible, by way of the feelings themselves, to overcome emotions that normally prevent us from engaging in such contemplation. He implies that in our response to the mimesis of an action appropriate to tragedy we undergo an experience of fear and pity that is continuously renewed and transformed into aesthetic

awareness and pleasure. In Chapter 14 he asserts, 'Those who use spectacle to create an effect not of the fearful but only of the sensational have nothing at all in common with tragedy, as it is not every pleasure one should seek from tragedy, but the appropriate kind. And since the poet should create the pleasure which comes from pity and fear through mimesis, obviously this should be built into the events'.

This psychological account of our willing involvement in the disturbing revelations of tragedy is anticipated by Aristotle's use of 'catharsis' in the penultimate paragraph of his *Politics*. Having promised to treat the subject with greater precision in his discussion of poetry, he makes a less subtle and complex use of the concept, in relation to the power of musical modes expressing passion and excitement to quell the feelings of individuals in a state of religious frenzy. In both cases an intense aesthetic experience of pathological emotion removes the pathological effects, and the parallel implies a psychologically specific intention behind Aristotle's use of the concept.

So while Aristotle defends the idea of tragedy as a powerful revelation of universal truths, an essential interconnection between thought and feeling means that this revelation is narrowly circumscribed in relation to experience in general. What it can reveal is strictly determined by how we respond to the representation of human life and how we protect ourselves from the contemplation of things which are painful and disturbing to us. This suggests that, for Aristotle, the value of art lies not in its capacity for a thorough investigation of the nature of human life and experience but in a distinctive experience of insight into that life, one in which a particular kind of insight is more relevant than comprehensiveness. In this respect the formal characteristics of tragedy, which make it possible to express what is universal, are significantly related to this distinctive way of seeing ourselves.

I have developed this interpretation of Aristotle's conception of tragedy, based on a careful reading of the text, in order to make the implied tendencies of the theory more explicit: for example, in the ways in which he uses the concepts of necessity and catharsis. This has helped me to provide an account of Aristotle's thought as a model for how we might understand the place of art in the knowledge of ourselves. My purpose now is to evaluate such a model in order to move from his concept of mimesis towards a more convincing theory. In the history of philosophical aesthetics Aristotle's theory is unrivalled and so it is an ideal text for this purpose, both in the breadth of its grasp relating to the philosophical meaning of art and in the cohesiveness of its various elements.

Here we should examine the conflict within this theory which has already been mentioned, in connection with Chapter 6. The first half of the *Poetics*, which discusses the formal characteristics of tragedy as a mimesis of human action, is dominated by the idea that the assembling of appearances can be identified with the arrangement and structure of events, and therefore that plot is the single most important element. In the second half, from Chapter 13, this judgement is seriously compromised by Aristotle's desire to explain the psychological conditions for an experience of tragedy. For it now appears that this experience is wholly dependent upon the representation of the right kind of person. Moreover, the universal truth that is revealed in tragedy depends to a significant degree on the character and actions of this person, as well as on his or her circumstances. Thus the character of the hero and the arrangement and structure of events in the action are actually so closely interrelated that it is impossible to consider one as being independent of, or more important than, the other.

Furthermore, the change in emphasis in Aristotle's theory implies that tragedy can be universal in an important sense only when it imaginatively explores the life and experience of individuals, and this is contrary to his assumptions about characterization. For our life and experience are only superficially understood by making reference to moral and personal qualities, as attributes which can be ascribed to a person simply and without qualification. So, while we might agree with Aristotle's assessment of Oedipus as a man who is better than ourselves because his position in society makes him pre-eminently important and responsible, the dramatist's interest in him goes beyond a simple recognition of his outward character.

Aristotle's conception of character is given a precise formulation in Chapter 6: 'Character is that which reveals moral choice – that is, when otherwise unclear, what kinds of thing an agent chooses or rejects'. However, what is seen and understood by a person is also relevant to character: for example, in the bias of his or her thought, the areas of ignorance, and the tacit assent to prevailing attitudes and values. As we will see in my interpretation of the play, Oedipus has a complex history and psychological background which is relevant to who he is, and to how he is seen by others. This background is formed by his decisions and actions in the circumstances of his life: these determine his reality as a reflective being. Most significantly, the action of the play illuminates the psychological intricacies of a life in which personal inclination affects judgement and understanding. To illustrate this point we can consider Hamlet's speech to the players, in which he describes the purpose of playing, 'to hold, as t'were, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own

feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure' (Act 3 scene ii), and compare this version of mimesis with the exploratory force of Shakespeare's play.

These observations are closely connected to another aspect of form in works of art. A theory that is based on the idea of resemblance assumes that an artistic genre is indeed akin to holding 'the mirror up to nature'; whereas genre itself is a life-defining form and susceptible to the bias created by personal inclination. Different forms of drama are distinguished not simply by differences of subject matter, they also view human life and experience in different ways. *Hamlet*, *Hedda Gabler* and *Endgame* reflect different ways in which genre is used as a life-defining form in order to represent human life and experience. In each of these plays form has its own rhetorical purpose. In this connection Aristotle's theory of mimesis is compromised by the details in his own exposition: the idea of genre as a life-defining form is implied in his argument that tragedy should portray a certain kind of man or woman, and his endorsement of the essential part that is played in this genre by our feelings and sympathies entails that it can only function as such a form.

To summarize the argument: according to Aristotle, the formal elements of tragedy are seen as media for the creation of revelatory resemblances, or for the assembling of appearances, and this is sufficient for the dramatist to represent a complex human action which has a serious universal significance. This discussion challenges his theory by showing that dramatic form cannot be regarded as having a serious universal significance if its elements are seen simply as media for the creation of resemblances. A serious universal significance requires a more subtle conception of relations between dramatic form and the form of what is represented, namely reflective life.

The life that is common to a people or a civilization is given its character by a multiplicity of life-defining forms, and, in order to represent such a life, dramatic form must itself be a life-defining form of a certain kind, a transcendent life-defining form. By representing our life in action dramatic art is able to illuminate the interaction of nature and the forms of society with inner experience and human psychology, and thereby to illuminate the effect of personal inclination on judgement and understanding. Thus, for example, *Oedipus* represents kingship as a life-defining form in relation to which the hero gives form to his own life, and through which he acquires an understanding of himself and the world.

An interpretation of *Oedipus the King*

We have just seen that Aristotle's conception of mimesis, as an assembling of appearances, fails to examine the rhetorical nature of genre. For if drama is a life-defining form, and subject to the conditions affecting life-defining forms in general, then it follows that any genre will have its own perspective, and represent life from a particular point of view. In *Oedipus* there is a significant opposition of genres which has a direct bearing on the ability of the dramatist to illuminate the effect of personal inclination on judgement and understanding. This is an opposition between the high literary form of tragedy and the low form of the riddle, and it works because the riddle exposes the means by which tragedy persuades us to form an understanding of ourselves and the world. In this connection we can accept Aristotle's definition of tragedy as the downfall of a good but fallible man, who is better and more powerful than ourselves, and therefore likely to arouse interest and sympathy. In *Oedipus* this confident definition of the high genre represents the kind of significance that is opposed, without being simply negated, by the challenge of another genre.

Before I develop these ideas we should consider the medium of dramatic performance and its significance in our experience and understanding of the play. We cannot expect tragedy, as the representation of reflective life in action, to be immediately grasped by an audience, it can only be understood through a process of reading and reflection. However, while it is unlikely that an audience seeing the play for the first time would be aware of the complex opposition between genres which I have mentioned, there is a fusion of dramatic elements leading us to a more serious form of reflection.

Oedipus is often likened to a romance or fairy tale transformed into a horror story, these being suggested by the idea of a lost child recovered by its parents which is framed in a haunting and violent manner, and there is a bleak echo of this idea at the end of the drama, when Oedipus makes a plea for the welfare of his own 'lost' children. At the same time, the play is a murder mystery, in which, without knowing it, the person responsible for the investigation is himself the murderer. It is not difficult to appreciate that the use of these elements is closely connected to our immediate response to *Oedipus* in the theatre. So, while it is frequently pointed out that Sophocles is making use of a traditional story, the outcome of which will have been familiar to his audience, he is also recasting this story, and the use of narrative elements akin to romance, horror story and murder mystery probably created the kind of dramatic tension and excitement that we ourselves experience. In the dramatic structure of the play these narrative elements involve us

imaginatively in the action and this leads us to consider the opposition of tragedy and the riddle.

The nature of this development is relevant to my criticism of mimesis. In contrast to Aristotle's idea of revelatory resemblance, for which the significance of feeling is mainly a question of empathy for the tragic hero, emphasis upon the distinction between theatrical experience and reflection gives a different significance to feeling. An adequate grasp of the representation of life is dependent upon our feelings of involvement in the action, as it is only by means of these feelings that we can form any real conception of what is happening to the characters and its significance. In relation to this, Sophocles subtly modulates the narrative elements suggesting murder mystery and horror story, as the increasingly insistent probing of Oedipus leads him further and further into the horror of his own situation. Resonance is created by a psychological development which is most clearly suggested when the focus of interest moves from murder investigation to Oedipus' compulsion to know the truth about his own history and circumstances.

Tragedy is the more complex genre precisely because it is concerned with serious questions about character, its unity and moral significance, and the mystery and horror of the action in *Oedipus* merge disquietingly into an atmosphere of insecurity about self-knowledge. Hence we will see how tragedy, with its fundamental impulse to define and clarify character, is opposed in this play by the riddle. On the one hand dramatic form in this play goes beyond the assembling of appearances and revelatory resemblance to analyse the psychological basis of reflective life, and on the other we can only engage with such analysis by being fully involved in the story and drawn in by its emotional power.

Phases of the action

Sophocles divides the action of the play into five phases of about three hundred lines each. After the opening phase, in which Oedipus is introduced, each phase begins with the first appearance of one of the other characters; the second phase with that of Teiresias; the third with Jocasta; the fourth the messenger; and the fifth the second messenger. The moment of recognition and reversal, when Oedipus discovers that he himself is the murderer of Laius, occurs in the middle of the third phase, and therefore midway through the action of the play as a whole. This is the point at which the riddle of the murder becomes for Oedipus the riddle to discover the truth about himself.

Phase one

The action is initiated by an order from the temple of Apollo, which decrees that Thebes can only be released from a wasting famine when the agent of Laius' death has been discovered and punished. In desperation over the suffering of his people, Oedipus himself has sent Creon to the temple; everything in the subsequent action is determined by an acceptance of divine authority, and the pre-eminence of this life-defining form in the world of the play is most deeply portrayed through the characterization of Oedipus. Hence the priest, who refers to the Sphinx's riddle, is reassured by the supernatural assistance that has been given to Oedipus by the god.

> You came and by your coming saved our city,
> freed us from tribute which we paid of old
> to the Sphinx, cruel singer. This you did
> in virtue of no knowledge we could give you,
> in virtue of no teaching; it was God
> that aided you, men say, and you are held
> with God's assistance to have saved our lives.
> Now Oedipus, Greatest in all men's eyes,
> here falling at your feet we all entreat you
> find us some strength for rescue. (Lines 35–42)

Though an embattled Oedipus will later shrug off his debt to the gods and claim the power of answering the Sphinx's riddle as his own, he agrees with the people that a heartfelt appeal to the gods is essential for the welfare of the city; and this is a form of respect that is especially binding upon the person to whom the welfare of the city is entrusted. The necessity for the king to act in accordance with the will of Apollo is a basic thread in the action of the play, and it becomes an important complication affecting the situation of Oedipus.

The opposition of tragedy and the riddle is already suggested in the action initiated by Creon's appearance and his message from the oracle. The manner in which Creon's message from the oracle turns the action of the play into a riddle for Oedipus is related to certain aspects of the dramatic situation suggested by the speeches. It is significant, for example, that, in his opening speech, Oedipus announces himself as 'Oedipus whom all men call the Great' when making his response to the suffering people of the city. The speech as a whole suggests that he announces himself so as a form of reassurance to the people that he possesses both the power and the will to save their land.

This attitude is confirmed by the priest, who makes it clear that the king is great because he has miraculously saved the land in the past. In his lengthy and rhapsodic appeal, which gives expression to the sufferings of the people, the priest also conveys an important fact about the relationship between the king and his people (lines 14–57). Oedipus is able to speak of himself as he does because an unspoken agreement with them affirms his nobility as an agent of divine assistance, and this will remain unquestioned so long as he continues to protect them. This situation is relevant to the sense of upheaval that is created by Creon's delivery of the oracle's message.

> King Phoebus in plain words commanded us
> to drive out a pollution from our land,
> pollution grown ingrained within the land;
> drive it out, said the God, not cherish it,
> til it's past cure. (Lines 96–98)

> By banishing a man, or expiation
> of blood by blood, since it is murder guilt
> which holds our city in this destroying storm. (Lines 100–101)

> The God commanded clearly: let some one
> punish with force this dead man's murderers. (Lines 106–107)

In the confusion of different reactions to this message we can discern the signs of a difference between the will of the people and the interests of the king, potentially disrupting their unspoken agreement, and as the action progresses it will become apparent that the order from the temple of Apollo is intended to have this effect. This purpose is anticipated by the delayed return of Creon, about which Oedipus is clearly agitated – it is characteristic of the action of the play that, as the object of its riddle, he is constantly unsettled, at one moment by procrastination and at the next by having to make critical decisions on the spur of the moment. In this atmosphere the order from the temple, while appearing to be clear and explicit, recedes into shadow when it is closely examined. Rhetorically, Creon makes the clarity of the order seem indisputable, in the phrase 'King Phoebus in plain words commanded us'; however, though the main ideas are clear, relations between them are unexplained.

These lines convey the message from the temple as consisting of three points: that the land is burdened by a moral pollution from which it must

free itself; that this will be achieved when the murderer or murderers of the dead king Laius have been punished by exile or execution; that murder guilt is the moral pollution which keeps the city in its present despair. However, the command is not clear about the connection between the moral pollution and its precise cause. Though the suffering is linked to the murder of Laius, the message does not directly associate the pollution which has overwhelmed the city with the act of murder. Thus, it is equally possible that the origin of this pollution lies in the failure of the people of the city to investigate the crime and punish the guilty. This is implied when Oedipus questions Creon about the negligence of the people in this respect (lines 125–140). Moreover, the ambiguity seems to have been fully registered by some of those present, for at the end of this scene, and in violent contrast with the priest's optimism, the Chorus gives vent to its anxiety and fear.

> What is the sweet spoken word of God from the shrine of
> Pytho rich in gold
> that has come to glorious Thebes?
> I am stretched on the rack of doubt, and terror and
> trembling hold
> my heart, O Delian Healer, and I worship full of fears
> for what doom you will bring to pass, new or renewed in the
> revolving years.
> Speak to me, immortal voice,
> child of golden Hope. (Lines 151–158)

Instead of resolution, the old men of the Chorus express an even greater sense of insecurity before the will of Apollo. Their plea to Apollo, Athene, Artemis, Zeus and Dionysus (lines 159–216) magnifies the uncertainty of the situation, and this is related to more than the ambiguity of Creon's message. The mood of disquiet is further deepened by the belief that Laius' murderers were many in number (lines 122–123). This obviously makes the task of discovering and punishing the guilty much more difficult, and intensifies the people's sense of unease.

By now the riddle presented to Oedipus is beginning to form. His response (lines 216–275) has been cleverly elicited by Creon; while assuming a decisive attitude which conforms to the tone of decision in the command, Oedipus has been guiled into making conflicting gestures. By referring to his earlier status as a fellow citizen he unites himself in spirit with the people in a common task, as a necessary recourse to obtaining useful information. At the same

time he warns his 'fellow citizens' not to withhold information, and this is an open display of sovereignty. In this speech we are given some insight into what is meant by moral pollution in the world of the play. It is clear that in his interpretation of Apollo's justice Oedipus seeks to threaten evasiveness and concealment with punishment of the greatest severity. Making use of the ambiguity in the oracle's command, he makes a direct identification of the pollution with any citizen who refuses to help, and so revives the anxiety of the people about their negligence in connection with the murder.

> But if you shall keep silence, if perhaps
> some one of you, to shield a guilty friend,
> or for his own sake shall reject my words –
> hear what I shall do then:
> I forbid that man, whoever he be, my land,
> my land where I hold sovereignty and throne;
> and I forbid any to welcome him
> or cry him greeting or make him a sharer
> in sacrifice or offering to the Gods,
> or give him water for his hands to wash.
> I command all to drive him from their homes,
> since he is our pollution, as the oracle
> of Pytho's God proclaimed him now to me. (Lines 232–244)

This warning leads into a curse upon the murderer, or murderers.

> Upon the murderer I invoke this curse –
> whether he is one man and all unknown,
> or one of many – may he wear out his life
> in misery to miserable doom!
> If with my knowledge he lives at my hearth
> I pray that I myself may feel my curse. (Lines 246–251)

Oedipus' identification with the order betrays his anxiety. By attributing pollution to anyone who withholds vital information he makes indiscriminate allegations, while the reference to his own hearth seems to be an exaggerated gesture. Significantly, the former increases the anxiety of the people about their own responsibility, while the latter is an unwitting act of self-condemnation. However, it is evident, in this volatile atmosphere, that Oedipus has a precise sense of how justice should be administered. Debasement in the eyes of the

world, as the bearer of a pollution that has ravaged the land, is seen by him as far worse than death.

Thus, while it seems that in this speech Oedipus is at the height of his moral authority, and assumes the responsibility that is desired and expected from him, it also seems that his actions are influenced by his fear of the god. This is suggested, in particular, in the way that his speech as a whole moves from a violent and intimidating condemnation of the murderer to an incongruous identification of himself with the victim Laius (lines 259–267). This recalls another moment (lines 136–141) in which Oedipus exaggerates his affinity with the victim, since, especially as he has married Laius' widow, there does not appear at this point to be any close personal connection. The language of heartfelt tribute, embellished by inclusion of the ancestors of the dead man, intensifies the opposition between Apollo, Laius, Oedipus and his supporters on one side, and the murderer, or murderers, and their allies on the other.

In *Oedipus*, it is of the utmost significance that the will of the god is understood as being not arbitrary but concerned with some moral failure; this implies that moral clarity is crucial in any response made to his demand. For Oedipus and the people such clarity is elusive, not only in relation to the precise origin of moral pollution, but also in relation to how this pollution originates from the murder of Laius. The reason why this death should be the cause of famine remains obscure, and the obscurity is tellingly reflected in the curse which Oedipus invokes upon the guilty. Fearfully, he follows the order of the oracle and identifies justice with the will of the god. Once again it is the Chorus, in their response to this speech, who indicate an essential aspect of the action, this time by objecting that since it is Apollo who has given the order it is appropriate that he should identify the guilty for them (lines 275–278). Instead of being shaken from his subjugation Oedipus brushes them aside. At the moment of his highest expression of moral authority he unknowingly places himself in a moral limbo, a position of weakness that will soon be exploited.

Phase two

Since Oedipus refuses to question the god any further, the Chorus then suggests that help should be sought from Teiresias, as he is the person 'who sees most often what the Lord Apollo sees' (lines 284–285). As it happens Creon has already made the same suggestion, and Oedipus welcomes the seer with elaborate ceremony and a heightened sense of expectancy. Teiresias is led in by a little boy, and this gives to his entrance an air of innocent unworldliness,

an impression of his being a man of truth and wisdom, unmoved by the attractions of power. This is effective, as it attracts the sympathy of the Chorus in what turns out to be an unexpectedly acrimonious encounter between Oedipus and the seer. This begins with an exchange in which Teiresias refuses to disclose his knowledge (lines 315–344), and predictably enrages Oedipus.

Oedipus
Indeed I am
so angry I shall not hold back a jot
of what I think. For I would have you know
I think you were complotter of the deed
and doer of the deed save in so far
as for the actual killing. Had you had eyes
I would have said alone you murdered him.

Teiresias
Yes? Then I warn you faithfully to keep
the letter of your proclamation and
from this day forth to speak no word of greeting
to these nor me; you are the land's pollution. (Lines 345–353)

The implications of this accusation are clear to the audience: if the authority of Teiresias goes unquestioned then Oedipus has willingly and explicitly cursed and condemned himself. Moreover, Teiresias uses his authority to dispel the ambiguity of the oracle concerning the source of moral pollution, placing it unequivocally in the murderer, 'you are the land's pollution'. In doing this he begins to remove the unspoken understanding between Oedipus and the people; by placing the origin of pollution in the murderer the seer liberates the people from the fear surrounding their own negligence. Their sense of relief is expressed at the end of the scene in a freely flowing reflection upon the fate of the guilty man (lines 461–512).

Who is the man proclaimed
By Delphi's prophetic rock
as the bloody handed murderer,
the doer of deeds that none dare name?

Now is the time for him to run
with a stronger foot
than Pegasus
for the child of Zeus leaps in arms upon him
with fire and the lightning bolt,
and terribly close on his heels
are the Fates that never miss. (Lines 462–472)

Now they are divided by a feeling of liberation from their fears and a sense of loyalty to the man whose wit rescued them from the Sphinx.

A deliberate psychological pattern can be discerned behind the action of this scene. The protracted unwillingness of Teiresias to divulge his knowledge, while repeatedly insinuating that he is unwilling because his interrogator is guilty, is designed to unsettle Oedipus, who is quick to recognize this when, at last, the main accusation is made against him ('How shamelessly you started up this taunt!' (line 354)). By goading Oedipus into making wild accusations, Teiresias wins the sympathy of the Chorus and is thereby permitted to make a revelation that might not otherwise have been accepted. Although when the people are desperate for help the seer is respectfully treated as a source of hope, the action of the play as a whole does not suggest that he is always trusted. In less threatening circumstances for the city Teiresias might generally be seen as a 'trick devising quack' (line 387); it seems that the status of prophets and seers is highly unstable and changes with the times.

The design is completed by turning Oedipus' investigation against himself and thereby releasing the people from their fears, and the deliberate nature of this action suggests a link between the seer and Creon. Creon's message from the oracle has created doubts in the Chorus about the gravity of their negligence in failing to seek out and punish the murderer; now Teiresias sways the Chorus by clearly identifying pollution with the murderer, and manipulates Oedipus in order to weaken their loyalty to him. This connection between Creon's message and Teiresias' design points to an association between the seer and Creon or the oracle, or all three, to devise a plot to depose the king. In the heat of the moment Oedipus can hardly be expected to grasp all of the possibilities, but his speech enables us to see something of what lies behind the action that is directly presented to us: 'And now / you would expel me, / because you think that you will find a place / by Creon's throne' (lines 399–401). The response has evidently been rehearsed.

If you are king, at least I have the right
no less to speak in my defence against you.
Of that much I am master. I am no slave
of yours, but Loxias', and so I shall not
enroll myself with Creon for my patron. (Lines 408–411)

Teiresias argues that he is not the slave of kings, and therefore has nothing to gain from their deposition. To strengthen his position, he asserts that he is Loxias' (Apollo's) slave, and, by extension, a servant of the oracle at the temple at Pytho. In other words, Teiresias is a disciple, or agent, of the oracle, and this clarifies how it is that Teiresias is the person 'who sees most often what the Lord Apollo sees'. The dialectical sleight of hand in his answer both refutes the argument and reminds Oedipus and the Chorus that Teiresias enjoys a position that is beyond the authority of merely temporal powers. But it also brings the oracle into the conspiracy against Oedipus, as the close connection between oracle and seer strengthens the causal relation between the ambiguity of the decree and Teiresias' release of the people from the threat of pollution that hangs over them. Our recognition of this co-ordination of action between the oracle and the seer enables us to see the oracle's purpose as fundamental to the action of the play.

Thus we can see how Teiresias' association with the temple explains his knowledge of Oedipus' history. Characteristically, Teiresias attributes it to his prophetic gift (lines 460–461), and this is accepted by the Chorus as a reflection of his affinity with the oracle – 'Delphi's prophetic rock' (lines 462–463). Whereas Oedipus sees himself threatened simply by political ambition, it becomes apparent that he inhabits a world in which power that is connected with religion is being exercised in ways that he cannot recognize or understand. Far from being simply a 'trick devising quack' (line 387), Teiresias has unusual psychological skills, which he demonstrates in weakening the tie between Oedipus and the people. Now, having answered the accusation of a conspiracy with Creon, Teiresias creates a prophetic spell which plays upon the fears of Oedipus about his parents, and taunts him with his ignorance.

Since you have taunted me with being blind,
here is my word for you.
You have your eyes but see not where you are
in sin, nor where you live, nor whom you live with.
Do you know who your parents are? Unknowing
you are an enemy to kith and kin
in death, beneath the earth, and in this life.

A deadly footed, double striking curse,
from father and mother both, shall drive you forth
out of this land, with darkness on your eyes,
that now have such straight vision. Shall there be
a place will not be harbour to your cries,
a corner of Cithaeron will not ring
in echo to your cries, soon, soon, –
when you shall learn the secret of your marriage,
which steered you to a haven in this house, –
haven no haven, after lucky voyage?
And of the multitude of other evils
establishing a grim equality
between you and your children, you know nothing.
So, muddy with contempt my words and Creon's!
Misery shall grind no man as it will you. (Lines 412–427)

The purpose of this spell is to create in Oedipus the feeling that he will inevitably be driven forth from the land 'with darkness on your eyes'. In the guise of a visionary, Teiresias leads his victim towards self-mutilation, anticipating the psychological consequences when the king finally uncovers the truth about his own history. In particular Teiresias knows that Oedipus is now trapped in a moral limbo in which the question of right and wrong has been reduced to a contest between them, and that, in losing this contest, Oedipus will disintegrate psychologically before the seer's 'prophetic' eminence. Teiresias reformulates his prophecy in literal terms at lines 454–457, so it does not merely refer to a darkness of understanding ('blindness for sight / and beggary for riches his exchange / he shall go journeying to a foreign country / tapping his way before him with a stick'). Furthermore, the seer's opening remarks in this speech, 'I have said what I came here to say not fearing your countenance', make it clear that his pretence at the beginning of the scene has been planned with the intention of unsettling and enraging Oedipus.

The murder enquiry is now quite sharply focused; if what the seer has claimed is true Oedipus is the murderer, and if it is not true then the claim is a deception contrived by the actual murderer and his collaborator(s). This reduction is implicit in the altercation that begins with Creon's indignant denial of the conspiracy. Therefore, the justified act of defending himself against conspiracy to murder Laius is also a means of forcing upon Oedipus the implications of his stand. For if Oedipus cannot persuade the people of

a guilty conspiracy on the part of Teiresias and Creon then the logic of his position demands that he should accept his own guilt. Hence he accuses Creon, 'you are proved manifestly the murderer of that man' (lines 533–534), when there is no evidence to support this accusation. Now Creon is able to create the illusion that his innocence of the murder implies that there is no conspiracy of any kind, and his most important speech (lines 583–615) uses this innocence as a tacit support for his (carefully prepared) explanation for why he should be content with the power that he already has.

> Consider, first, if you think any one
> would choose to rule and fear rather than rule
> and sleep untroubled by a fear if power
> were equal in both cases. I, at least,
> I was not born with such a frantic yearning
> to be a king – but to do what kings do.
> And so it is with every one who has learned
> wisdom and self-control. As it stands now,
> the prizes are all mine – and without fear…
>
> My mind would not be traitor if its wise;
> I am no treason lover, of my nature,
> nor would I ever dare to join a plot.
> Prove what I say. Go to the oracle
> at Pytho and inquire about the answers,
> If they are as I told you. (Lines 584–605)

Creon ignores altogether the accusation that he is the murderer. He knows that there is nothing for him to answer, and that this is how the matter will appear to any impartial observer. By making no response he both avoids the impression of entanglement that might be created by protesting and implies that there is no case against him. The speech has an added dramatic dimension, for Creon is not merely replying to Oedipus in order to clear himself of suspicion, he is also acting upon the Chorus in order to influence their attitudes. Therefore, in refuting the charge of conspiracy, his disregard of the murder accusation implicitly creates an impression of general innocence. In relation to the charge of conspiracy, however, there are certain points to consider: Creon's appearance at the beginning of the action was unaccountably delayed, and, more significantly for Oedipus, it was Creon who suggested to him that advice should be sought from Teiresias. Earlier in this scene Creon

pretends that this suggestion is quite understandable, by describing the seer as highly honoured (line 563), and is calculatingly unruffled by his interrogator's sarcasm. He responds to the matter of delay along with that of the main charge, inviting Oedipus to verify the order by going to the oracle (lines 603–605). This, of course, is a safe challenge if the oracle is a fellow conspirator.

But this challenge is also aimed at the Chorus. It follows a lengthy self-portrait in which Creon presents himself as a grey eminence who is satisfied with his position; free from the perils of conspicuous power and honoured by all; a man of sober wisdom who is unaffected by ambition or envy. The Chorus commends Creon for his wisdom and self-mastery (lines 616–617). Oedipus, who is not so blessed, is exposed not merely to the injustice of his accusations against Creon and Teiresias, but increasingly to the moral limbo which he has created for himself by his response to the oracle's command. Creon needs only to hold his ground against Oedipus in order to finally break the tie between king and people upon which his rule depends.

Phase three

The appearance of Jocasta, who joins the Chorus in restraining Oedipus, marks a turning point in the action: impending dissolution of the tie between Oedipus and the people coincides with a focused investigation into the murder of Laius. At this moment of isolation Oedipus is exposed to the one purely fortuitous event which has enabled the conspirators to act against him. In explaining to him that 'human beings have no part in the craft of prophecy', Jocasta refers to the oracle from the temple of Apollo and in doing so refers to a place where three roads meet. The action of the play hinges on a coincidence, for the oracle had predicted that Laius would be killed by his own son at a place where three roads meet, and this is what has happened. Occurring at the mid-point of the action, Jocasta's speech appears at first to be a moment of calm, as she tries to reassure Oedipus.

> Do not concern yourself about this matter;
> listen to me and learn that human beings
> have no part in the craft of prophecy.
> Of that I'll show you a short proof.
> There was an oracle once that came to Laius, –
> I will not say that it was Phoebus' own,
> but it was from his servants – and it told him
> that it was fate that he should die a victim
> at the hands of his own son, a son to be born

of Laius and me. But, see now, he,
the king, was killed by foreign highway robbers
at a place where three roads meet – so goes the story;
and for the son – before three days were out
after his birth King Laius pierced his ankles
and by the hands of others cast him forth
upon a pathless hillside. So Apollo
failed to fulfill his oracle to the son,
that he should kill his father, and to Laius
also proved false in that the thing he feared,
death at his son's hands, never came to pass.
So clear in this case were the oracles,
so clear and false. Give them no heed I say;
what God discovers need of, easily
he shows to us himself.

Oedipus
O dear Jocasta,
as I hear this from you, there comes upon me
a wandering of the soul – I could run mad.

Jocasta
What trouble is it, that you turn again
and speak like this?

Oedipus
I thought I heard you say
That Laius was killed at a crossroads.

Jocasta
Yes, that was how the story went and still
that word goes round. (Lines 707–731)

There is a rich ambiguity in this moment of recognition and reversal, which reflects the dramatic complexity of the situation, in particular the uncertainties concealed within ordinary experience. Jocasta's explanation demands that she should explain Laius' abandonment of their son and its violence; her acceptance of this horror is in conflict with the reassuring purpose of her speech. Her lack of feeling coincides with the critical disclosure of the speech

and how this is related to the oracle. For the piece of information that brings focus to the murder investigation and develops into Oedipus' self-examination is merely a scrap of common knowledge in Jocasta's account, and an incidental detail in the prophecy made so long ago. The image of 'a place where three roads meet' has a poetical resonance that gives credence to the supernatural powers at work in the events that have been forecast. Hence in the action of the play there is a deliberate confusion of what is charged with supernatural significance and what is fortuitous and banal, and this is reflected in the psychological disorientation of Jocasta's speech.

To Oedipus, the supernatural elements are of such power that he is suddenly at their mercy, seeing himself as singled out for punishment by Zeus, and fearing, in spite of his contempt for the juggling antics of men like Teiresias, that in this case the seer may have been right (lines 738–748). In this demoralized state, Oedipus has no alternative but to disclose to Jocasta, and to the Chorus, the events leading up to the murder, and how the killing occurred. Already we can see that knowing the truth about himself is more to him than instinct for survival; the combined effect of extraordinary events and the power of the oracle has transported him into the world of supernatural will and influence.

I was held greatest of the citizens
in Corinth till a curious chance befell me
as I shall tell you – curious, indeed,
but hardly worth the store I set upon it.
There was a dinner and at it a man,
a drunken man, accused me in his drink
of being bastard. I was furious
but held my temper under for that day.
Next day I went and taxed my parents with it;
they took the insult very ill from him,
the drunken fellow who had uttered it.
So I was comforted for their part, but
still this thing rankled always, for the story
crept about widely. And I went at last
to Pytho, though my parents did not know.
But Phoebus sent me home again unhonoured
in what I came to learn, but he foretold
other and desperate horrors to befall me,

that I was fated to lie with my mother,
and to show to daylight an accursed breed
which men would not endure, and I was doomed
to be murderer of the father that begot me. (Lines 776–793)

In giving his account of the murder, and so giving evidence against himself (lines 771–834), Oedipus also enables us to glimpse certain aspects of the relationship between his character and the (transcendent) life-defining form that dominates the action of the play. We can see, for example, how the sudden collapse in his confidence is related to the extent to which he is in thrall to his religious beliefs, to a sense of the supernatural and to the fear of its intervention in the world of human affairs. The background to his encounter with Laius gives us a sense of how deeply his thoughts are affected by these fears and beliefs. Even his response to the rumours concerning his legitimacy, and his going to the oracle at Pytho, betray an over-reaction to the drunken outburst. He admits that as Corinth's greatest citizen (lines 776–778) he could well have ignored the slight of an inferior. Further, in making this visit secretly he has increased his isolation and vulnerability to powers that are beyond his comprehension, and so invited the oracle to exploit the weakness of his situation. Thus he is given no satisfaction over the question of his legitimacy, but instead the oracle reiterates the prophecy made to Laius many years earlier.

The susceptibility of Oedipus to the supernatural is of great dramatic significance. For though we have seen that the action of the play hinges on a coincidence, the conditions for Oedipus' act of violence have been created by the oracle. It was when in flight from the malevolent prophecy that Oedipus encountered Laius and his party, and so the murder could be seen as an act of retaliation committed by a man who has been terrified and abandoned to supernatural fears and imaginings. This association between coincidence and the power of the oracle can be extended to the action of *Oedipus* as a whole; the prophecy is, like the seer's preparation of Oedipus' self-mutilation, a prediction which helps to create the conditions for its own fulfilment. In this connection, chance can be seen as a factor in the operations of the temple of Apollo, in that prophecies are made in the hope that on some occasions coincidence will come to their aid and confirm the powers of the oracle. When this does not happen nothing is lost, as the prophecies will be forgotten. Such forgetfulness is especially prevalent in a superstitious people who are dependent upon religion when times are difficult.

We can identify the exact point at which the riddle of self-knowledge for Oedipus emanates from the murder investigation in the evidence he gives against himself.

> When the old man saw this he watched his moment,
> and as I passed he struck me from his carriage,
> full on the head with his two pointed goad.
> But he was paid in full and presently
> my stick had struck him backwards from the car
> and he rolled out of it. And then I killed them
> all. If it happened there was any tie
> of kinship twixt this man and Laius,
> who is then now more miserable than I,
> what man on earth so hated by the Gods,
> since neither citizen nor foreigner
> may welcome me at home or even greet me,
> but drive me out of doors? And it is I,
> I and no other have so cursed myself.
> And I pollute the bed of him I killed
> by the hands that killed him. Was I not born evil?
> Am I not utterly unclean? I had to fly
> and in my banishment not even see
> my kindred nor set foot in my own country,
> or otherwise my fate was to be yoked
> in marriage with my mother and kill my father,
> Polybus who begot me and had reared me. (Lines 807–827)

The interweaving of Oedipus' susceptibility to the power of the gods with the designs of the oracle is dramatically significant at this point. Oedipus' psychological state at the time of the murder, to which he alludes at the end of these lines, is now echoed in his engulfment by supernatural fears, in particular the fear that his fate has been predestined by malignant powers. Sovereignty, authority and personal eminence disintegrate, and his disjointed reference to the personal circumstances that have led to the murder betray the confusion in his thinking. He is increasingly unable to grasp what is happening and cannot connect the diverse strands in a complex web of events: in particular, the prophecy, the murder and his relation to Laius. This confusion is evident in, 'I pollute the bed of him I killed', and cruelly underscored by his mistaken reference to Polybus 'who begot me'. Here the

idea of pollution comes from Teiresias, who accuses Oedipus of being the land's pollution and implicitly links this with parricide and incest (lines 345–353 and 456–459). However, in itself marriage to the wife of a man you have killed does not imply pollution in the world of the play.

At the close of this scene, the Chorus alludes to the oracle (lines 864–910). This chorus is not inspired by sympathy for the hero, rather its tone is austere and expresses concern for the clarity of moral vision upon which understanding and purposeful action depend. In the opening verse, alertness to the moral laws and their immutable truth and authority is linked to the hope of a remedy for the people of Thebes. The obstacle to this is the tyrant, but this idea is qualified by reference to 'the eager ambition that profits the state'. Hence the Chorus considers that the law has been broken by the king, but the structure of the chorus as a whole suggests their intention is to cover themselves. Moving from the general idea of piety, and the clarity of the moral law, to a vision of what happens to life when the desecration of those laws is itself the object of honour (lines 895–896), this chorus reaches its true concern in the final verse.

We have seen earlier in the action (lines 278–279) a suggestion from the Chorus that the order from the oracle should have been more explicit, and now stress upon the need for clarity in the source of moral law is, by implication, extended to the spheres of moral judgement and execution of the law. Anxiety concerning the integrity of the oracle has been created by doubts over whether, in this case, 'the oracles are proved to fit for all men's hands to point at'. Instead of clarity in the sphere of moral judgement, we have a rigmarole of ancient and forgotten prophecy, impenetrable confusion of family circumstances, and tenuously connected events over a considerable period of time. In relation to fundamental convictions about morality and supernatural influence the ambiguous instructions of the oracle have become dubious. However, the position of this moment is highly significant, as it coincides with the disintegration in Oedipus' mastery of himself. As the Chorus wakes up to the possibility of political corruption stemming from the temple of Apollo, a terrified Oedipus advances towards a knowledge of his own history that will vindicate the conspirators.

Phase four

In the dramatic structure of the play, this moment of uncertainty from the Chorus represents the last fleeting hope for Oedipus before his enemies prevail and depose him. Upon the appearance of the messenger from Corinth (line 924), who brings news of the death of Polybus and of the people's wish

that Oedipus should succeed him, Oedipus is told more of his history. But in the course of the messenger's response to interrogation we see how a gradual disclosure of the riddle of self-knowledge for Oedipus coincides with his growing inability to put together the elements of his history. The messenger's description of the exposure and maiming of the infant, and the circumstances under which this has occurred, clearly echoes Jocasta's speech (lines 707–725) a little earlier. As Jocasta herself becomes more and more aware that her husband is the son whom she and Laius abandoned at birth, and more desperate to end the investigation, we see that as he turns away from her Oedipus loses command of his situation, while losing his grasp of what is disclosed. His mind is deranged by a panic-stricken desire to know. This reaches a climax towards the close of this scene, when he is seized by the conviction that he is the son of slaves.

> Break out what will! I at least shall be
> willing to see my ancestry, though humble.
> Perhaps she is ashamed of my low birth,
> for she has all a woman's high-flown pride.
> But I account myself a child of Fortune,
> beneficent Fortune, and I shall not be
> dishonoured. She's the mother from whom I spring;
> the months, my brothers, marked me, now as small,
> and now again as mighty. Such is my breeding,
> and I shall never prove so false to it,
> as not to find the secret of my birth. (Lines 1076–1086)

In this phase of the action, dramatization of Oedipus' need to understand is imagined from different points of view: one is the natural sense of our moral and personal qualities as they are expressed through our actions, and the other is created by a religious interpretation of how circumstances have made us what we are, that is, a metaphysical conception of character. The peculiarities of Oedipus' personal history, combined with its exploitation by his enemies, have eroded the natural sense of himself which appeared to be so strong at the beginning of the action; now he puts his faith in the hope of a 'beneficent Fortune' that works itself out in the circumstances and events of our lives. This abstract notion leads Oedipus into a final disoriented 'self-knowledge', and his enactment of the prophecy that has been made about him by Teiresias.

The Chorus appears to mock the disorder, praising Cithaeron, which is grotesquely described as 'native to him [Oedipus] and mother and nurse at once', ridiculing the idea of a beneficent Fortune, and the honour bestowed upon it (lines 1089–1097). This time the call to Apollo is one of disillusioned irony and this is developed in the antistrophe, in which the idea of a beneficent Fortune attending Oedipus is exaggerated in fanciful speculations about his parentage, invoking gods and nymphs, and the wildly inappropriate 'bride of Loxias' (that is, an easy woman casually enjoyed by the god on the 'grassy slopes'). Doubts about the oracle, which were expressed in the previous chorus, have grown into an agitated sense that the people are being diverted from their main concern. The plight of the city is receding ever further from the interests of the protagonists, as a deranged Oedipus seeks to discover the secrets of his own character. We can see how the 'mind' of Thebes has become polluted by the design of the conspirators.

In the following scene the herdsman reveals the facts about Oedipus' birth. The exchange between them and the messenger clarifies important details in the story: the rumour that Laius had been murdered by robbers was invented by the same herdsman in the interests of self-preservation (lines 750–762), otherwise he would have had to tell Jocasta that her husband Oedipus was the murderer. The messenger revives the herdsman's fears when he identifies Oedipus as the child who was abandoned on the hillside of Cithaeron (lines 1145–1146). In being forced to reveal his part in the abandonment he betrays his knowledge that the evil oracles (line 1175) have seemingly been fulfilled and that Oedipus is the pollution of the city and accursed by the gods. Furthermore, we can now appreciate that the conspirators have had a source of information concerning the actual circumstances of the murder, and, through the oracle, they must know how this is connected to the whole of Oedipus' life. Hence it is evident that the elaborate design of the conspirators has created a riddle for Oedipus concerning his own character. They have been able to assume control over the religious forms which determine his understanding of himself.

We can see that this process began with the weakening of the tie between Oedipus and the people of Thebes (as represented by the Chorus). In turn, the injustice of his accusation against Creon, which was provoked by Teiresias, led to a labyrinthine enquiry in which the will of the oracle could prevail. Instead of a rational investigation which might ensure an explanation of the causes and how they should be judged, the decisions of the people, and of Oedipus himself, have been determined by the illusion of his malevolent fate.

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
with them I lived with, cursed in my killing. (Lines 1182–1185)

These lines anticipate the form of self-mutilation by Oedipus that has been 'foreseen' by Teiresias, and they enable us to see that the whole framework for Oedipus' sense of himself has been created. His descent has been purposefully interpreted for him by Teiresias (for example, 'living in foulest sin'), so that when the truth comes out it will be all the more devastating. Oedipus is not condemned for the crimes that he committed deliberately and violently, but rather for the parricide and incest which he committed unknowingly. Instead of being regarded as a sign of innocence his ignorance is presented as proof of the deepest moral corruption, as it confirms the supernatural curse upon him. Oedipus and the Chorus are lured into seeing him as guilty, and he is systematically disarmed of the means to challenge this judgement.

The success of the conspirators is evident in the inability of Oedipus, and indeed of the Chorus, to review the earlier events of the play and realize that the terms of culpability have altered to fit the changing circumstances. The order from the oracle, at the beginning of the action, did not mention parricide and incest, and, furthermore, belief that the murder is the cause of pollution is confirmed by the Chorus at lines 462–482. Parricide and incest become relevant when developments in the action make it convenient to the conspirators. So powerful is the authority of the supernatural in the world of the play that uncanny and unnatural circumstances overwhelm any desire to question. Even the Chorus has to yield, despite its justified doubts and misgivings, and its lament for an accursed Oedipus (lines 1186–1223) betrays their altered attitude.

Phase five

In the terrible scene that follows, a second messenger describes the events in which Oedipus at first decides to execute Jocasta, and then, having been thwarted by her suicide, enacts the self-punishment that has been planted in his mind by Teiresias (lines 1237–1286). Sophocles' use of the convention of reported violence enables him to present another point of view at this climactic moment. Thus the messenger's speech is free from self-interest; his reactions are those of a fellow human being who has the misfortune to

witness appalling events. This directs a clarifying lens upon the action. Thus his account of the suffering of Oedipus and Jocasta conveys a sense of its being both extreme and incomprehensible. The eruption of one moment of violence to another is conveyed in vividly sympathetic language; we see only the turmoil of the characters and its background.

> When she came raging into the house she went
> straight to her marriage bed, tearing her hair
> with both her hands, and crying upon Laius
> long dead – Do you remember, Laius,
> that night long past which bred a child for us
> to send you to your death and leave
> a mother making children with her son?
> And then she groaned and cursed the bed in which
> she brought forth husband by her husband, children
> by her own child, an infamous double bond…
>
> Then, as she lay,
> poor woman, on the ground, what happened after,
> was terrible to see. He tore the brooches –
> the gold chased brooches fastening her robe –
> away from her and lifting them up high
> dashed them on his own eyeballs, shrieking out
> such things as: they will never see the crime
> I have committed or had done upon me!
> Dark eyes, now in the days to come look on
> forbidden faces, do not recognize
> those whom you long for – with such imprecations
> he struck his eyes again and yet again
> with the brooches. And the bleeding eyeballs gushed
> and stained his beard – no sluggish oozing drops
> but a black rain and bloody hail poured down…
>
> The fortune of the days gone by was true
> good fortune – but today groans and destruction
> and death and shame – of all ills can be named
> not one is missing. (Lines 1241–1285)

Jocasta's earlier resistance to the prophetic authority of the oracle (lines 707–725) and to the taint of incest (lines 977–983) collapses under the weight of an overwhelming realization of all that has been 'foreseen'. Suicide averts her execution at the hands of Oedipus, who in the act of self-mutilation links the curse upon his family with banishment (lines 1271–1274). Here the manipulation of Oedipus' thought by the conspirators is fulfilled in his self-banishment. The idea that henceforth Oedipus can see only in his imagination marks his exclusion from the life of his fellow human beings.

Superficially, the penultimate scene of the play resembles an orchestrated lament, in which questions and responses are both antiphonal and rhetorical (lines 1297–1369). The Chorus questions Oedipus about his act of self-mutilation knowing that a true answer is impossible, and Oedipus, who has acted in a spellbound frenzy, does not see anything of the real causes. His explanation that Apollo has willed him to self-destruction, and that this is justified by his having 'nothing sweet to see', is a view that others have devised for him (lines 1329–1335).

There is, however, another side to this lament and its tone is opposed to the disinterested horror of the messenger's speech. The Chorus does not react in pity and horror, as their discontent betrays their moral uneasiness. Thus the severity of the scene, in which Oedipus appears before the audience in his wounded state, is echoed by the severity of the Chorus. Even the initial avowal of pity is qualified by 'I shudder at the sight of you' (line 1306), and thereafter their responses confirm Oedipus in his condemnation of himself and become increasingly forceful as the scene unfolds. This makes his metaphorically divesting himself of his sovereignty, by calling the Chorus his friend, an appeal to the fellow feeling of those who remain with him. Unmoved by this appeal, the Chorus open with a piteous rhetorical question and end by damning Oedipus in his very existence, 'Unhappy in your mind and your misfortune, / would I had never known you!' (lines 1346–1369). Their attitude can be contrasted with the view of the messenger, 'The fortune of the days gone by was true good fortune'. This draws attention to the uneasy conscience of the Chorus. Having promised to be faithful to Oedipus, and then shifted from one position to another as circumstances change, the Chorus now absolve themselves by accepting the oracle's judgement that Oedipus and his family are cursed from birth by the god.

The scene closes with a formal act of judgement by Oedipus upon himself, in which he delivers both verdict and sentence (lines 1370–1415). Once again he justifies the violence that he has done to himself, asserting that in all of the things that bind him to life there is no longer anything in which his senses

can take delight, and recalling the curse that he called down upon himself in the name of Apollo and justice. The religious interpretation of character prevails over the appraisal of human actions.

> O Polybus and Corinth and the house,
> the old house that I used to call my father's –
> what fairness you were nurse to, and what foulness
> festered beneath! Now I am found to be
> a sinner and a son of sinners. Crossroads,
> and hidden glade, oak, and the narrow way
> at the crossroads, that drank my father's blood
> offered you by my hands, do you remember
> still what I did as you looked on, and what
> I did when I came here? O marriage, marriage!
> you bred me and again when you had bred
> bred children of your child and showed to men
> brides, wives and mothers and the foulest deeds
> that can be in this world of ours. (Lines 1394–1407)

He sees the murder of Laius as a desecration of nature and religion. Marriage to Jocasta is represented as a sacrament that has been defiled by the things that are most natural to it, and so procreation becomes, in the language suggested to him by Teiresias, 'the foulest of deeds that can be in this world of ours'. By passing sentence on himself that he should be banished or put to death Oedipus formally relinquishes his sovereignty to Creon.

In the final scene the severity of religious authority is associated with the inner destruction of Oedipus by his enemies. The bleak tone is essential to the extreme action of the play and to its uncompromising enquiry into our understanding of ourselves and the world. Hence the scene begins with a speech by Creon (lines 1421–1428), which moves rapidly from a feigned assurance that he will not exalt in his triumph to a lofty expression of censure. This impresses upon Oedipus the fallen stature that is already accepted by him. It is clear that Creon's will to assert order, and to conceal from his audience the horror of what has just occurred, does not relax in any way the execution of his purpose. Not only is he relentless in vanquishing Oedipus, he is unaffected by the suicide of his sister, and his inhumanity is contrasted with a true expression of feeling when he allows Oedipus to be united with Antigone and Ismene.

O children,
where are you? Come here, come to my hands,
a brother's hands which turned your father's eyes,
those bright eyes you knew once, to what you see,
a father seeing nothing, knowing nothing,
begetting you from his own source of life.
I weep for you – I cannot see your faces –
I weep when I think of the bitterness
there will be in your lives, how you must live
before the world. At what assemblages
of citizens will you make one? To what
gay company will you go and not come home
in tears instead of sharing in the holiday?
And when you're ripe for marriage, who will he be,
the man who'll risk to take such infamy
as shall cling to my children, to bring hurt
on them and those that marry with them? (Lines 1480–1496)

The role of Creon in this scene represents a stark opposition to the pathos in Oedipus' harrowing vision of his daughters' future, especially as this role is connected to their inherited guilt and social exclusion. Alongside Oedipus' despairing conviction that Apollo's curse must fall upon his beloved children, the triumphant victor assumes the guise of a defender of religious truth and generous successor ('I gave you this because I knew from old days how you loved them as I see now' (lines 1476–1477)). Throughout the scene we can see how remorseless Creon has been in his ambitions, never permitting himself to consider the consequences of his actions, or to be concerned by what is natural and just. The play ends with an abrupt separation of Oedipus and the children, and with the admonition, 'Do not seek to be master in everything, for the things you mastered did not follow you throughout your life' (line 1524). The closing chorus echoes his thought, and the deposition of Oedipus is thereby sealed by a public acceptance of his punishment by the god.

Conclusion

Tragedy is by its nature concerned with the representation of character. Portrayal of the moral purpose and meaning of human behaviour, is, therefore, a basic element of the genre. Consequently, the moral judgement associated with guilt and innocence, justice and retribution, redemption and damnation is relevant to the ways in which a tragic characterization is

achieved. Thus it is easy to identify characterization with moral terms, and in simpler forms of drama the purpose of the action is to define and judge character according to the possession of moral qualities. It is in contrast to this simplified conception of character in tragedy that the opposition of genres in *Oedipus* should be seen.

The use of the riddle as a genre is suggested by the domination of the action by a murder investigation. Beyond its serving as a dramatic device for the presentation of a serious theme, the enquiry into Laius' murder develops, according to strict dramatic principles, into Oedipus' investigation into his own character. In this respect the riddle at the core of the action begins with a murder investigation and evolves seamlessly into an enquiry into character itself (in Phase three). The uncertainties of Oedipus about himself dramatize the need of a reflective being to understand itself and the world. Such understanding is a foundation for the possession of character.

Enfolded in this dramatic development is the riddle of the oracle and its influence upon the action: the hidden purpose of the conspirators. Oedipus attempts to uncover their design when he accuses Teiresias and Creon of treachery, and his inability to solve this riddle has consequences in what follows when the murder enquiry has been solved. The 'riddle' of Oedipus' personal history is interpreted for him by his enemies, and his understanding of himself is transformed in accordance with their ambitious purposes.

At the heart of the action we see that life-defining forms essential to the hero's understanding of himself are covertly manipulated in order to paralyse his will. In my analysis of the action we have seen how religious belief confirms Oedipus in his authority as the king of Thebes, especially when he is required to take action against the murderer of Laius. The life-defining forms associated with this belief are used by the oracle, Teiresias and Creon in order to turn Oedipus against himself. In this the Aristotelian conception of character in tragedy is opposed by the complex riddle that permeates the action of the play; character is defined not simply in relation to social position and the will but also in relation to the life-defining forms which shape our judgement and understanding.

There are two further aspects of this mode of representing character in accordance with the form of reflective life. First, we have established a connection between character and the need for a reflective being to decide how it will respond to the life to which it belongs. This is fundamental to the conception that we form of ourselves as moral beings, and implies a need to see things as they are – both in ourselves and in the life. A corollary to this is the connection between character and the need of others to decide how they

will live. This means that character is grounded not only in my behaviour and understanding of myself and the world, but also in my perception of others. His ignorance of what religion means to his enemies makes it impossible for Oedipus to comprehend the ambitions of the oracle or the psychological motives and abilities of a man like Teiresias. Because of this ignorance, the effect of personal inclination on *their* judgement (for example, the inclination to see religion primarily as an instrument of power) plays an important part in Oedipus' acceptance of their interpretation of his character. Because we cannot always know the motives of those in response to whom we must fashion our lives, an element of disorder is built into the very nature of character.

Second, artistic genres themselves are life-defining forms, and therefore an expression of our need to give shape to our lives. The significance of genre for the representation of character, especially when such representation is subtle and penetrating, cannot be divorced from the importance of art as an experience. Powerful representations of reflective life are possible only because the need to understand life is itself essential to us as reflective beings. By giving us a vision of life an artistic genre fulfils its basic function as a life-defining form. However, it is obvious that genres and their use are not equally profound; often art persuades us to think and feel in ways that accord not with genuine understanding, but with how we prefer to think and feel.

Nonetheless, as I have shown, a complex use of genre can be the basis for a true representation of reflective life in action. The opposition of genres in *Oedipus* enables the dramatist to illuminate the nature of life-defining forms. This is possible because Sophocles uses the riddle in a way that challenges the tendency of tragedy to represent character as relatively stable and transparent. The characterization of Oedipus in particular explores the dependence of judgement and understanding upon personal inclination, and we have seen that such dependence is both fundamental to reflective life and potentially unsettling to our normal assumptions about the possession of moral qualities. We can conclude from this argument that, rather than being simply a medium for the creation of revelatory resemblances, genre is an instrument of analytical thought.