

Narrative and Lyric Structures in Athenian Tragedy

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Though ancient and obscured by its distance, the tradition of Sophocles' Attic tragedy remains relevant in our current philosophical landscape. Aristotle's understanding in his *Poetics* of the unity of tragic *mythos*, the plot of an Athenian tragedy, is in agreement with Jan Zwicky's conception of sequential narrative structure. Which is to say, a unilateral string of cause and effects whose end is sense making. However, an asequential structure also exists in tragedy which we can identify through lyric philosophy as a polydimensional constellation of gestures, a non linear form of a motivic nature. For Zwicky, as outlined in *Lyric Philosophy*, lyric and sequential forms are distinct insofar as a unilateral structure (such as narrative sequence) cannot convey the content of that which is polydimensional. For a motivic non-causal structure to exist distinctly with a sequential one in a composition, its gestures must retain identity outside of the context of narrative. Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* exemplifies both a sequential narrative and a lyric motivic structure, and the two live respectfully together by virtue of the lyric gestures' identity out of the narrative context. First, it will be helpful to attend to the shapes of lyric and narrative, noting some of the differences between the two.

Lyric longs for wholeness and integrity; its gestures crave coherence, "a homecoming, which must feel like remembering."¹ Narrative's *eros*, the end that it craves, is a different breed. It yearns for sequential order, for a "syntax which it shares with discursive argument;" which is to say, for syntactical-temporal consequence.² Narrative desires causal understanding (and *then...* and *then...* and *then...*), it "loves temporal linkage" (earlier, after, later, during).³ Unlike narrative, lyric attempts to listen, to be attentive; it tries to remember without fabricating and imposing a logical temporal order onto our experience of the earth.

Narrative's answer to the world is less important than its attempt to formulate an answer in the first place.⁴ Lyric understands that responding to the world is nothing more or less than the experience itself: *this...* and *this*. In lyric, we recognize that the world is a resonant whole, that its parts are "integrally related to every other part."⁵ Importantly, the appropriate reaction to this realization is to be overwhelmed.

¹ Jan Zwicky, "Lyric, Narrative, Memory," in *A Ragged Pen: Essays on Poetry and Memory* (Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press, 2006), 93.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

The aim of narrative is to tame the nebulous; the kind of safety you get from owning a day planner.

Narrative is trying to stitch “moments together into a pattern which looks human” – a Frankenstein’s monster – whereas there is no place for the self in lyric. Rather, “what exists are moments of completely open attention and address... everything is a center, everything is a detail.”^{6 7} In lyric there is no climax, no hero, no plateau, no small parts. Narrative’s *eros* is to make sense of the world; it is a desire for understanding to be located in causal order. Narrative pines to come to terms with the world by measuring, skinning, stuffing, labelling, and cataloguing it (alphabetically). From the perspective of lyric, imposed sense making is an artifice; a rogue taxidermy of hippogriffs, skvaders, and jackalopes. For lyric, the structure of consequence (in both narrative and in analytic-syntactical argument) misrepresents the “what-is...of the world”; it is an imposition of logic onto that which is not “rational, causal or systematic.”⁸ In dissection, an attempt to know the internal logic of parts through disintegration, the animal is usually mutilated in the process.

This is not to dismiss narrative; “it’s not that logic is wrong...it’s just that it’s not the full story.”⁹ As well, “narrative thinking is as natural and as human as tool-use” – it is one of the many ways in which we make digestible the confusing, amorphous whirl of experience.¹⁰ We feel the compulsion to make sense of what is baffling, and this urge to make approachable something that is frighteningly mystifying is perfectly sympathetic. The impulse to understand something which cannot be understood through systematic thought is not fundamentally flawed, nor is it a uniquely narrative itch; lyric, too, desires to be with the world (though lyric knows that this cannot be). Narrative “*makes* things hang together causally,” so that our experience of the world does not overwhelm us; rather, “it selects among events for causal relevance”; it distinguishes, sorts, compartmentalizes.¹¹

Before we try to understand the shape of Aristotle’s portrayal of tragic *mythos*, we must acknowledge its primacy in his dramatic scheme. For Aristotle, *mythos* is the “soul” of tragedy.¹² He contends that the other five dramatic constituents (character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song) are subservient handmaidens to *mythos* which is “the first essential.”¹³ This prioritization hinges on Aristotle’s contention that “tragedy is the representation of an action”; that this mimesis at tragedy’s core is one and

⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁹ Jan Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy* (Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press, 2011), §271.

¹⁰ Zwicky, “Lyric, Narrative, Memory,” 96.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹² Aristotle, *Classical Literary Criticism*, Trans. Penelope Murray and T.S. Dorsch (New York: Penguin Classics, 2000), 65.

¹³ *Ibid.*

the same with *mythos* (action here to mean plot).¹⁴ The most important dramatic element could not, for example, be character, because “tragedy is a representation, not of people, but of action.”¹⁵ Effectively, elements such as character are merely “involved for the sake of the action,” and Aristotle even goes so far as to say that “there could not be a tragedy without action, but there could be without character.”¹⁶

Recognizing Aristotle’s contention that “tragedy is the representation of an action” we must now confront the characterization which follows: that this *mythos* is united; that it is “whole.”¹⁷ Helpfully, Aristotle divulges outright what he means by this: that “a whole is that which has a beginning, middle, and an end.”¹⁸ If a plot is united successfully (because a well-constructed plot is an approximate goal), it will neither begin nor end in a haphazard fashion; rather, it will conform to the pattern Aristotle has set out. This pattern being that a beginning “does not necessarily come after something else,” although something else “comes about after it”; that a middle “follows something else, and is itself followed by something”; and that an end “naturally follows something else and is not itself followed by anything.”¹⁹ The arranged combination of incidents here is ordered by “necessity” and “consequence.”²⁰ To once again make an example of character, the second most important dramatic element, a plot does not possess unity merely “because it is about one man.”²¹ Although a man may do many actions or have many actions done unto him, this does not mean that a unified plot will emerge. The various events in a play ought to be arranged so that “if any one of them is differently placed or taken away” the “effect of the wholeness will be seriously disturbed.”²² For Aristotle, if the presence or absence of something makes “no apparent difference” then it is no real part of the whole.²³

Aristotle’s unity of plot is not dissimilar to the Zwicky sequential narrative structure depicted earlier. Aristotle’s scheme, where an ordering of events link together causally with necessity and consequence is not a far cry away from a narrative whose *eros* is sequential order. Comparable to Aristotle’s conception of plot, “logico-linguistic syntax fundamentally involves ... sequence,” it concerns “preferential ordering.”²⁴ The nature of the sequencing involved in syntax, like tragic plot, is that of consequence, a specification of classes and a regulation of their relations to one another: climax to plateau, hero to walk-on. The discrete elements and their relationships are governed by syntax in the same way incidents are ordered in Aristotle’s scheme by necessity and consequence.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66; 66; 67.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

²² *Ibid.*, 68.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, L §128.

Focusing on Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Tyrannus*, one might contend that the incidents of its *mythos* do not unfold in a sequential, linear fashion on stage; the murder and sex are already over before the play begins. For example, the inciting incident where Jocasta and Laius receive the prophecy doesn't occur until halfway through the script.²⁵ Of course, not all narratives have a straightforward trajectory; the *Odyssey* begins in *media res*, after all. Yet, despite non-linear forms, foreshadowing and flashbacks, narrative's cogs are oiled by our "experience of meaningful sequence in time."²⁶ Narrative, linear in the propulsion of its logic, is "a single dimension" on "a solitary axis of experience, a dimension set against space";²⁷ recall Aristotle's chain of causes (*and then because x...and then because x...*). Regardless of the "literal order" of Aristotle's incidents, the unity of tragedy's internal logic holds.²⁸ This is assuming that the tragedy's ordering is not haphazard, for "if the conceptual hierarchy is violated" no sense will be made²⁹ – for Zwicky this holds equally true for an argument which follows "the grammars of consequence."³⁰ Let us examine the ordering of incidents in *Oedipus*.

– At a banquet a drunkard exclaims that Oedipus is not the son of Polibus and Merope.

(SO THEN) Oedipus goes to Delphi seeking answers about his lineage, the prophecy is revealed to him [that he will murder his father and sleep with his mother].

(SO THEN) Thinking his parents are Polibus and Merope and that leaving Corinth will stop what is fated, Oedipus flees, seeking a new home far away from his parents.

(SO THEN) Oedipus journeys far from Corinth and along the way is confronted by some travelers.

(SO THEN) In retaliation, Oedipus slaughters them (his father, the king of Thebes included).

Etc.

For both Zwicky and Aristotle, the incidents of *Oedipus'* narrative/*mythos* are ordered by consequence; each event clings causally to the next. Here, we observe the unidimensionality and sequence characteristic of narrative structure. When out of sequence (not in the script but in the timeline of the narrative), incidents do not fol-

²⁵ Sophocles, "Oedipus Tyrannus," in *Theban Plays*, Trans. Peter Meineck and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 713.

²⁶ Zwicky, "Lyric, Narrative, Memory," 93.

²⁷ Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, L §276.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, L §2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Zwicky, "Lyric, Narrative, Memory," 95.

low with necessity and consequence and cannot therefore be considered as a united tragic *mythos*. For example:

[4] During his journey Oedipus is confronted by a group of travelers.
(SO THEN) [1] at a banquet a drunkard exclaims that Oedipus is not the son of Polibus and Merope.

There is no necessary or probable cause in this sequence; there is no sense in the consequence of a drunkard exposing his lineage being because he was confronted by the travellers. Sense-making, the *eros* of narrative and the measure of Aristotle's causal chain of events, is absent. This example demonstrates how crucial necessity and consequence are to a coherent Aristotelian *mythos*. Furthermore, no incident may be "differently placed:"³¹

[2] During his journey Oedipus is confronted by a group of travelers.
(SO THEN) [1] Thinking his parents are Polibus and Merope and that leaving Corinth will stop what is fated, Oedipus flees, and walks the road seeking a new home far away from his parents.
(SO THEN) [3] In retaliation, Oedipus slaughters the group of travellers (his father, the king of Thebes included).

"...or taken away:"³²

[1] Thinking his parents are Polibus and Merope and that leaving Corinth will stop what is fated, Oedipus flees, seeking a new home far away from his parents.
(SO THEN) [3] In retaliation, Oedipus slaughters the group he meets on the road (his father, the king of Thebes included).

Though the incidents of *Oedipus* do not occur sequentially on stage, but rather through hear-say and flashback, the "literal order" holds and is immutable; both *mythos'* desire for unity in arranged sequence of consequential incidents and narrative's *eros* for a structure of consequence which induces sense hold fast. The above instances are meaningful in the appropriate narrative context. The plot is organized tightly to exclude the improbable and nonsensical. The *mythos*, the narrative, is brilliantly designed.

Though we've identified a structure in *Oedipus* which agrees with Zwicky's narrative sequence and Aristotle's causal chain of consequential and necessary instances, another structure is present which deserves our attention. In *Oedipus*, there also exists a lyric motivic structure.

³¹ Aristotle, *Classical Literary Criticism*, 68.

³² *Ibid.*

A lyric image “is a gesture of great particularity” which “seeks to comprehend the resonant structure of the universe.”³³ It is an effort to understand “the whole in a single gesture.”³⁴ For clarity’s sake, the difference between the wholeness, the understanding of the world which narrative and Aristotle’s unity of *mythos* strive for, and lyric’s desire for oneness with the earth, is that lyric knows that “we cannot live in” it while remaining human.³⁵ Narrative instances, by contrast, in isolation, do not generate wholeness (in Aristotle’s sense of that word). Unlike unidimensional narrative structure, the lyric form “is non-sequential,” it moves “by association” it is “geometrical,” with no beginning or end.³⁶

Understanding what Zwicky means by “lyric closure” clarifies the shape of lyric motivic structure. Compositions, Zwicky tells us, usually “consist of a number of lyric “motifs” and that each motif has its “own gestural integrity.”³⁷ Additionally there “is frequently also one gesture that stands in relation to the others, and about which the others turn,” we might think of the image of Oedipus blinding himself once he clearly sees his reality.³⁸ This relation of “their so holding” is crucial to “the sense of closure.”³⁹ This is not to insinuate the existence of a hierarchy of lyric particulars; unlike the *telos* of an analytic argument, which is similar to a consequence ordered narrative), lyric closure is distinguished by “the degree to which meaning is lost when the context is removed.”⁴⁰

For Zwicky, the sequential can reside in the context of the lyric but not the inverse. Sequence, or consequential structure, can be an axis of integration in a lyrical polydimensional structure; “in a lyric composition, moments of analysis can be set in lyric relation.”⁴¹ Sequential systematic narrative, such as Aristotle’s conception of *mythos*, might “be given [a] lyric treatment,”⁴² however, for Zwicky, polydimensionality cannot exhibit unidimensionality “any more than a piece of cloth can have the form of an individual strand of wool.”⁴³ The relationship between the sequential and the asequential is more sensitive than incommensurability or irreconcilability. The lyric may make an appearance in a sequential narrative “as a variable, a counter” but “its content – as integrally expressed through its [polydimensional] form – cannot be given systematic expression.”⁴⁴ For a lyric motivic structure to reside in the context of consequential narrative, the content of the lyric gestures must have an identity outside of the narrative form; “the degree to which meaning is lost when the context is removed.”⁴⁵

³³ Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, L §70.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, L §73.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, L §152.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, L §73, L §271.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, L §211.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, L §212.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, L §196.

⁴² *Ibid.*, L §10.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, L §196.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, L §110.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, L §212.

Let us address the motivic constellation in question. Below are gestures towards a lyric motivic structure in *Oedipus* laid out as they appear chronologically in the script; “a set of variations [building] on preceding variations.”⁴⁶ Remember – sequence can be an axis in a lyric form.

Oedipus... *look* (14); Let news shine bright in his *eyes* (81); I will *see* it exposed (132); the gift of *sight*, clear as Apollo (284–5); though you are *blind* (302); I *saw* it clearly (317); fail to *see* (337); I *see* it now (346); your ears and your mind are as *blind* as your *eyes* (371); your *eyes* cannot *see* your own corruption (413); your keen *eyes* will *see* only darkness (419); you cannot *perceive* the deluge of disasters (424); a *blind* man who once could *see* (454); the *seer* has no *sight!* (462); *blind* here and now, *blind* to the future (488); I start to *see* (754); why *look* into this? (1144); light, let me *look* at you one last time (1182–4); time found you out *all-seeing* (1212); I wish I’d never *seen* you (1217–8); I close my *eyes* in sleep (1221); you are *blinding* me with horror (1306); I *see* despite the darkness (1324); why should I have *eyes* when there is nothing sweet to *see* (1334).⁴⁷

The utterance (I pick one for the sake of space), “the seer has no sight” could appear at multiple points in the narrative and retain sense.⁴⁸ Perhaps it refers to Tiresias, to metaphorically or literally blind Oedipus, or all three; the content of the gesture is not bound by the sequential structure. If lyric closure is distinguished by “the degree to which meaning is lost when the context is removed” these gestures must be able to have an identity outside of the structure of necessity and consequence.⁴⁹ Recall the earlier exercise with Aristotle’s instances, where narrative’s meaning was dependent on consequence and necessity.

A. *Tiresias is a blind seer* THEREFORE [it is necessary that/as a consequence] *Oedipus is convinced he can see clearly (in a metaphorical sense) but he cannot perceive his reality.*

B. *Oedipus now able to see his condition, his reality, blinds himself.* THEREFORE [it is necessary that/as a consequence] *Oedipus sees that he, that man, is the answer he’s been looking for to solve the Sphynx’s riddle.*

In **A.** though the gestures appear one after the other in the narrative, they do not follow

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, L §29.

⁴⁷ Sophocles, “Oedipus Tyrannus.”

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 462.

⁴⁹ Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy.*, L §212.

consequently or necessarily from one another. Tiresias being blind but possessing prophetic sight does not lead to or necessitate Oedipus not being able to perceive his reality. Effectively, that “Tiresias is blind” is not necessary to the narrative sequence of events, any prophet might have filled Tiresias’ role, and an ode to the blind seer could have been sung by the chorus at any point in the action. There is meaning in the relation of the above lyric gestures, but it is not derived from causal, sequential order. They have meaning out of the context of narrative. They stand in relation to one another; they are set beside one another lyrically. In **B.**, the gestures are anachronistic (the utterance of the Sphinx precedes Oedipus’ literal self-blinding). And as in **A.**, Oedipus’ literal self-blinding holds no causal power over the utterance of seeing that the asker is the answer of a riddle (despite there being meaning in the relation of these two gestures). Here, the resonant meaning between these two gestures holds in spite of being out of sequence; this is not the case in the narrative form. There is relation between Oedipus’ seeing that he was the answer to his inquisition and Oedipus’ seeing that he, as a man, was the answer he was looking for to solve to Sphinx’s riddle – but the relationship is not causal.

Narrative and lyric structures are distinct. They are in tension insofar as polydimensionality and unidimensionality cannot coincide. This is not to say that there are not mixed genres. I believe *Oedipus* is one such hybrid in which both structures reside respectfully of each other. *Thisness* can coexist with *thenness* given that the lyric particulars have identities and meaningful relationships to one another out of the context of sequence; an experience of lyric particularities in the sequential flow of time. My intuition is that to some degree the “sequential and non-sequential forms... inflect one another,” though I believe this is only possible if there are two independent structures.⁵⁰ This is not to say that lyric and narrative are a unity, but rather that they may live respectfully and distinctly together within the same composition. Aristotle held that tragedy could teach us to be better members of our polis through inducing fear and pity in a constructive fashion, “a way of existing in community.”⁵⁴ Perhaps tragedy can also help us to become more aware of the necessary tension between our inescapable use of narrative, of imposing sense-making sequence, and our desire for lyric wholeness: our desire for the universe to be understood in a single gesture.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, L §271.

⁵⁰ Zwicky, “Lyric, Narrative, Memory,” 97.

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