

6

Synaesthesia in Sophocles*

CHARLES P. SEGAL

I

The combination of two (or more) different senses into a single metaphor is a recurrent feature of Greek poetic diction at its most brilliant. The poetry of Sophocles is no exception. The purpose of this paper is to call attention to some neglected aspects of Sophocles' "synaesthetic" or "intersensal" imagery, as W. B. Stanford calls it,¹ and thereby to remind us once again of the subtlety and sophistication of Sophocles' art not only as a dramatist, but also as a poet.

The poetic and dramatic effects of synaesthetic imagery work closely together in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The mixture of senses vividly expresses the recurrent concern with the reliability of human knowledge and the problem of man's comprehension of "reality." What man takes to be reality may be in fact a fearful illusion of security in a most insecure world.

The most powerful and perhaps the most important case of synaesthesia in Sophocles occurs in Oedipus' line in the midst of his quarrel with Teiresias (*O.T.* 371): τυφλὸς τὰ τ' ὤτα τὸν τε νοῦν τὰ τ' ὄμματ' εἶ. Like the other synaesthetic passages which we shall discuss later, this verse combines sight and hearing, but it adds to them the general perceptual field implied in *nous*. The synaesthetic figure adds to the effect of violent passion which Oedipus feels, but there is also a powerful dramatic irony at work, for his taunt, as Teiresias points out at once, applies to Oedipus himself (372-373):

σὺ δ' ἄθλιός γε ταῦτ' ὄνειδίζων, ἃ σοὶ
οὐδείς ὄς οὐχὶ τῶνδ' ὄνειδιεῖ τάχα.

* I would like to thank the American Council of Learned Societies for a fellowship for 1974-1975, in the course of which this paper was written.

¹ For the figure and examples see W. B. Stanford, *Greek Metaphor, Studies in Theory and Practice* (Oxford, 1936; reprint 1972) 47-62.

The full degree of irony involved here appears later when Oedipus explains to Jocasta that he fled Corinth in order that he "might not see (*μήποτ' ὀψοίμην*) brought to fulfilment the insults (*δνειδή*) of evil oracles" (796 f.). It is, however, just this exchange of "insults" (*δνειδίξειν*, 372-373) which makes Oedipus "blind" to the truth which Teiresias is here uttering. The theme of vision and nonvision are kept alive in this scene by the emphasis on seeing in Oedipus' reply to Teiresias' words about the "insults" which will soon apply to him (374-375): "You are nurtured by one continual night so that you could harm neither me nor any other who sees the light (*ἄστις φῶς ὄρα*)."

Three synaesthetic images in the play's first two choral odes prepare for and then expand the significance of the synaesthetic figure. In their lamentation over the disasters afflicting the city the chorus in the parode sings of the groan of suppliants and the cry of the united voice of the people as the paean "flashes forth" (186-189):

*παιὰν δὲ λάμ-
πει στονόεσσά τε γῆρως ὀμανλος·
ὦν ὑπερ, ὦ χρυσέα θύγατερ Διός,
εὐῶπα πέμψον ἀλκάν.*

The figure, Stanford says, "combines the idea of a flashing beacon fire with the resounding paean."² The image of "flashing," however, works in a close and complex way with the allusions to destructive fire immediately before and after these lines. In 174-178 the souls of those who have died of the plague are compared, as they flutter off to Hades, to birds fleeing before a terrible fire (175-178):

*. . . ἄπερ εὐπτερον ὄρνιν
κρείσσον ἀμυμιακέτου πυρὸς ὄρμενον
ἀκτὰν πρὸς ἑσπέρου θεοῦ.³*

In the following antistrophe, immediately before the synaesthetic lines of the paean's "flashing," there is another suggestion of light and sound, fire and cry, working together as the women "groan" (*ἐπιστενάχουσι*, 185; cf. *στονόεσσα*, 187) around the altars, to be thought of as kindled with offerings in this crisis for the city. The unusual phrase which describes these altars, *ἀκτὰν παρὰ βῶμιον* (184), recalls the souls' flight "to the shore of the western god," i.e. to Hades, in 176. The combination of sound and fire stresses the ritual aspect of the scene, the impression of voices and flame (188) before the altars of supplication. Thus it underlines the

² *Ibid.* 56. See also J. C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles*, IV, *The Oedipus Tyrannus* (Leiden, 1967) ad OT 186.

³ See Kamerbeek (preceding note) ad OT 174-176 and 176.

desperation of the people and the pressure to find the murderer of Laius. The synaesthetic effect of 186–188 gives the whole scene an eerie, supernatural mood appropriate to the emergence of supernatural forces in the background.

In the next strophe fire, once more in close association with sound, recurs as the chorus utters prayers to avert “Ares the blazingly destructive who . . . attended by shouts (of battle) burns me . . .” (190–192):

Ἄρεά τε τὸν μαλερόν, ὃς . . .
φλέγει με περιβάτος ἀντιάζων.

The “irresistible fire” in the simile of 175–177 has prepared us for this mysterious and destructive divine fire, and the combination of Ares’ ominous “blazing” (φλέγει) and “shout” (περιβάτος) in 192 are a grim answer to the “flashing” of the paean in 186. Ares himself has a fiery quality in his destructive violence since *μαλερός* is always an epithet of fire in Homer and is associated with fire in the tragic poets too.⁴

Turning away from these destructive visions, the chorus invokes more benign deities, gods who have associations with light, brilliance, flashes of fire: Zeus “who wields the power of the fire-bearing lightning” (200–201); “the fire-bearing brilliance of Artemis” (206–207); “shining-visaged, blazing” Dionysus (214). But the earlier sections of the ode have given us little encouragement to think that this divine fire is benign (cf. 176, 192), and the ode ends with a kind of oxymoron which suggests the ambiguous nature of divine power, Ares as τὸν ἀπότιμον ἐν θεοῖς θεόν (215).⁵

The next ode, the first stasimon, closely echoes the synaesthetic imagery of the parode (473–476):

ἔλαμψε γὰρ τοῦ νιφόν-
τος ἀρτίως φανείσα
φάμα Παρνασσοῦ τὸν ἄδη-
λον ἄνδρα πάντ’ ἰχνεύειν.

Since *φάμα* also has a prominent place in the previous ode (158), the two synaesthetic figures are probably to be connected. The dim oracle and obscure report are gradually illuminated by the light of truth, which, however, comes at least in part as violent, destructive fire. In the latter passage, the first stasimon, the synaesthesia is reinforced by the word-play, *φανείσα φάμα* (474–475), and by the contrast between the whiteness of “snowy” Parnassus and the “obscure” criminal (*ἄδηλον*, 475; cf. 497).⁶

⁴ *Iliad* 9.242, 20.316 = 21.375. Aeschylus, *Cho.* 325; Euripides, *Trö.* 1300.

⁵ See the scholion *ad* 215, *ad fin.*: θεῶν γὰρ ἐστὶ τὸ εὐεργετεῖν τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, ὃ δὲ φθείρει καὶ ἀπόλλυσιν.

⁶ Kamerbeek (above, note 2) comments *ad OT* 473–475, “It is as if the oracle is also conveyed by the far visible glitter of snow-capped Parnassus.”

In both the first and the second odes the synaesthesia emphasizes the element of vision, which is, of course, a major theme in the play. In the second ode the “flashing” of the oracle’s report not only sets off the emergence of the “hidden” or “obscure” truth out of the darkness of the seeing/blind Oedipus (cf. 371–375, *supra*), but also leads into the theme of the ambiguity of human knowledge and the unreliability of perception in this ode’s closing antistrophe (498–511). Here another synaesthetic image reinforces the point. Beginning with the divine knowledge of Zeus and Apollo (497–499) and the question of prophetic skill (499–503), the chorus reflects on their dilemma in choosing between Teiresias and Oedipus. They conclude, “I would never agree with those who blame (Oedipus) until I should *see a straight word* (ἴδοιμ’ ὀρθὸν ἔπος, 505). The visual theme is stressed by the description, immediately after, of the Sphinx as it came into Oedipus’ vision (cf. *φανερὰ*, 507), an encounter in which he “was *seen* as wise” (σοφὸς ὤφθη, 509), although, of course, the contest with this “singer” (36, 391, 1199) was one of words, not sight (cf. 392–394).

II

Stanford mentions two other passages in Sophocles where, he argues, synaesthesia has little vividness. He agrees with Lobeck that in these passages the synaesthetic metaphors are to be explained “as catachrestic uses of verbs meaning ‘to see’ or ‘to hear’ for the general sensuous term ‘to perceive’.”⁷ The passages in question are *Trachiniae* 693 and *Philoctetes* 202. I believe that Stanford has underestimated the significance of the figure. A brief reexamination of the contexts will show that the synaesthetic imagery is both poetically alive and thematically relevant.

Trachiniae 693. Deianeira has just described how the tuft of wool with which she anointed Heracles’ robe flared up and disintegrated in the light. Before going on with the details, she says (693–694):

εἶσω δ’ ἀποστείχουσα δέρκομαι φάτιν
ἄφραστον, ἀξύμβλητον ἀνθρώπων μαθεῖν.

The synaesthetic figure is as striking as those cited above from the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. It is of a piece with the rich poetical language characteristic of this play and particularly of this speech (cf. 675–678, 683, 695–704). The synaesthesia has two effects. First it emphasizes the eerie quality of the events now unfolding. The monstrous Centaur and Hydra in the background become more insistent presences. Second, it forms part of an

⁷ Stanford (above, note 1) 51.

inversion of light and darkness which runs throughout the play and is especially prominent here.⁸ The drug is kept locked up in the recesses of the house (*δόμοις* . . . *ἐγκεκλημένον καλῶς*, 578–579; *ἐν μυχοῖς*, 686). It must be kept away from the light (*ἀλαμπές ἡλίου*, 691; cf. 685 f.). When revealed to the “sun’s beam” (*ἀκτῖν’ ἐς ἡλιῶτων*, 697), it shows its destructive force. Later, at the peripety, Kypris, the goddess behind the disaster, is “revealed,” “made clearly visible” as the “soundless agent” (*ἄναυδος φανερά τῶνδ’ ἐφάνη πράκτωρ*, 862–863). This destructiveness of light and sun is a leitmotiv in the play (e.g. 94 ff., 379, 607, 608, 1086, 1104, 1144); and the attention drawn to sight and light by the synaesthesia of 693 both derives strength from and contributes to its effectiveness.

Philoctetes 201. Neoptolemus and the chorus are waiting for Philoctetes to return to his cave in order to put into operation the ruse agreed upon between Odysseus and Neoptolemus in the prologue. The chorus warns their leader to be *silent* since “a sound has appeared” (201–202):

*προφάνη κτύπος,
φωτὸς σύντροφος ὡς τειρομένου <του> . . .*

The juxtaposition of the sound’s “appearance” with *φωτὸς* in the next line (albeit in the meaning “person”) reinforces the synaesthetic effect.

More important, however, the synaesthesia is not an isolated phenomenon in this passage. We may note *ἀχὼ τηλεφανῆς* as the chorus describes Philoctetes’ pitiful cries in 188–189 and the similar *βοᾶ τηλεπὸν ἰωάν* in 216 f.⁹ Less vivid, but probably also involving some mixture of senses is *διάσημα θροεῖ* in 209. Here too the synaesthesia calls attention to the special or unusual context of this sound. On desolate Lemnos there is sound, but no communication. Philoctetes had cried out, but there is no answer, for he is alone on his island. The “far-seen echo” of 189 and the similar expression in 216 stress the quality of desolation. A sound is *heard*, but nothing is *seen*.

Sound is a major theme throughout this section of the play. Odysseus’ warnings about Philoctetes and his deadly bow (45–47, 104–107) have made Neoptolemus and his men alert to the castaway’s approach. All their senses are strained, sight as well as hearing. But what sets the dramatic tension underway is partly that the sounds which they hear are such as to awaken compassion rather than fear.

Though Philoctetes lives in the wild like a shepherd, he plays no

⁸ On the significance of light and dark see my essay, “Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*: Myth, Poetry, and Heroic Values,” *YCS* 25 (1976) 143–145.

⁹ E. Wunder and N. Wecklein, *Sophoclis Tragoediae*, I.i (Leipzig, 1875) note *ad Phil.* 187 the parallel construction in 187, 202, 216 and remark on *τηλεφανῆς*, “. . . nam sensuum vocabula permutat poetarum acumen, ut mox 202 . . . , 216 . . .”

pastoral tunes on a flute (213 f.): his only music is the "terrible shouting" of his pain (προβοῆ . . . δεινόν, 218; cf. also 188–190, 206, 216). His first desire is to hear a human voice: φωνῆς δ' ἀκοῦσαι βούλομαι (225); φωνήσατ', εἴπερ ὡς φίλοι προσήκετε (229); ὦ φίλτατον φώνημα· φεῦ τὸ καὶ λαβεῖν | πρόσφθεγμα τοιοῦδ' ἀνδρός . . . (234 f.). When the promise of friendship held by this renewal of human speech is disappointed, he turns back to the silent rocks and the inarticulate beasts of his deserted island (935 ff., 1146 ff.; cf. 182–185).¹⁰

III

Besides these passages there are three instances of ἰδοῦ, ἴδε used of sounds where Stanford thinks that all visual implication is lost: *Ajax* 870, *Electra* 1410, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1463. "In all these," Stanford remarks, "I think most people will agree that the poets expect no *imaginative* force to be felt in their words . . ." ¹¹ These passages stand on a different level from those discussed above, where the synaesthetic imagery is worked into a rich poetical diction. In the three passages which we are now considering the synaesthetic figure is unquestionably weaker; yet it is not entirely insignificant. It recalls us to the visual aspect of the performance or what Aristotle called ὄψις, the spectacle unfolding on the stage.

The combination of hearing and sight in *Ajax* 870–871, as in the *Philoctetes* passage above, emphasizes the straining of all the senses to locate the hero, sight in 876 and 890, hearing in 886 and 891.¹² Tecmessa cries out when she finds the body, and the chorus "sees" her (894), but not Ajax. The scene, she says, is one deserving of lamentation (αἰάζειν, 904), one of the play's grim puns on the name of the hero. She briefly conveys the visual effect of the sword fixed in the body (906 f.). The chorus blames itself for being "deaf" and "ignorant" (911 f.): ἐγὼ δ' ὁ πάντα κωφός, ὁ πάντ' ἀιδρις where there is perhaps an implication of sight in the root of ἀιδρις (ἰδεῖν). The body is presumably wheeled out on the ekkyklema, but Tecmessa's first words are, "He is not to be seen" (οὔτοι θεατός, 915) as she covers the corpse with her cloak. The discovery of

¹⁰ On the theme of language in the play generally see A. J. Podlecki, "The Power of the Word in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*," *GRBS* 7 (1966) 233–250.

¹¹ Stanford (above, note 1) 51. See also D. Tarant, "Greek Metaphors of Light," *CQ* n.s. 10 (1960) 184: "While in some instances (e.g. Aesch. *Pers.* 395) the combination gives great vividness of effect, in most the general sense of perception appears to be super-seding the proper meaning of the words of sight."

¹² For the importance of sight in the play see E. Schlesinger, "Erhaltung im Unter-gang: Sophokles' Aias als 'pathetische' Tragödie," *Poetica* 3 (1970) 364–367.

Ajax is a kind of negative synaesthesia, balancing the positive synaesthesia of 870–871 (*ἰδοῦ ἰδοῦ,| δοῦπον αὖ κλύω τινά*). There is a doleful blocking of the senses in the silence of the great corpse and the cloak which conceals it from view. We may compare the effect at the very end of the play where sound and sight are grimly conjoined in the silent playing of the “pipes” of the dead hero whose “blowing” produces the visual, not audial, impression of the “black” blood (1411–1413):

ἔτι γὰρ θερμαὶ
σύριγγες ἄνω φουσῶσι μέλαν
μένος.

Electra 1410. The long-awaited deed of matricide is being performed. Orestes and Pylades are inside the palace. Electra strains every sense to ascertain what is happening there. Finally she hears a shout within and asks the chorus to “listen” (*ἀκούετε*, 1406). They reply that they have heard “something not to be heard” that makes them shudder (*ἤκουσ’ ἀνήκουστα . . . ὥστε φρίξαι* 1407–1408). Then we hear Clytaemnestra’s desperate offstage cry for help (1409), to which Electra says in 1410, “Look, someone is crying out,” *ἰδοῦ μάλ’ αὖ θροεῖ τις*. The combination of sound and sight in this line stresses the tension contained in the crucial action whose effects we can hear, but not see. The combination of senses conveys also something of Electra’s intense desire to *perceive* as fully and concretely as she can the action which has been the main goal and the driving force of her life, killing her mother.¹³

The next scene enacts the uncovering of the hidden object, the result of the unseen action whose sounds so stir Electra.¹⁴ Aegisthus asks about news of Orestes’ death; and Electra, in deliberately ambiguous language, plays on the fusion of speech and sight (1453): *οὐκ, ἀλλὰ κάπέδειξαν οὐ λόγῳ μόνον*. Aegisthus would behold the evidence in its visual clarity (*ὥστε κάμφανῆ μαθεῖν*, 1454). But as the hearing of this deed was something “not to be heard,” so the sight of it is equally ambiguous: “an unenviable sight” is Electra’s reply (*μάλ’ ἄζηλος θέα*, 1455). The visual effect is

¹³ This is not the place to discuss Sophocles’ attitude to the matricide in the *Electra*. With a number of recent scholars, I believe that Sophocles meant us to feel its full horror, which is reinforced by the synaesthetic effect and its suggestion of Electra’s eagerness. See in general R. P. Winnington-Ingram, “Sophocles’ *Electra*: Prologomenon to an Interpretation,” *PCPS* n.s. 3 (1954–1955) 20–26; H. F. Johansen, “Die Elektra des Sophokles—Versuch einer neuen Deutung,” *C & M* 25 (1964) 8–32; C. P. Segal, “The *Electra* of Sophocles,” *TAPA* 97 (1966) 474 ff., 501 ff., 519 ff.; J. H. Kells, *Sophocles, Electra* (Cambridge, 1973) 1–12.

¹⁴ On this scene and its themes of vision and concealment see my remarks (preceding note) 527.

underlined by Aegisthus' hypocritical words as he is about to lift the veil (1466-1467):

ὦ Ζεῦ, δέδορκα φάσμι' ἄνευ φθόνου μὲν οὐ
πεπτωκός· εἰ δ' ἔπεστι νέμεσις οὐ λέγω

But when he sees what is beneath he cries, οἴμοι, τί λεύσσω; (1475). The sound/sight mixture of 1410 reinforces this grim horror of what is finally seen, the result of a terrible act which was only heard.

Oedipus at Colonus 1463. Thunder is heard: ἔκτυπεν αἰθήρ (1456). Oedipus asks that Theseus be called (1456 f.). He explains that this "winged lightning of Zeus will bring me at once to Hades" (1460-1461). The chorus then sings (1463 f.):

ἴδε μάλα μέγας ἐρείπεται
κτύπος ἄφατος ὄδε διόβολος.

The effect of the synaesthesia here may be compared with that in *Trachiniae* 693, above. It stresses the strange, supernatural quality of events on and off the stage. Here, of course, that supernatural quality moves in a direction quite the opposite to that of the *Trachiniae*: it is the will of Olympian Zeus becoming manifest, not the workings of archaic, phantasmagoric monsters.

The phrase Διὸς περωτὸς βροντή in 1460-1461 already stresses the interaction of sound and sight. βροντή denotes the primarily *audial* effect of the divine sign (cf. βρέμω, "roar"), whereas περωτὸς suggests the *visual* appearance of the flash in the sky. The visual aspect of the god's call is again stressed immediately after (1466-1467): οὐράνια γὰρ ἀστραπὴ φλέγει πάλιν. The synaesthesia of 1463-1464, ἴδε . . . κτύπος, brings the two senses together with the power of vivid condensation. The oxymoron κτύπος ἄφατος in 1464 is surrounded by words which may denote the visual, as well as the audial, aspect of the thunder-and-lightning as it moves across the sky, viz. ἐρείπεται (1463) and διόβολος (1464).

Here again, as in the other passages which we have examined, the synaesthetic figure is developed in the surrounding context. There is a second flash of lightning, and the chorus cries (1477-1479):

ἔα ἔα, ἰδοῦ μάλ' ἀν-
θις ἀμφίσταται διαπρύσιος ὄτοβος.

Here, as in 1463 f., a sound is "seen" (ἰδοῦ, 1477; cf. ἴδε, 1463). The almost tangible quality of this sound is stressed by the metaphor of its "standing around" the spectators.¹⁵ The next lines then focus on vision

¹⁵ See R. C. Jebb, *Sophocles, The Plays and Fragments*, II. *The Oedipus Coloneus* (Cambridge, 1900) ad 1477.

again with the mysterious light/no light (cf. ἀφεγγές, 1481) of the god's message. The mysterious light recurs near the end of Oedipus' last speech some seventy lines later (1549–1550):

ὦ φῶς ἀφεγγές, πρόσθε πού ποτ' ἦσθ' ἐμόν,
νῦν δ' ἔσχατόν σου τοῦμόν ἀπτεται δέμας.

The paradoxical darkness-in-light is appropriate to the ἀφανής θεός whom the chorus invokes in their next lines (1556). It suits too the mixture of chthonic and Olympian deities in this call to Oedipus (compare 1462–1471 with 1556–1578 and cf. also 1463 f. and 1606). The blind man who once "saw by his voice" (φωνῇ γὰρ ὄρω, 138) now guides the seeing (1520 ff.); vision becomes unearthly as the inward sight, given by the gods, replaces the blind eyes.

Theseus' first words, as he arrives from the hasty summons, continue the mixture of sound and sight (1500 f.):

τίς αὖ παρ' ὑμῶν κινῶς ἠχεῖται κτύπος,
σαφῆς μὲν ἀστῶν, ἐμφανῆς δὲ τοῦ ξένου;

The total effect of these synaesthetic expressions throughout the great finale of this play is to convey the overpowering impression of the numinous atmosphere as it grips and dominates the entire sensory field of the spectators.

To conclude, Sophocles uses synaesthetic imagery, more restrainedly and sparingly than Aeschylus or Pindar, to be sure, but with a fine sense of both verbal and dramatic effectiveness. It is especially important to note how closely the synaesthesia is related to its context. It is not an isolated piece of ornament or verbal coruscation, but forms part of a coherent, self-conscious pattern. It often helps express the recurrent Sophoclean themes of loneliness and the absence of communication, the deceptiveness of language, the mysterious remoteness of the gods, and the uncertainties of human knowledge in a world where reality is often hidden and distorted by appearances.