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Sophocles: Selected Poems

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Introduction

DESPITE (or because of) his accomplishments and stature as a dramatist, mythographer, and political thinker, we inhabitants of a later world do not usually think of Sophokles first as a poet. Yet if we read all seven tragedies and the fragments of Sophokles, we can begin to sense the overall range of his preoccupations as a poet. In addition to Sophokles' extraordinary and unique way of putting perception, idea and feeling into words, indirectly but very strongly he expresses sympathy for human beings whose great powers, courage, and potential come to brokenness, suffering, and grief. Sophokles, the poet, ponders the harmony or dissonance between human and divine justice. He acknowledges uncertainty, doubt, and fear in the human stance toward the divine. He evidently relishes the sheer variety of language, from spoken immediacy to ceremonial song; and in his odes, a special diction and density of poetic language heighten the power of feeling and our sense that, in a way, fate itself lives within language. Language may sometimes be fate.

Reading Sophokles' odes apart from the plays in which they serve a powerful dramatic purpose could seem reductive; but in reading them separately as poems, we begin to see aspects of Sophokles that are not otherwise so apparent when the odes are read only within the plays—especially in translations that have brought over very little of the poetic texture and movement of the odes. These aspects, these meanings, are more available to us if the odes are translated *as poetry*—by which I mean, in shapes that evoke their original poetic structure, in lines that can be read as lines, and in language chosen not primarily to *explain* what the Greek original says, but for the sake of keeping up with the quick movement of Sophokles' imagery, the unfolding of thought in his syntax, and the progress of feeling in his voicing and narrating. As much as Sophokles can be a dramatic psychologist in his dialogue and plots—revealing motives, loyalties, assumptions, conflicts—he can be a poetic psychologist, too, following the thought and feeling that move by association.

As a poet, in some ways Sophokles seems *least* visible to us. Translators and stage directors have worked freely with his plays in order to produce versions that are readable and playable—that is, dramatically satisfying—in terms of the ideas about drama and language of their own times; scholars have produced editions and versions that give the student copious information about, and great insight into, the Greeks and the Greek language. But we do not read poems only for information, or even for insight; we also read poems in order to let our feeling and thinking move, turn, leap by means of poetic figures and forms; we also read for pleasures of language, and to experience the poet's stance toward the world. The poetic translator needs to create some sense of Sophokles the poet.

The richly woven textures of Sophokles' language and the beauty of his poetic structures can never be conveyed fully in translation into modern languages, because his odes, especially, cannot be rendered into any diction and form that adequately represent the complexity and effects of the original Greek. And perhaps no translation of a complete play can produce a very strong impression of Sophokles the poet, if only because many translators seem to be trying to keep the odes from getting in the way of the play. The Greeks could enjoy the rhythm of the interruption of a plot by the odes, which provided moments of reflection and feeling, which created suspense. And they could hear and enjoy the remarkable poetic compression and intricate textures and repeated rhythms of Sophokles' choral odes. But we can no longer hear anything like that even in our own language. The Greeks heard linguistic broadband, so to speak, and while we can listen to several things at once in the midst of our busiest moments, we do not know how to listen to everything that is meaningful, all at once, in a rich poetic text.

The ancient Greeks responded to the tragedies as great, complex poetic performances in several poetic modes, and loved the lines. While Sophokles himself might not have thought of his odes as poems that should be heard or read apart from the plays in which they are sung, I believe that when the poems are read by us this way—we who are informed by a very different sense of poetry than that of Sophokles—then we only gain in our sense of Sophokles' powers and achievement. I do not ask for the odes to be read *instead*

of the plays, but only for the odes to be read *as* poems—here *and* also within the plays. To be read as poems means, in translation, to be read as instances of poetic thinking, and for their value as the work of a single temperament, rather than primarily for their dramatic effect. We read Browning's dramatic monologues as "Browning"; we perceive something of the authorial mind of Browning even in the great differences between his various masks in those poems; we read certain remarkable passages in Shakespeare as "Shakespeare," not only as the characters "Hamlet," "Othello," or "Lear."

Even in ancient times, choral odes from the plays might be sung as entertainment, apart from the plays. Presumably at least some of those listening might know, or know of, the tragedy to which the song belonged. But perhaps not always. And the effect could be powerful. Plutarch tells of how, when the Athenians lost their disastrous war against the Spartans, in the battles in Sicily, at least a few of the Athenian soldiers avoided execution or slavery because of their ability to recite Euripides, "for it seems that the Sicilians were more devoted to his poetry than any other Greeks living outside the mother country." This was in 413 BCE, and Euripides, whose works were more popular than those of Sophokles or Aiskhylos, was still alive; Plutarch says some of those who eventually returned to Athens thanked Euripides in person for having saved their lives. If this anecdote were not enough to give us a sense of how powerful a medium poetry was in ancient Greece, there is another, even more relevant to my presentation of translations of tragic odes in this volume. Plutarch also writes that (in 404 BCE) when the Spartan conquerors of Athens were deciding what to do with the city and its inhabitants, and entertaining the possibility of razing the city and enslaving its entire population, "the principal delegates [from the Spartan military allies] met for a banquet, [and] a man from Phocis sang the opening chorus from Euripides' *Electra*, which begins with the lines: 'Daughters of Agamemnon / I have come, Electra, to your rustic court.' At this the whole company was moved to pity and felt that it would be an outrage to destroy so glorious a city, which had produced such great men."¹

So why not give Sophokles a small book solely for some of his poems in translation? To my knowledge, no translator has ever pre-

sented to English-language readers a selection of Sophokles' poems—that is, choral odes from surviving plays—all translated with a consistent aesthetic of attention to the language, rhythm, and structure of the originals. Nor, so far as I know, has anyone ever translated a selection of his fragments in order to draw out of them some of the Sophoklean qualities of poetic thinking, keenness of language, and representation of world, feeling, action, and thought.

II

With other Athenian Greek poets of the fifth century BCE, especially Aiskhylos and Euripides, the other tragic poets whose works survive, Sophokles created and developed tragic drama as in effect a performance poem in several poetic modes, and for multiple voices. The tragedies not only inaugurated western drama, and in so doing brought myth and song into relation with dramatized speech, but also gave heightened use to the choral ode. In fact, tragic drama may have developed out of the performance of choral odes, so tragedy in fifth-century-BCE Athens is poetic in origin as well as in form. Meanwhile, the choral ode, an old and well-established poetic genre, remained very much alive; it continued to be performed on ritual and celebratory occasions at a variety of festivals by many different groups, some far larger than the dramatic choruses.

Fifth-century Athenian tragedies combined dialogue and song; ritual and performance; religious and civic occasions. The tragedies included costume, musical accompaniment, and dance; contests of ideas; characters distinguished from each other psychologically as well as by status, power, and their roles in the plot; a mythology immensely rich in story and in meaning; and different kinds of language, from fast-paced, high-stakes arguments called *stichomythia*, to the special poetic diction of the choral odes. Also, the odes were performed differently from the dialogue: they were sung, not spoken; they were danced while sung; and they were voiced by a group, the chorus, not by an individual actor. I call the tragedies performance poems because they consist of verse, some of it spoken, some of it sung or chanted. The messenger speeches are a kind of minia-

turized epic narrative. The set speeches and stichomythia dialogue make poetic and dramatic use of the contests of rhetoric and argument so characteristic of ancient Greek public life. The tragedians wrote not only the choral odes that are sung and danced between episodes in the plays, but also occasional choral passages to be sung as lyric dialogue between the chorus and a tragic character, when heightened emotional intensity saturated a scene. So in addition to the superb stagecraft of Sophokles' tragedies, above all *Oidipous Tyrannos*—the ancient play that has arguably most fascinated the modern world—there is superb poetry throughout his plays as well. Yet most translations of Greek tragedies represent primarily the sense and dramatic force of speech and song, not their poetic qualities. The choral ode, in fact, is the most problematic element for modern translators, directors, actors, and audiences. This translation, however, pursues the virtues of the odes as poems, apart from their dramatic function, and apart from the problems of staging them as musical and danced anthems.

The odes translated in this volume (to all of which I have given titles) are drawn from *Oidipous Tyrannos*, *Antigone*, *Oidipous at Kolônos*, *Aias*, *Philoktetes*, and *Trakhiniai*. (The odes in *Elektra* do not at all lend themselves to being read independently of that play.) The odes were sung and danced in performance by men (fifteen, in Sophokles' tragedies) making up a chorus that might be either male or female, depending on the play. A leader of the chorus might sing some passages solo. What a chorus sings or chants in the odes, or says, chants, or sings in dialogue with characters, does not represent the point of view of Sophokles himself. The role of the chorus is that of another dramatic voice—contesting, yielding, asking, praying—in a dramatic relationship with the main characters. Typically the Sophoklean chorus, while distinct in identity from the audience and with its own allegiances, interests, and particular status (for example, a chorus of old men in *Antigone* and in *Oidipous Tyrannos*, or young unmarried women in *Trakhiniai*), nevertheless offers the audience one point of identification, among others.² But the chorus has a poetic role, too—they perform the intensity of language that is characteristic of a highly wrought ode, and this intensity is itself a

key element in the spectacle—at times, the most important. (In notes at the end of this volume, I describe briefly the dramatic context of each ode.)

I have translated those complete odes from the surviving plays that have a kind of structural completeness on their own. I have also included two speeches that can be read as dramatic monologues—one by the tragic hero Aias (Ajax, in the Latinized form), which seems almost like an uncanny anticipation of much later poets, from Shakespeare to Robert Browning, and the other by Oidipous at the end of his life, on the effects of the passage of time—expressing sentiments that are not foreign to us.

This volume includes all five odes from *Oidipous Tyrannos*, presented as a poem sequence. Many of us already know the plot of this tragedy, so we can follow the action that is only implicit in the odes. Furthermore, the odes clearly mark the stages of feeling of the whole drama: desperate hope for deliverance from plague; loyalty to Oidipous despite authoritative accusations against him; acknowledgment of the folly of offending the gods; more hope, now foolish and blind; and the realization that if even the heroic Oidipous has brought, however unwittingly, horrific moral pollution into his city, then “nothing that’s of mortal men is fortunate.” Read in sequence, the five odes enact this emotional arc.

Every ode creates an occasion that is part of the play—sometimes very obliquely—but also different from the play. Charles Segal writes that the “odes are set off from the dialogue by meter, dialect, the musical accompaniment, and dance; they also use a far greater proportion of dense poetical language, gnomic utterances, and mythical paradigms.” The gnomic or proverbial utterance—expressing something familiar—fits the Greek poet’s impulse to relate the subject or occasion of a choral ode to the timeless realm of general, customary, mythological, or divine truths.

None of the choral odes is lyric poetry in our sense of that genre. Greek lyric poetry was simply poetry accompanied by a lyre—that is, poetry as song (the Greek word for song, *oidê*, was contracted to *ôidê*, and from this word our word “ode” ultimately derives). Greek poetry included much public performance on public themes: a political satire, an exhortation, a hymn to a god, praise of a famous man,

a mythic narrative, a drinking song, an epigram, an erotic song, a song of victory, or a dirge. All choral poems were public, and even personal poems—such as love poems by Sappho—were not as private in ancient Greece as they are in the modern world, since they were not only read privately but also performed publicly for audiences small or large. Because choruses (on all occasions) sing their poems as public performances, the odes in the tragedies sometimes invite us to respond to a claim of—in the words of Charles Segal—“a privileged moral authority, which derives from a heightened awareness of the political or social implications of an action, the ways of the gods, the nature of the world order, or the numinous powers of nature or of passion (such as Eros or Aphrodite) that may redirect or destroy human lives.” Although we cannot experience or even completely imagine a poetry so wholly public, with public uses no longer present in our culture, the vividness and energy of language in Sophokles’ odes, as well as the movement of feeling and thought, invite us to stand within each poem and move with it, as the dancing chorus do, to recite it and breathe it, to join in its (e)motion.

The ambiguity of Sophokles’ tragedies requires an audience that engages with the unresolved and potentially unresolvable conflicts and dilemmas of the main characters; the odes likewise invite an active listener or reader to apprehend unresolved and sometimes contradictory feelings and ideas (as in the odes from *Oidipous Tyrannos*). Segal writes, “The very elusiveness and discontinuity of the choral style express the search for a final meaning that may lie beyond the reach of all the human participants, the chorus included. But the language, imagery and broad scope of the odes express at least the hope that a fuller, more inclusive understanding is possible and accessible to mortals.”³ That is, because the odes are thoroughly poetic in nature, rather than a dramatic imitation of speech, they signify more fully, more ambiguously, and perhaps more lastingly. J.-P. Vernant has observed that the language of Greek tragedies does not attain its greatest meaningfulness in the exchanges *among* characters and choruses on stage; rather, “it is only for the spectator that the language of the text can be transparent at every level in all its polyvalence and with all its ambiguities. Between the author and the spectator the language thus recuperates the full function of com-

munication that it has lost on the stage between the protagonists in the drama."⁴ The text is for the audience and the reader, not for the characters themselves. However much the choral odes say to the characters themselves in the drama, they are for the audience. And even if Greek spectators or we modern readers cannot, in fact, grasp all that is in the text "at every level," the odes articulate meanings—familiar or new, clear or uncertain, straightforwardly or with dramatic irony—that reach beyond the characters, and even beyond the plays. Even in translation the odes also offer us as readers the sheer pleasures of image, figures (such as metaphor and metonym), narrative, expressiveness, and structure; they offer us fullness of feeling and thought.

III

We know that Sophokles wrote a treatise, "On the Chorus," but it is lost. We don't know how he worked, but we should not assume that he composed orally. While performers of epic narratives such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* could rely on formulaic phrases, well-established mythological stories, and the use of only one poetic meter, and could in fact recompose episodes as they performed from memory, the authors of tragedies created original, unique works, drawing on myth but also inventing, staging conflicts that might have been only mentioned or briefly described in epic poems, and adding new expressive resources to their language and their art. In an era when Sophokles' friend Herodotos was writing his history, Sophokles too must have written. It is nearly impossible to argue that poems as complex as his odes, with their intricate metrical schemes, variations on key words, and remarkable structures, could have been composed without the advantages of written revisions. And in fact Athens was in the midst of one of the great technological and mental revolutions, from oral culture to writing culture. (In the Athenian tragedies and comedies, there are several interesting allusions to or enactments of reading.⁵)

And at some point the tragedies, including of course the odes, would probably have had to be written down so that the lines could be learned by or taught to the chorus and the three actors, even if

not all of them were literate. Since the poet also composed the music (for which there was an alphabetical form of notation) and created the choreography for the choruses, the task of composing even one tragedy was very large. Between Sophokles' debut as a tragic poet in 468 and his death in 406, he is likely to have written on average about two plays every year, each requiring music, direction, and choreography! (At the annual dramatic competitions, each of three selected Athenian dramatic poets presented three tragic plays and a fourth, buffoonish play, performed last and relying on the crude sexual and scatological humor of satyrs—male mythological creatures, partly animal.) The Athenian tragic poets lived in a culture of keen verbal memory (which is exactly what Plato thought would be destroyed by the technology of writing) *and* the increasingly widespread practice of writing.

IV

From the lost Sophoklean plays there are also more than a thousand fragments that survive—either as quotations in later authors' works, or as words or lines found on ancient papyrus sheets that were reused as scrap paper or for wrapping Egyptian mummies. The Sophoklean fragments range in size from one word to a substantial portion of a satyr play. I have translated a few individual fragments as short poems in themselves; others, much shorter, I have assembled into titled groups by organizing the fragments thematically. I have not added anything of my own to these groups of fragments; I use only Sophokles' lines—his language, images, and ideas, his exclamations, his descriptive, dramatic, and discursive phrases.

My impulse is not to try to reconstruct from fragments something that is lost, but to allow fragments to form something new. In the fragments I have chosen, however small, the language, images and ideas still sparkle with the freshness of Sophokles' responsiveness to the human, the natural, and the divine. Because we are acquainted with a huge variety of poetic practices over the centuries, we can read for fragmentary significance, and we can move from one fragment to another using our own imaginative freedom to perceive the many possibilities of meaning in Sophokles' attention to the world. In fact,

the themes of my groups of fragments are Sophokles' own, which I came to perceive by reading these remnants of his work repeatedly. They may not necessarily recapitulate the main themes of his plays, but they suggest some of the dominant themes of a poetic mind, evoking these with images and brief utterances. I seek the poetic and imaginative energy that still remains in some fragments; it cannot be found in all, and so this is not a comprehensive collection of them.

Naturally, a different translator might see somewhat different themes or ideas among the fragments, might well make a different selection, and would certainly produce a different sequencing of the fragments in each group. But I believe that in my choices I have been true to Sophokles' language, temperament, and preoccupations.

A handful of shards remain from Sophokles' lost play *Thamyras*, which portrayed the mythological figure of a poet-singer whose story traces the familiar tragic narrative from power or prominence to insolence and then to punishment by the gods. These fragments from *Thamyras* are the only group in this volume taken entirely from one play; they give us a startled sense of how utterly shattered by time all the lost works of Sophokles are.

My purpose in translating the fragments is the same as in translating the odes: to encounter and to respond to Sophokles, the poet. Rescuing some of the fragments by grouping them together makes it possible for us to get a glimpse of his individual manner of poetic thinking—and paradoxically reveals it in a way that is difficult to follow when we read plays that are complete. As readers, we would not deliberately break down the larger work in order to isolate from it a few words at a time in which we sense a certain way of being-in-language. But time itself—the long, ineluctable, destroying passage of it—has left us, from almost all of Sophokles' plays, only a few words. The fragments are plays in ruins. And so, taking what time has left us, I try to set the fragments next to each other so that not only poetic detail but also poetic delight can be seen again. In the complete odes, by contrast, we are more likely to see his mastery of movement in a poem from one feeling, one image, one idea, to the next (in other words, his mastery of poetic structure), and his surpassing ability to give intimate intensities of feeling a shared and even public urgency.

Our having any fragments at all, much less whole plays of Sophokles, has depended mostly on those who long ago preserved them, never to know that their own quoting of Sophokles, or their schoolboy copying of a Greek text on the back of a discarded document, would safeguard a fragment of what would later be lost. Among those who quote Sophokles in their own works, the reasons for doing so were their own, not ours, within the framework of their own valuation of Sophokles. Early preservation of Aiskhylos, Sophokles, and Euripides served purposes of the cultural and political prestige of Athens. Some of the Athenian tragedies became canonized as school texts in the ancient world and survived for centuries because of it; some were discussed and preserved by later Christian monks, scholars, and thinkers. Lines were quoted regarding flora and fauna, social and material culture, matters of rhetoric and grammar. In what survives of a fifth-century-CE anthology by Stobaeus, the apparently non-Christian compiler of extracts from many Greek writings, the quotations are exemplary statements on morals, ethics, science, and politics (hence my title for one group of fragments, "What Sophokles Wrote on Women Was Preserved by Men"). In his historical and biographical writings, Plutarch quoted Sophokles. But we cannot know if a character whose sober counsel is quoted by Stobaeus or Plutarch, and comes to us only as a fragment of a lost play, was a voice of ideal moderation or a figure like Shakespeare's Polonius whose sentiments are at once more or less truthful and also comically or tragically inadequate. Nor can we know how a statement's position in a drama inflected its meaning either in the typical tragic contest of wills and opinions among characters, or by tragic irony that the audience could perceive and the characters could not. Through various agents, time itself has made its selection of Sophokles' literary remains, and so my choice of fragments is only one more sifting.

V

Sophokles was born in the 490s BCE and died soon after the performance of his last plays, in 406. His life span coincided with the greatest cultural achievements, political institutions, and military

successes and failures of the city-state of Athens. He is said to have been an actor and musician as a young man, and to have played the lyre in his tragedy *Thamyras*. With his first plays Sophokles won first prize, defeating the dominant dramatist of his era, the older Aiskhylos. Sophokles often pleased his public—he won many first and second prizes, and never a third. As with other tragedians of his time, his artistic success had a religious and civic dimension unknown in the modern world. Winning a contest of this kind meant being regarded as having contributed seriously and substantially—as well as pleurably—to public life, honoring the patron god of the theater, Dionysos (in whose theater, beside and below the Akropolis, the Athenian plays were performed), celebrating the dominance of Athens among Greek cities, and offering a performative symbol of Athenian institutions and civic pride. The extent of the public respect given to Sophokles brought him election to the position of military general, and in this capacity he joined an expedition in 440 to punish a rebellious Athenian ally, the island city-state of Samos; Sophokles also held a civic office as a treasurer. Late in life he devoted himself to the god of medicine, Askloplos.

Sophokles enlarged the earlier form of drama of Aiskhylos in ways that added depth of character and mobility of thought, that focused tragedy on a crucial moment of retrospective insight (or *anagnôrisis*, “recognition”) by the central character, and that broadened the range of language in tragedy. From various sources we know that he composed more than 120 plays. Beginning in the European Renaissance, an enthusiasm for the philosophical, scientific, and literary works of the ancient Greeks brought their work into wide circulation among scholars, scientists, historians, political thinkers, philosophers, poets, and dramatists. Sophokles’ *Antigone*, especially, came to seem central to an understanding of the possibilities of human thought and political agency (see George Steiner’s masterful study *Antigones*). Much later, Freud’s focus on *Oidipous Tyrannos* made that play seem again—as it had been for Aristotle, but for different reasons—perhaps the greatest of the tragedies. For us, Sophokles’ seven surviving plays represent the genius, talent, cares, and close attention of the playwright, and also many attitudes, preoccupations, and ideas of his age and of later ages as well, since the surviv-

ing plays and the traces of all the lost plays also suggest motives, beliefs, and practices of preservers of his work who lived in very different historical moments and situations.

VI

Sophokles appears to have been an outwardly conventional believer, neither zealous nor casual, and in his surviving plays he sometimes puts the gods at a distance. This means that in the odes he often shows the chorus petitioning the gods to intervene in human affairs, even though the members of the chorus may see no clear signs that the gods are listening. On the other hand, it seems possible to regard the tragic figures in the two greatest plays, *Antigone* and *Oidipous Tyrannos*, as responsible in wholly human terms for what happens to them, and so the choral odes may comment on folly that is wholly human, and may plead with the gods to remedy human error.

The evidence in literature shows that when a person in ancient Greece did almost anything, but especially something decisive, excessive, or impulsive, the gods might be thought to have instigated it. This is how Sophokles accounts for the madness of Aias. While Sophokles may also have entertained the idea that at times the gods withdraw from the human realm, he makes clear that mortals may nevertheless offend the gods by immoderate and impious words and deeds. We might think that the god to whom a human act is partly or wholly attributed is a metaphor for those dimensions of ourselves that we cannot know fully, or well, or which, even knowing well, we cannot entirely control. (Ezra Pound said in his early text "Religio" that the ancient gods are simply enduring states of mind that we still recognize.) But our secularizing of Greek concepts of divinity does not lessen the truth of Sophokles' writing; instead it only transfers that truth from religious belief to metaphor. One obvious example is sexual desire—represented by four poems in this volume.

The Greeks are both alien to us and not so different from us. There are attitudes we may still share with them which would explain the odd fact that we do understand so much of their way of being. On a larger scale, our dominant religions and American polit-

ical institutions, despite their ethical virtues and humane achievements in art, education, and the rights of woman and man, have remained in part as incorrigibly corrupt as were the Greek; and so perhaps we also share the perplexity of the Greeks at how good counsel so seldom prevails in human affairs, despite the fact that prudent and moderate behavior, informed by general shared truths—such as of religion and philosophy and science—can result in less human suffering and greater human good. Again like the Greeks, we so often distrust other human beings whom we consider to be different from us. And traits we still share with ancient peoples (not only in Greece) are many—the determination to destroy and kill, the inclination to worship, the experience of the betrayal of our bodies by illness or age, the reversals of fortune, the feeling of being possessed by wine or song. Even knowing as we do all sorts of hidden reasons for our behavior that the Greeks had not yet thought out, we seem no more able than they to ameliorate enough of what is worst in ourselves in order to commend and foster what is best. Sophokles, among other poets both ancient and modern, articulates ethical and moral questions brilliantly and movingly; he does this obliquely through his characters and choruses. To the chorus singing the Sophoklean ode, and to the audience listening, the stakes mattered, the dilemmas were urgent, and the answers were sometimes not clear—or even when clear, were disturbing.

VII

I translated the five odes from *Antigone* with the late Charles Segal when we made our version of that play. For that volume and for the earlier translation that he and I made of Euripides' *Bakkhai* I wrote essays about some of the problems of translating ancient Athenian plays into present-day English. In the present volume the problems have been different, but, at least to me, no less interesting.

The immediacy and liveliness of Sophokles' language arose partly from the physical world of a culture with the technologies of builders, farmers, fishermen, merchants, shipwrights, and warriors. The Greeks had the metallurgy of war gear and statues and coins, they cut and sculpted stone, they used wheels and writing, and they

practiced other arts and crafts that leave few enduring traces at all—paints, cosmetics, cloth, cooking. (Sophokles himself, by the way, was said to have introduced into tragedy something the Greeks called “scene painting,” but we don’t know exactly what it was.) Ancient Greek is in itself a remarkable source of ideas articulated through, and arising from, figurative language derived from the physical world. Also, it was clearly a very sonorous language, although we do not know exactly what it sounded like. (But we can see that it delighted in sound. For instance, we have the word “gargle,” derived from Old French; the corresponding verb in ancient Greek has much more sound: *anagargaridzô*. We have the words “gibberish” and “jibber-jabber,” evidently imitative in sound; Spanish has the word *algarabía*, which means gibberish that is foreign, specifically Arabic [!]; Sophokles has on his tongue remarkably harsh-sounding words to mean the incoherent and the alien, such as a word he uses in *Antigone* [line 1002] for the screeching of disturbed birds of augury, a word that conveys that the sound is alien [*barbaros*] and also enacts its meaninglessness by sounding like babble: *bebarbarômenos*. If anything within my small linguistic ken outdoes the rich English stock of words for the everyday world before industrialization—these words having derived mostly from Anglo-Saxon—it is ancient Greek. I wander happily in the lexicon.)

Charles Segal says of the “intricate” poetry of Sophokles that it “often defies translation precisely because it is continually fashioning metaphoric and metonymic links between the realms of nature, the city and the gods. In the *parodos* [introductory or entrance ode] of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, for example, the shrines to which the desperate citizens of the chorus appeal are called ‘the shore of the altar,’ suggesting, perhaps, safety from the violence of the plague that seems to buffet the city as if it were a ship caught in a seething storm; but this same ode, a few lines before, describes the dark, frightful land of the dead as the ‘shore of the western god,’ to which the souls of those who perish in the plague fly like birds before a fiery blaze. The figurative language brings together, in a single imaginary landscape, nature (the sea), the city (civic altars), and the gods (the western god, or Hades).”⁶

Sophokles frequently used characters and stories from Homer, and also alludes to other texts. In the famous first line of the first antistrophe (the second stanza) of the third choral ode in *Oidipous Tyrannos* (line 873), Sophokles writes *hubris phuteuei turannon*—which I translate as “Insolence begets a tyrant,” which Lloyd-Jones translates as “Insolence has a child who is a tyrant,” which Charles Segal translates as “Violence (*hybris*) begets the tyrant,” and which R. D. Dawe argued meant “Tyranny begets Hybris.”⁷ The next line (in my wording) adds: “Insolence, if vainly stuffed with wealth—neither rightfully nor fittingly [. . .].” The implication is that immoderate privilege and wealth corrupt the ruler. It happens that an earlier and renowned Greek poet and ruler, Solon, wrote (in M. L. West’s translation), “Surplus breeds arrogance, when too much wealth attends / such men as have no soundness of intent.”⁸ Another scholar comments on the use of this thought, with very similar wording, by both Solon and the sixth-century-BCE poet Theognis, and translates Solon’s Greek this way: “For *koros* [satiety, surfeit] breeds *hybris*, when much wealth follows all men whose minds are not fit.”⁹ Clearly, the phrasing and the import are familiar to Sophokles, and he is not only speaking to his audience but also responding to earlier poetry in a way that creates a kind of second, underlying poetic discourse. Similarly, he takes words from Aiskhylos and turns them in a new direction at the beginning of the “Ode on Man” in *Antigone* (see Charles Segal’s note on this ode, p. 105, below). And there are many gnomic or aphoristic statements in Sophokles that he gives to characters and chorus when they are appealing to settled custom and accepted truths. For those of us who are not scholars, our experience of encountering Sophokles’ poetry lacks this apprehension of allusiveness. (Translation is about culture, too, and our contemporary literary culture lacks a significant practice of poetic allusion, unlike, say, Russian culture, in which poetry is seen by some poets as consisting, as a whole, of a vast “citational epic” in fragments.) My purpose as translator is to try to respond to both Sophokles’ way of shaping the poems and also his characteristic vividness of expression. I have not translated freely, adding or deleting; I assure the reader that what is presented here in English I have brought as closely out of the Greek as I could.

VIII

A translation alone cannot make these poems matter to us; some portion of our whole culture must respond, or some region of values within it. I try at least to show what mattered to Sophokles and his time in the form of the public poem and in the articulations of a prodigious poetic mind.

After all, despite differences and difficulties, Sophokles' poems do speak to us, even now in translation. Why? Because we still experience the way poetry works on us in something like the way it did on the Greeks. We too quicken our attention to language, apprehend the strangely potent ways of thinking we call metaphor and metonymy, get pleasure from the sounds of words and the rhythms of phrases, experience a keen interest in following intuitively what a poem says by the way it moves by association from each image or figure of speech, feeling or idea, descriptive or narrative element, to the next. For that matter, why do poets of our own time and language still use poetic devices and structures invented so long ago in other cultures and other languages? I think it is because even a "mental environment" like ours, saturated though it is with the speech and spectacle of commerce, politics, entertainment, and business, has not yet suffocated our responsiveness to the play of language, the compression of meaning, and the power over us, through us, and for us, of all that is extraordinary about language. In our ongoing processes of knowing ourselves, becoming ourselves, knowing others and the world, and surviving in the world, we are immersed in the possibilities of meaning and pleasure in language. Perhaps poetry is an appetite born in human beings when language first came into use, and renewed in each of us anew when we acquire it individually as children. Language-in-poetry can intensify and compress processes of feeling and thought, whether in a lyric, an ode, or a narrative, bringing us to think and feel in particularly meaningful ways. The intensity and play of meaning can make the realm of inner life as large as the outer world. It can strengthen our inner life for trials of mental and physical survival and for the courage required to preserve our ideals of inner freedom and outward action. Poetry deepens the productive silences within us, and

points out the emptiness of the noise around us. Dear readers, here is a master of all that, the poet Sophokles.

A note on measure, line and stanza

Unfortunately for us, neither the English language nor the history of poetry in English can provide us with the linguistic and literary resources to create artistic analogues to what Sophokles does in Greek. Since no one can create in English the metrical and rhythmical effects of the Greek originals, because the sounds and rhythmic possibilities of English are fewer, we cannot produce or hear effects like ancient Greek metrical variety and musical complexity. And while we do have a traditional use of end-rhyme, in fact ancient Greek poetry does not use end-rhyme. (But see the note on “On Sleep,” p. 108–9.) I use hemistichs (half-lines) when translating the choral odes (free-verse hemistichs in the odes from *Antigone*, which I translated with the late Charles Segal, and syllabic ones in all others). The hemistichs that were once native to our language were used in Old English, an oral culture; they multiplied occasions for the noticeable repetition of sounds. My hemistichs, though, unavoidably belong to late print culture; they multiply occasions for line-initial and line-final typographical emphasis of words, which allows me to emphasize aspects of syntax, rhythm, and sound. (I do try to repeat word-sounds for the sake of weaving the translation together more tightly). My hemistichs do not represent an existing oral rhythm (as in Old English) but rather they are a musical score for ad hoc rhythms and syntax. Why then do I use them? The Greek language is capable of great compression, so English-language translation usually requires more words than the original text. To keep translations to the same line-length as the Greek originals makes the English-language line too long; it sags. But a halved line of two shorter spans remains energetic and allows for four words to be emphasized to the eye (and the mind’s ear) by their visual and syntactic prominence at the ends and beginnings of the hemistichs. The very slight hesitations of the enjambments are everything—for rhythmic and conceptual emphasis. I vary the syllable counts of the hemistichs so that in some lines they are of exactly equal length, and in

others they are of a strictly counted unequal length. In some of the translations of odes many lines have the same syllabic length; in others, the line length varies.

Why use syllabic counts rather than metrical or free verse? I do not consider metrical verse in English to be at all monotonous when it is excellent, but on the other hand, since English only has one artistically viable metrical foot for sustained use (the iamb), metrical translation of Sophocles' odes would inevitably create a metrical sameness, even if rhythmic variation were more brilliant than I am likely to achieve. However, syllabic (and in the case of the *Antigone* odes, free) verse can allow more variation of the rhythms of our language, while at the same time sustaining closely structured lines and stanzas. (But in the two monologues included in this volume, and in some fragments, I do use iambic meter; translating Greek poetry requires all the resources English verse can offer—syllabic, metrical, and free.) Also, I use hemistichs for the sake of the two-step line as a gesture that might evoke the dance of the original verse—right foot, left; left foot, right. In all the syllabic translations, I produce my syllabic measure not in order to conform to a rule (the rule, in this case, being my own), but rather to produce poetically justified opportunities for emphasis, surprise, and freedom in the lines.

In translating the choral odes, there is another technical problem that is difficult to solve, and very few modern translators have tried to do so. As everyone who has read Greek tragedies (even in translation) knows, the choral odes are usually made up of pairs of stanzas—strophe and antistrophe; the dance that the chorus performs when singing them is thought to have represented a complementary or even antithetical relationship of antistrophe to strophe by moving in one direction in the strophe, and then reversing the steps and moving in the opposite direction in the antistrophe. (An ode may also end with a final stanza, an *epode*, that is not followed by a symmetrical response.) In Greek, strophe and antistrophe precisely match each other metrically, in that each corresponding line—line six, say, of the strophe and line six of the antistrophe—has exactly the same metrical structure. While metrical verse in English sustains the same foot through the line and can only vary the rhythmic pattern by varying the way the natural speech stresses in English,

and the pauses for punctuation and emphasis, play against the expected regularity of the meter, each Greek line is composed in a different way, out of the surpassing variety of combinations of different types of metrical feet. So in Greek the metrical responsion, as it is called, in strophe and antistrophe, is dazzlingly intricate.

I attempt only two things: to give each choral stanza in English the same number of lines as the original stanza in the Sophoklean text on which I rely (almost entirely I use the Loeb Library edition by Hugh Lloyd-Jones), and in all the choral odes except those from *Antigone*, to create a syllabic responsion, so that line six, say, of a given antistrophe in my translation precisely corresponds in syllable count and hemistich proportions to line six of the strophe that it answers. When a Greek ode has more than one strophe-antistrophe pair, each pair has its own unique metrical shape; a second pair does not imitate the first pair. And if there is an epode, it too has its own unique metrical scheme. I follow the same practice.

I stay as close as I can to the Greek, or rather to *some* of what the Greek says, since it is impossible to convey it all, and many passages are puzzling either because of textual problems caused by corruption through their having been repeatedly recopied before the invention of print, or because Sophokles' syntax is difficult. I hope I have understood enough of the meaning that is hoarded and released in these extraordinary works to give adequate honor to their maker.

A note on transliteration

I prefer to use transliterations of Greek proper nouns rather than Latinized names; hence Oidipous rather than Oedipus, and many others. It is hard to decide where exactly to draw the boundary, so as not to make names that might be familiar to the reader in their Latin versions unrecognizable when transliterated directly from the Greek. In general, there is no consistency to how translators and scholars use Greek transliteration, or Latin spellings or English words; the same play is known as *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Oedipus the King*, and *Oidipous Tyrannos* (or *Turannos*). So there remains some inconsistency in my practice of representing Greek proper names,

but I hope only a little. My goal is to represent Greek itself, not Greek filtered through Latin, which would be a little like representing indigenous American proper nouns in their French, Spanish, or English versions, interposing a linguistic barrier to the very sound of the original language (at least so far as we can imagine it.)