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Contents

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The Semiotic Basis of Politics in *Seven Against Thebes*[1]

Abstract

Beyond its formal segmentation, the structure of *Seven Against Thebes* is marked by the successive stages of a confrontation, in which the protagonist Eteocles faces first the panicking Chorus, and then (through the messenger's report) the boastful assaults of the foreign warriors. In both phases, the conflict reveals a radical divergence in the understanding of language and signs, and points out the prerogatives of language as one of the play's major themes. This paper tries to read these different stages as illustrations of polarized worldviews reflecting the ambiguous status of the λόγος in the episteme of the first half of the fifth century BCE: in its interaction with the Chorus, Eteocles emphasizes the rational and analytical basis of language in opposition to its expressive value; when discrediting the Seven's ominous vaunts, the Theban leader highlights the necessity of referential constraint, in which he sees a defence against the primitive, fallacious and anticultural misuse of signs. In the final phase, when his action showing him as a rational strategist is disrupted by the re-emergence of his father's ἀρά, Eteocles does not fail to reaffirm the need for a convergence between the rules governing the linguistic sign and the roots of moral and political order.

Keywords: Aeschylus; *Seven Against Thebes*; philosophy of language; rationalism; archaic and classical thought

1. Linguistic Horizons in *Seven Against Thebes*

This paper starts from the consideration of some distinctive traits of *Sev-*

[1] Greek quotations are from Hutchinson's text (1985); different textual choices are discussed in the relevant footnotes. English quotations are from Sommerstein's translation (2008), occasionally modified to fit Hutchinson's text or for the sake of my argument. I wish to express my gratitude to my friends and colleagues Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliazzi, and Gherardo Ugolini, for their support and many fruitful discussions on the topics dealt with in this paper. I also thank Carmen Dell'Aversano, Eric Nicholson, Guido Paduano, and the anonymous referees of *Skenè*, for helping me focus on a number of passages of my argument. It goes without saying that I bear full responsibility for its final version. Susane Payne's competence and patience proved invaluable in providing the English translation of the text, and I am deeply grateful for her help.

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en Against Thebes, specifically of what could be labelled the "epistemic fragmentation" which emerges from the actions of the protagonist:[2] his judgements and acts can be seen as expressions of disparate worldviews; this has led interpreters of the text to assume that the play, or its protagonist, lack unity.[3] My aim is to show how this inner contrast is made visible in the structure of the play in a tension involving the semantic field of speech and the different possible approaches to the uses of language. My thesis is that the symbolic dynamics underlying *Seven Against Thebes* encode the ambiguous status of the λόγος in the episteme of the first half of the fifth century BC, where the traditional trust in language as the medium for a magical-sacred unveiling of the world is juxtaposed, in a dialectical relationship but on an even footing, with an innovative consideration of the potential of reasoning and discourse as instruments for the analysis and the management of reality.[4] This inquiry is all the more interesting and relevant if we consider that these different views of language can be shown, in the sym-

[2] I shall be dealing with this problem in a more systematic manner in a study to be published shortly (Grilli 2018).

[3] Starting from Wilamowitz (1914), who sees in the plot's presumed discontinuity evidence of the play's different mythical sources. An article by Solmsen (1937) contributed significantly to the consideration of Eteocles as an inconsistent character. Solmsen enhances the sudden irruption of the Erinys during the course of rationally planned actions – a reading which, at the conclusion of a long series of studies, has recently been further developed by Sewell-Rutter (2007: 15-77; 139 ff.). Here the attention of the reader is drawn to the convergence of the sudden breakthrough of the supernatural and the voluntary action of the character. Among the many analyses intending to demonstrate the discontinuity of Eteocles' character and attributing this inconsistency to various causes, it is that of Winnington-Ingram (1983: 51) which should above all be mentioned. This study recognises in Eteocles' disparate nature the emergence of a conflict between his two social identities; for he is at one and the same time ruler of the Cadmeans and son of Oedipus "in virtue of which he is the common focus of a twofold issue, the destinies of the city and the family, dangerously intertwined". In a similar framework, Thomson's interpretation had already discerned, in the dynamics of the *Seven*, the passage of the aristocratic system towards the organization of a city state, in which "the clans lose their identity in common citizenship" (1916: 315-316 = 1966[3]: 285).

[4] The hypothesis of a linear evolution from mythical thought to rationalism, central to a celebrated essay by Wilhelm Nestle (1942[2]), is by now deemed simply an interesting chapter in cultural history, having been supplanted by a debate initiated a few years later by Dodds (1951). However, the fact that the ancient philosophers considered themselves as an alternative to traditional mythical thought is incontestable (as is emphasized by Lloyd 1987: 1-49). In general, the most recent studies (cf. for example, Buxton 1999: 1ff.; Morgan 2000: 15ff., in particular 30-7) tend to go in the direction of an emphasis on the coexistence and the complex interaction between the two planes, both for the relevance of literary texts as documents of the history of philosophy (Wians 2009: 1-4) and for the obsolescence of the view linking the origin of philosophy with the development of writing (Atwood Wilkinson 2009: 7-9).

bolic makeup of the text, to be the foundations of opposite political visions, which showcase the transition from the aristocratic political tradition to the democratic order, in which the status of language as an instrument of sharing, analysis and negotiation grows more and more central.

It is usual, and understandably so, for critical interpretations of the *Seven* to place at the centre of their analyses the second episode with its hypnotic scene of the so-called *Redepaare* (369ff.).[5] This centrality is obviously justified, but it risks eliminating the sequence, from the prologue to the final *threnos*, upon which the structure of the play is based. The initial interaction between Eteocles and the scout, or, again, the encounter and resulting argument between the hero and the chorus in the first episode are in danger of losing significance, both from the point of view of content and from that of theatrical impact, if the analysis focuses too closely, or even exclusively, on the deployment of the warriors. The interpretative angle adopted by this paper as its starting point privileges the vision of the architectural configuration of the play in its entirety as a three-stage structure. During the development of the action, its various phases do not depend so much on structural or formal correspondence, as they do on the respective prevalence of both different and complementary attitudes towards the problem of language and communication. If the text is read using the criteria of the philosophy of language it becomes immediately obvious that the development of the *Seven* is founded on a bid to implement an operation of contrastive definition, a gradual sharpening of focus on the prerogatives of language – of its potential, its functions, and its limits.

In the first part of the play Eteocles, whose opinions are more or less identical to those of the scout,[6] shares his views on the difficulty of the siege with the women of Thebes who form the chorus. However, he ends up in violent disagreement with them, expressing himself in very harsh

[5] For the presentation of text and dramatic structure the studies by Fraenkel (1964=1957), Taplin (1977: 146-56) and Thalmann (1978: 105-35) are still of fundamental importance. Ferrari (1970) and Maltomini (1976) attempt to determine the starting point and clarify the unfolding of Eteocles' strategy. The shields have been investigated in relation to the material culture of archaic Greece (Berman 2007) or to their symbolic role in the play (Bacon 1964). The aspect that concerns us most particularly here is the specific object of studies by Bernardete (1968); Cameron (1970); Zeitlin (1982); Judet de La Combe (1987).

[6] Not only because the scout's patrol is the result of a specific order on the part of Eteocles (36), but also because of the trust that the sovereign explicitly places in the reliability of his report (36-7). The scout, in his turn, says he relies on first-hand experience (40-1) and guarantees the factual accuracy of his statements (54). The clearest sign of agreement is that both Eteocles (2-3) and the scout (62) resort to a nautical metaphor when they attribute to the sovereign of the polis the role of 'helmsman' (οἴακα νωμῶν, 3; οἰακοστρόφος, 62).

terms. At this point it is not difficult, in my opinion, to identify the clash between the rational dimension of language and its emotional aspect which underlies the explicit dispute. From the opening lines of the play, and with increasing strength during the conflict with the chorus, Eteocles seems to conform to an analytical, functional, practical *logos*, while the young Theban women (παῖδες, 792) demonstrate a different conception of language, whose essential function is that of the immediate transmission of emotion, a language of figurative and evocative potential. The bone of contention is, in the terminology of contemporary linguistics, the pragmatic dimension of communication, since Eteocles persists in excluding the emotive component of language and giving priority to its propositional aspects, so as to make of it an instrument of lucid and functional analysis of reality.

However, in the second part, which includes the famous scene of the postings, although language is still the protagonist, the terms of the conflict now regard the question of reference, that is to say the relationship between linguistic sign and extralinguistic reality. Later we shall see more clearly how Eteocles' demystification of the Argive champions' bragging is fundamental to the state of referential detachment: the language of the Seven, who constantly assume its hidden power and its potential closeness to sympathetic magic, is treated by Eteocles as pure sign, with no referential function, and therefore delegitimized in its aim to shape reality. Eteocles counters the primitive voice of the Seven with a flexible,[7] versatile *logos* brought into line and controlled by practical objectives. So it is that Eteocles, adopting strategies which are subtly diversified and suggested by their context, demystifies and diminishes arrogance into braggadocio, ominous threats into empty chatter, in the name of a rigorous pragmatism that can be seen to be complying precisely with a world view which is as flawless logically as it is ethically and politically. Eteocles places against signs and words used by the Seven merely to anticipate the fulfilment of personal wishes, a totally different language: in so doing, he manages to reveal the ethical, political and religious limits of the semiosis adopted by the foreign warriors, in the name of a superiority substantiated as much by analytical clarity as by a scrupulous referential precision.

After the first two stages of the play it has become clear that Eteocles is the representative of a vision of language that, although quite far from the rationalistic *logos* of subsequent philosophy, is clearly angled in that direction, especially regarding its aspiration towards analytic disengagement

[7] One example of the flexibility of Eteocles' hermeneutics emerges in his considerations accompanying the posting of Melanippus, where the sovereign's rebuttal of the sympathetic magic implied in Tydeus' emblem (397-9) is immediately followed (402ff.) by a discourse that appropriates its presuppositions. On this problem see Grilli 2018.

and rigour of the relationship with reference. This is obviously not to consider the Seven as a treatise on the philosophy of language: in point of fact the culmination of this process is to be discerned, in the third stage, at the very moment of the sudden beginning of its breakdown. Eteocles' aspiration to perfect an instrument capable of piloting thoughts and actions at a crucial moment seems to find its first confirmation in the efficiency with which the general's plans and orders are carried out. But the posting of Polyneices at the seventh gate, with the sudden surfacing of their father's ἀρά in the chain of events, means that there is a fracture both in Eteocles' tenaciously achieved strategic and rational design, and also in his prudent and reliable anticipation of causal links.

It will be easier to see how the text articulates the outcome of the conflict, and, indeed, the corresponding outcome of this reading of the play, at the conclusion of the paper. For now, it is more useful to further explore the three stages identified above through a more precise analysis of the textual evidence.

2. Analytic Language and the Communication of Emotions

During the first stage, as has been mentioned, contrasting conceptions of language, among other matters, help make visible the antagonism between Eteocles and the young Theban women of the chorus. For the women, communication itself is above all an elaboration of sensory stimuli, to be immediately transformed into the figurative expression of complex emotional patterns, whereas for Eteocles language is the vehicle of a factual communication which privileges the informative and descriptive dimension and is associated with an attitude geared towards analysis and the making of rational decisions.

This opposition is set up in the prologue and the *parodos*, and the confrontation takes place in the first episode. In the opening speech, the protagonist informs the Theban populace of the prophecy of a seer, which tells of an imminent attack (24ff.). Eteocles, who curiously emphasizes the technical character of the divination in order to motivate its plausibility (ἀψευδεῖ τέχνῃ, "with infallible skill", 26), has in fact already sent a scout to find out details about the enemy camp.[8] When the scout returns, his first words highlight the reliability of his information which was gained at first hand (ἥκω σαφῆ τἀκεῖθεν ἐκ στρατοῦ φέρων· / αὐτὸς κατόπτης δ' εἶμ' ἐγὼ τῶν πραγμάτων, "I come bringing definite news from the army

[8] The city's defence hinges upon knowledge gathered from different sources, both religious (the prophet's statement) and technical (the scout's report); this can be read as one of the signs of the above-mentioned epistemic fragmentation (n3).

out there; I was myself an eyewitness of what they were doing", 40-1). The scout returns to his initial concept at the end of his report, reiterating the importance of first-hand investigation for reliable information, and of reliable information for the security of the strategy (κἀγὼ τὰ λοιπὰ πιστὸν ἡμεροσκόπον / ὀφθαλμὸν ἕξω· καὶ σαφηνείᾳ λόγου / εἰδὼς τὰ τῶν θύραθεν ἀβλαβὴς ἔσῃ, "For my part, from now on, I will keep a faithful daytime scout's eye out, and through my clear reports you will know what is happening outside and not come to harm", 66-8).

The chorus comes on stage shortly after this (78ff.) and right from the opening lines they display a different attitude: in contrast to Eteocles, whose information is sourced from a scout he dispatched for this express purpose, and who comes back reporting in minute detail events from inside the enemy camp, the chorus infer their information from sensory evidence, both visual and auditory. This evidence is not so precise as an analytical description, but has the force of immediate perception: αἰθερία κόνις με πείθει φανεῖσ' / ἄναυδος σαφὴς ἔτυμος ἄγγελος, "The dust I see in the air shows me it is so, / a voiceless messenger, but true and certain!", 81-2. The fact that this "voiceless" evidence is configured metaphorically as speech – since by itself it is equivalent to the report of an ἄγγελος – aims to highlight the equivalence and the opposition between the two sources of information. This characterization of the chorus has an obvious purpose from a theatrical standpoint: support the staging of the *parodos*, which in all probability (and in all Greek tragedy this is one of the scenes for which the loss of choreographic and musical resources is most to be regretted) included dances and musical and other sound effects of particular expressive value.[9] But the contrast between the chorus and the protagonist also aims at polarizing their overall attitudes towards reality; the concept of 'certain clearness' (σαφής, σαφήνεια), for example, only appears in the *Seven* in the lines quoted above (40 and 47, both referring to the scout's report), and at l. 82, where 'certain' is a quality of the "voiceless" announcement of the dust: the connotation of this occurrence patently reverses that of the first two ones.

Indeed the chorus goes on to emphasize their auditory perceptions which, though prelinguistic and inarticulate (πεδί' ὁπλόκτυπ' ὠ-/τὶ χρίμπτει βοάν, "The soil <of my> land, struck by hooves, sends the noise right to my ear!", 83-4; ἀκούετ' ἢ οὐκ ἀκούετ' ἀσπίδων κτύπον; "Do you hear, or do you not, the clatter of shields?", 100 – an open apostrophe which is addressed to the other members of the chorus, at the same time as, *ipso facto*, it activates the emotivity of the audience; κτύπον δέδορκα,

[9] On the staging see Taplin 1977: 141-2; on the expressive significance of dochmiac metre Medda 1995 and Lomiento 2004. The play's musical aspect has recently been studied by Griffith 2017 (on the *parodos* in particular: 125ff.).

"I see the noise", 103 – a splendid synaesthesia which has been unjustly considered as textually corrupted;[10] cf. again 115; 153 etc.), are treated as equivalent to the analytic report, and give rise to an immediate emotional response.

The entire first episode (181ff.) is devoted to the attempt, on the part of Eteocles, to limit and control this emotional reaction, which he considers damaging for his defence strategy: the extreme terror on the part of the women, although it is understandable from a psychological standpoint, is completely inopportune from a practical one, as it risks triggering a crowd reaction and unleashing panic in the whole city (πολίταις τάσδε διαδρόμους φυγὰς / θεῖσαι διερροθήσατ' ἄψυχον κάκην, "with you running around in all directions like this, your clamour has spread panic and cowardice among the citizens", 191-2). The censorious tone of the protagonist is not due to prejudiced aversion to womankind, as many studies have maintained;[11] this is proved by the fact that when he briefly gives in to his feelings after receiving the news of Polyneices' posting, Eteocles urges himself to exercise self-control – something which, although expressed in different words, assumes the same fear of mimetic contagion: ἀλλ' οὔτε κλαίειν οὔτ' ὀδύρεσθαι πρέπει, / μὴ καὶ τεκνωθῇ δυσφορώτερος γόος ("But it is not proper to cry or lament, lest that give birth to grief even harder to bear", 656-7). Eteocles reproaches the women for howling to express their feelings (αὔειν, λακάζειν, "howl, scream", 186), and insists peremptorily on the duty of obedience (196-9), emphasizing this with a reminder of customary social behaviour (200-1; cf. 230-2). Once more when this is taken up again shortly afterwards the relevance of the opposition is significant: the emotional question in l. 100, which the chorus asks of a generic "you", referring to the chorus maidens as well as to the theatrical audience (ἀκούετ' ἢ οὐκ ἀκούετ' ἀσπίδων κτύπον; "Do you hear, or do you not, the clatter of shields?"), is reversed at l. 202 by Eteocles, who, with the same disjunctive question, in a totally different practical and 'didactic' acceptation, tries to lead the chorus back to the paths of reason: ἤκουσας ἢ οὐκ ἤκουσας, ἢ κωφῇ λέγω; ("Did you hear me or not? Or am I talking to the deaf?"). Here too the chorus's answer, with their partial disregard of the proper signif-

[10] Askew's conjecture, δέδοικα for the transmitted δέδορκα, although still printed by Murray in his second edition (1955), is rightly considered "weak and unnatural" by Hutchinson 1985: 63 (but Lesky 1996 [1972]: 131 had already defended the *paradosis*). For a systematic reconsideration of this synaesthetic metaphor see Marinis 2012.

[11] For example Gagarin 1976: 151-62; Zeitlin 1990: 103; Podlecki 1993: 64-72; Stehle 2005. Among the scholars who maintain that Eteocles' attitude is not significant (owing to the patriarchal context of classical Athens), or that it is in any case justified by the action itself, should be recalled Hubbard 1992: 105; Sommerstein 1996: 111-12; Paduano 2013: 15.

icance of the question, shows up the juxtaposed origins of their respective ways of understanding sensation and communication: ἔδεισ' ἀκού-/ σασα τὸν ἁρματόκτυπον ὄτοβον ὄτοβον, / ὅτε τε σύριγγες ἔκλαγξαν ἑλικότροχοι . . . ("I was frightened when I heard the sound of the rattle, the rattle of the chariots, and the noise of the whirling sockets of their wheels . . .", 203-7).[12] The quotation is useful as it also helps the understanding of the intersection of dramaturgical and thematic elements in the tragic text: the chorus's reply to Eteocles, indeed, establishes from the very beginning the distance between the speakers; the young women have certainly heard (ἤκουσας; 202 ~ ἀκούσασα, 203), but not so much Eteocles' words as the sounds of the siege, immediately evoked in great detail.[13] This rampant lyricism is the beginning of an epirrhematic dialogue (203ff.) during which Eteocles pressures the women with his demands for reason (in declaimed iambic trimeter), while the chorus continue to express themselves in singing the frantic dochmii of the *parodos*. This confrontation of two world views, which may be analysed as conflicting approaches focalized on language, also emerges in the text in terms of contrasted formal and dramatic features (the chorus very probably continue dancing during Eteocles' intervention which can be seen as an attempt to control motion and as a *rappel à l'ordre*). On the level of content, the dramatic and theatrical contrast is strengthened during the stichomythia which concludes the epirrhematic dialogue, with an increasing divergence between the attitudes of Eteocles and the chorus; in point of fact the chorus simply witness the events and then echo the emotions these events elicit, whereas Eteocles tries more and more resolutely to impose silence (249-53):

Χο. δέδοικ'· ἀραγμὸς ἐν πύλαις ὀφέλλεται.
Ετ. οὐ σῖγα μηδὲν τῶνδ' ἐρεῖς κατὰ πτόλιν;
Χο. ὦ ξυντέλεια, μὴ προδῷς πυργώματα.
Ετ. οὐκ ἐς φθόρον σιγῶσ' ἀνασχήσῃ τάδε;

[Chorus I'm frightened! And the clatter at the gates gets louder and louder. / Eteocles Will you not keep quiet, instead of talking all about it in public? / Chorus Assembled gods, do not betray our walls! / Eteocles Can't you put up with it in silence, confound you?]

The immediate continuation of the incident shows how from this point on the conflict is only postponed. Eteocles concludes the dialogue with an attempt to influence the chorus's prayer, which in his opinion only needs to

[12] On this passage see Novelli 2005, *ad l.*

[13] Edmunds (2002) uses these textual hints to substantiate his hypothesis of an extra-dramatic space, starting from the auditory component of the staging.

conform to religious norms and not be emotional and agitated (266ff.). He himself provides the example of an impeccable votive invocation, in which he addresses the local gods in a dignified manner, promising them sacrifices and the consecration of the war spoils (271ff.). He then concludes with the presentation of his defence strategy (282ff.), contrasting his demonstrations of ritual and tactical order with the ματαίοις κἀγρίοις ποιφύγμασιν ("wild, useless pantings", 280) of the chorus. In so doing, he emphasizes once again the distance between the analytic and functional language that he, the general, employs, and the purely expressive kind used by the women. But, at the end of the episode, the first *stasimon* is followed by an outstanding performance, on the part of the chorus, of their vision of the potential sack of Thebes (321ff.). The structural separation of this sung and danced *stasimon* is also justified functionally by the fact that it may be contrasted with the general's capability for rational forecast, wholly based on reports, conjectures and carefully planned ritual offerings. The women's capacity for forecast is a totally emotional one, as it is founded on a lyric and visionary presentiment of imminent suffering.

This opposition continues in the subsequent sections of the play: at the beginning of the second episode, for example, the text greets the arrival of an "eyewitness" (κατόπτης, 369), and accentuates the general's desire to obtain information (μαθεῖν, 373) as he listens to the news as ἀρτίκολλον . . . λόγον (ibid.), that is, as "precise and faithful report" (ἀρτίκολλος is a metaphor from the language of craftsmen and literally means 'tightly glued', hence 'close-fitting').[14] The chorus's reaction to the same news, on the other hand, is entirely to be expected: ἱκνεῖται λόγος διὰ στηθέων, / τριχὸς δ' ὄρθιος πλόκαμος ἵσταται, "Their words pierce through my breast, / and each lock of my hair stands up on end", 563-4. Eteocles completely understands this reaction, as he had already shown that he feared the σπερχνούς τε καὶ ταχυρρόθους / λόγους ("a flurry of hasty, noisy words", 285-6) and the inevitable confusion that would ensue.

[14] Occurrences of ἀρτίκολλος are quite scanty: the only ancient parallels for this passage are Aesch. *Ch.* 580 and Soph. *Tr.* 768. From both it can be inferred that the original meaning of the word was 'tightly glued' (of a garment to a human body in Sophocles' passage; of things "fitting well together", *LSJ*, in the *Choephori*). Ancient commentaries on the passage of *Seven* explain the word as a reference to Eteocles' eager anticipation of the messenger's report, or to his entry so 'close in time'. But we know of no further ancient occurrence with this meaning. Hutchinson (1985: 107) rightly supposes that the paradosis ἀρτίκολλον, if referred to λόγον, "might mean that the report fitted accurately the events it described"; anyway, he ends up rejecting this meaning (surprisingly dismissed as "not appropriate") in favour of the "more natural" (but also much less interesting and meaningful) sense of 'right in time', referring to Eteocles' entry. In order to do so, Hutchinson of course needs to alter the text and print Paley's conjecture ἀρτικόλλως. My own reading sticks to the *paradosis*.

The distance between Eteocles' position and that of the chorus is further specified in one of the scout's speeches, who, in a momentary display of fear, takes up an intermediate position: although still on the side of Eteocles' pragmatism, he cannot avoid showing, on occasion, his own emotional involvement. When he describes Hippomedon in the fourth *Redepaar* of the second episode, the scout yields to a metadiscursive expression of his own feelings which for the study is of particular interest (489-90):

> ἄλω δὲ πολλήν, ἀσπίδος κύκλον λέγω,
> ἔφριξα δινήσαντος, οὐκ ἄλλως ἐρῶ.
>
> [I shuddered, I won't deny it, to see him brandish his great round orb of a shield.]

The first line, with its curious redundancy, juxtaposes the metaphorical and literal designation of a single object. This is a deliberate clumsiness, as it allows the text to contain a conscious distinction between the plane of poetic intensity and that of simple propositional denotation. The significance of this redundancy is made clear, in my opinion, from the next line onwards: the first hemistich makes explicit (ἔφριξα, 'I felt frightened') an emotive reaction of the ἄγγελος, while the second one provides a sort of metadiscursive justification of this feeling. The parallelism between the two lines therefore allows to read the first hemistich of l. 489, which hyperbolically equates Hippomedon's shield with the circular face of a heavenly body,[15] as a mark of emotional speech, while the metadiscursive explanations swiftly restore the general tone of the discourse to the plane of analytic and objective description, which the scout knows to be preferred by the sovereign.

3. The Problem of Reference

The following part of the play (369-652) constitutes the second stage of my analysis, and it takes up nearly the whole of the second episode.[16] In this long segment a juxtaposition between the king of Thebes and his enemy champions is established and developed. The enemy warriors have drawn lots for their various positions (55) and they are each presented in some detail. The Argive champions, with the exception of Amphiaraos, who seems to share the view of Eteocles and the Thebans and accuses Tydeus

[15] See Hutchinson 1985: 123.

[16] It is, indeed, only from the answer to the seventh *Redepaar* (653ff.), that Eteocles will have to reckon with the unexpected crisis factor of the presence of Polyneices at the seventh gate, which triggers the last stage of his journey and which will be discussed in the next section.

and Polyneices to be the advocates of a radically unjust war (580ff.), present themselves at their battle stations with an exaggerated show of their attributes and of their determination to gain their objectives. They all exploit, both in the words they utter or through the semiotics of the images displayed on their shields, the sympathetic magic of signs. Eteocles' answers refute their confidence and help to clarify the concept of language and communication underlying his own words.

As obvious even at first glance, the first five *Redepaare* are functionally similar to one another; in the sixth the unusual presence of Amphiaraos is referred to and commented on as that of a religious and morally upright man who finds himself part of the Argive expedition against his will; then the seventh constitutes the epitome of the first five in the presentation of Polyneices, when Eteocles' reaction causes events to precipitate towards a breakdown. If, as I believe, this similarity between the *Redepaare* is well-founded, it is hard to deny the particular importance that the introduction to Eteocles' first answering speech (397-9) now acquires: simply because of its opening position and for its indicative nature, it somehow functions as a premise to all the replies, and may be considered as an expression of Eteocles' predictable opinion:

> κόσμον μὲν ἀνδρὸς οὔτιν' ἂν τρέσαιμ' ἐγώ,
> οὐδ' ἑλκοποιὰ γίγνεται τὰ σήματα·
> λόφοι δὲ κώδων τ' οὐ δάκνουσ' ἄνευ δορός.
>
> [I would not tremble at the accoutrements of any man; and shield-devices cannot inflict wounds, nor can crests or bells hurt without a spear.]

Just as in the conflict with the women of the chorus, when Eteocles tries to curb the emotional component of their outburst, here too his censorship – and his distrust – concern the 'expressive' dimension of discourse, the κόσμον, the ornamental devices, that semiotic surplus with which the warrior tries to objectify his feelings (or to solicit other people's) through their expression and, at the same time, summons to his aid the strength hidden deep within signs. This view of language can be seen to enable the possibility of envisioning a paradoxical continuity between the emotional communication of the chorus and the ominous, almost magical language of the enemy chiefs (both of which types of expression, being characterized, not fortuitously, by Eteocles as vain, μάταια: cf. 280 ~ 438 and 442). Eteocles, on the other hand, posits a purely referential idea of the λόγος, in which language is at the service of its own denotation, and where there exists between *res* and *verbum* a purely linear designatory relationship, governed by an ethical and religious parameter. This important methodological premise permits the resolution of the apparent contradiction which arises in

the posting speech by Melanippus: in point of fact, immediately after having demonstrated his rationalistic attitude when he remarks "shield-devices cannot inflict wounds", Eteocles casually formulates a kledonomantic[17] denial of the device on Tydeus's shield which seems to correspond with the logic of sympathetic magic. The contradiction does not really exist, as Eteocles believes neither in his kledonomantic confutation nor in the magical and sympathetic power of emblems.[18] Rather, he remains faithful to his own idea of language as a tool for the analytic and rational description of reality, whose dignity and efficiency are in his opinion the only criteria worth considering.

All the kledonomantic confutations which Eteocles expertly comes up with should therefore really be considered 'ironic', that is, intended to demonstrate, with no intellectual engagement whatsoever, that the application of identical principles of sympathetic magic can in fact lead to totally opposed interpretations of the very same signs. It follows, inevitably, that it is precisely the interpretative ambivalence of this type of discourse which debars it from consideration in this context: it is essentially contradictory, therefore rationally untenable.

That Eteocles' kledonomancy is ironic, and should therefore not be considered as an expression of the character's beliefs, is confirmed by the fact that the hero never assumes that his own brilliant demystifications should be taken at face value. From the very first speech, in which he wittily returns Tydeus' threats to the sender, Eteocles does not neglect to soberly defer to fate and to the unfathomable will of the gods: ἔργον δ' ἐν κύβοις Ἄρης κρινεῖ ("Ares will decide the issue with his dice", 414). In the same way, the other Theban champions are indeed shielded by the sovereign's skilful semiotic contentions, but their success is seen to depend, in the last analysis, on metaphysical uncertainty. Polyphontes is identified as being under the protection of Artemis and may depend upon the favour of the gods (449-50); the possible outcome of Megareus' duel is left uncertain;[19]

[17] On kledonomancy see Zeitlin 1982: 46-9; she emphasizes the potentially magic power of language in the following terms: "The operation of a kledonomantic system attests to the basic instability and ambiguity of language, where one discourse can lie behind another. It attests to the arbitrary character of signs in the signifying system whereby meaning can shift, gaps can open up between signifier and signified, and new sequences of signs can be created and recreated. Yet once the sign is seized as κληδών, it loses its indeterminacy and gains instead a *dynamic power* to determine the future" (47, my emphasis).

[18] At this point my idea of Eteocles' hermeneutics differs from that of Zeitlin (1982: 48): she only recognizes (tragic) irony in the protagonist's failure to understand the pertinency of the *omina* not simply to the city's destiny but to his own.

[19] But if the Theban warrior wins, he will be able to exult in having beaten not just his actual opponent but also the one represented on the shield (478-9). This assimilation

Hyperbius wants to know his destiny ἐν χρείᾳ τύχης, "in this crisis of fortune", 506; the forecast of victory on the part of Megareus' brother, Actor, will be fulfilled only "if the gods are willing" (θεῶν θελόντων, 562). Again, in the case of Lasthenes, who will confront Amphiaraus, Eteocles closes on a note of religious fatalism (θεοῦ δὲ δῶρόν ἐστιν εὐτυχεῖν βροτούς, "but mortals' good fortune is the gift of gods", 625). In the end, Eteocles' semiotic virtuosity seems to be underpinned more by the intent of showing up the inconsistency of the Argives' exhibitionism than by the illusion of being able to endow the Theban champions with the efficacious protection of sympathetic magic.

In Tydeus' case, the irony is clear in l. 402 (τάχ' ἂν γένοιτο μάντις ἀνοία τινί, "perhaps someone's folly may prove prophetic"). Here the Argive champion is sarcastically referred to using the indefinite pronoun (τινί, "for someone"), and his choice of emblem is considered as "folly" (ἀνοία), as he is unaware of the ominous implications which underlie the term νύκτα ("night", 400). To the semiotics of wishful thinking characteristic of the Argives, Eteocles juxtaposes an alternative semiotics based firstly, on a refusal of expressive language in favour of efficacious and linguistically essential action; secondly, on moral principle as the only binding criterion of linguistic validity; thirdly, on the mistrust of the ambiguity and arbitrariness of symbolic signification, and therefore on the recuperation of a different 'etymological' significance of words.

It is worth quoting in full the speech in which Eteocles posts Melanippus against Tydeus, and which can be scrutinized as model of all following speeches (403-15):[20]

εἰ γὰρ θανόντι νὺξ ἐπ' ὄμμασιν πέσοι,
τῷ τοι φέροντι σῆμ' ὑπέρκομπον τόδε
γένοιτ' ἂν ὀρθῶς ἐνδίκως τ' ἐπώνυμον,
καὐτὸς κατ' αὐτοῦ τήνδ' ὕβριν μαντεύεται.
ἐγὼ δὲ Τυδεῖ κεδνὸν Ἀστακοῦ τόκον
τῶνδ' ἀντιτάξω προστάτην πυλωμάτων,
μάλ' εὐγενῆ τε καὶ τὸν Αἰσχύνης θρόνον
τιμῶντα καὶ στυγοῦνθ' ὑπέρφρονας λόγους·
αἰσχρῶν γὰρ ἀργός, μὴ κακὸς δ' εἶναι φιλεῖ.
σπαρτῶν δ' ἀπ' ἀνδρῶν ὧν Ἄρης ἐφείσατο
ῥίζωμ' ἀνεῖται – κάρτα δ' ἔστ' ἐγχώριος –
Μελάνιππος· ἔργον δ' ἐν κύβοις Ἄρης κρινεῖ.

of referent and signifier as homogeneous elements of a set/whole is, in my opinion, yet another sign of the irony implicit in Eteocles' kledonomancy.

[20] My reading of this scene adheres to the hermeneutical perspective of Judet de La Combe 1987.

Δίκη δ' ὁμαίμων κάρτα νιν προστέλλεται 415
εἴργειν τεκούσῃ μητρὶ πολέμιον δόρυ.

[For if the night of death should fall on his eyes, then this boastful device would prove to be rightly and properly true to its name for its bearer, and he is making this arrogant prophecy against himself. I will post against Tydeus, as defender of this gate, the brave son of Astacus, a man of very noble birth and one who honours the throne of Modesty and hates arrogant words; for he never does a shameful deed, and to be cowardly is not his way. He is a scion arising from the Sown Men whom Ares spared, and a man of this land through and through – Melanippus. Ares will decide the issue with his dice; but it is very much the just duties of kinship that send him forth to protect the mother that bore him from the enemy's spear.]

From ll. 404-6 it can be perceived that mantic and kledonomancy coincide to transform the σῆμ' ὑπέρκομπον, the "boastful device" of Tydeus into a sign which is really (ὀρθῶς) and authentically (ἐνδίκως) meaningful (ἐπώνυμον), that is to say an anticipation of divine punishment (κατ' αὐτοῦ . . . μαντεύεται, "he is making this arrogant prophecy against himself", 406). The insistence on the moral disapproval of excess is shared by the other speeches: Capaneus is condemned for the χαρᾷ ματαίᾳ ("foolish joy", 442) with which he shows "contempt for the gods" (θεοὺς ἀτίζων, 441); Hippomedon provokes Pallas Onca who abhors his ὕβριν ("arrogance", 502): Parthenopaeus makes Eteocles pronounce a collective denunciation against all the ἀνοσίοις κομπάσμασιν ("unholy boasts", 551) of the Argive champions; Eteocles alludes to Polyneices as a φωτὶ παντόλμῳ φρένας ("a man with so utterly audacious a mind", 671). In Eteocles' eyes, then, the ἐπωνυμία, the 'meaningful' semanticity of language, depends on the moral correctness of the *énoncé*, bringing together, as the connotation of the adverbs ὀρθῶς and ἐνδίκως in l. 405 shows, the logical matrix of the linguistic reference with its moral component. The same thing happens in the case of Capaneus, whom Eteocles expects to see ξὺν δίκῃ ("with justice", "justly", 444) struck by lightning – where the meaning of the syntagm ξὺν δίκῃ recalls that of ἔνδικος or of πάνδικος at ll. 405; 670; 673. Moreover, it does not seem irrelevant to recall that the metaphoric foundation of some of the key concepts of law, as is indeed the case with ὀρθόν and δίκη, consists in the idea of 'direct indication':[21] a just thing is one which can be established linearly, with an undisturbed and direct correspondence between sign and ref-

[21] For the etymology of δίκη/δίκαιος see Frisk 1954: 393-4 and Chantraine 1968: I, 283-4; for a semantic analysis, Havelock 1969: 49-50. The etymological connection with δείκνυμι is commonplace and illustrates how the basic meaning is 'indicate', 'show': for Lloyd-Jones the original meaning of the word is "the 'indication' of the requirement of the divine law, themis" (1971: 167n23).

erent. This convergence may be considered a distinctive feature of Eteocles' 'linguistic' thought: he tends unfailingly to guide justice towards precision, namely, to consider ethical principles and semantic rigour bound to one another in a relationship of mutual validation.

Against Tydeus, and against the unacceptable conception of language implicit in his actions, Eteocles posts a warrior who has been chosen with this particular semiotic idea in mind: Melanippus is of course in the first place "nobly born" (εὐγενῆ, 409), so that, from the perspective of aristocratic ethics of which Eteocles is the paragon, he may guarantee, *a priori*, a solid moral foundation. This is proved by the fact that the young man holds Modesty in due respect, and rejects with horror any speech which goes beyond the bounds of moderation (409-10). Once again, meaningless boastfulness comes up short against calm self-control, which, for its spontaneity, is also in significant contrast with the hard-won silence imposed on the women of the chorus. Veneration for the "throne of Modesty" is undoubtedly associated with a sparing use of words, as is shown by a vague air of nostalgia during the description of an old-fashioned upbringing in Aristophanes' *Clouds* (961ff.; cf. in particular l. 963 πρῶτον μὲν ἔδει παιδὸς φωνὴν γρύξαντος μηδέν' ἀκοῦσαι, "No child would ever be heard, for one thing, indulging in whining complaints." [trans. Halliwell 2016]; cf. also 998 and 1003). Melanippus' personality is therefore defined through negation, citing those deeds of which the warrior is incapable, deeds, for instance, which are qualified as being ignoble (αἰσχρῶν) and cowardly (κακὸς . . . εἶναι). In the same way, other Theban champions are characterized for their capacity to act in an efficient and reasonable manner whereas their adversaries use too many words. Capaneus is "loud-mouthed" (στόμαργος, 447) and a tireless blasphemer, ἀπογυμνάζων στόμα (441, "who is exercising his mouth"); Actor, on the contrary, is incapable of boasting, and resolute in action (ἀνὴρ ἄκομπος, χεὶρ δ' ὁρᾷ τὸ δράσιμον, "a man who does not boast but whose hand can see what needs to be done", 554); Lasthenes is agile and sensible (γέροντα τὸν νοῦν, σάρκα δ' ἡβῶσαν φέρει, "who has got a mature mind but youthful flesh", 622) and he, too, is decisive in action (623-4).

Finally, Eteocles returns to Melanippus' noble birth, not in generic terms this time, but specifically: the Theban champion is of the race of the Sown Men, and therefore he is κάρτα . . . ἐγχώριος ("a man of this land through and through", 413). The reminder of autochthony,[22] from Eteocles' preferred referential perspective, works as a sort of 'etymological' validation – on-

[22] Cameron (1970: 85-95) links the relationship with the soil to the central symbolic nucleus of the play (birth and death of their shared mother earth concerns the Sown-Men as much as the last of the Labdacids). For a detailed analysis of the theme of autochthony see Rader 2009.

ly not on the level of the signifier, as would be obvious and logical, but paradoxically on that much more sound and reliable one of the referent: to be ἐγχώριος, that is, autochthonous, to be able to claim a "root" (ῥίζωμα) which connects the chosen warrior's body directly to the Theban soil, τεκούσῃ μητρί ("the mother that bore him", 416; cf. also l. 16), is the functional equivalent of being ἐπώνυμος, 'of a meaningful name', that is of confirming, through a present-day manifestation the deep potential roots of the meaning implicit in the name (as several characters agree in highlighting at ll. 8-9; 135; 536; 658; 829).

In the description of Melanippus, the reference to the mother who gave birth to him is one of the signals authorizing a reading of the *Redepaare* as a structured and symmetrical whole. Even without wanting to go too far in the search for correspondences,[23] it is clear that the first (Tydeus vs Melanippus) and last pair of speeches (Polyneices vs Eteocles) are indeed placing the two main champions of the Theban expedition, Tydeus and Polyneices, both sons-in-law of Adrastus, king of Argos, at the furthest points of opposing extremes. Melanippus, opponent of Tydeus, is thus a prefiguration of Eteocles, future opponent of Polyneices,[24] and his rightful collocation with regard to the mother country accentuates the contrasting transgressive action embarked on by the Labdacid in exile. The exploit is defined as being unjust from the very moment of Polyneices' birth (in a telling periphrasis: φυγόντα μητρόθεν σκότον, "when he escaped the darkness of the womb", 664), and even his own ally, Amphiaraus, reproves him for being a profaner of his mother country (μητρός τε πηγὴν τίς κατασβέσει δίκη; "What claim of justice can quench the mother-source?", 584).

Overall, I believe that Eteocles' demystification of the enemy emblems is oriented to a notion of justice which tendentially converges with a linear and transparent semiosis: the only secure guarantee of the Theban champions' fate, beyond the inscrutable will of the gods, remains the matchless strength of reference.

[23] The object of a systematic exploration in Zeitlin 1982: 171-7; see also Wilkens, where the scholar makes the reconstruction of a hypothesized modular symmetry at the basis of the entire second episode the objective of his detailed (in my opinion not utterly convincing) critical and textual analysis (1974: 26-61).

[24] Besides the structural symmetry, which, for example, in Wilkens' scheme, too (1974: 29, 60), links the first and last pairs of speeches, the sign of a correspondence seems guaranteed by the distant echo of a similar characterization (411: αἰσχρῶν γὰρ ἀργός, μὴ κακὸς δ' εἶναι φιλεῖ ~ 685: κακῶν δὲ κᾀσχρῶν οὕτιν' εὐκλείαν ἐρεῖς) – as if to say that the similarity of character of Melanippus and Eteocles (strengthened by the paronomastic echo of εὐκλείαν) lies in their identical refusal of 'ugly' and 'cowardly' actions.

4. Consensus, Ethics, Etymology: the Rational Foundation of Politics

Eteocles' frame of reference, clearly revealed during his confrontation first with the chorus and later (indirectly) with the Argive champions, is a sign of the tendency towards total control which is a distinguishing trait of his character – or at least of his aspiration to organize efficiently a certain situation in its entirety, based on an examination of the available facts which is as systematic as possible. The third phase of Eteocles' confrontation with other approaches to language and communication begins, indeed, when the seventh speech of the messenger reports the posting of his brother Polyneices at the seventh gate. This news, which the hero receives as a dramatic and terrifying adversity, overturns all his organized strategies and brings to the fore various areas of conflict.

In the first place, the imminent implementation of Oedipus' curse, and with it the punishment for Laius' erstwhile transgression, reveals the rigid and indiscriminate nature of divine power, which can even strike a righteous man if he is associated with a group of people who are compromised in some way. In the context of the Labdacid γένος, tainted by Laius' guilt, Oedipus' curse against his sons, and Polyneices' unholy aggression of his fatherland, even Eteocles' civic virtue is useless. In the text, this involvement of the righteous in the punishment of the unjust is considered to be a traditional and self-evident fact. Eteocles himself refers to it when he comments upon the anomaly of Amphiaraus siding with the Argive chiefs (597ff.). In this passage, Eteocles expresses himself in terms that should be extended, by tragic irony, to his own predicament, as innocent heir of a family which is branded by guilt and impurity. The most relevant aspect of these lines, above and beyond the many questions they raise, lies, in my opinion, in the great prominence they give to Eteocles' inclination to consider situations and problems as complex, interwoven systems. This is a crucial point in a political reading of the play and it is confirmed by an extensive network of textual indications. The overall picture of Eteocles as an impartial, ethical and reasonable character, right up to the clash with the forces of an adverse metaphysical power, demonstrates, in the end, the root of the problem of world order, which considers the religious plane in potential opposition to order attainable by human means.

The second aporia revealed by Polyneices' posting is dependent on the first, as it consists in the discrepancy between the traditional moral and religious rule (incarnated, as is usual in tragedy, by the chorus) and the attempt at a rational solution of the problem. Indeed, from the religious point of view the correct choice on the part of Eteocles would be the refusal to

fight. This would have the primary advantage of avoiding a potentially inexpiable pollution (this is the aspect on which the chorus places the greatest emphasis, 681-2), and also a secondary benefit, from an individual point of view, in that the king would be guaranteed not to lose his life. But this would be an apolitical, improvised and above all individualistic solution, as it would detach the sovereign's choices from that process of deliberate action undertaken right from the start. As he is responsible for the polis, the king cannot disregard the fact that he must decide not what is advantageous to him personally but what is best for the city as a whole. Consequently, the first effect of the option not to fight is a manifestation of the tension, or better of the contradiction which sets the respect for religious constraints against the execution of a 'politically' deliberated military strategy.

A rational evaluation of the events encourages the decision to fight, for several reasons: the more predictable one is stated by Eteocles when he rejects the solicitation to be cautious addressed to him by the chorus (716-7, quoted below). He reminds them of military ethics which, as is documented from the earliest periods of Greek culture, binds the citizen (all the more so if he is a leader) to his responsibility and obliges him never to retreat before the danger of combat for the defence of his country. More specifically, Eteocles knows that confronting his brother is a sort of 'linguistic' verification of his cause, because only direct combat would permit him to pit his own 'semantic' justice, composed of moral rectitude and of the most rigorous correspondence between facts and words, directly against the Justice exhibited by Polyneices, sign without referent as are all the images on the Argive shields (670-1):

> ἦ δῆτ' ἂν εἴη πανδίκως ψευδώνυμος
> Δίκη, ξυνοῦσα φωτὶ παντόλμῳ φρένας.
>
> [Truly Justice would be utterly false to her name if she consorted with a man with so utterly audacious a mind.]

Polyneices is indeed the man who subverts the linguistic code, overturning the bond of continuity with the motherland in a contrastive relationship (cf. 584) and trying to impose the magic energy of language on an intractable reality (659-61):

> τάχ' εἰσόμεσθα τοὐπίσημ' ὅποι τελεῖ,
> εἴ νιν κατάξει χρυσότευκτα γράμματα
> ἐπ' ἀσπίδος φλύοντα σὺν φοίτῳ φρενῶν.
>
> [We shall soon know where that blazon will end up, whether those letters worked in gold, blathering insanely on his shield, are really going to bring him home.]

The figure of Justice depicted on his shield is in point of fact a sign separated from its referent: the golden letters are defined as φλύοντα (661), that is 'seething', under the pressure of a mental energy that is eluding control (σὺν φοίτῳ φρενῶν, ibid., where φοῖτος stands for 'going wandering'). The comparison with *PV* 504 (μάτην φλῦσαι, 'to be mad'; cf. as well Nic. *Alex.* 214: μανίης ὕπο μυρία φλύζειν, 'regurgitate a thousand mad things')[25] demonstrates that at the heart of this metaphor of mental disorder lies the connection between an excess of expressive energy (φλύω = 'to bubble' used of gas that comes freely to the surface of a boiling liquid or melting metal)[26] and the absence of a referential link, which could still anchor the mind, through language, to the principle of reality.

The fatalism of Eteocles' choice hides, in the end, a possible ulterior element of rational evaluation. Since Oedipus' curse is directed symmetrically against both brothers, it is probable that the hero foresees the result of the duel as a reciprocal killing. In this case, the death of Oedipus' sons, both of them 'without children', as we learn from the chorus (ἀτέκνους, 828), would imply the extinction of the royal house,[27] and with it the fulfilment and auspicable extinction of the ἀρά that, through the Labdacids, burdens the polis. In this case too, however, the application of a rational criterion to these decisions is expressed through the constant prevalence of the political (that is, of a significance determined by collective interests) over the subjective and the individual.

Here too it would be mistaken to attribute to Eteocles, as military leader and politician, an idea of a generally shared world view in conformation with the prevalence of custom and common sense. On more than one occasion the text shows Eteocles distancing himself from the opinions of common people (4-8; 218; 225). Above all – and this seems to me the most interesting feature –, Eteocles is able to distance himself from common sense when it is a question of rejecting the appeal from the chorus to retire from his posting (716-7):

Χο. νίκην γε μέντοι καὶ κακὴν τιμᾷ θεός.
Ετ. οὐκ ἄνδρ' ὁπλίτην τοῦτο χρὴ στέργειν ἔπος.

[25] See also Hesych. φ 663: φλυσ(σ)ῶσα· μαινομένη.

[26] As is emphasized by the ancient *scholion* to Aesch. *PV* 504.

[27] Hutchinson (1985: 185) deletes ἀτέκνους as corrupted. His linguistic and metrical arguments are ingenious, but not fully convincing (for example, assuming that "non-melic anapaests very rarely have four consecutive shorts" does not necessarily make of this passage an unparalleled, impossible unicum). Therefore, the text may be kept, as in most modern editions. For the sake of my argument it is relevant to observe that implications of total destruction of Oedipus' γένος also occur in other passages of the *Seven*: cfr. 689-91; 813 – to mention only passages of undisputed authenticity.

> [Chorus Yet god respects even an inglorious victory. / Eteocles That's not an expression that a man-at-arms should tolerate.]

The chorus' proposal is made in an apparently gnomic form (Eteocles seems to imply this when talking of ἔπος) and has the flavour of a saying aimed at justifying an ethic of compromise.[28] But for Eteocles this sort of consensus is unacceptable as it does not accord with his system of values, based as we have seen on the convergence of ethics with logical and referential rigour. In the end, Eteocles' ethical stance, which seems to aspire to being considered as *more geometrico demonstrata*, consists wholly in the attempt to restore to language the capacity of a complete and binding designation, in a sort of idealistic, ingenuous, but, in any case, heroic ethicization of semiosis. Only on these conditions is Eteocles inclined to join in the dynamics of cultural exchange, and to share a knowledge which is authentically and literally 'making sense'.

Confirmation of this attitude may be found in the mirroring that may be discerned between Eteocles and Amphiaraus, the virtuous prophet (ἄνδρα σωφρονέστατον, "a man of the highest virtue", 568), who has reluctantly sided with the impious Argive warriors. Just like Eteocles, in fact more so given his prophetic powers, Amphiaraus is able to see things as they really are, and from this diagnostic capacity he derives a total refusal of 'expressive' language, in which he clearly discerns the risk of mystification. Accordingly, Amphiaraus has no emblem on his shield, as any device could determine, in a possible contrast with actions undertaken, an intolerable discrepancy between sign and referent, a dyscrasia that archaic culture perceives as the divergence between the substance of being and the falsehood of seeming: σῆμα δ' οὐκ ἐπῆν κύκλῳ· / οὐ γὰρ δοκεῖν ἄριστος, ἀλλ' εἶναι θέλει ("On its circle there was no image; for he desires not the appearance of excellence but the reality", 591-2).[29]

[28] Here Hutchinson's observation (1985: 160) seems pertinent: the chorus do not express an opinion commonly shared, but stick to a negative position only to highlight Eteocles' moral qualities – exactly as in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (79-85), where Neoptolemus rejects Odysseus' considerations by declaring that he prefers καλῶς / δρῶν ἐξαμαρτεῖν ἢ νικᾶν κακῶς (94-5). From the archaic tradition (see for example Theogn. 1.971-2) to tragedy (see for example Eur. *Andr.* 777-8), ignoble victory is always condemned, or at least absurd and self-defeating (as in Aesop. 197, where the ass who wins the tug o' war ends up by falling off a cliff: νίκα, κακὴν γὰρ νίκην νικᾷς).

[29] The mythic variants relative to this character are discussed in Pfeijffer 1999: 535-6; for the differing treatment of him in the Seven and in Pindar's *Eighth Pythian* see Foster 2017. For Otis 1960: 163-4 the parallelism that links Eteocles and Amphiaraus does not include awareness – the understanding, that is, that a person's fate is unrelated to his moral worth. This parallelism is developed further by De Vito (1999), who sees in the prophet the mediator of a choice that coincides precisely with the

Still more useful towards the clarification of the conditions Eteocles poses as necessary for participating in social exchange are the words of reproval that the prophet Amphiaraus directs at Polyneices; here the outrageous anticultural nature of war against the motherland is underlined, while negating any compatibility with civic memory (579-83):

> λέγει δὲ τοῦτ' ἔπος διὰ στόμα·
> "Ἦ τοῖον ἔργον καὶ θεοῖσι προσφιλές,
> καλόν τ' ἀκοῦσαι καὶ λέγειν μεθυστέροις,
> πόλιν πατρῴαν καὶ θεοὺς τοὺς ἐγγενεῖς
> πορθεῖν, στράτευμ' ἐπακτὸν ἐμβεβληκότα."
>
> [he utters from his lips: "Is an act like this really smiled on by the gods, is it an honourable thing for posterity to hear and tell of, to devastate one's fatherland and its native gods by bringing a foreign army to invade it?"]

Contrary to what is emphasized here by Amphiaraus, the fact that the actions that myth prefers to transmit to posterity are actually the anticultural ones (above all the myth of the Labdacids themselves) is an extremely interesting question, but which is beyond the remit of the unfortunate prophet . . . At this point, the only relevant fact for us is that civic identity, based on family relationships, both real and metaphorical, with the μητρὸς . . . πηγή ("maternal fount") and with the πατρὶς . . . γαῖα ("fatherland", 584-5), presupposes a continuity of shared discursive memory (καλόν τ' ἀκοῦσαι καὶ λέγειν μεθυστέροις, "an honourable thing for posterity to hear and tell of", 581) that Polyneices' choice has made impossible. The memory mentioned here is obviously that good memory which prolongs through the ages the good reputation auspicated for citizens by the chorus (κῦδος τοῖσδε πολίταις, "glory for these citizens", 317).

Eteocles, too, by refusing to act as a coward, shows he aspires to this εὐκλεία ('good repute') which permits him to be unreservedly faithful to the character represented by his name (683-5):

> εἴπερ κακὸν φέρει τις, αἰσχύνης ἄτερ
> ἔστω· μόνον γὰρ κέρδος ἐν τεθνηκόσιν·
> κακῶν δὲ κᾀσχρῶν οὔτιν' εὐκλείαν ἐρεῖς.
>
> [If one must suffer evil, let it not be shameful; that is the only profit the dead can gain. You can never speak of a good reputation arising from a disaster which is also a disgrace.]

These lines hold a position of particular interest in the text, as they constitute Eteocles' first reply, after he has just decided to meet Polyneices in a

protagonist's acceptance of necessity.

duel, to the women of the chorus who are beginning to try to dissuade him. The lines evince, right from the beginning, the notion of evil that comes from outside (εἴπερ κακὸν φέρει τις, "If one must suffer evil"), which will be picked up in a circular manner, demonstrating the thematic cohesion of this section of the play, in the last line pronounced by Eteocles before leaving the stage (θεῶν διδόντων οὐκ ἂν ἐκφύγοις κακά, "When the gods send evil, one cannot escape it", 719) – with the sinister specification that the origin of this 'external' evil is the will of the gods. Eteocles refuses this idea of a life without honour: when describing his alter ego Melanippus, the sovereign had emphasized his respect for this warrior who seemed to be the personification of Modesty (τὸν Αἰσχύνης θρόνον / τιμῶντα, "one who honors the throne of Modesty", 409-10), and his incapacity to commit evil or cowardly deeds (αἰσχρῶν γὰρ ἀργός, μὴ κακὸς δ' εἶναι φιλεῖ, "for he never does a shameful deed, and to be cowardly is not his way", 411) – exactly the qualities that in the above quotation Eteocles claims for his own. The only addition regards the theme of posthumous repute, that is to say the continuation of one's identity in discursive memory. For Eteocles, this 'good repute' (εὐκλεία) goes hand in hand with identity, in that it is the realization of that κλέος ('fame, renown') etymologically inscribed in his own name. Indeed, right from the earliest phases of documented Greek culture, the notion of identity is tightly enclosed in an onomastic and textual dimension.[30] When Eteocles himself exhorts the citizens to defend Thebes, his principal objective is τιμὰς μὴ 'ξαλειφθῆναί ποτε (15), "so as never to let their rites be obliterated", with a metaphor derived from the context of writing[31] and equating the identity of the city with an ideal written compendium of its customs and rituals.[32] This is why in the text the language spoken in the polis is decisive in the determining of identity, to the extent that the invading army is rather awkwardly described as ἑτεροφώνῳ ("of alien speech", 170).[33]

In Eteocles' ethicizing semiotics, where every word must be validated by the right action and where moral justice, on the other hand, is measured against the degree of denotative precision with which reality is de-

[30] The connection of identity with the textual dimension of culture clearly presupposes the notion of 'cultural memory' elaborated by Jan Assmann (1992; specifically on Greek identity: 259ff.).

[31] The verb has a figurative use which however does not except a material or scribal connotation: see Todd 2008: 147 on Lys. 1.48.

[32] Sickinger (1999: 26ff.) focuses on the problem of the writing of Solon's ἄξονες and that of the conservation of the law codes in archaic Athens.

[33] Hutchinson (1985: 72) re-evaluates the problem of a 'foreign' language, arguing that the difference to which the adjective is referring is that between the various Greek dialects.

scribed, the very fact of having been named Eteocles obliges him to fulfil his semantic duty. To be able to call himself truly (ἐτεόν, 'true, authentic', is in this sense a synonym of ὀρθῶς, 'rightly', 829) worthy of the κλέος inscribed in his name, Eteocles must act in accordance with the moral laws legitimating the attribution of κλέος to him. This etymological relevance of proper nouns is not simply a case of interpretative extrapolation, but is evidenced several times in the text, by Eteocles (9; 658), by Amphiaraus (576-7), by the Messenger (536) and by the chorus (678). The most pertinent passage regarding my argument is during the anapaests with which the chorus comments on the news of the victory of Thebes and on the death of Oedipus' sons (829-31):[34]

> οἳ δῆτ' ὀρθῶς κατ' ἐπωνυμίαν
> <ἐτεοκλειεῖς> καὶ πολυνεικεῖς
> ὤλοντ' ἀσεβεῖ διανοίᾳ;
>
> [. . . who have verily perished in a manner appropriate to their names – / with "true glory" and with "much strife" – / because of their impious thoughts?]

Here the different mythical character of the two brothers seems in some measure to have been coded *a priori* in their names, which define their respective symbolic roles (the good brother and the bad brother).[35] Aeschylus' choice of a strongly polarized characterization seems therefore to signify a definite intention to account for the implications of the brothers' names. The various attempts to distribute equally the responsibility for the conflict, or to draw attention, on one pretext or another, to the negative connotations of the Eteocles of the *Seven*, are, in my opinion, completely out of place.[36] In this play Eteocles is the good brother and Polyneices the bad

[34] I follow West (1990a) at l. 830 in printing a conjecture by Petersen slightly modified by Hutchinson (1985: 30). For once the detail of a conjectural reconstruction does not matter as the sense is unconditionally clarified by the symmetry with Polyneices' name.

[35] As he interprets the character of Eteocles as morally culpable, Hutchinson (1985: 186) is forced to play down the etymological significance of his name. In my opinion, Aeschylus' text endeavours to highlight the opposition between the brothers' names as well. It seems opportune to recall the observations made by von Kamptz 1982: 36 (also echoed by Hutchinson), where the scholar associates Eteocles' and Polyneices' names with those of other pairs of brothers (Κάστωρ and Πολυδεύκης; Ποδάρκης and Πρωτεσίλαος) where only the second "einen sprechenden Namen trägt". But even if the opposition identified by von Kamptz makes sense in the abstract, one cannot help noticing that in the *Seven* Eteocles' name is undoubtedly considered as significant as his brother's.

[36] Eteocles' moral quality, already assessed by the play's ancient reception, is high-

one. Eteocles' goodness lies in having shown himself worthy of κλέος by a series of choices, not last of which the fratricidal duel, the result of evaluations made bearing in mind the maximum possible advantage to the community – a rational evaluation, especially when considering that these choices imply breaking a strong cultural taboo.

Naturally the text, like all dramatic texts, throws into relief the various perspectives of the *dramatis personae*, and triggers interaction with opposing, or at least nonaligned visions. It cannot be ignored, for instance, that Eteocles' choices, which I have tried show as rooted in a rationalistic morality (which expresses, in my opinion, the predominating position of the implicit author), are constantly surrounded by an aura of religious and moral misgiving on the part of the chorus. However, when the chorus mentions ἀσεβεῖ διανοίᾳ ("impious design", 831), it only refers to the religious dimension of a choice that has, in any case, determined a crucial and permanent advantage for the polis. If we go backwards in the text from this quotation, we see that the choice of mourning the bodies of the last two Labdacids is one of the two horns of a dilemma, of which the end of the play, as far as we can plausibly fathom,[37] explores only the second option (825-8):

> πότερον χαίρω κἀπολολύξω
> σωτῆρι πόλεως ἀσινείᾳ
> ἢ τοὺς μογεροὺς καὶ δυσδαίμονας
> ἀτέκνους κλαύσω πολεμάρχους . . . ;
>
> [Shall I hail with shouts of joy / the unharmed salvation of the city, / or shall I weep for the wretched, ill-starred, / childless warlords . . . ?]

Notwithstanding the problematic condition of the text, it is not difficult to

lighted, among others, by Lawrence 2007 and Paduano 2013.

[37] The closing scene certainly presents the play's most conspicuous – and most arduous - textual difficulties. In particular, we do not know if the spurious conclusion was simply added to the lament intoned by the chorus over the brothers' bodies or if it replaced another original one. However we interpret the history of the interpolation and its dating (Bergk 1884, Robert 1915, Petersmann 1972, West 1990b, Centanni 1995, Lech 2008, Judet de La Combe 2011 connect it to a fifth-century restaging; Wilamowitz 1914, Page 1934, Dawe 1967, Hutchinson 1985, Barrett 2007, to one of the following century), the prevailing opinion is that the conclusion of the *Seven* is spurious. The consensus of opinion mainly regards ll. 1005-78 (this athetesis, proposed by Scholl, is discussed by Königsbeck 1981: 9), while the expunction of the Antigone and Ismene's entrance at ll. 861-74, proposed by Bergk (1884: 302-5), is then taken up and discussed by Wilamowitz (1903: 436-50 and 1914: 88-93). For a detailed analysis of these subjects see, in particular, Petersmann 1972; Taplin 1977: 169-91; Barrett 2007; Judet de La Combe 2011; a compendium of the different options in Zimmermann 1993: 106-7.

see that the chorus knows that in the first place it may rejoice (χαίρω) for the victory that has left Thebes unconquered (ἀσινείᾳ, 'without damage'). The choice of giving precedence to the funeral rites, the ceremony closing the tragedy, should not, however, mask a crucial detail: in political terms, and more generally from the perspective of correspondence between rational deliberation on choices and 'metaphysical' confirmation of moral qualities, the conclusion of the *Seven* is a positive one, as it demonstrates the transcending of potentially devastating forces towards a prospect of greater political stability and general harmony. The death of the sovereign is therefore an ambiguous event, a point of arrival but also a point of departure. On the one hand, it finds its place in the logic of the ἀρά, which in this way is fulfilled and transcended; on the other, it may be seen as the result of a sequence of choices, and can thus be resemanticized on the plane of κλέος as the affirmation of a particular political vision, destined to yield its fruits during future stability. With his death, Eteocles has provided a concrete example of the fact that the interests of the city must prevail over those of the sovereign and of the γένος, and that ethical and strategic rigour in defence is the most sensible approach, separate from and prevailing over religious prescriptions as well as an irrational and fatalistic submission to fate.

For this reason, the funeral lament that concludes the *Seven Against Thebes* may be better understood in this ambit by using the tools of reception aesthetics,[38] starting at the moment when the chorus declares itself uncertain between joy and sorrow. The choice of mourning has obviously two corollaries: in the first place, it conforms to the aesthetic and structural principles of tragedy, one of whose basic components is the controlled expression of grief;[39] and in the second place, it interrupts the discussion on an element that has however been explicitly evoked: the joy for the regaining of civic peace. This is not in the least a secondary concern, considering that the play, it could be said, starts with the terrified anticipation of destruction, which of course can only determine in the receiver an agonized desire for safety. The fact that the expression of joy for the achievement of this safety is postponed 'to another day' therefore implies, on the basis of the simple enunciative articulation of the dramatic text, that this emotion is marginalized and forced out of the dramatic space towards the theatrical space. In this way, the tragedy stays faithful to its original form, as it

[38] I am referring to the theory and analytical method elaborated by Iser 1972 and 1976.

[39] The connection with grief and mourning is a defining feature of the tragic genre – although of course one neither straightforward nor without problems: Sorkin Rabinowicz 2008: 13; Hall 2010. Bushnell 2005: 1ff. emphasizes (yet another Aeschylean theme) the link between suffering and the forms of understanding.

develops the horn of the dilemma expressing grief, while the joy of the polis for the peace-bringing victory is set free to resound in the mind of the spectator.

We modern readers of the difficult and often dubious text of the *Seven Against Thebes*, are very different from the audience possibly aimed at by Aeschylus when writing this play, but we do know some things about this audience. The *Seven* was written for people who had seen their own city threatened with destruction only a dozen years before, and who had participated in the joy for a victory, determined by strategic ability, against a much bigger army led by a king who was perceived in Greece as impious and proud.[40] Besides being an eyewitness of this invasion, the spectator of the *Seven* is also a citizen for whom a growing prosperity associated with the victory over the Persians coincides with decades of radical social reform, which after forty years had reached full stability. The conclusion of the tragedy should therefore be considered as a sort of understatement – limited by formal, ritual and linguistic conventions – of the celebration of victory. The civic mourning staged by the Thebes of the text emphasizes *e contrario* the satisfaction and joy for this victory, and leaves them suspended, to be enjoyed by the citizens of Athens, foregathered in the theatre of Dionysus.[41]

In support of this hypothesis, there are various arguments, both historic and anthropological. In the first case we can return to the oldest reception of the *Seven* known to us, Gorgias' judgement that the play was "full

[40] For the censuring of Xerxes' overweening impiety during the second Persian war, substantial evidence is provided by Aeschylus himself in his 472 BCE dramatization of the king's defeat (see, for example, the rhesis uttered by Darius' ghost, *Pers.* 800ff., particularly 827-8: τῶν ὑπερκόμπων ἄγαν φρονημάτων; 831: ὑπερκόμπῳ θράσει). Herodotus 7.35.3 recalls the episode of the whipping given to the sea after the first bridge of ships across the strait was wrecked.

[41] Garvie (2014) suggests that, in spite of the undeniable victory over the foreign invaders at the end of *Septem*, sporadic references (at ll. 742-9; 842-4; 901-5) imply the city's future destruction in a second Argive attack; the contradictions involved in these passages should not be seen as a sign of Aeschylus' defective composition, but as deliberate allusions to other versions of the myth, aiming at an effect of indeterminacy which is not alien to other Aeschylean, as well as Sophoclean and Euripidean endings. Factual contradictions are unquestionable, as shown by the number of deletions proposed to remove some difficulties (references in Garvie 2014: 30-1 and n46): in my opinion, Garvie's sensible and ingenious argument deserves in-depth consideration. As far as my reading of the ending is concerned, anyway, I am inclined to think that thin textual clues such as these could not affect the overall pragmatic effect of mourning (over the last Labdacids' dead bodies) and of implicit relief (for the city's salvation) that I am trying to analyse here.

of Ares".[42] This very opinion was picked up and appropriated by Aeschylus himself, at least in his fictional representation as a character in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (1019-22):

> Ευ. Καὶ τί σὺ δράσας οὕτως αὐτοὺς γενναίους ἐξεδίδαξας;
> Δι. Αἰσχύλε, λέξον μηδ' αὐθάδως σεμνυνόμενος χαλέπαινε.
> Αι. Δρᾶμα ποήσας Ἄρεως μεστόν. Δι. Ποῖον; Αι. Τοὺς Ἑπτ' ἐπὶ Θήβας·
> ὃ θεασάμενος πᾶς ἄν τις ἀνὴρ ἠράσθη δάιος εἶναι.
>
> [Euripides What actions of *yours*, could you please explain, taught the people to be quite so noble? / Dionysus Answer him, Aischylos. Don't keep brooding in arrogant, wilful rage. / Aeschylus I composed a play that was full of Ares. / Dionysus Which one? / Aeschylus The *Seven Against Thebes*. Every man who saw that play performed would have longed for a warlike spirit. (trans. Halliwell 2016)]

If after more than sixty years the *Seven Against Thebes* remained in the eyes of the Athenians the tragedy of military valour and of patriotic defence *par excellence*, we may be sure that Aeschylus' plan of action was interpreted right already in the fifth century not as the illusion of a shadowed mind that guiltily forgets to refer to divine power, but as the exemplary and efficacious advance of a skilful strategist. The *scholion* of John Tzetzes at *Frogs* 1021 is proof of the fact that in the twelfth century this was still the common reading of the play:

> γενναίως γὰρ καὶ στρατηγικῶς ἐκεῖ καὶ βασιλικῶς ὁ Ἐτεοκλῆς καὶ στρατηγεῖ καὶ βουλεύεται καὶ κατασκόπους ἐκπέμπει καὶ τάσσει τοὺς λόχους καὶ τἄλλα πάντα ποιεῖ, ὁπόσα ἐχρῆν βασιλέα καὶ στρατηγὸν δεξιώτατον.
>
> [In that play, indeed, Eteocles behaves like a nobleman, a general and a king: he controls the war, makes careful decisions, sends out explorers, positions troops and does all the things that a king and a general of great ability must. (My translation)]

Instead, an anthropological line of reasoning is provided by de Martino's interpretation of the funeral lament (1958). From this perspective, he says, the function of the play's ending may be compared to an analogous function of the phases of the funeral ritual, which leads the community towards

[42] Fr. 24 DK of Gorgias is quoted by Plutarch (*Mor.* 715e) without any information about its original context: indeed, Plutarch adopts Gorgias' expression as a surprising counterexample as part of a discussion comparing the effects of drinking and those of being drunk, and where the example of Aeschylus, who is said always to have written in a state of inebriation, is used as proof of the compatibility between the consumption of wine and the artist's self-control.

the reinforcement of social ties (102-3). In his opinion, in exactly the same way as the funeral lament expresses the possibility of a sharing of grief from which to begin, once again, to reintegrate broken ties and reactivate the web of social exchange, so in the *Seven*, the weeping for Eteocles and Polyneices, culturally codified and so traditionally observed, is the starting point of the restoration of unity threatened as much by war as by metaphysical turmoil (the dynamics of guilt/malediction) that was the underlying cause of everything.

This hypothesis is strengthened by the observation that in semiotic terms the relationship between the moment of the funeral rites and ordinary time, external to this ritual, is the same which exists in the theatre between dramatic simulation and extra-dramatic reality. The only difference is the second degree nature of the rite on the stage, as opposed to a non-theatrical funeral ritual, which takes place 'really', although it is obviously, in semiotic terms, only the first degree enactment of a script.[43]

As de Martino maintains, the suffering that all the participants experience during the accomplishment of such a ritual act is the indispensable stage leading to a feeling of safety able to overcome the "crisi della presenza" – which signifies, in the ambit of the *Seven*, not only the risk of military destruction but also the crisis of meaning provoked by the aporetic conflict between the metaphysical order of the world and the rational basis of ethical values. The order which is regained in the *Seven*, starting from the deaths of Eteocles and Polyneices, is the harbinger of a more durable joy, as it is founded on new grounds. The political option has been shown able to conquer a primordial fear of metaphysical chaos, by finally rooting traditional military ethics, which had crystallized long before Aeschylus in the epos and the archaic elegy,[44] in a rationally grounded system. Traditional ethical norms emerged from this and were apparently simply confirmed, but they also gained the strength of a univocal and necessary principle, validated by their no longer discretionary application in a unified political system.

Translation by Susan Payne

[43] For the stylization of the Lucanian lament in its various phases, see de Martino 1958: 75ff. The pages 78ff. in particular emphasize how stylised patterns of lamentation are flexible enough to include elements from the occasional context; these elements are embedded in a linguistic frame whose 'protected' nature derives, in the last analysis, from its formally organized structure.

[44] An anthology of texts on Greek military ethics is in Sage 1996. For a correspondence with the perspective of the *Seven*, Callinus 1 (who, for example, at ll. 6-7 anticipates Aesch. *Sept.* 14-6) or Tyrtaeus, 10.13ff. will more than suffice. For a general vision see Campbell and Tritle 2013; Bryant 1996: 27ff. (on the transformation towards hoplite ethics: 90ff.).

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