Charting Channels and Shoals in the Blank Verse of *Oedipus at Colonus*:
towards an Alternative Cartography

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Part I

A. Introductory

Sa fin est mon commencement

ω̣ παίδες, όδ᾽ ἔπεσθ᾽: ἐγὼ γὰρ ἠγεμόν
σοφὸν αἰώνερον καινόν, ὕσσεορ αἰῶν πατρί.
χωρεῖτε, καὶ μὴ ψαύετε, ἀλλ᾽ ἐέτε με
αὐτὸν τὸν ἤφην γὰρ τὸν ἠγεμόν ἐξευφείν, ἵνα
μοιρὰν ἀνδρὶ τῷ διὰ τὴν κρυφθῆναι χθονὶ.

τῇδ᾽, ὥδε, τῇδε βάτε: τῇδε γὰρ μ᾽ ἀγεί
Ἐρμῆς ὁ πομπὸς ἢ τε νεφέρα θεός.
ὁ ψος ἀφεγγές, πρόσθε ποῖ ποτ᾽ ἢθο' ἐμόν,
νῦν δ᾽ ἐσχατὸν οὐ να τούμον ἀπεται δέμας.

5 ἡδὴ γὰρ ἔσχατον τὸν τελευταῖον βίον
κρύψων παρ᾽ Ἀιδήν, ἀλλά, θάλατα ἑξόνω,
αὐτὸς τε χῶρα θ᾽ ἢδε πρόσπολοι τε οοί
ἐσταῖμες γένοισθε, καὶ τε ἐπιτελεῖσθαι
μέμνησθε μοι ἃν θανόντος ἐπιτελεῖσθε ἄει.

10 (Sophocles, *Oedipus Coloneus*, lines 1542–55)

I shall begin by making some rather disjointed comments on the content and language of the last speech that Sophocles put into the mouth of Oedipus (‘sa fin est mon commencement’), working my way backwards from the end of the speech with a view to preparing the reader for the ‘retrograde motion’ of much of this essay.

Oedipus’s very last words (lines 11–14) are addressed to Theseus, king of Athens, to Athens itself, and to the leading Athenians. They express a message of hope and reconciliation (whereas, earlier, the blind Theban had been more inclined to lamentation and to cursing his kinsmen and countrymen), and they include no fewer than three words beginning with the prefix *eu*—may his unseen listeners be happy (*εὐδαίμονες*); may they always enjoy good fortune (*εὐτυχεῖς*); may they remember him for the sake of their lasting prosperity (*εὐπραξίᾳ*). The mood reminds one of the ancient definition of Comedy (*cuius materia prospere terminatur*) rather than of Tragedy.ii

The preceding ten lines are pervaded by two paradoxes under a veil of mystery. Let us consider the mystery first. Oedipus clearly knows something which the Athenians do not, namely, that his body is fated to disappear without trace and, therefore, without the all-important rites of burial and without a tomb. It is this knowledge which underlies his apparently innocent, but ‘cryptic’, repetition of forms of the verb *krypto*, ‘to hide’. Referring to himself in the third person, he says it is fated that ‘this man will be concealed (*κρυφθῆλθαι*)...
in the earth’, and then — switching back to the first person — that ‘I go to conceal (κρύψων) the end of my life in Hades’.

Of the two paradoxes, the more ambitious and more moving comes in Oedipus’s apostrophe (lines 8–9) to the ‘lightless light’ (φῶς ἀφεγγές) of the sun. (It is by this Miltonic passage that we shall ‘remember him in death’, 14.) In his early life (πρόσθε) the sun’s light had been his (ἐμόν), but it became ‘lightless’ when he blinded himself on discovering his incest. Now (νῦν), only moments before death, he rejoices in its warmth on his body, referring to the sensation with the strikingly concrete phrase: ‘my body clutches at you for the last time’ (ἔσχατόν σου τοῦμὸν ἁπτεται δέμας).

The earlier paradox lies not in the language but in the plot. It consists of an unexpected and comprehensive reversal of roles. Addressing the two daughters (παῖδες), who have been his guides throughout the long years of blindness and exile, Oedipus declares he will now take on the novel task of being leader to them (ἐγὼ γὰρ ἡγεμὼν / σφῷν αὖ πέφασμαι καινός). They are not to touch him (μὴ ψαύετ) but to follow him (ἕπεσθ) as he seeks out for himself his appointed tomb. They must go to that place confidently (the repetition of τῇδέ also expresses urgency: τῇδέ, ἤδη, τῇδέ βάτε), for he is being conducted there (τῇδέ γάρ μ’ ἄγει) by Hermes and the Goddess of the Underworld.

A full commentary on these dozen lines might easily take up a dozen pages, but enough has been said to remind the reader of Sophocles’ unflagging power to surprise his audience and of the density of his language. We are dealing with an archetypical tragic hero in one of the greatest masterpieces of Greek tragedy. This is dramatic poetry that bears comparison with the last words of another (metaphorically) self-blinded king to his daughter:

No, no, no, no! Come let’s away to prison:
We two alone will sing like birds i’ th’ cage;
When thou dost ask me blessing I’ll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we’ll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies...  

*(King Lear, Act V, Sc. 3, 9–13)*

In operabilibus finis est sicut principium. In principio erit verbum

I have taken Oedipus’s last speech as my starting point because in one important and literal sense it may well constitute the goal of my activities during the next seven months. By February 2010 I hope to have helped (or I dream of helping) a good actor to speak those lines as well as he can at the climax of his interpretation of the role of the blind king in a semi-staged production of *Oedipus at Colonus*. If the as yet unknown actor succeeds in getting anywhere near my ideal, I would like to make a high-quality recording of his performance which might serve as a model to be emulated by teachers and students, all over the world, when reading dramatic or narrative verse in Ancient Greek.

It will be clear that my goal is practical rather than theoretical and this is why it will provide the touchstone to assess all the activities relating to this enterprise, in accordance with Aristotle’s dictum that, in any discourse about action, ‘the end is as it were the beginning’ (meaning, of course, that the *aim* provides the *principles* in terms of which we evaluate the *means* to achieve that aim).

A few more words are therefore necessary concerning the planned production to which this essay is subservient. About two thirds of the text of *Oedipus at Colonus* will be read in the original language. Elegant and economical ‘surtitles’ will be prepared to the same
exacting standards as in my staging of five dramatisations from the Odyssey (in the Homeric cycle which I have entitled Odysseus Philoumenos) and they will be projected on a very large screen at the rear of the ‘stage’ or ‘acting area’. Images will be projected to fill the greater part of the same screen. At times these will be little more than a ‘backdrop’ to remind the audience of the place of the action (as was done in my production of Wordsworth’s play The Borderers in 2008), but they may contain appropriate statues or busts from classical art to establish the identity of the actors in the play, and, conceivably, appropriate pictures of places, objects, heroes and gods referred to in the text.

It is possible that there may be some simple incidental music (of the kind Robin Holloway composed for the productions of Odysseus Philoumenos). For perhaps two of the choruses in the play (most of them will have to be omitted), I am tempted by the idea of commissioning music to be sung by two or three voices in unison (although I shall certainly avoid the kind of congregational chanting used in the last two productions of the triennial Greek Play in the Arts Theatre). There will be no lighting effects, no costumes, no choreography, and, indeed, no movement at all apart from the readers rising when it is their turn to speak, moving to and from a lectern, and sitting down again. The participants will not have had time to memorise their parts and they will act with their voices and faces. Everything will be subordinated to the delivery of the text. In the beginning will be the Word.

Tres virtutes dicendi

I have used expressions like ‘as well as he can’, or ‘getting near my ideal’ which indicate that I hold firm opinions about the assessment of reading aloud. It is only fair to place on record that my evaluations — those of a modern linguist working backwards to the classical past — do not always coincide with those of classicists who have directed or acted in Greek plays; and so, before returning to the text of Oedipus at Colonus, I feel it appropriate to give some idea of the criteria and the standards in which I believe.

The simplest possible account of my views might boil down to this: a good reading of Oedipus’s last lines must somehow make audible the kind of qualities on which I was commenting at the beginning of the essay. To be a little more specific, however, I believe that the person playing the part of Oedipus should deliver his lines not just accurately, but as beautifully, expressively and naturally in Ancient Greek as a great English actor does when playing King Lear (and, by extension, as well as a great French actor does when playing Polyeucte, a German actor playing Faust, or an Italian actor playing Aminta). I cannot accept the validity of any criterion with regard to the performance of plays in the dead languages of Greek and Latin which I would reject in performances of plays in the four living languages which I can speak, performances where it is still possible to test the results on the sensibility of educated native speakers.

The issues at stake here are important enough to require another paragraph by way of clarification. Through my experience in rehearsing and staging the dramatisations from Homer, I have come to recognise three distinct sets of virtutes dicendi which I described and defended in an article published in 2007. For pedagogical convenience, I have come to associate these virtues with three buildings in which language is used and judged, namely, School, Market and Theatre (Didaskaleion, Agora and Theatron). To put it very briefly, I believe that a good performance of a passage of dramatic verse must exemplify all three kinds of virtue. In other words, the reading must be expressive (possessing the virtues of the Theatre),
making the audience aware of the originality, power, variety and beauty of the text. It must sound natural (embodying the virtues of the Market Place), unselfconsciously matching the rhythms and the rise and fall of a living language spoken by native speakers in real situations. It must be correct (faithful to the virtues instilled in the Schoolroom), which means among other things that it must convey, through phrasing and intonation, the ascertainable meaning of every phrase and sentence, that it must respect contrasts between phonemes (e.g. the difference between long and short vowels in AG), and — given that the text is in verse — that it must be informed by an awareness of the metrical structure and its associated conventions.

Notice that the three sets of virtutes dicendi might also be compared to three storeys of a single building. The second level (‘naturalness’) rests on a sure grasp of the meanings of the words and the grammatical rules, while the third (‘expressiveness’) must rest on the unselfconscious delivery of a native speaker. Notice further, that in the England where I grew up, the virtutes were acquired one stage at a time. Modern Linguists of my generation studied the grammar of a foreign language for several years at school, went to live in a country where it was spoken in order to acquire a good accent and sense of idiom, and then studied the literature of the country for three years at university. And notice finally that, for someone like myself, the first two levels are little more than ‘base-camps’ on the climb to the ‘summit’: they are subordinate to the goal of reading poetry in a newly acquired language. Together with Dante, I believe that verbal music is of the essence of poetry and that poetry is what gets left out in translation.

In tantum certitudo quaerenda est in quantum natura rei recipit

The Director of an established classic at a National Theatre — be it in Rome, Berlin, Paris or London — can simply take it for granted that his chief actor will be a native speaker who will have learned the meaning of any archaisms in the canonical text and be familiar with the metrical conventions belonging to the language in question. He and the actor, therefore, have the enviable luxury of being able to concentrate their attention exclusively on attaining the virtutes dicendi of the third and highest level. My Oedipus, by contrast, will be an amateur, who may turn out to be a native Greek, a classicist from America or mainland Europe, an English modern linguist with limited knowledge of AG, or even a good amateur actor with no previous knowledge of the language (as has often been the case in the Triennial Cambridge Greek Play). He will therefore almost certainly need some basic instruction if he is to avoid errors in pronunciation and if he is to speak the words convincingly as verse.

I would like to underline the adjective ‘basic’, because I shall hold fast to another important principle, also enunciated by Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics, that it is ‘the sign of a good mind to demand that level of certainty which the nature of the subject permits’. If my actor proves to have only a limited knowledge of the language, he will not need to master every tense and mood of all the AG verbs before he can begin work. Most of the instruction required, indeed, will relate to particular words in particular lines in the order in which they occur in the text. Points of literary or linguistic fact can be explained simply and informally in such a way as to preserve the interactive atmosphere in which actor and director will be jointly experimenting with alternative phrasings (as they must experiment in the rehearsal of any play whatsoever). Nevertheless, there are some theoretical issues of which the actor ought to have some kind of background knowledge. And this essay started as an attempt to explore
— for myself, in the first instance — what those issues are, and just how much the actor will need to be told.

In the event, I shall not venture here into the minefield of the competing pronunciations of AG (the reader will find my views set out in some detail in the article published in 2007, mentioned above). It is enough to say that I hope to find an actor who will be willing to make the effort to follow me (and the recommendations of Professor Horrocks) in adhering coherently to a compromise solution (neither authentic nor arbitrary), which I call *prolatio conveniens*. But even if I have to work with a native speaker of Modern Greek or a classicist of mature years (both of whom tend to be firmly set in their habits), the following discussion of the metre of Oedipus’s speeches will be confined to features of the verse to which an actor must respond, no matter what kind of pronunciation he was taught at school.

### B. Charting by ‘Triangulation’: a Comparative Study of Syntax and Metre in Sophocles, Corneille and Dante

#### ‘Blank’ Verse

Let us go back to the lines with which I began and take in their general appearance:

\[ \text{oι παιδες, ωδι επεσθε: έγω γαρ ήγεμων} \]
\[ \text{σφων αι πεφασμαι καινος, άδοπιο σφω πατρι.} \]
\[ \text{χωρειτε, και μη ψαυτε, αλλα έστε με} \]
\[ \text{αυτων των ειρων τυμβον έξευρειν, ίνα} \]
\[ \text{μοιρ άνδρι τηδε τηδε χρυφηναι χθονι.} \]
\[ \text{τηδ, ωδε, τηδε ματε τηδε γαρ μ’ άγει} \]
\[ \text{Έρμης ο πομπος η τε νεφέρα θεος.} \]

On the page they look for all the world like any passage of blank verse in English — for example, the opening of Lear’s speech to Cordelia, quoted above:

No, no, no! Come let’s away to prison:  
We two alone will sing like birds i’ th’ cage:  
When thou dost ask me blessing I’ll kneel down  
And ask of thee forgiven  
So we’ll live,  
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
At gilded butterflies...

and I shall consistently refer to the Greek lines by this anachronistic term.

I do this for no fewer than three reasons. First, to remind the reader that the unvarying structure of the lines (in a ‘bread-and-butter’ metre which is found in plays by the other AG dramatists) is in direct contrast with the complex and varied lyric measures used in the Choric Songs, in much the same way that Shakespeare’s blank verse contrasts with his rhymed songs in various stanzaic forms. Second, because the received technical term for the metre (iambic trimeter), despite its antiquity, seems to me just as debatable as the terms used by ancient astronomers to describe the movement of the sun and stars. And third, because my references to ‘blank verse’ will continue to highlight the fact that I am deliberately ‘working backwards’ towards the past from my knowledge of four modern literatures, and
that I am applying the same criteria to the reading of Sophocles as I would to the reading of
dramatic verse by Shakespeare and Goethe.\textsuperscript{xi}

\textbf{Metrical Units and Syntactical Units Defined}

Appearances are not always deceptive. The lines from \textit{Oedipus at Colonus} look more or less
the same length as each other, and in one fundamental respect they \textit{are} the same length. All
the blank-verse lines in the play have twelve syllables and in every case the end of a line
coincides with the end of a word.

The first half of this statement will have to be qualified later, because it would be more
accurate to say that all the lines have twelve \textit{metrically relevant} syllables (a concept which will
be explained in the next section). For the moment it is enough to say that a small minority of
blank-verse lines have more than twelve syllables; but these few apparent exceptions all
involve what might be called ‘licenced substitution’ of three for two and do not invalidate
the claim.\textsuperscript{xii}

The second half of the statement — about the end of words and the end of lines —
may be blindingly obvious, but the seemingly gratuitous observation allows me to make two
important points. (a) A great deal of metrical analysis can be performed without fully
understanding the language, because it is primarily concerned with the arrangement of
sounds — with syllables, not words. (b) On the other hand, recognition of the beginning and
end of a \textit{metrical unit} (in our case, the line of blank verse) does presuppose recognition of the
smallest \textit{semantic unit}, the word. The actor must study metre and meaning together. He must
be aware of the dialectical relationship between the numerically regulated, more or less
unvarying pattern of the system of syllables and the semantically regulated, constantly
changing groupings of the words that convey the all important information.

Most of this essay, in fact, will be devoted to a study of one very important aspect of
the relationship between metre and meaning in \textit{Oedipus at Colonus}, namely, the relationship
between a single metrical unit, the \textit{line} (usually ‘hinged’ near its middle to form two parts
called \textit{hemistichs}) and a half dozen units of syntax (\textit{phrase, participial phrase, subordinate clause,
main clause, sentence, period, and paragraph}). The units of syntax, of course, may either coincide
with lines or hemistichs, or, more interestingly, fail to coincide.

I digress for a moment to offer simple definitions of the syntactic terms as I shall use them
(for fuller discussion, the reader is referred to Chapter Five of \textit{Dante's Style in his Lyric Poetry},

The smallest syntactical unit is the \textit{phrase}, a group of words (prepositions, particles,
adjectives, adverbs, nouns and participles) lacking a finite verb (it may be no more than two
words). Next in the hierarchy comes the \textit{clause}, defined as a structure containing a finite
verb. Given the very free use of participles in AG, it will also be convenient to recognise
the \textit{participial phrase} (alias \textit{non-finite clause}) as a kind of mezzanine floor between phrase and
clause.

True clauses may be either \textit{main} or \textit{subordinate} (the first being able to stand
independently, the second being grammatically dependent either on a main clause or on
another subordinate clause, in which case one speaks of \textit{sub-subordination}). Higher than the
clause (in my usage) ranks the \textit{sentence}, which may consist of a single main clause, but
usually consists of a main clause governing one or more subordinate or sub-subordinate
clauses.

The term \textit{period} will be reserved for a structure containing two or more main clauses
(with or without subordination) linked by conjunctions or by simple apposition (the last
seven lines of the passage quoted at the beginning of the essay form a single period. The largest unit relevant to present purposes is the paragraph, normally containing more than one sentence or period. (Pearson in the Oxford Classics text starts a new paragraph at the beginning of my extract. Three later editions print the whole of Oedipus's last speech as a single paragraph.)

In a majority of cases, obviously, a point of punctuation in a modern edition will indicate the position of a boundary between two syntactic units. Not every boundary is so marked, however; and there is no fixed correlation between the hierarchy of syntactic units, just described, and the hierarchy of punctuation. Nevertheless, a comma will usually occur between two phrases or at the start of a subordinate clause, while a colon will typically come between linked main clauses. A full stop, question mark or exclamation mark will come at the end of a sentence or period, while a new paragraph will be indicated by indentation of its first line.

Lessons from Corneille’s Oedipe: Metrically Relevant Syllables

The identification of a line of dramatic verse composed of twelve metrically relevant syllables immediately makes a modern linguist think of the alexandrine in French neo-classical drama of the seventeenth century. And there are several features of the alexandrine, as found in any short passage of Corneille or Racine, which can serve to throw light on the concept of ‘metrical relevance’ and on the nature and function of the caesura in the blank verse of Sophocles. Let us take an example from Corneille, so that we may remain with the figure of Oedipus. Here are eight lines from near the beginning of his Oedipe (1663), where the speaker is the eponymous hero, who — despite his use of the present tense — is looking back to the moment when he solved the riddle of the Sphinx, freed Thebes of the monster, and was rewarded with the hand of the Queen.

Au pied du roc affreux, semé d’os blanchissants,
Je demande l’énigme et j’en cherche le sens, 2
Et ce qu’aucun mortel n’avait encore pu faire,
J’en dévoile l’image et perce le mystère. 4
Le monstre, furieux de se voir entendu,
Venge aussitôt sur lui tant de sang répandu, 6
Du roc s’élance en bas, et s’écrase lui-même.
La Reine tint parole, et j’eus le diadème. 8

(Oedipe, Acte 1, 247–54)

To the ear of an ordinary modern Parisian (as opposed to a Marseillais), four of the lines (2, 4, 5, 8) might seem to have no more than ten syllables and one to have only eleven (7). He has to be reminded that in the seventeenth century the final atonal e would normally have been pronounced before a following consonant and also heard distinctly at the end of a phrase or sentence. He might also have to be reminded that alexandrines are always deployed in rhymed couplets and that it is an inviolable convention for the rhymes to be alternately masculine (entendu / répandu) and feminine (mêmē / diadēmē). By contrast, an ordinary listener in Corneille’s own day would have heard distinctly all the constituent twelve syllables in every line (i.e. up to and including the first syllable of the rhyme); and an educated listener would have known that the extra syllable in the feminine rhymes is essential for the metre but does not affect the syllable count by virtue of which the line is deemed to have twelve syllables. Let me now ‘edit’ the same passage, modifying its
appearance so as to assist an actor in a modern performance, by adding diaereses on *furieux* and *diadème* and underlining all the unelided final vowels, in order to make visible the ‘metrically relevant’ syllables which ought somehow to be made audible.

Au pied du roc affreux, semé d’os blanchissants,
Je demande l’énigme et j’en cherche le sens,
Et ce qu’aucun mortel n’avait encore pu faire,
J’en dévoile l’image et perçez le mystère,
Le monstre, furieux de se voir entendu,
Venge aussitôt sur lui tant de sang répandu,
Du roc s’élance en bas, et s’écrase lui-même,
La Reinette tint parole, et j’eus le diadème.

If we now ask how a modern French actor might show his awareness of these conventions, the answer seems straightforward and, more important, suggests a solution to analogous problems in performing the blank verse of Sophocles. In my view at least, he should pronounce the underlined final vowels as distinct syllables within the line, and he should at least ‘fake’ the effect of feminine rhyme by articulating the last consonant distinctly. If he were to feel the need, for rhetorical reasons, to widen the gap after phrases like ‘je demande l’énigme’ or ‘j’en dévoile l’image’, he should make the final *e* in the words *énigme* and *image* clearly audible even though the syllables are not ‘metrically relevant’. If he does so, of course, the audience will actually hear thirteen syllables; but, for reasons that will become apparent in a moment, there will be no possibility of upsetting the pattern, because the conventions and expectations are so clear.

It is worth noting that both the native-speaker of modern French and the non-Greek classicist have to strike a satisfying balance between the demands of literary convention and of naturalism. The difference is that a French actor, whose vowels, intonation and rhythms will sound natural without any conscious effort on his part, must strive to suggest the missing elements in the formal structure, whilst an English classicist, who is usually all too aware of the metrical rules, must cultivate the art of *sprezzatura* in order to make his delivery sound something like living speech.

**Making Haste Slowly: (a) Analogies before Analysis**

Anyone who has received coaching in a sport such as golf will know that precise technical directions may be less effective in improving one’s swing or follow-through than a single striking image. The same empirical approach also works wonders with actors. So before attempting a close analysis of the relationship between syntax and metre in Corneille and Sophocles, I would like to digress for a moment to explore the implications of two similes that I found helpful when rehearsing the dramatisations from Homer. One is derived from the human body, the other from the art of building.

The standard metrical unit in both authors, as has been noted, is a line of twelve syllables. There is a risk — no more than that, but still a risk — of conceiving these equal units as something rigid and uniform, something like railway-sleepers, and then of imagining the play as a stretch of track, created simply by assembling the units at regular intervals, one after the other.

To avoid such implications, it is better to think of the line of verse as an *arm*. In repose, the arm hangs by the side, but the shoulder joint allows it to be raised and swung...
lateral through a wide arc. It can be held rigid with a clenched fist (an excellent analogue for the end-stopped line), but it is made of two principal parts, of unequal length, which are joined at the elbow in a way that allows the lower arm to be flexed at different angles (I have found the elbow joint to be the best analogy for the all-important caesura). The wrist and hand together form the most ‘expressive’ part of the arm (hence their importance in portraiture) and they offer a particularly suggestive image for the rhyme word at the end of the French alexandrine, which is often the most important semantically in the phrase or sentence. The pairing of rhyme words in a couplet is analogous to one hand clasping the other. The hand may also be used to lay hold of the upper part of the other arm, which is a nice way of visualising what happens, both in French and AG, when a syntactic unit overruns the end of the metrical unit. The strength of the grip may vary considerably, being sometimes a firm grasp and sometimes no more than a gentle squeeze with finger and thumb; and this variability can help us to recognise different degrees of enjambement (the French term, incidentally, was originally a metaphor derived from our lower limbs, the image being of two legs straddling a gap).

From the human body we pass to one of the oldest of human crafts. The actor should be invited to think of his words as building blocks and of each long speech as a wall. In this analogy, the line of verse becomes the equivalent of a course of either stones or bricks.

Stones came before bricks in the evolution of the art of building. They are found in nature in varying shapes and sizes and the builder chooses and arranges them in such a way that they will support themselves in the finished wall. He may sort them first on the ground, perhaps slotting them into standard wooden frames for ease of assembly (that would be a nice analogy for the Homeric half-line), but the maker of a dry-stone wall does not measure everything out beforehand. He does things by eye. He relies on experience based on earlier trial and error.

Bricks were initially little more than a substitute for stones, but once their dimensions became standardised (in England, the length is twice the width), the way was open for many unforeseen developments. If the wall is constructed two bricks wide, for example, the bricks may be laid in pairs either lengthways or crossways. Stretchers and headers, as they are then called, offer a suggestive analogy for the standardised long and short syllables of ancient grammatical theory and for the convention by which — in the hexameter — two shorts are equivalent to one long. The sequencing of stretchers and headers may also be systematically regulated (short-long; long-short-short-long etc.) to create recognised ‘bonds’ (‘English’, ‘Flemish’), which are loosely analogous to the ‘feet’ which the grammarians labelled with technical terms such as ‘iambs’ and ‘anapaests’. Bricks are normally held in place by mortar of uniform thickness with the result that the different bonds combine with the straight lines of the pointing to create conspicuous patterns on the surface of the wall, patterns which become visually more important than the unpredictable variations in colour and texture of the individual bricks — this being a splendid analogy for the kind of poem in which metre prevails over meaning. And so on.

It would be tedious to spell out all the analogies that could be discovered in the AG literary tradition which began, metaphorically speaking, with the dry stones of the pre-Homeric tradition and continued to the virtuoso bricklaying found in the choric odes of Athenian tragedy and in later lyric poetry down to the codification of this virtuosity in treatises on metrics. In the immediate context of this essay, however, the building imagery is intended to help the actor to remember two things. First, Sophocles was active in the middle period of the tradition. By his time the poet had become conscious, so to speak, of the existence of bricks, and bonds, and courses, and he scrutinised his lines with an eye open to the abstract and arithmetical procedures of an architect or bricklayer. But he still made his lines out of individual, irregular stones, without using mortar, rejoicing in their different colours, textures and shapes, like the maker of a dry-stone wall. Second, a good
reader of Sophocles’ dramatic verse should be attentive to its formal patterning, as described or prescribed by the metricians, but he should be even more attentive to the sound of their individual words, their meaning, and the rhythms arising from the syntax. His listeners should be made aware of the ‘bonds’ in the individual ‘courses’, yes, but they should not be forced to look at the horizontal and vertical lines of the pointing.

**Making Haste Slowly: (b) Metre and Syntax in Corneille**

I return from this digression to the example from Corneille in order to describe some aspects of the extremely simple relationship between metre and syntax in the alexandrine of seventeenth-century tragedy. The French conventions are in fact so simple that it is possible to illustrate all the points of which an actor needs to be aware from the eight lines already quoted. I apologise in advance if the exposition seems laboured to those who would understand the briefest statement in technical terms, but it is best to make haste slowly when re-examining familiar territory from an unusual viewing-point. And it will facilitate later analysis of the highly complex conventions and deviations to be found in the blank verse of *Oedipus at Colonus*, if the reader is thoroughly at home with the straightforward paradigm of the rhymed alexandrines in *Oedipe*.

Here once again is Corneille’s Oedipus, relating how he dealt with the sphinx. This time, however, his speech is printed as though it were a paragraph of prose, so that the reader may concentrate on the syntactic units:

```plaintext
Au pied du roc affreux, semé d’os blanchissants,
Je demande l’énigme et j’en cherche le sens,
Et ce qu’aucun mortel n’avait encor pu faire,
J’en dévoile l’image et perce le mystère.
Le monstre, furieux de se voir entendu,
Venge aussitôt sur lui tant de sang répandu,
Du roc s’élance en bas, et s’écrase lui-même.
La Reine tint parole, et j’eus le diadème.
```

After allowing time for the reader to make the necessary mental adjustment, I shall print out the same passage a second time, changing the layout on the page as necessary in order to make visible the beginning and end of the main units of syntax. In this next version, a return to the left hand margin will indicate the end of a clause of a certain magnitude. (‘Magnitude’ will be calculated in syllables and a clause will have to have eight or more syllables before it triggers the return.) As before, underlinings call attention to the final atonal vowels that might be swallowed in modern French, but would have been audible in the expressive reading of a prose text in the seventeenth century.) The resultant display of the main syntactic units looks like this:

```plaintext
Au pied du roc affreux, semé d’os blanchissants,
Je demande l’énigme et j’en cherche le sens,
Et ce qu’aucun mortel n’avait encor pu faire,
J’en dévoile l’image et perce le mystère.
Le monstre, furieux de se voir entendu,
Venge aussitôt sur lui tant de sang répandu,
Du roc s’élance en bas, et s’écrase lui-même.
La Reine tint parole, et j’eus le diadème.
```

Nothing is new. Oedipus’s narrative appears in exactly the same form as it was printed on p. 8. In this case, then, a layout of the text showing the main syntactic units coincides exactly
with the traditional layout making visible the main metrical units. In other words, there is complete coincidence between the two systems at this level of analysis.

Let us next scrutinise the lesser semantic units within each line of text and determine the position of the internal junctions (that is, junctions between phrases and short clauses). Their position may be made visible by introducing a space equivalent to five characters, like this:

Au pied du roc affreux,  semé d’os blanchissants.

The next print-out reveals that there is an internal junction in almost every line, and that in all but one line the junction occurs at the same point in the sequence of twelve syllables — in the exact centre of the line. This distribution is, in fact, just what one would have predicted, because it is common knowledge that the overwhelming majority of alexandrines in Corneille and Racine are composed of equal hemistichs, that is, of semantic units containing exactly six metrically relevant syllables:

xxi  Au pied du roc affreux,  semé d’os blanchissants,
    Je demande l’énigme  et j’en cherche le sens,  2
    Et ce qu’aucun mortel n’avait encore pu faire,
    J’en dévoile l’image  et père le mystère.  4
    Le monstre  furieux de se voir entendu,
    Venge aussitôt sur lui  tant de sang répandu,
    Du roc s’élance en bas,  et s’écrase lui-même.
    La Reine tint parole,  et j’eus le diadème.  8

The two exceptions to this rule of equality are more apparent than real, but they are different in kind and require a brief commentary. In line 3 there is no significant boundary between the noun mortel and the verb avait of which it is the subject. (I shall later refer to such lines as ‘unified’.)xxii In line 5, by contrast the syntax of the line falls into asymmetrical blocks, of three syllables (le monstre), and of nine (furieux de se voir entendu). But both lines illustrate the essential rule that there must be a word-boundary after the word containing the sixth metrically relevant syllable in the chain (respectively, mortEL and mONstre), even if there is no clear syntactic junction at this point. It must always be possible to divide the alexandrine into units of six syllables without ‘cutting’ a word (without tmesis). We shall find that there seems to be an analogous rule in the blank verse of Sophocles.

Both kinds of deviation from the norm are of great importance to the actor. He must respect the syntax of the clauses in front of his eyes, rather than the pattern of the metre in his head, if he is to convey their meaning; and he will in any case want to seize any legitimate opportunity to introduce rhythmic variety into this extraordinarily rigid system. But he must be discreet. In both examples (as so often), the tension between metre and syntax is minimal. The opening words of line 5 (le monstre furieux), considered in isolation, form a complete phrase of a very common type (article + noun + adjective); and although line 3 is ‘unified’ (in that ce qu’aucun mortel is not a complete phrase and avait (a mere indicator of tense) must be tied to the past participle of its verb, pu, which in turn must be tied to the infinitive, faire, which it governs), it is extremely common for the subject of a clause to occupy the whole of the first hemistich, and for the predicate to occupy the second. It would make nonsense of line 5 to make any sort of pause after furieux; but it would be extremely natural, and arguably
rhetorically necessary, to make a slight pause after mortel (provided the intonation was correct).

**Some Important Differences between the Verse of Corneille and Sophocles**

The extremely simple phenomena to which attention has just been called in Corneille’s *Oedipe* all have their counterparts in Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*, and the technical terms I have introduced, as well as the typographical resources used in presenting them (*ante oculos ponendi causa*), will all recur below. But there are two linked aspects of their versification in which the two poets differ profoundly and which have a very marked effect on the movement of their lines in performance (to anticipate and to put it very simply: there is little or no enjambement in Corneille and no rhyme in Sophocles). To understand these differences, we must jump from the minute analysis of a tiny sample in a French play to generalisations about a distinctive feature of the sound system in the French language as a whole and to implied generalisations about the relationship between any given metrical system and the structure of the language within which it developed.

It is generally accepted that the role of dynamic stress in French differs radically and distinctively from its role in other European languages, whether these be cognate, like Italian, or unrelated, like English. In English and Italian, there is an intensity accent on one particular syllable in every polysyllabic word, whatever its place in the sentence (although it is obvious that there can be extra rhetorical emphasis on the most important word). In French, by contrast, delivery is much more even (although it is obvious that there is a clear difference in weight between each of the three syllables in a word like mystère — a trisyllable in Corneille). Significant dynamic emphasis is typically reserved for the last strong syllable in the last word of a phrase or sentence. It is therefore not fortuitous that all traditional French metres are isosyllabic and rhymed (meaning, simply, that each line has to be of equal length, with no restrictions as to its rhythm, and that its last substantial syllable has to share the same sound as its counterpart in another line in the vicinity). A language begets a native metre in its own likeness and image.

In the alexandrine of French tragedy, the lines are rhymed in pairs; and my analysis of the syntax offered above was defective in that it mentioned but did not dwell on the existence of *couplets*. The movement of an archetypical couplet might be compared to the shooting of a crossbow bolt. Here is the climax of Racine’s description of a monstre furieux (the bull-headed dragon or dragon-tailed bull who causes the death of Hippolytus):

\[
\text{Indomptable taureau, dragon impétueux,} \\
\text{Sa croupe se recourbe en replis tortueux.}
\]

*(Racine, *Phèdre*, Act V)*

In the first hemistich the archer begins to wind his ratchet, tightening the spring, his bow still pointing at the ground. In the second he increases the tension (notice the chiasmus), while simultaneously raising the bow in the general direction of his target (the rhyme sound is now determined). In the meaning and assonance of the third hemistich (*sa croupe se recourbe*), he tightens sounds and sense to their utmost before releasing the catch. In the fourth and last, the arrow whizzes away to strike its target with the satisfying thud of the rhyme word.

For better or worse, there is nothing in Sophocles comparable to the effect of a rhymed couplet like this one, nor even to the effect of the relatively mechanical couplets in
the example from *Oedipe*. But the French authors achieve their impact at a high price. Just as a crossbowman could be a liability in the mêlée, because he needed significant time to retension his bow and could never achieve the rate of fire of a longbowman, so the rhymed isosyllabic couplet is incompatible with the flexible use of enjambement. It is no accident that there is not a single example of enjambement in the eight lines analysed. A Cornelian sentence may extend over many couplets, but a Cornelian phrase, participial phrase, or short clause does not overstep the end of a line. Nouns are not normally separated from their adjectives, nor are one-word subjects from their one-word verb, nor are other short modifiers from the word they modify. When enjambement does occur, it will tend to be of the least obtrusive kind (perhaps a delayed vocative, as in Racine’s ‘Je me suis tu cinq ans, / Madame, et vais encor me taire...’), and it will come at the end of the first line in the couplet.

It may be safely inferred from this paragraph that the converse holds true for Sophocles. All that needs to be said for the moment is implicit in the combative words of Corneille’s contemporary John Milton in his preface to *Paradise Lost* (1667), with its reference to the ‘sense variously drawn out from one verse into another’ and its appeal to the practice of the ‘learned ancients’:

> The measure is (...) heroic verse without rime, as that of Homer in Greek, and of Virgil in Latin; rime being no necessary adjunct or true ornament of (...) good verse (...).

Some (...) Italian (...) poets of prime note have rejected rime (...) as a thing of itself, to all judicious ears, trivial and of no true musical delight; which consists only in apt numbers, fit quantity of syllables, and the sense variously drawn out from one verse into another, not in the jingling sound of like endings, a fault avoided by the learned ancients both in poetry and in all good oratory (...).

**A Theban Braggart in Dante**

Milton was not referring to Dante in his allusion to ‘Italian poets of prime note’, but it will be instructive at this point to glance at some aspects of Dante’s versification. Maintaining a Theban connection, we may look at nine intensely declamatory lines roared out by Capaneus in the Circle of the Violent:

> Se Giove stanchi ’l suo fabbro da cui
>   crucciato prese la folgore aguta
> onde l’ultimo di percosso fui;
> o s’elli stanchi li altri a muta a muta
>   in Mongibello a la focina negra,
>   chiamando ‘Buon Vulcano, aiuta, aiuta!’,
>   si com’ el fece a la pugna di Flegra,
>   e me saetti con tutta sua forza:
> non ne potrebbe aver vendetta allegra.\textsuperscript{xxv}

\textit{(Inferno XIV, 52-60)}

As in the passages from Sophocles and Corneille, all the lines have the same number of metrically relevant syllables: in this case, eleven. The Italian metrical conventions that underlie the syllable count are sufficiently similar to those in French to require no explanation and to allow us to pass on immediately to examine the extent to which the units of syntax coincide with the units of metre.\textsuperscript{xxvi}
The relationship between the two systems proves to be very close to what was found in Corneille. A pattern of rhyme-sounds—in this case, *triple* rhyme, *terza rima*—reinforces the last word in the hendecasyllabic lines; and the end of each line (except the first) coincides with the end of a clause or phrase. Hence the familiar way of printing verse to show the *metrical* form is once again a fairly faithful visual representation of the *syntactic* form. (Although *da cui* in line 1 belongs grammatically with *prese* in the next line, the slight dislocation in the word order of the clause, as so often, creates a junction before *cruciato*).

The same kind of resemblance to Corneille’s alexandrines will be found with regard to the lesser syntactic boundaries within the lines. Almost all the lines prove to have a clear internal junction between lower-level syntactic units; and each line tends to divide into two hemistichs. In the next print-out of the passage, below, the position of these boundaries will again be made visible by introducing a distinct space between the syntactic units; and it will be seen that there are two important points of difference from Corneille. First, the phrases or clauses tend to be shorter than in the French text. Second (given the odd number of syllables), the junction can never occur in the exact middle of the line, as it must do in the alexandrine, but falls as close as possible to *either* side of the centre. The hemistichs *must* be of different lengths. The line may begin with the shorter hemistich, Type A, which Italian metricians refer to with a Latin term, *a minore* (*from the lesser*); or it may begin with the longer hemistich, Type B, *a maggiore*.

The following print-out of the lines has been modified in three ways. All the lines are given the same margin (by removing the hanging margin that in all the fourteenth-century manuscripts of the *Comedy* serves to emphasise the status of the terzina as the most important metrical unit). The position of the internal boundaries is shown by a wider space, as in Corneille. Each ‘conformist’ line has been labelled as either A or B.

```
Se Giove stanchi 'l suo fabbro — da cui
   crucciato prese la folgore aguta
   onde l’ultimo dì percosso fui;  3 B
   o s’elli stanchi li altri a muta a muta
   in Mongibello a la focina negra,
   chiamando ‘Buon Vulcano, aiuta, aiuta!’
   si com’ el fece a la pugna di Flegra,
   e me saetti con tutta sua forza:
   non ne potrebbe aver vendetta allegra.
```

It will be seen that there are four representatives of each type in this passage, whereas, for the record, the average distribution in Dante’s verse would be nearer to 6 of Type A and 3 of Type B. (From the purely metrical point of view, by the way, the apparently non-conforming first line clearly belongs to Type A, for reasons that need not be explained here).

The pattern found in these wholly typical Italian hendecasyllables (with their caesuras falling in one of two ‘canonical’ positions, and with their oscillation between *a minore* and *a maggiore* lines) is remarkably close to that found in the blank verse of Sophocles—so close indeed that there is a risk of terminological confusion and I must digress for a moment to explain one very important difference between Italian and AG metrics.

In Italian it does not matter whether the word at the end of a line of verse is oxytone, paroxytone or proparoxytone. (To use the native terminology, a line may end in a *parola tronca*, like ‘andò’, a *parola piana*, like ‘andáte’, or a *parola sdrucciola*, like ‘andárono’). It is, however, essential that the stressed syllable in the final word falls in the last-but-one position.
in the chain. In the hendecasyllable, therefore, the last stressed syllable must fall in the tenth position.

If the final word is *piana*, as are the vast majority of words in Italian, the hendecasyllable will possess all the syllables suggested by its name. But provided the tenth syllable is stressed, the line still counts as a hendecasyllable even if the final word is *tronca* or *sdrucciola* (if necessary, the whole line may be described as an *endecasillabo tronco* or an *endecasillabo sdrucciolo*).

What matters to us is that the same principles apply to the word at the end of the first hemistich. In Type A, the crucial stressed syllable in this word must come in the fourth position in the chain of eleven; in Type B, it must come in the sixth. I will try to make this visible in yet another modification of the print-out by placing the relevant numbers, in coloured superscript, at the end of the syllable to which they refer:

To summarise the digression: despite the apparent differences between Italian conventions and those of Ancient Greek, all Type B lines in Dante will prove to be, in principle, like all the Type B lines to be identified in Sophocles; and with the same qualifications, all Type A lines in the two poets will be alike in this essential particular.

**Approaching the Subject of Rhythm: Naming the Contrasting Syllables**

The Microsoft Word Count reveals that I have now written over 8000 words about three short passages of dramatic verse in which nothing has yet been said about what most people might regard as the most important subject of all — rhythm.

The delay is, of course, deliberate. The long discussion of examples from two Romance languages has been intended to prevent native speakers of English from rushing in where angels fear to tread, to make them recognise and call into question the unconscious assumptions and ingrained habits which they have absorbed from their mother tongue, and to think twice before exporting these assumptions and habits into the performance of verse from Ancient Greece. But there are still a few more ‘stumbling blocks’ to be identified and
removed, before the metaphorical ‘building site’ can be made level and free from obstructions.

Whatever the word rhythm may come to imply in practice for the actors who will perform Oedipus at Colonus, it presupposes the existence of two classes of syllable, contrasting and alternating with each other in the same sort of way as antonymical pairs like day and night. In different languages, in different contexts, and in the writings of different scholars, these two classes of syllable have been variously labelled as strong–weak, long–short, heavy–light, stressed–unstressed. Some of the phenomena and some of the usages overlap, but there seems to be no universally accepted set of definitions. I shall therefore launch another terminological digression in which I shall describe — and attempt to justify — my own practice, bearing in mind the Aristotelian axiom, quoted above, that it is the mark of an educated man ‘to require just that degree of precision which the nature of the subject allows’.

Earlier in this essay, I did in fact allude in passing to two classes of syllable within the French alexandrine and the Italian hendecasyllable, and it can now be revealed that the terms adopted were chosen with care. With regard to the distinction between masculine and feminine rhymes in the alexandrine, I decided to use the pair strong–weak (thus, in the rhyme sounds of mys-tè-re and fai-re, the final syllable is ‘weak’, the preceding syllable ‘strong’). This decision was influenced by a desire to remind the reader that the level of dynamic stress in the sound system of spoken French is much lower than it is in English: typically, there is extra intensity on the last strong syllable in the word, but the delivery of all the sounds is remarkably even, and, as was noted earlier, the greatest intensity is reserved for the last strong syllable in the phrase.

When describing Dante’s lines, I preferred the pair stressed–unstressed (thus, in one of the words occurring before a caesura, the penultimate syllable of Mon-gi-bel-lo is ‘stressed’ while the final syllable is ‘unstressed’. It would also be acceptable to say that the penultimate carries the ‘tonic accent’ while the final is ‘unaccented’). There are two points to bear in mind here. (a) The difference in intensity between stressed and unstressed syllables in Italian is greater than in French, but less than in English (which explains why the final unstressed vowels of Italian words have survived the attrition of centuries and are pronounced distinctly enough to convey grammatical contrasts). (b) As in English, the position of the stress in any given Italian word is not totally predictable from its syllabic structure and it can differentiate meaning (príncipi means ‘princes’, but princípi means ‘principles’; pórtio means ‘port’, but portò means ‘carried’). There is a difference between long and short vowels in Italian, and there might therefore seem to be a case for recognising vowel length when describing Italian syllables. But the distinction is irrelevant to the discussion of metre and rhythm, because an Italian vowel is automatically pronounced long if it occurs in an open, stressed syllable (as in the first syllable of pré-se), and will not be pronounced long if this open syllable does not carry the tonic accent. Conversely, a vowel is considered short in a closed syllable even if it carries the stress (as in bél-lo).

English is more complex. But whether one is contrasting the syllables in an individual word, analysing the elements of prose rhythm, or describing the pattern of metre in a line of verse, the crucial opposition is between stressed and unstressed. This said, it is important to remember that there are very marked differences in length between English vowels and diphthongs (contrast ship and sheep, river and stream); that the position of the stress is not predictable from the syllabic structure and can differentiate meanings; and that the stress frequently falls on short vowels in a word containing a long vowel (the single pair bellow–below may serve to exemplify all these points). To complicate matters still further, I myself am prepared to uphold Tennyson’s view that there is such a thing as quantity in English words and that it is possible to assess their relative weight with some precision.
(including the quantity of the word scissors which Tennyson, speaking with tongue in cheek, said he felt unable to determine).

In English, Italian and French (as I insisted at the beginning of the essay) all these bald and oversimplified assertions may be checked and refined by listening to the unselfconscious practice of educated native speakers. With regard to the pronunciation of Latin and Greek, by contrast, we have to proceed by inference. Nevertheless, the inferences are pretty clear and they lead to the conclusion that the number of possible oppositions between syllable classes in AG was even greater than in English.

So important was the distinction between long and short vowels that in two cases (ε and η, ο and ω) it was incorporated into the alphabet. There was undoubtedly a distinction between high pitch and low pitch in syllables within the same word (there was, that is, a difference in pitch without regard to the intonation of the phrase); and the position of these ‘musical’ accents is not predictable from the syllabic structure, so that it can serve to differentiate meaning (βρότος means ‘gore’, βροτός means ‘mortal’). According to W.S. Allen, there must have been light dynamic emphasis on certain syllables in colloquial AG, and in his tentative reconstruction (based on a sample of blank verse in AG comedy), it would appear that the position of this dynamic stress was predictable from the arrangement of heavy and light syllables in the given word and inflected form.

For the ancient grammarians, however the crucial opposition, was that between long and short syllables—not vowels, but syllables. (Since a great many long syllables contain a short vowel, the choice of terms can lead to confusion: I follow Professors Allen and Horrocks in preferring to describe the same opposition as that between ‘heavy’ and ‘light’ syllables, just as the ancient Sanskrit grammarians had done.) To this legitimate complexity may be added the fact that—when it comes to performance—northern classicists (chiefly, native speakers of English and German, but all of them following the lead given by a Dutchman, Erasmus) believe in a further entity called metrical i
tus, which requires them to place a dynamic accent on certain ‘long’ syllables in a line of verse (regardless of whether these syllables did or did not carry a musical and/or natural dynamic accent in colloquial AG) in order to make the quantitative pattern of the metre audible accentually to Teutonic ears.

T
to summarise the digression and to look ahead. Universally speaking, rhythm is an audible consequence of differing patterns in the distribution of two classes of syllables, X and Y. In the following discussion of this distribution in the alexandrines of Corneille, the hendecasyllables of Dante, and the blank verse of Sophocles, I shall use different terms to describe the opposing pairs in each language: strong–weak for French, stressed–unstressed for Italian, heavy–light for Greek. But in all three cases we shall be scrutinising lines of verse containing an unvarying number of metrically relevant syllables (12, 11 and 12 respectively), in order to ascertain whether syllables of type X may or may not be predicted in certain positions in the isosyllabic chain. The position of such a syllable (strong, accented, or heavy) will be indicated by a cardinal numeral. In a pattern represented by the numbers 1 — 4 — 7 — 10, the rhythm of the line would be ternary (dactylic). In a pattern represented by the numbers 2 — 4 — 6 — 8 — 10, the rhythm would be binary (iambic).

In printing out the examples, I shall indicate both the existence of an X syllable in a given word and its position in the chain by placing a red superscript number immediately after the syllable in question. Thus, in the following three examples, one from each language, it emerges from a single glance that each begins with a similar rhythmic potential within its respective system, and it is easy to check whether the analysis has been performed correctly. (For the moment, I ignore the fact that the first syllable of the AG line is also heavy):
La Reine tint parole, et j’eus le diadème.

me sæt con tutta sua forza:

μέμνησθέ μου θανόντος εὐτυχεῖς ἀεί.

Fixed Points and Flexible Rhythm in Corneille

Let us return to Corneille. Here is a transcript (for ease of reference) of the whole passage in which unequivocally strong syllables have been marked in the way just exemplified:

```
Au pied du roc affreux, semé d’os blanchissants,
Je demande l’énigme et j’en cherche le sens,
Et ce qu’aucun mortel n’avait encore pu faire,
J’en dévoile l’image et perçez le mystère.
Le monstre, furieux de se voir entendu,
Venге aussitôt sur lui tant de sang répandu,
Du roc s’élançe en bas, et s’écritse lui-même.
La Reine tint parole, et j’eus le diadème.
```

Even the most cursory glance at the numerals reveals that no two lines are the same in respect of the distribution of their strong syllables, and, from the point of view of the director and actor, this is perhaps the single most important fact, since they ought to rise to the challenge and convey something of that variety in performance.

Closer examination shows that there are two positions in the chain — the sixth and twelfth — where there is a strong syllable in every line; and this is the most important fact from the point of view of the metrician. He can in fact formulate a rule that every alexandrine must have a strong syllable in the sixth and twelfth positions (that is, in the word before the expected caesura, and in the rhyme word); and he can simplify his description by removing the numbers 6 and 12, because there is no requirement to ‘mark’ conformity to a rule. (Before the relevant numerals are removed in the next print-out, notice that the word bearing a mandatory stress may terminate in an extra weak syllable, whether it comes at the end of a line (according to the rule governing the alternation of masculine and feminine rhymes mentioned earlier) or whether it comes before the expected caesura (which is shown in the print-out by the extra width of the space)).

Here is the same passage again, simplified, as just described, in a way that makes it easier to absorb further facts and implications which are valid for all classical alexandrines.

```
Au pied du roc affreux, semé d’os blanchissants,
Je demande l’énigme et j’en cherche le sens,
Et ce qu’aucun mortel n’avait encore pu faire,
J’en dévoile l’image et perçez le mystère.
Le monstre, furieux de se voir entendu,
Venге aussitôt sur lui tant de sang répandu,
Du roc s’élançe en bas, et s’écritse lui-même.
La Reine tint parole, et j’eus le diadème.
```
It will be seen that there is at least one strong syllable within each hemistich. The presence of such a syllable, too, may be regarded as a rule; and this strong syllable might be called ‘free’, as opposed to ‘fixed’.

Where there is no more than one free syllable, it will be seen to occur in positions 2, 3 or 4 in the first hemistich, and in positions 8, 9 or 10 in the second. (Significantly, it is not found in the penultimate positions (namely, 5 and 11), where it would clearly ‘interfere’ with the following obligatory strong syllable before the caesura or the end of the line). If there is only one such syllable, and if it falls in positions 3 and 9, there will be two sequences of weak–weak–strong in each hemistich. (The whole of line 2 above would be traditionally described as ‘anapestic’). Notice, also, that if a single, free, strong syllable occurs in positions 2, or 4, or 8, or 10, there may be a sequence of three weak syllables (there are three examples above).

Equally clearly, there may be a second strong syllable in either hemistich (which might be called ‘optional’), thus multiplying significantly the number of patterns which may be regarded as perfectly regular. The sixth line has an optional strong syllable in both hemistichs, yielding the pattern 1—4—(6)—7—9—(12); whereas the seventh and eighth lines have an optional syllable only in the first hemistich (both in position 2, yielding the binary pattern: 2—4—6). The two lines differ from each other, however, in the position of the free syllable in the second hemistich (respectively, 8—12, and 9—12).

(In the theatre, be it noted, different Directors would respond to these observable facts differently in different scenes. Where it seemed important to underline the formality of verse in a drama like Oedipe, for example, it might be appropriate to emphasise the elements common to every line and the isochrony (e.g. by widening the gaps at the caesura and line-end, dwelling a little more on the rhyme sound, and perhaps ‘promoting’ some weak syllables to the rank of strong). Where, on the other hand, the virtues of the Market Place and Theatre were paramount, the lines would be delivered in such a way as to convey the variety to which attention has just been called.)

Fixed Points and Flexible Rhythm in Dante

As will have become all too apparent, it is extremely tedious for the reader to take in written descriptions of all the facts that have just been reported concerning Corneille’s use of the alexandrine — facts and implications that would have been absorbed in an instant, had they been exemplified with the voice. But once the points have been grasped in one author and one language, it becomes much easier to call attention to similar phenomena in another language and author. So it should be possible to deal more expeditiously with the passage from Inferno.

Dante’s lines will now be reprinted again with the same internal spaces as before, to mark the caesura, but with the introduction of superscript numerals to indicate the position of the stressed syllables. The capital letters in the margin are retained to remind the reader that, in the Italian hendecasyllable, the caesura may occur regularly in either of two positions, creating two basic families, Type A and Type B (also called a minore and a maioare).

Se Gio\textsuperscript{2}ve stan\textsuperscript{4}chi ’l suo fab\textsuperscript{7}bro da cu\textsuperscript{10}i (A)
crucci\textsuperscript{2}to pre\textsuperscript{4}se la fol\textsuperscript{7}gore agu\textsuperscript{10}ta A
on\textsuperscript{2}de l’ult\textsuperscript{3}imo dl\textsuperscript{10}; perc\textsuperscript{8}so fu\textsuperscript{10}; 3 B
o s’el\textsuperscript{2}li stan\textsuperscript{4}chi li al\textsuperscript{3}tri a mu\textsuperscript{8}ta a mu\textsuperscript{10}ta B
in Mongibel\textsuperscript{4}to a la foc\textsuperscript{8}na ne\textsuperscript{10}gra, A
Once again the data may be simplified by removing two of the numerals in each line — the last one in the chain (10), and the one before the caesura (which will be a 4 in lines of type A, and a 6 in lines of type B). The implication is clear: every hendecasyllable must have a stress in these positions, and there is no need to mark conformity to a rule.

The surviving superscript numerals show the presence and position of ‘extra’ stressed syllables, and it will be seen at a glance that, as in Corneille, these do not fall in the same positions in each line. In one respect there seems to be less variety than in Corneille. In the shorter hemistich, there is an accent on the second syllable in all the lines, giving a binary (iambic) impulse to the lines of Type A, which begin with the pattern 2—4, and a binary (trochaic) cadence to all the lines of Type B, which end with the pattern 8—10. It should be noted, however, that this greater uniformity is due largely to the shortness of the unit (it lacks two syllables with respect to the hemistichs in the alexandrine), and that in Dante’s normal practice the stress does also fall on the first syllable in the shorter hemistich (quite commonly in Type A, yielding the incipit 1—4, and not uncommonly in Type B, yielding the cadence 7—10).

The kind of rhythmic variety found in the longer hemistich resembles that in Corneille’s alexandrines. There is at least one ‘free’ accented syllable, and not necessarily more than one. In our brief sample, one of the Type-B lines has a single extra stress (falling in the third position), while the four Type-A lines have only one extra stress (falling in either the seventh or the eighth position). Three of the four Type-B lines, however, have two extra accented syllables, pleasingly varied to give the patterns: 1—3—6; 2—4—6; 1—4—6.

(I shall comment in a moment on those few lines in the chosen passages which seem in some respect ‘exceptional’ or ‘dissident’ (stressing that ‘exceptions prove the rule’, and that a spark of ‘dissidence’ is vital to the health of any community). But I must add one immediate gloss on Capaneus’s speech. My knowledge of Dante enables me to say that the high proportion of Type-A lines with the pattern 2—4—7—10 is extremely unusual (there are four out of five, if the dissident first line is also assigned to Type A). This proportion may well be an indirect consequence of Capaneus’s blustering rhetoric; and if I were directing an actor in this speech, I would suggest he made these cadences very rhythmical, very ‘emphatic’, in both the original and the modern senses of the word. With that reservation, however, the last two terzinas, read in isolation, offer a typical sample of the variety of rhythm to be found in Dante.)
An Interim Conclusion

The foregoing analyses are based on the hypothesis that the Italian hendecasyllable and the French alexandrine exist as metrical units simply by virtue of the fixed number of syllables in the line and the obligatory presence of two X syllables in fixed positions (before the caesura and at the line end). In other words, metrical units (meaning, in this case, ‘lines of verse’) may exist without any reference to a specific rhythm or rhythms. One can go further. Even in hendecasyllables and alexandrines that are regular in every way — the great majority — there is an expectation of rhythmic variety. It is therefore incumbent on a metrician to describe the sources and limits of this desirable variety with the same care as he devotes to defining the common elements that constitute the line.

To the eye, as displayed on the page, there may seem to be a wider range of rhythmic variety in the alexandrine, if only because it really contains two more metrically relevant syllables than the hendecasyllable. But to the ear there is an equal or greater variety in the Italian metre, partly because of the inequality of the two hemistichs and the different sequences of a minore and a maio re lines, and partly because, in Italian, stressed syllables contrast more strongly with the unstressed than do French strong syllables with the weak.

Non-conforming Lines

In both languages there is predictably a greater variety of rhythm in the minority of lines where uncertainties as to the status of the X and Y syllables, or their unusual distribution in the chain, create ambiguities which lead to disagreement between different analysts, or cause the same analyst to waver and change his mind from one day to the next. Such lines add up to a significant minority. In Dante’s and Corneille’s oeuvre as a whole, the total may be as high as 15–20%; and my preliminary results suggest that the figure may be a little higher still with regard to the blank verse in Oedipus at Colonus. By serendipity, rather than design, the three sample passages from the three authors have proved typical in that they all contain non-conforming lines in about the right proportion.

There are four points to make about this ‘dissident minority’. First, they are to be recognised as such and welcomed, and not to be ignored or explained away. They must not be strapped down on a Procustean bed and trimmed to make them fit. The actor, in particular, should be encouraged to delight in them and make the deviations audible, because, in my experience, they often prove to be the unintentional consequence of a shift in register, or of a sudden surge of passion in the character who is speaking, or of a flash of linguistic creativity in the author. (They tend to occur at moments when — to revive distinctions introduced at the beginning of the essay — the virtues of the Schoolroom defer to those of the Market and Theatre.)

Second, the causes of a rhythmic ambiguity will usually be found to lie in some kind of dissidence between the units of metre and the units of syntax. (One should never study rhythm in the abstract, in isolation from the particular words assembled to carry particular meanings.) Clauses and phrases may overstep or overrun the end of a line, or come to a halt in internal positions other than the caesuras described above. This kind of dissidence, too, must be recognised and welcomed. Nor should it be assumed that each and
every departure from the norm is of equal importance. Enjambements, in particular, are not all of the same ‘strength’.

Third, as hinted above, it is sometimes difficult to decide whether a given syllable is to be considered as X or as Y. In French and Italian one has to face the problems posed by words of four and more syllables, which may have a secondary X syllable; and certain monosyllables that would normally rank as weak or unaccented may have to be ‘promoted’ in specific contexts for syntactic, semantic or rhetorical reasons. In Ancient Greek the commonest conjunction of all (καί) may rank as either heavy or light; and in any case syllabification goes by the phrase, with the result that final syllables which are light when considered in isolation, but which become heavy in response to an initial consonant or consonant cluster in the following word, are like the unclean spirits in the Gospel of Mark: their name is Legion.

Fourth, I have found it good practice to create a kind of twilight zone or no-man’s land by recognising two levels of dissidence or non-conformity — a lower (open to disagreement) and a higher (beyond all possible doubt). To give one example of what I mean, the resultant intermediate class (neither unquestionably regular, nor unquestionably dissident) will accommodate lines where the distribution of the X syllables is to some extent contradicted by the position of the internal syntactic boundary, but where instinct and experience suggest that the rhythmic pattern is not seriously disturbed.

This becomes a very important matter when compiling what the layman calls ‘statistics’ (meaning ‘statements about relative frequencies expressed as percentages’). One needs to be told exactly how the analyst has resolved problems like this, before one can make use of his figures.

I myself would tend to assign such a potentially ambiguous line to the species or subspecies determined by the distribution of the X syllables. For example, in the passage from Corneille (marked up on p. 18 above), I would regard the fifth line as essentially normal; and I would consider the first line of the Dante passage to be essentially Type A, treating it as though it could be represented in the same way as its syntactic ‘twin’ in line 4.

For the record, in my preliminary analyses of the blank verse in Oedipus at Colonus, I have put eleven percent of the lines into this intermediate category (which implies that I recognise some anomalies but regard the lines as belonging essentially to either Type A or Type B), in order to distinguish them from a further sixteen percent of clear cases of dissidence between syntax and metre, where the lines are syntactically undivided, or not divided syntactically in the canonical positions, or not separated syntactically from their predecessor or successor.

Having entered those four caveats, however, it must be made clear that the lines which present no ambiguities constitute a massive majority in all three languages and authors. Whatever the nature of the pattern established by the metre in each case, it reasserts its equilibrium quickly after every patch of turbulence. ‘Normality’ is not something laid down in a book of rules, such as the Highway Code, but something omnipresent in the immediate environment. ‘Deviations’ are perceived not as transgressions, understood only by lawyers and punished by judges, but as being like a swerve onto the hard or soft shoulder, followed by a corresponding swerve back onto the road.
Part II

Blank Verse in *Oedipus at Colonus*: Metre, Syntax, Rhythm

Conventions used in Marking up the Text: Revision

At long last Sophocles can take centre stage on his own. I shall launch the second part of this essay by reprinting the same fourteen lines of blank verse as were used to launch the first, but inserting internal spaces and marking the text up in the same way as Dante’s hendecasyllables, partly by way of revision, partly to offer closer definition of a key term, and partly to demonstrate that the anachronistic categories may indeed be applied.

The new print-out is intended chiefly for reference, and readers are invited to give it no more than a cursory glance before proceeding.

X syllables (in this case ‘heavy’ syllables) will again be indicated by placing a superscript numeral in red immediately after them. All unmarked syllables are ‘light’. Notice in passing that I do not treat either a full stop or a line end as automatically ‘promoting’ a final syllable from light to heavy. I am more comfortable with a rule stating that the final position in the chain is *antept* (accepts syllables of either class) than with a rule stating that the final syllable is ‘long by position’.

Blue characters call attention to the existence of a ‘triplet’, which is treated as the equivalent of two metrically relevant syllables.

The position of an *internal* syntactic boundary or junction is again indicated by a wider space between words. If such a boundary comes after the fifth or the seventh syllable in the chain, and assuming that there is a heavy syllable in the fourth and sixth positions respectively, the boundary will be referred to as a *caesura*. The term *caesura* is limited to the analysis of a metrical text when the focus is specifically on the metre. There are three points to make clear about my own usage of the word.

(a) It will be used, in connection with Sophocles’ blank verse, to refer to a boundary between syntactic units only if it falls in one of the two positions just described.
(b) A blank-verse line may well exist without any caesura (I refer to it as ‘undivided’).
(c) Since I am avoiding all reference to ‘feet’ or ‘metrons’ (which are not relevant to French or Italian metrics) I do *not* use the term caesura to describe a boundary between two words occurring in their normal order within the same phrase, but lying in the middle of a foot, and thus ‘cutting’ the foot in two. (In this sense *caesura* was opposed to *diaeresis*, which was the term used by some writers to indicate the coincidence of word-boundary and foot-boundary.)

A bold capital letter in the right-hand margin confirms that the line has a canonical caesura, without any complications, and that the line in question belongs to either Type A or Type B. If the letter is placed between parentheses, it means I consider the line to be mildly anomalous, and have assigned it to the intermediate category described on page 22. A dash in this column indicates a clear case of ‘dissidence’ or ‘non-conformity’. 

| ὦ παῖ δες, ῥγον ἣς εμὼν | (B) |
| σφῶνι αὐτῷ πέφασμαι καὶ νός ὑπερ σφῶν πατρί | B |
| Χωρεῖ τε, καὶ μὴ ψαυτόν, ἀλλ’ ἐᾶ τέ με | B |
| αὐτὸν τὸν ἅρθον τῷ οὖν ἐτεῖ | - |
| μοι ὁν ὁδί τῷ τε τῇ δε κρυφθῇ, ναι | ἀνθρώποι. (5) A |
It will become clear in a moment that this print-out cannot serve as a representation of both the metrical and the syntactical structure (as was the case, or nearly the case, in Corneille and Dante: cf. p. 22 above). However, before exploring the divergences between metre and syntax, it is important to stress that there is nothing in this passage from Sophocles which could be said to embody a tension between the two systems. From a strictly metrical point of view, twelve of the fourteen lines present no ambiguities; and, of these, exactly half belong to Type A and half to Type B. So normal and typical are the last nine lines, indeed, that it would be hard to find a better sample for use in explaining this metre to beginners.

**Additional ‘Cartographical’ Expedients in Marking up the Text:**  
**Boundaries via Slashes; Enjambement via Traffic Signals**

There is, nevertheless, a greater degree of dissidence between the syntax and the metre in the above passage from Sophocles than was found in the lines from Corneille and Dante, and it is this dissidence I now want to chart in more detail. Before doing so, it will be necessary to refine some of the technical terms already employed and to introduce some further representational devices used to make the phenomena visible in a print-out.

‘Dissidence’ implies that the expected or predicted syntactic boundaries come in the ‘wrong’ places or are at the ‘wrong’ level. The most striking species is enjambement, which entails the absence of a clause-boundary or a strong phrase-boundary at the end of a line, but is rarely found without some anomalies within one of the two lines that are run together.

Internal anomalies take three main forms. (a) There may be a strong mid-stop, that is, a junction between sentences instead of between phrases or subordinate clauses. (Recognition will not be controversial because the modern editor will have inserted the relevant point of punctuation. In the following print-out a strong mid-stop will be emphasised by a placing a double slash ( // ) in the wider space used to indicate the syntactic junction). (b) There may be no internal syntactic boundary of any kind. (c) There may be a displacement of the anticipated ‘low-level’ syntactic boundary away from the position where it would constitute a caesura, and/or the addition of a similar boundary to a regular caesura. (All internal boundaries will be displayed as wider spaces between words). Notice that, in cases of absence, displacement or addition, it will be impossible to allocate a line to either Type A or Type B without qualification.

Enjambement is more difficult to describe and make visible. As a rough index of its frequency (a simple but very important factor) we may calculate an elementary ratio — the ratio between the number of lines without any final punctuation in a modern edition and the number that end with a comma, colon, full stop or question mark. With regard to its nature or degree, it will be convenient to recognise four levels. These will need to be characterised in due course in the same spirit as Admiral Beaufort’s descriptions of wind strength on his
twelve-point scale, but it is unnecessary to do so for present purposes. For the time being, I shall allow myself to be a little impressionistic and explore the use of coloured symbols reminiscent of traffic controls.

End-stopped lines will be regarded as the norm and hence left unmarked. (An editorial comma will normally be regarded as sufficient evidence of end-stopping.) There may be occasions, however — especially when the mark-up is intended specifically to be of assistance to actors — when I will want to add a bold red spot or circle in the margin in order to reinforce an editorial full stop.

Lines where the clause overruns will be marked by printing their last word in the appropriate colour (as an advance warning to the reader or actor) and by adding in the margin a bold symbol of the same colour (for the convenience of the analyst, who will want to see at a glance how many enjambements there are and of what degree).

The following table summarises my provisional choice of colours and symbols and gives the appropriate metaphorical ‘driving’ instruction to the actors as they approach a ‘crossing’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Colour</th>
<th>Instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Halt at major junction ahead.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>!</td>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>Proceed cautiously and touch the brakes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>Change down one gear, but keep moving decisively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Go over unhesitatingly: it is your right of way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>This is an emergency: keep your foot on accelerator.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is how our passage would look after receiving what musicians might call ‘chromatic alteration’.

(For purely technical reasons (notably, the lack of contrast between coloured spots on a computer), I have changed font and increased the size of the characters in this experimental print-out, and I have created three separate columns for the signals, in order to help distinguish red from orange and orange from amber. I have put in five red signals (where the full stops are), but the end-stopped line is the ‘default-setting’ and would not normally need to be marked.)
I will now attempt a ‘tedious brief’ commentary on what the mark-up reveals so clearly and economically. With regard to the internal syntactic boundary, there are five lines which show some dissidence. There are two strong stops in mid-line (marked with the double slash) in lines 1 and 11, but these are not disruptive since they coincide with the caesura in both cases. There are two lines where an extra space has been inserted in order to make visible the parallel arrangement of phrases (line 12) or short clauses (line 6), reinforced by some kind of verbal repetition: in neither case, however, is the caesura compromised. Finally, there is one line (4) without a caesura (as I define it) and in which the only boundary falls after the tenth syllable, giving rise to an enjambement.

The frequency and nature of enjambement is typical, the ratio of punctuated to unpunctuated lines being 1 : 1 (there are five full stops and two commas in fourteen lines). In the seven lines affected, five of the overruns are at the lowest level, ‘orange’ (lines 3, 6, 10, 12, 13), one is ‘amber’ (line 1), and only one is a clear ‘green’ (line 4). The situation might be summarised (at the risk of explaining ignotum per ignotius) by saying that the relationship between syntax and metre is more divergent than in the lines from Inferno XIV, but not dissimilar to many passages in Paradiso. (A crude but not misleading statistic provided 130 years ago by Lisio shows that enjambement becomes progressively more frequent in the Comedy, rising from 1 : 15 in Inferno to 1 : 5 in Paradiso.)

**A Totally Different Kind of Layout to Display the Syntax**

This ‘chromatic’ mark-up retains the traditional and universally adopted layout in which the metrical structure of a passage in verse is displayed by returning to the left-hand margin at the beginning of each new line of verse and, occasionally, by indenting the new line to call attention to the appearance of a shorter line. (A plague on the poverty of English which does not distinguish between verso and riga!). I now want to introduce a different kind of layout which gives priority to the syntactic structure of the passage (at the expense of the metre). In this case a new line will mark the beginning of a new clause, and indentation will be used to show subordination and sub-subordination.

This layout has evolved from my experience over the last few years in coaching readers for performances of the dramatisations from the Odyssey. The participants were from different countries, and of different ages, temperaments and specialisations, but, with two glorious exceptions, they had been traumatised by their teachers and hypnotised by the traditional layout, with the result that they used their vocal resources to convey metre rather than meaning: in my terminology, School prevailed where Theatre demanded the virtues of the Market Place.

I tried at first to cure the readers of their trauma or rouse them from their trance by using a prototype of the chromatic mark-up, which was intended to help them prepare mentally for a coming enjambement. It did not work. So I evolved a more drastic remedy, which in effect converts the text into ‘free’ verse. It was conceived as a temporary expedient, for use in rehearsal only; and my first attempts at possible layouts were refined in collaboration with each reader in turn until we arrived at a visual aide-mémoire for the phrasing on which we had agreed. It worked. It worked so well, in fact, that, even in performance, many of the actors with ‘walk-on’ parts preferred to read from the sheet of paper with the layout in free verse, rather than from the text of the play.
Let me now introduce the conventions followed in this kind of layout. Wider spaces are inserted between words — a little more freely than hitherto — to suggest the grouping of phrases within a clause. (It is important to insist that a space does not necessarily entail a *pause* in delivery!) A new line indicates a new clause (except that short clauses may sometimes be treated as phrases, and long phrases as clauses). Indentation indicates that the new clause is subordinate to, or is in some way the completion of, the clause in the previous line. The precise placing of the indentation is deliberately very flexible, but, typically, the new clause is boldly indented so that it starts almost underneath the end of the previous clause to which it is linked. Vertically aligned indentations call attention to parallelisms, especially to paired clauses.

From the actors' point of view, let it be noted parenthetically, the single most important connotation of the layout is that, once they have set off from the left-hand margin, they must not lose momentum or relax tension until they see that the next line is about to revert to the primary margin. They can and should introduce appropriate pauses within each sentence or period; but when they do, their inflections and body language must make it clear that they have not yet reached the end of that particular utterance.

Here is a first version of such a layout:

ὦ παῖδες, ὡδ’ ἐπεσθ’.  
ἐγὼ γὰρ ἤημεν ὁφὸν αὐτὸν πεφάσμαι καινός, ὑσπερ σφῶ πατρί.  
χωρεῖτε, καὶ μὴ ψαύετ’, ἄλλ’ ἐκέτε με αὐτὸν τὸν ἱερόν τύμβον ἐξευρεῖν,  
InnerHTML: ἰνα μοῖρ’ ἀνδρὶ τῶδε τῆδε χρυφόθηναι χθονὶ.  
τῆδ’, ὡδὲ, τῆδε βάτε; τῆδε γὰρ μ’ ἁγεὶ Ἐρμῆς ὁ πομπὸς ἢ τε νεστέρα θεός.  

ὦ φῶς ἀφεγγές, πρόσθε ποὺ ποτ’ ἦσθ’ ἐμὸν,  
φῶν δ’ ἐσχατὸν σου τοῦμὸν ἀπέπαι δέμας.  
ἡδη γὰρ ἔριπτο τὸν τελευταῖον βίον χειρὶ παρ’ Ἀιδην.  

ἂνάλλα, φίλτατε ξένον,  
αὐτὸς τὲ χῶρα θ’ ἤδη πρὸσπολοὶ τε σοὶ εὔδαιμονες γένοιονθε,  
καὶ’ εὐπραξίᾳ μέμνησθε μου θανόντος εὐτυχεῖς ἄει.  

I go on to offer an improved and slightly more radical version, which differs in three respects from the first. (a) The full stops in the middle of line 1 and at the end of line 9 are replaced by colons, because in each case the period is incomplete (the new main clauses are in apposition to their predecessors and complete their sense). (b) The elided final epsilons of ἐπεσθ’ and ψαύετ’ are reinstated and should be pronounced in lines 1 and 3 (just as, with the agreement of Anthony Bowen — or, rather, at his insistence — we always treated similar vowels/syllables in similar circumstances in the theatrical performances of Homer). (c) The optimal vertical alignment of indentations is used more freely to call attention to the repetitions of σφῶν/σφῶ in line 2, of τῆδε in line 6, and of the prefix εἰ in lines 13–14. It is also used to flag up the parallelisms of πρόσθε, φῶν, and ἡδη in lines 8-10.

Here is the second version, which, in my view, provides almost as much practical guidance to the reader as he might glean from listening to a recording made by a good actor (such a recording will always remain the best way of giving assistance). It does not look much like the normal layout; but this is how the syntax really goes.
ὦ παιδεῖς, ὅδε ἔπεσθε:
ἐγὼ γὰρ ἤγεμὼν σφῶν αὐτὲς πέφασμαι καινός,
ὡς περ ὑπὸ πατρός.
χωρείτε, καὶ μὴ παῦτε,
ἀλλ᾽ ἐστέ με αὐτὸν τῷ ἑορτῷ τῷ βίον ἐξευθείαν,
ἐγὼ γὰρ ἑαυτὸν τῷ ἑαυτῷ τῷ θεῷ τῷ δικοῖ τῷ θεῷ ἔνθα κρυφθήκαν καὶ χειμών.
τῇδε, ὅδε, τῇδε βάτε:
ὁ δὲ τὸν θεόν ἵνα νεκρεῖν ἔτειν ἀνδρί τῷ δεὶν ἐς τῷ πατρὶ.

ὦ φῶς ἀφεγγές,
πρόσθε πού ποτ᾽ ἦσθ᾽ ἐμόν,
 νῦν δὲ ἐστάτων οὐκ ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ ἑπτετέι δήμας:
 ἡδί γὰρ ἕρω τὸν τελευταῖον βίον ὁμοῖον παρ᾽ Ἀιδήν.

ἀλλὰ, φίλτατε ξένον,
αὐτὸς τε χώρα θεὸν ἔτειν πρὸςπολοὶ τε οοὶ
ἐνδιατύμονες γένουσιν,
κἀτε ὑποταξία μὲν μὴν ὠν ὁμοῖος ἔτεινές αὐτί.

**Summary of Syntax and Metre and Transition to Rhythm**

If and when I start rehearsing with the actor who will play Oedipus, I will certainly use something like this more sophisticated version right from our very first meeting (being ready, of course, at any time to modify the implied phrasings as we go along). For, although at first sight it may seem quicker to scribble notes on the printed page, in the longer term it saves a huge amount of time to manipulate a downloaded text on the computer (where it is so easy to revise and print further clean copies). *Scripta manent*. When the actor begins to commit his part to memory, he will memorise what has actually been agreed.

Another great advantage of the layout is that it focuses attention on meaning. Perhaps the most important lesson I have learned from my role as coach is that one can tell instantly when a reader has failed to understand a sentence or begins to lose the thread. No theatrically expressive phrasing can be right if it does not make sense; and the first task of a Director is, paradoxically, to insist on the ‘virtues of the School’.

I have had the privilege of rehearsing with native Greeks, who were using MG pronunciation of the AG text, and with European and American classicists, who were adopting (with varying degrees of consistency) one of the philologically viable reconstructions of Athenian speech in the fifth century BC. The non-Greeks could in principle distinguish between long and short vowels and were often able to make the distinctions audible. The Greeks could do neither. To my surprise, however, many of the problems associated with speaking verse vanished for both groups of readers as soon as they concentrated on one of my layouts, speaking the sentences as though they were in heightened prose or in ‘free verse’, and therefore thinking about content rather than expression. They were required to pronounce all the syllables distinctly (as Italians do) and evenly (as the French do), and to respect the syntactic junctions (most of which coincide with the caesuras and line-ends of the metre). It did not matter greatly which syllables they felt inclined to stress as a result of their education. The rhythmic ‘flow’ — ‘rhythm’ derives from the verb *rheo* — was usually more than just acceptable.
Rhythm in a Quantitative Metre

I turn now, at long last, to the subject of rhythm as this word is ordinarily understood, and the essay will be brought to its conclusion via a preliminary survey of the distribution of syllables in the AG blank-verse line as used by Sophocles in *Oedipus at Colonus*.

It will be remembered that, for metrical purposes, syllables are divided into just two opposing classes: they are deemed to be either X or Y (Y being the 'unmarked' form, defined as 'not X'). In discussing the French alexandrine, I chose to call these classes 'strong and weak'; in the Italian hendecasyllable, I referred to them as 'stressed and unstressed'; in AG I shall follow Allen and Horrocks in calling them 'heavy and light'.

It will also be recalled that the 'weight' of every syllable in AG may be ascertained objectively on the page, even by a near-beginner, provided that syllabification is done phrase by phrase and not word by word. The rules are simple, and even though the apparent exceptions make tedious reading when described with precision, they are limited in kind and do not invalidate the general principles, which are all that an actor needs to understand. It is easy to lose concentration when carrying out the prosaic task of dividing syllables, and easy to make a slip, but mistakes can be quickly and quietly corrected. Controversy arises only with regard to the proper way of making the distinctions audible in performance.

This is a convenient point to recall that there are apparent exceptions to the general proposition (on which my comparative analysis depends) that the AG blank-verse line is isosyllabic, possessing neither more nor less than twelve metrically relevant syllables. The concept of metrical relevance has to be invoked (as it was for Corneille and Dante) to do justice to a handful of cases where, in a very small number of lines, and only in certain positions in the chain, a group of two syllables may be replaced by a group of three. Some lines therefore do in fact have thirteen syllables, and, in theory, might even have fourteen: but the extra syllables do not affect the count or invalidate the rule.

There is no need here to spell out all the conditions governing these licenced substitutions (some of which are crucial for certain proper names, like Antigone or Polynices, to make them 'run smoothly in the even road of blank verse', since they would otherwise be impossible to include), but we must glance at one of these apparent exceptions in the fourth line of the passage from *Oedipus at Colonus* chosen for analysis. xxxvi In positions 3 and 4 in the chain, where one would have predicted a light syllable followed by a heavy, we find instead a group of three (τον-τας τόν τον ιερόν τον τυμβον εξευρείν ινα).

However, the substitution is typical in that it is barely perceptible when read aloud, being equivalent, in musical annotation, to the replacement of a quaver and crotchet by a triplet of equivalent duration. Hence, in this example, I have unhesitatingly restored the count to normality by using the numbers 5 and 6 to indicate the following syllables in the chain — (bi-e·) ron·tym· bon).

‘Up to a point, Lord Copper’

It will be seen again in the line just quoted that the position of the X syllables may be indicated by inserting red superscript numerals in exactly the same way as was done in the passages from Corneille and Dante. Here are the last nine lines of the sample, marked up in

---

αὐτόν τὸν ιερόν τυμβόν ἐξευρέτησαι, ἵνα

'Up to a point, Lord Copper'
this way. (As was remarked earlier, these lines are so totally representative that they could be used in an introductory lecture on metrics.)

\[
\tau \delta ' 1, \delta ' \delta ' \tau \tau ' \delta \gamma ' \gamma ' \delta ' \gamma \mu ' 12 \\
\epsilon ' \nu ' \mu ' \zeta ' 2 \omicron ' \omicron ' \tau \gamma ' \theta ' \zeta .
\]

The result looks terrifying in that the text seems to be peppered by a red rash. Nevertheless, the visually confusing presentation is not without its uses, because the ‘pockmarks’ serve to highlight the greatest single difference from the passages in French and Italian. The X syllables are far more frequent and their positions more strictly regulated. There is, in fact, a heavy syllable in each of the first five even-number positions in every line (2, 4, 6, 8, 10); and in two thirds of the lines, there is a heavy syllable in position 12 as well.

Now, if there were a Y syllable in every odd-number position in the chain (1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11), there would be a pattern of strict alternation between light and heavy, and my ‘mountains’ would have ‘gone into labour to give birth to a derisory mouse’. For in that case, obviously, the rhythm of these lines could be described without qualification as ‘iambic’, which is how they have been labelled by every classicist since antiquity.

Closer inspection, however, shows that the alternation is not perfect. Heavy syllables occur commonly in three of the six odd-number positions, namely 1, 5 and 9. It is common for the final even-number syllable (12) to be light. Not one of the fourteen lines in the chosen passage from Oedipus at Colonus has light syllables in all the odd-number positions; and the total number of heavy syllables per line in the sample ranges from six to eight (in theory, there could be as few as five and as many as nine). Most striking of all, every single line in the sample opens with two heavy syllables, while seven of them end with a light syllable. The movement of the Greek lines could hardly be more different from that of the English metre usually known as the ‘iambic pentameter’, especially when it is deployed in a rhyming couplet:

The skilful Nymph reviews her Force with Care;
Let Spades be Trumps, she said, and Trumps they were.

On the other hand, binary alternation of X and Y syllables is clearly the norm; and there is not (and apparently may never be) a heavy syllable in three of the six odd-number positions, namely 3, 7 and 11. If rhythm in AG verse is no more than a product of the sequencing of heavy and light syllables, then the rhythm of the AG blank-verse line would seem to be entirely regular. There would be no ‘inbuilt’ source of rhythmic variety of the kind that was shown to exist in the French alexandrine and the Italian hendecasyllable (see in particular pp. 18–21 above). And since it is good practice to reduce any kind of marking to a minimum, and since the specific position of any X syllable in the chain of twelve is of no great importance for the binary rhythm, it might seem best to renounce the use of red numerals altogether, or find some other way to differentiate heavy syllables from light in
order to guide the actor when he is studying his part — perhaps one could even fall back on
the long and short dashes placed above the syllables used in traditional scansion! *Iterum
peperunt montes...*

I shall return at the very end of the essay to the subject of other possible sources of
variety in the AG blank-verse line which may prove of importance for the performer, but for
the moment I would like to develop one train of thought based on the fact that the line is in
fact isosyllabic. It always has twelve metrically relevant syllables, while the hemistichs in lines
of Type A and B (more than 75% of the total) must have either five or seven syllables (and
even if there is no caesura in my usage of the term, there is always a *word*-boundary in one of
the positions where the orthodox *phrase*-boundary would fall). This argues that both lines
and half-lines are perceived as units by virtue of their length rather than by any prescribed
rhythm or change of rhythm (as in the cadence of a hexameter).

It was noted above (p. 19) that in both the French and Italian metres it is very rare to
find a ‘free’ X syllable in the position immediately before the ‘compulsory’ X syllable in the
rhyme word or in the word followed by the caesura, for the reason that strong or stressed
syllables in those positions would ‘interfere’ with the cadence marking the end of the unit or
sub-unit. We have just seen that the AG line *must* have light syllables in positions 3, 7 and 11.
It seems plausible that these obligatory light syllables serve to isolate and enhance the status
of the compulsory heavy syllables that precede them, i.e. 2, 6 and 10. xxxvii

It is therefore possible that the three heavy syllables in positions 2, 6 and 10 should
be regarded as crucial to the integrity of the line as an isosyllabic unit. In metaphorical terms,
they would have the status of weight-bearing columns in an arcade, while the heavy syllables
in the *other* even-number positions (4, 8 and, optionally, 12) could be compared to pilasters
that continue the pattern of the arches but are not strictly functional. (On this analogy, any
optional heavy syllables in positions 1, 5 and 9 would be like tall statues placed in the voids
and disturbing the pattern of vertical accents.) And if that were the case, one could argue
that the actor should be helped to ‘feel’ the underlying structure of the line, by reminding
him each time where the second, sixth and tenth syllables come in the chain through the
insertion of just three red superscript numerals, as in following example. Have the mountains
given birth for a third time? Are we approaching a *trimeter*?

αὐτός 2 τε  χώρα 3 θ’ ἦ 4 δε  πρόσπολοι 5 τε  σοι

‘To make an end is to make a beginning’

In my first empirical analysis of the 1259 lines of blank verse (iambic trimeters or iambic
dodecasyllabics) in *Oedipus at Colonus*, I concentrated my attention almost exclusively on the
relationship between the units of syntax and the units of metre and did not look closely or
consistently at the distribution of heavy and light syllables in all the lines. (See the remarks on
p. 26.)

By the time I come to do further work on rhythm in the play (in so far as rhythm is
conceived as the product of numerically regulated variations in syllable weight), my
conclusions and formulations will have been modified by reactions to this essay from long-
suffering classicist friends and by what I shall have taken on board from a (deliberately
delayed) reading of the acknowledged experts in the field. But when I feel able to speak with
greater confidence, and to back up my assertions with detailed quantitative evidence about
relative frequencies in the whole play, I shall still want to be of assistance to *performers* while
they are in the phase of studying their parts and developing their interpretations, and I shall
want to simplify my findings and, where necessary, make them visual in print-outs. By way of conclusion, therefore, I shall offer three further, alternative or complementary displays — relating now to rhythm — which are intended to help actors of different kinds who might be lured into accepting the role of Oedipus. The information they convey may have to be corrected in the light of experience, but the displays can still stand as examples of the kind of devices through which general theory and contextual information can be channelled and brought to bear on practice in the theatre.

The first version is minimalist. It is intended to help a pragmatist, rather than a perfectionist (probably a native Greek, intent on the ‘virtues of the Market Place’), someone who will have felt immediately at home with the ‘free-verse’ layout offered above and also with the earlier displays showing enjambments and other forms of dissidence between metre and syntax. His instinct, so to speak, will be to let the ‘family likeness’ between the lines speak for itself and to dress each ‘child’ differently in such a way as to emphasise its individuality.

If he is a Greek, he will almost certainly interpret the written tonic accents as he would in MG (i.e. as marks of light dynamic stress), and will need to be made conscious of the position of what I have just called the three ‘weight-bearing’ heavy syllables in the chain: the positions of 2, 6 and 10 will therefore be shown by superscript numerals. He will also need to be aware of the recognised, life-giving deviations from the norm. So, heavy syllables in positions 1, 5 and 9 will be shown by extra superscript numerals; a light syllable in the final position will be shown by using a smaller point-size for the whole of the last word; and a ‘triplet substitution’ will be shown by printing the syllables in blue. His mark-up of the key features of the quantitative rhythm would look something like this (I print only the first seven lines to give the idea):

 quiero a dos de, donde he pensado. pero tu removio
αφονι αυ βάφαις καυγός, άσπερ αφωνι πατρί.
Χωρείτε, καθι μη τετμέντε, άλλε ἐκτεμενε με
αυτόν τὸν ἱερόν τῷ βον ἐξερεθεν, ἵνα
μοί το άν δοι τόδε τῇ δέ κρυφθαι νερων φλοιοι.
τῇ δε, τῇ δε βατε τῇ δε γαώ με απει
Ἐν μης οι πομπὸς ἥ τε νεφέραι θέκος.

The second layout goes to the opposite extreme. It is intended to provide help for a formalist, probably an Anglo-Saxon classicist with good knowledge of AG, who will be more comfortable in School than in the Market, and whose highest priority will be to convey the metrical structure of the verse. He will be trying, so to speak, to bring out the ‘family likeness’ in every line by dressing all the ‘siblings’ in the same school uniform.

He will be inclined to signal every line-end by a pause of appropriate duration, and he will probably treat the caesura in the same spirit (for him, there must by definition be a caesura in every line). He will call the heavy syllables ‘long’, as the ancients did; and if he has the courage of his convictions, he ought to practice his lines until he is able to deliver them to the beat of a metronome, set at quaver = 140, in such a way that every long syllable is treated like a crotchet with the duration of two quavers. (Of course, such an exercise would be for training purposes only, or for a preliminary warm-up in the theatre.) In all probability, he will ignore the written accents entirely and opt to make an iambic pulse audible by giving dynamic stress to all the even-number syllables, withholding stress from all the other
positions. In order to guide him in his preparations, therefore, the passage might be marked up more heavily, like this (I give the last seven lines only):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ὦ φῶς} & \quad \text{ἀφεγγές} // \quad \text{πρὸς σθε} ποi ζηθότω 10 \quad \text{ἐμόνι}, \\
\text{νῦν δ’ ἐξ’ ἱστόν} & \quad \text{ου} // \quad \text{τοῖς μόνο} ἀπ’ τεταὶ 10 \quad \text{δέμας}. \\
\text{ἤδη} & \quad \text{γὰρ ἕρ} πω // \quad \text{τὸν} τελευταὶ 10 \quad \text{δίον} \\
\text{κρύψων} & \quad \text{παρ’ Λύδιν}. // \quad \text{ἀλά, φίλ’ τατε} 10 \quad \text{ξένων}, \\
\text{αὐτός} & \quad \text{τε χώρα θ’ ἤδε} // \quad \text{πρόσ} πολοί 10 \quad \text{τε οοί} \\
\text{εὐδαίμονες} & \quad \text{γένοισθε}, // \quad \text{κατ} 7 \quad \text{εὐπραξία} 10 \quad \text{έξι}. \\
\text{κρύψων} & \quad \text{παρ’ Λύδιν}. // \quad \text{ἀλά}, φίλ’ τατε} 10 \quad \text{ξένων}, \\
\text{αὐτός} & \quad \text{τε χώρα θ’ ἤδε} // \quad \text{πρόσ} πολοί 10 \quad \text{τε οοί} \\
\text{εὐδαίμονες} & \quad \text{γένοισθε}, // \quad \text{κατ} 7 \quad \text{εὐπραξία} 10 \quad \text{έξι}. \\
\end{align*}
\]

There has, of course, been an element of caricature in the last two paragraphs, where the difference between the two actors and the two approaches has been exaggerated with a view to setting up a thesis and its antithesis. It needs to be stressed that both these imaginary actors — whether they give priority to School or to Market — will believe themselves to be upholding ‘virtues of the Theatre’, the one insisting that a play in verse is the product of art, not nature, and that its special status must be made clear by a special kind of declamation, the other insisting that, while poetry is indeed a case apart, its rhythms must always be based on the ‘speech of living men’.

It will be clear from everything I have written that I am hoping to find an actor of a third kind who will join me in the pursuit of a synthesis, someone who accepts the need for intelligent compromise. He will not be embarrassed by imprecise phrases like ‘best practice’, or ‘easy commerce of the old and the new’. He will want to achieve all three kinds of virtutes dicendi. Annotations for his use would be sparser and more flexible; and almost all of them would be intended to help him achieve a balance between metre and meaning, between norm and variation.

He would probably need the information already encoded in the first of the two new mark-ups just provided, to ensure that he is aware of the all-pervasive, quantitative rhythmic pattern inscribed in the words, and to ensure that he notices, and tries to exploit, the limited sources of variety allowed by the metre.

I will probably try to devise some way of calling attention to the heavy syllables which contain long vowels, or diphthongs, because at the impressionistic level at which I am prepared to assess the ‘weight’ or ‘quantity’ of any English word, there is a hugely important difference in effect between syllables that used to be called ‘long by nature’ and those that are ‘long by convention/position’. One would like, for example, to be able to highlight the fact that, in the chosen passage from Oedipus at Colonus, not only are all the first syllables heavy, but that eleven out of fourteen contain either a long vowel or a diphthong.

With this revival of the ancient distinction between ‘nature’ and ‘convention’, the mountains may seem to have produced a third mouse; but the travails of birth are not over yet. If the actor is willing to adopt the compromise pronunciation which I have come to prefer (i.e. if he follows the recommendations for AG Greek prose endorsed by Professors Allen and Horrocks), he will not have to guard against the danger of monotony, because each successive line will sound subtly different from its predecessor in point of rhythm. This will happen automatically because, by using the prolatio conveniens, he will be applying light dynamic stress to all the syllables which, in the time of Sophocles, were pronounced at a higher pitch than their neighbours. (It is intriguing to note, in parenthesis, that native-speakers of English and Modern Greek will not thereby be unfaithful to the sound system of
Ancient Greek, because they are accustomed to pronounce all stressed syllables at a higher pitch.)

How will the actor know which syllables to stress? What is the best way of marking up his text? *Nascitur iterum ridiculus mus.* The best system is undoubtedly the one perfected over many centuries by the scholars and editors of Byzantium. The single most useful print-out for the purposes of my ideal actor will be the text in exactly the same form as it was presented at the beginning of the essay — the one showing the unity of the lines (which classicists revere when reading verse aloud) and the *accents* (which classicists, when reading verse aloud, ignore...).

As one used to say in the cinemas of my youth: ‘This is where we came in’. Or as Eliot put it more elegantly: ‘What we call the beginning is often the end’.xxxix

(Ó παιδες, ὥδ’ ἔπεσθ’. ἔγώ γὰρ ἠγεμόνι
σφὼν αὐ τέρας καινός, ὥσπερ σφώ πατρί.
χωρείτε, καὶ μὴ φακίτε, ἀλλ’ ἔκατε με
αὐτὸν τόν ἱερόν τύμβου ἐξενείη, ἵνα
μοῖρ’ ἀνδρὶ τῶδε τῆδε χρυφθῇναι χθονί.
τῆδ’, ὥδε, τῆδε βάτε. τῆδε γὰρ μ’ ἀγει
Ἑμῆς ὁ πομπὸς ἢ τε νερέτα θεὸς.
ω φῶς ἀφεγγές, πρόσθε ποτ’ ἢσθ’ ἐμόν,
νῦν δ’ ἐσχατόν οὐκ ἐπέτει δέμας.
ἢθ’ γὰρ ἔκατω τόν τελευταῖον βίον
χρύσων παρ’ Αἴδην. ἀλλ’ φίλτατε ξένων,
αὐτὸς τε χώρα θ’ ἢδε πρόσπολοι τε σοι
εὐθαῦμοις γένοιος, κἀπ’ εὔπραξία
μέμησθε μου θανόντος εὐτυχεῖς ἅνε
(Sophocles, *Oedipus Coloneus*, lines 1542-55)

Patrick Boyde
16 October 2009
A brief comment on the symbolism of the joint dedication to Stirling Moss and Copernicus. A Formula One racing driver does not become world champion without a vast support team of designers and mechanics, but he does not have to understand anything in detail about what happens under the bonnet or in the transmission of his car, and he will soon tell his team if there is something less than perfect with regard to the handling of the controls. Moreover, the team exists for the sake of the driver and his victory, not the other way round. The point of the first dedication, then, is to emphasise that this essay is one element in a sustained effort to help performers of AG verse in the theatre, and that a performer does not have to understand the metrical minutiae which assisted classical scholars in establishing his text.

Copernicus, for his part, did not have access to any new astronomical data of the kind that would be supplied 150 years after his death through the invention of the telescope. His predecessors had been able to predict complex phenomena such as eclipses of the sun and moon or the movements of Venus and Mars, using a geocentric model of the heavenly bodies which was universally accepted as self-evidently true. His innovation was simply to re-examine the existing data from a different vantage point and to reinterpret the phenomena by asking his readers to allow him to suppose, for the sake of argument, that the earth was not immobile at the centre of the universe but rotated on its axis and revolved round the sun. I hope my classicist friends will be indulgent enough to entertain, for the sake of argument, a similar hypothesis and a similarly unfamiliar ‘projection’ of the phenomena.

It should be noted, however, that the Messenger reports in direct speech nineteen more lines addressed by Oedipus to his daughters after he has left the stage; see lines 1611-19, 1631-5 (addressed to Theseus and daughters jointly), 1640-44. For the definition of ‘comedy’, see Dante, Epistola XIII, 29.


I have long been haunted by the music of a three-part motet by Machaut setting (and enacting) the text ‘Ma fin est mon commencement et mon commencement ma fin’.

Penelope and Nausikaa: Two Plays from Homer’, in The Teaching of Ancient Greek Language and Civilisation (Proceedings of a Conference organised by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute in Nicosia with the support of the Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus and the Council of Europe), Nicosia, 2007, pp. 24–52. I quote the following paragraphs.

“So, what do we mean when we say that a reading aloud — be it of Homer or of Aeschylus — is ‘good’? My own answer is that we must distinguish three sets of criteria, three different ‘virtues in speech’, virtutes dicendi, and that we must demand excellence under all three heads.

I have found it pedagogically convenient to associate the three virtutes dicendi with three buildings or spaces where language is used and assessed. The first is the Διδασκαλεῖον or School. When we studied a language at school, we learned pronunciation, morphology, vocabulary, syntax and, at a later stage, metrics. We had to memorise paradigms, rules, and exceptions to rules. We wrote exercises which were corrected by the teacher. ‘Good’ implied ‘correctness’, not making mistakes, not transgressing.

The second building or space is the Αγορά or Market Place. Here (or in any place where human beings interact in real life) you learn or develop your language skills not by conforming to rules, but by observation, imitation and practice. In the first instance, speaking ‘well’ means understanding what other people want from you or what they are offering. Next, it entails effective communication of your own needs and desires. Later still, speaking ‘well’ implies adopting the speech habits of the community — their intonation and use of idioms and clichés, their ums and ahs, and their body language. It means speaking ‘naturally’, ‘like a native speaker’, and therefore being accepted by the group as one of them.
The third building is the Θέατρον or Theatre, which is to be understood in a special sense as something like the National Theatre or the Comédie Française, that is, as a symbolic Church of High Culture where the classics are performed by professional actors. The language of these canonical texts (Sophocles, Shakespeare, Racine, Goethe) is good not because they conform to rules, or reproduce natural speech faithfully, but because the authors have raised the potentiality of their mother tongue to its highest power. Their works are good because their use of language is original, creative, virtuoso, inexhaustibly varied, unexpected, profound, beautiful. We ordinary mortals are not required to handle language at their level. Our task is to study, understand and enjoy the unique qualities of their writings, and — if we are actors — to use all the resources of our vocal technique to convey — through the way we read aloud — their variety, originality and beauty.

vi I quote another paragraph (prefaced by the accompanying illustrations) from the article cited in the preceding note.

Figures 3 and 4

Figure 3 shows wooden models of the three buildings (all of the same height, be it noted, like the little houses and hotels in the game of Monopoly) and figure 4 shows how the pieces can be assembled — by placing the Market on the School, and the Theatre on the Market — to form a pyramid. In this pyramid all three parts have come together in a higher unity which symbolises some important facts about the relationship between the virtutes dicendi. Full command of a foreign language (the adjective ‘foreign’ here implies a language we have learned artificially as a schoolchild or as an adult) means knowing its grammatical rules, and being able to handle it idiomatically, and having been made aware of its literary potentialities. The reading aloud of a literary text will attract unqualified praise only if the pronunciation is correct, and the phrasing conveys the meaning naturally, and the speaker brings out the beauty, power and nuances of the text. (p. 9).

vii If I seem to labour these points it is because classicists, for obvious reasons, tend to neglect the virtues of the Agora. All too often they seem to me to judge the quality of a reading in the same spirit as Beckmesser responded to Walter’s Prize Song in The Mastersingers of Nuremberg, striking their metaphorical anvils at every false quantity in the performance of a passage in Virgil, while accepting intolerably English intonation patterns and metrical chanting of a totally unnatural kind.

I gather together in this note some apt phrases and a lovely pun which Tom Stoppard puts into the mouth of Housman: ‘He [Kennedy] imputed to the practice of translation into Greek and Latin verse a value which it does not really possess, at least not as an insight into the principles of ancient metre. It stands to reason that you are not likely to discover the laws of metre by composing verses in which you occasionally break those laws because you have not yet discovered them’. ‘... I heard Jowett pronounce ‘akribos’ with the accent on the first syllable, and I thought, “Well! So much for Jowett!”’. With Jebb it was Sophocles. There are places in Jebb’s Sophocles where the responsibility for reading the metre seems to have been handed over to the Gas, Light and Coke Company’, The Invention of Love, pp. 2–3.

Art. cit. in note v, pp. 19–21.

Cf. note i on Copernicus, and the following sentence, unusually eloquent, from the last page of *Vox Graeca* by W. S. Allen: ‘The prevalence and antiquity of a bad habit is no argument for its continuance’ (p. 144).

Before leaving the subject of my conscious anachronism, I will make two more points about the approach. (a) This essay is based on, and limited to, an empirical analysis of all 1259 lines in blank verse in *Oedipus at Colonus*. (b) I have deliberately delayed my study of the acknowledged experts in the field until I have seen what might emerge from an independent examination of the relationship between metre and syntax in these lines, using the very simple categories I found helpful in studying the French alexandrine, as used by Corneille and Racine, or the Italian hendecasyllable, as used by Dante, Ariosto and Tasso. The approach implies, among other things, that I want the actor’s delivery to respect the underlying metrical form, but that I also want it to reflect the intonations and rhythms of what Wordsworth called ‘the language of men’, and to respond (by changes in tone-colour, speed, length of pauses etc.) to the constant variations in mood, register and style from one situation to another, and from one moment to another. (Boyde’s Law, formulated in 2005, states that in the allegedly formulaic hexameters of Homer, there is, on average, one significant shift in register every two and a half lines.)

Wordsworth’s very congenial words are worth quoting in full, in context:

> It is indeed true that the language of the earliest Poets was felt to differ materially from ordinary language, because it was the language of extraordinary occasions; but it was really spoken by men, language which the Poet himself had uttered when he had been affected by the events which he described, or which he had heard uttered by those around him. To this language it is probable that metre of some sort or other was early superadded. This separated the genuine language of Poetry still further from common life, so that whoever read or heard the poems of these earliest Poets felt himself moved in a way in which he had not been accustomed to be moved in real life, and by causes manifestly different from those which acted upon him in real life. This was the great temptation to all the corruptions which have followed: under the protection of this feeling succeeding Poets constructed a phraseology which had one thing, it is true, in common with the genuine language of poetry, namely, that it was not heard in ordinary conversation; that it was unusual. But the first Poets, as I have said, spoke a language which though unusual, was still the language of men. (Wordsworth, *Appendix*, 1802, to the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*).

See p. 29 below and the remarks on metrical relevance apropos of Corneille’s versification in the next section.

The terms are of course purely conventional: the nouns *mystère* and *diadème* are masculine in gender, while the verb *faire* has no gender.

*Énigme* is pronounced as three syllables in ordinary speech, *image* as two. But from the point of view of ‘metrical relevance’, *énigme* has two syllables in this line, while *image* has three.

If the actor were sounding all the *e muets* coherently, it is almost certain that he would make the now old-fashioned liaisons, i.e. he would always sound a final consonant before a vowel at the beginning of the following word where the consonant is now silent in ordinary modern speech.

There are no examples in the passage quoted from *Oedipe*, but I possess a recording of the following line in Racine, where an actor at the Comédie Française in about 1950 makes both liaisons:

> Je vous redemandaig à vos tristes États.

With regard to the pertinence of these remarks to Sophocles, see below, p. 27 and note xxxiv. In the next phase of my enterprise, I intend to look out for, and count, all the ‘licenced substitutions’ in the play, especially those involving proper names. On proper names, cf. Benedick’s thoughts about writing poetry in *Much Ado about Nothing* ‘Leander, the good swimmer, Troilus... and a whole bookful of these quondam carpet-mongers, whose names yet run smoothly in the even road of blank verse...’ (Act V, sc. 2, 31).
On the couplet in French classical drama, see below, p. 12.

To change the analogy: a good listener to good reading of good poetry will attend not to the upper part alone, nor to the accompaniment alone, but to the counterpoint and harmonies of the interacting strands.

Again I have in mind the analogy suggested by my dedication to Copernicus: see note i.

In this faithful reproduction of the text from the Éditions du Seuil, 1963, each line happens to end with a conventional point of punctuation.

Remember that the feminine endings of the second hemistichs in each alternate couplet (lines 3–4, 7–8) do not affect the syllable count; and notice that wherever there is a feminine ending at the end of the first hemistich, it must be followed by a word beginning with a vowel, so that the atonal vowel may be elided or coalesced with the following syllable: in all three examples in this passage (lines 2, 4, 8), as so often, the second hemistich begins with the conjunction et.

What I call ‘unified’ lines are more likely to occur in highly inflected languages, particularly in those like AG and Latin which exhibit a fully developed case system in nouns and adjectives, because any dislocation of the common order of the words in normal speech does not change their semantic/syntactic relationship, and thus the speaker or writer may place his words for expressive or rhythmical purposes with much greater freedom. In the early rehearsals, an actor will constantly find that a noun in the first hemistich, which is apparently self-sufficient, proves to be qualified by an adjective in the second, compelling him to start again and to bind all the words together with his voice until he reaches the end of the clause or phrase (and, of course, this kind of legato phrasing, imposed by means of word order, can and does happen between a noun in the second hemistich and an adjective in the next line: see the discussion of enjambement below).

Capaneus, of course, is another great name in what medieval French authors called the ‘matière de Thèbes’, which Dante knew primarily from Statius’s Thebaid.

Literally: “If Jupiter were to exhaust his smith, from whom in wrath he took the sharp bolt by which I was struck on my last day, or if he were to exhaust, shift after shift, the others in the blackened smithy of Etna, crying ‘Good Vulcan, help, help’, as he did at the battle of Phlegra, and if he were to shoot me down with all his power, still he could not have a joyful revenge.”

The surrounding lines confirm that Dante consciously intended to make his character speak with such defiant bombast. The verbum dicendi (line 51) is ‘gridò’. Virgilio names him as Capaneus (63), identifying him as ‘one of the seven kings who besieged Thebes’ (68–69), and explains that he ‘held God in disdain’ (70), that his bestial anger (‘rabbia’) constitutes his condign torment (65–66), and that he is punished most of all in that his pride (‘superbia’) is unquenched (63–64). Commentators refer helpfully to Dante’s sources in Aeneid 8, 439–53 and Thebaid 10, 904–05.

The conventions are much the same in the two languages, but the concept of metrical relevance is even more important in Italian than in French. A hendecasyllable may contain as many as fifteen syllables, which will be clearly audible in a good reading (and a majority have twelve or thirteen audible syllables). In the second line of the passage, the final vowel of folgore belongs to the same syllable as the opening vowel of aguta, but it is not swallowed or suppressed: there is a glide from one vowel to the next. There is at least one similar coalescence in the remaining lines with the exception of line 8. It may prove relevant later to point out that the two vowels in suo in line 1 and sua in line 8 count as one syllable, metrically speaking, whereas the vowels in cui at the end of the line count as two. Saetti, incidentally, has three syllables, sa-eti-

The record, it is relatively uncommon to find a parola tronca in the position before the caesura in a hendecasyllable of Type A, and relatively common to find it there in Type B. Hence, in purely numerical terms, the lines divide 5 + 6 and 6 + 5, more often than 4 + 7 and 7 + 4. With these qualifications, however, all Type A lines in Dante have the caesura in the same place as all Type A lines in Sophocles.
Such lines are extremely rare in Dante, but there is no difference in the structure of the first ten syllables of the hendecasyllable in any of the three types.

It is this difference in pitch that was indicated by the two main prosodic accents (acute and circumflex), which were used to indicate syllables that began at a higher pitch than unaccented syllables (‘accent’ derives from the Latin ad + cantus, itself a calque translation of the Greek pros + oda, meaning ‘for singing’). The position of the accented syllable may shift in the same word in the inflexion of nouns, adjectives and verb, but the shifts are entirely predictable and are reminiscent of the rules governing the shifts in the dynamic accent of Latin (e.g. Nom. volúntas, Acc. voluntátem).

In this print-out I have not taken account of the analytical complications of recognising two strong syllables in the same word, even though the first syllable of blanchissants is clearly ‘stronger’ than os or the final syllable of semé.

As in traffic lights and railway signals, the colours follow each other in the sequence of the circle of colours, proceeding anticlockwise from red (= Stop) through amber (= Proceed with caution) to green (= Go). To deal with ‘emergency-cases’ only, we might even continue round the circle and use blue to indicate enjambements at the highest possible level. These last will be extremely rare and startling, whereas enjambements at the lowest level (amber) are common and unremarkable. (Typically, a clause will run over into the next line, but there will be an inversion in the word-order or the phrase-order of the hypothetical naturals ratio divendi, with the junction between the transposed words or phrases occurring at the end of the line.) Examples will soon make this clear.

Several senior classicists have gone almost into vapours at the thought of reinstating elided vowels to the text — and pronouncing them — on the grounds that ‘it destroyed the metre’. They are clearly unfamiliar with what happens in Italy. What I am describing and recommending is normal practice in good readings of Italian verse.

It is a curious fact (already noted on p. 15) that the essential metrical features of an AG line of Type B, in which there was a canonical caesura after the seventh syllable and the final syllable was light, can be expressed numerically with extreme economy as 2—6—10, that is, in exactly the same way as an Italian endecasillabo sdrucciol a maiore. In my analyses of Dante’s hendecasyllables, conducted 50 years ago, I used three or four numerals linked by dashes to indicate the position of the stressed syllables in the chain of eleven, and I used to underline one number to indicate that this stressed syllable occurred in the word which preceded the caesura.

Tennyson, who (according to T. S. Eliot) claimed he knew ‘the quantity of every English word, except scissors’, is the great English master of these effects. To see what this entails, it is enough to turn to the third stanza of The Lady of Shalott and notice the deliberate contrast between the weight of the first three lines and the lightness of the next two (the lines offer a lovely example of the rhetorical figure called Energeia). ‘By the margin, willow-veiled, / Slide the heavy barges trailed / By slow horses; and unhailed / The shallop flitteth silken-sailed / Skimming down to Camelot.’ The metre is the same in every line; the stylistic effect is not.

I have smuggled in the reference to the final section of Little Gidding rather flippantly, but I will make amends by quoting more fully from the relevant section in this final note. The ‘spirit’ of these lines (and of Four Quartets as a whole) has ‘hovered over the waters’ of this essay throughout its protracted genesis (cf. ‘Et spiritus Dei ferebatur super aquas’, Genesis 1.2).
What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from. And every phrase
And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
Taking its place to support the others,
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
An easy commerce of the old and the new,
The complete consort dancing together)
Ever phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
Every poem is an epitaph. 

(Little Gidding, V)
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in Sophocles, Corneille and Dante

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Part II

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