

# UNCONTAINABLE CONSCIOUSNESS IN SOPHOCLES' *AJAX*

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Sophocles' *Ajax* presents a world possessed by the consciousness of its hero. It is not enough to say that all attention is turned upon him or that the world of the play is preoccupied by him.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the entire play is a series of attempts by one party or another to control Ajax, grasp his intentions, reify his significance and, in short, keep him in place. All of these attempts fail, and so too have efforts by audiences and critics to understand completely Ajax' character. So long as he survives, the play's very contours are contorted to accommodate the turns of the hero's ultimately uncontainable consciousness. Even tragic commonplaces, such as the immovability of the chorus from the stage, are overturned by Ajax' actions. After his death, the drama is taken up with the question of how to finalize the memory and the meaning of Ajax. The question remains open. Ajax always understands himself better than he is understood by anyone else and, in particular, by the audience. Scholars have long acquiesced to the notion of dramatic irony, whereby the audience perceives more than the characters onstage do, but *Ajax* lays out the opposite model. In this play, the hero outpaces the audience in understanding due to the dramatic indeterminacy of Sophocles' portrait. Where can we find an explanation for this mode of characterization? In this paper, I argue that a model can be found in the early theories of Mikhail Bakhtin on the novel in general and Dostoevsky in particular.

In 1929, Bakhtin published a monograph on Dostoevsky, his first major work. More than thirty years later, after an intervening period of exile and obscurity, Bakhtin expanded and republished the work. This later version, to which I will refer throughout this paper, is a difficult book to classify: it is about Dostoevsky, but also about existence, faith, communication, and death, among other things. Although Bakhtin uses the term "dialogic" in this work and declares "polyphony" the "artistic key" to Dostoevsky's novels,<sup>2</sup> he does not present the concept of dialogism with all its implications for

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<sup>1</sup> This is what Knox, B. M. W., "The *Ajax* of Sophocles", *HSCP* 65 (1961), 1-37, argues: "Ajax, dead and alive, imposes his gigantic personality on every turn of the action, every speech. When he is not speaking himself, he is being talked about; there is only one subject discussed in this play, whether the speaker is Ajax, Athena, Odysseus, Tecmessa, the messenger, Teucer, Menelaus, or Agamemnon—and the subject is Ajax" (1-2). Knox stops short of seeing Ajax' awareness of his own significance. This awareness makes him more than just a subject of discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Bakhtin, M. M., Emerson, C., trans., *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis 1984), 17; henceforth to be referred to as *PDP*.

discourse and genre until his later writings. Bakhtin's statement in this work has much more to do with his view of consciousness. One element of Bakhtin's theory that is especially relevant to *Ajax* is his treatment of consciousness (in Dostoevsky) as the facility to experience, process, and react to events:

Dostoevsky frequently interrupts, but he never drowns out the other's voice, never finishes it off "from himself," that is, out of his own and alien consciousness. This is, so to speak, the activity of God in His relation to man, a relation allowing man to reveal himself utterly (in his immanent development), to judge himself, to refute himself (*PDP* 285).

Dostoevsky, for Bakhtin, distinguishes himself from other authors in allowing his heroes full consciousness.

Some of the qualities that Bakhtin attributes to Dostoevsky's works correspond closely to the qualities Bernard Knox perceives in Sophocles' plays: the centrality of the hero, his moral recalcitrance, his refusal to be assimilated into the world around him.<sup>3</sup> But Knox' *The Heroic Temper* does not probe as deeply as Bakhtin's literary philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Knox accurately describes aspects of Sophoclean characterization, but does not illuminate its elusive core. He acknowledges the heroes' "strange success"<sup>5</sup> but does not tell us in what it consists. Bakhtin shows something about Dostoevsky as well as something about the human condition—that individuals strive for release from systems that seek to quantify and define them. In guidelines that Bakhtin wrote when expanding his book on Dostoevsky, he reminded himself that "[a]s major heroes Dostoevsky portrays only those people in his work with whom argument has not yet ended (for indeed it is not yet ended in the world)" (*PDP* 284). This tendency towards unending argument is found in all of Sophocles' heroes, but I will discuss only *Ajax* in this paper. *Ajax*, one of Sophocles' earlier plays, offers a stark view of the hero's uncontainable consciousness and the indeterminacy of his character.

Bakhtin's interpretation of the heroes in Dostoevsky's novels can be brought to bear directly on Sophocles' *Ajax* because Dostoevsky's protagonists are similarly

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<sup>3</sup> Knox, B. M. W., *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Berkeley 1966), 1-61.

<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin's project was wholly broad and ambitious. Emerson (1984), xxxi, writes of Bakhtin's lifelong "philosophical project...[that] constituted a basically religious quest into the nature of the Word." The truth of this statement is perhaps best illustrated by a passage from Bakhtin's notes: "Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, in the world symposium" (*PDP* 293).

<sup>5</sup> Knox (1966), 6: "Sophocles pits against limitations on human stature great individuals who refuse to accept those limitations, and in their failure achieve a strange success."

dominant and, for Bakhtin, similarly impossible to understand or objectify fully. His reading of the protagonist of *Notes from the Underground* is instructive:

The hero from the underground eavesdrops on every word someone else says about him, he looks at himself, as it were, in all the mirrors of other people's consciousnesses, he knows all the possible refractions of his image in those mirrors... But he also knows that all these definitions, prejudiced as well as objective, rest in his hands and he cannot finalize them precisely because he himself perceives them; he can go beyond their limits and can thus make them inadequate. He knows that he has the *final word*, and he seeks at whatever cost to retain for himself this final word about himself, the word of his self-consciousness, in order to become in it that which he is not. His consciousness of self lives by its unfinalizability, by its unclosedness and its indeterminacy (*PDP* 53).

Ajax also is intensely preoccupied with how the rest of the world reads him. His anxiety on this matter motivates him to perform his two most significant actions: his attempt to murder the generals Agamemnon and Menelaus (which precedes the play) and his suicide. Yet, in the end, it is not Ajax' acts of violence which keep him from being "finalized," for these are constantly in danger of being appropriated and interpreted at his expense by his community, by the divine world, and by the audience. Rather, Ajax' intentions, decisions, and words expose a gap between the audience's comprehension of him and his comprehension of himself, and keep him from being, in Bakhtin's phrase, "absolutely equal to himself."<sup>6</sup> Ajax is not limited to what the audience sees and hears.

## I. The World Against the Hero

*Ajax* begins with Athena's explication of events. This first takes the form of a monologue addressed to Odysseus, then a dialogue with him, and finally a malicious exhibition of the maddened Ajax. This prologue is exceptional; *Ajax* is Sophocles' only extant play with a divine, explanatory figure in the prologue. Yet this divine presence stops short of presenting the drama through an omniscient lens, for Athena's involvement turns out not to determine of what is to come.<sup>7</sup> Such a determinative perspective would have subordinated that of the hero, as can be seen in certain plays of Euripides, which feature gods whose choices direct the plot. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, for example, Aphrodite spends the prologue explaining the punishments she has devised and predicting their outcome. In the *Bacchae*, Dionysus, like Aphrodite, uses the prologue to

<sup>6</sup> Bakhtin, M. M., Emerson C. and Holquist, M., trans., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin 1981), 34; henceforth to be referred to as *DI*.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Whitman, C. H., *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism* (Cambridge 1966), 69-70: "Athena is a particularly subtle figure... She motivates nothing; she acts through no direct line of events; and the whole latter half of the play is devoted not to a justification of the gods, least of all Athena, who disappears entirely. It is Ajax who is justified, and nothing is said in favor of Athena's apparent "justice.""

discuss the punishment he has in mind and then sees his plans through to completion for the remainder of the play.<sup>8</sup> The human characters in these plays, Phaedra and in the former and Pentheus in the latter, appear ignorant and passive by contrast. There are parallels here with Bakhtin's view of literary works that eschew dialogism:

The total finalizing meaning of the life and death of each character is revealed only in the author's field of vision, and thanks solely to the advantageous "surplus" which that field enjoys over every character, that is, thanks to that which the character cannot himself see or understand (*PDP* 70).

Tragedy as a genre is often thought to offer such a totalizing "field of vision."<sup>9</sup> In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the ignorance of the hero—despite his good intentions and sharp intellect—has been read as a declaration of man's helplessness. The notorious "tragic irony" of this play resides in the distance between the audience's knowledge and that of Oedipus.<sup>10</sup>

There is no such distance from the hero afforded to the audience of Sophocles' *Ajax*. Their foreknowledge of Ajax' suicide (an essential element of the Ajax story in Greek mythology) is matched through much of the play by Ajax' own certainty of his end. Beyond this, the audience follows the progress of Ajax' intent with no help from any external or elevated source: the presence of the divine Athena does not give hints of what is to come, only of what has transpired, and the chorus is generally ignorant and

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Foley, H. P., "The Masque of Dionysus", *TAPhA* 110 (1980), 107-33. Foley aptly labels Dionysus the "stage director" (110) of the *Bacchae* – such is his influence over the plot. Of course, not all of Euripides' divine prologue-speakers have so much control over the action: Apollo and Death in *Alcestis* and Poseidon and Athena in the *Trojan Women* are portrayed more as privileged participants than omnipotent directors. This perhaps has something to do with the fact that they must share the stage with one another.

<sup>9</sup> Bakhtin would have been the first to think so. Indeed, he refused drama the honor of "polyphony" or "dialogism," declaring that "[i]n drama the world must be made from a single piece" (*PDP* 17). I would argue that one of Bakhtin's significant limitations is his insistence on exclusivity. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, he excludes Tolstoy; in *The Dialogic Imagination*, he excludes all of epic. Whether genres that are *not* the novel can produce "polyphonic" works remains a matter of debate. Obviously I think that they can.

<sup>10</sup> The notion of Sophoclean irony was suggested first in 1833 by Connop Thirlwall, who observed, in one instance, that a choral ode allows "the spectator to reflect, how different all is from what it seems" (Thirlwall, C., "On the Irony of Sophocles" in Dawe, R. D., *Sophocles: The Classical Heritage* (New York 1996), 190). Irony, as such, is certainly at work in the first two thirds or so of *Oedipus Rex*, but this interpretation ignores the final part of the play, following Oedipus' discovery of his identity. In this significant portion of the drama, Oedipus' character, choices and knowledge exceed our understanding. He too becomes an exemplum of dramatic indeterminacy rather than irony.

bewildered.<sup>11</sup> The audience, then, is left to depend on its hero in a relationship that is not at all dissimilar to the one Bakhtin describes between the narrator and hero in Dostoevsky's narratives: "the narrator is literally fettered to his hero; he cannot back off from him sufficiently to give a summarizing and integrated image of his deeds and actions...it is from this maximally close, aperspectival point of view that he structures their representation" (*PDP* 225). Sophocles similarly provides a claustrophobically close view of his hero and does not undermine this view with other, better-informed perspectives. This unwillingness to undermine Ajax is illustrated by the degree to which Athena, the immortal speaker of the prologue, disappoints the audience's expectation that she will elucidate the play and its hero, though she appears to promise such elucidation. Her opening speech to Odysseus ends with this statement: "and there is no use any longer in your peering into the gate,/ but rather tell me why you're going to this trouble,/so that you may learn from someone knowledgeable" (11-13).<sup>12</sup> Athena's subsequent comment to Odysseus is in an equally omniscient vein: "I knew all this, Odysseus, and for some time I have gone around to keep watch" (36). She thus attempts from the very start to establish her credentials as an expert witness, so as to define the situation and the hero.

When Athena forces the reluctant Odysseus to view Ajax in his delusional and murderous state, she offers not only answers to Odysseus' questions and an explanation of obscure bits of evidence, but also living proof of her version of events: "but I will even show you this sickness in full view,/so that, having seen it, you can declare it to all the Argives" (66-67). Athena's goal is to "totally quantif[y], measure, and define" Ajax, not only for the benefit of Odysseus, but also in the view of the whole Argive army. It is hard to imagine a character more thoroughly determined and finished than Athena's version of Ajax.<sup>13</sup> Even the meanings of his own words are fixed completely by the goddess, for the delusion that Athena has cast on Ajax causes his own utterances to slip from their intended denotations. When Ajax speaks of honoring Athena "in gratitude for this hunt" (93), the word "hunt" does not carry the meaning that Ajax has assigned to it (his intended hunt of the Greek generals), but instead refers to his recent hunting of livestock, and also to Athena's hunting of him.<sup>14</sup> Bakhtin writes that Dostoevsky's characters "all do furious battle with...definitions of their personality in the mouths of other people"

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Burton, R. W. B., *The Chorus in Sophocles' Tragedies* (Oxford 1980), 6-40, who declares "we shall...find no help from the chorus in understanding the moral issues raised by the play" (7). This is in contrast to choruses in other plays that are positioned at a nearly authorial remove, like the chorus of Sophocles' *Antigone* which sings the famous "Ode to Man", delivers a lecture on the wayward influence of Eros, and scolds both Antigone and Creon for their misjudgments.

<sup>12</sup> Translations of *Ajax* are from Garvie, A. F., ed. and trans., *Sophocles: Ajax* (Warminster 1998), versified and modified for the sake of literal sense and word order.

<sup>13</sup> Athena's observation that Ajax was once great ("Who could have been found to be more prudent than this man [was]/ or better at doing what had to be done?" (119-20)) only serves to redouble her triumph over the power of the gods to crush the likes of him. Cf. Garvie (1998), 135.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Worman, N., "The *Herkos Achaion* Transformed: Character Type and Spatial Meaning in the *Ajax*", *CP* 96 (2001), 228-52, for how these verbal reversals are reinforced by visual ones.

(*PDP* 59). Ajax is forced to do battle with the finalizing words about him that he himself unintentionally utters.

Yet Ajax, with help from Odysseus, challenges the terminating force of Athena's definitions. Odysseus exposes the goddess' small-mindedness through his reluctance to join in her humiliating exposition of Ajax (74, 80, 88, 121-126)<sup>15</sup> and, ultimately, he is the final line of defense in the play that prevents Ajax from being defined and condemned. All of this happens despite the fact that the relationship between Ajax and Odysseus was traditionally portrayed as problematic. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus tells the tale of approaching the shade of Ajax and being rebuffed: "Apart from them all, the spirit of Ajax, son of Telamon, stood at a distance... So I spoke, but he answered me not a word and went his way to Erebus to join the other ghosts of those dead and gone" (11.543-44, 563-64).<sup>16</sup> Ajax and his allies believe that this famous antipathy will guide Odysseus' actions.

Therefore, when Odysseus plays the role of Ajax' defender, it is a great surprise to all who encounter him (including, one expects, the ancient audience), especially in view of Ajax' expectation that Odysseus will be only too happy to observe his destruction (379-82). Even Athena seems taken aback by Odysseus' apparent compassion for her spectacle of humiliation (75-81). The astonishment that Teucer, half-brother to Ajax, expresses to Odysseus ("you have deceived [ἔψευσσας] me greatly in my expectation" [1382]) encapsulates the indeterminate aspect of Odysseus. By behaving honestly and honorably, Odysseus has "deceived" Teucer. The very quality that led to the inherently false reification of Odysseus previously—his tendency to deceive (ψεῦδος)—is ironically the instrument (in Teucer's estimation) of undermining the false quantification of Odysseus. In moving so far beyond the expectations of others and disregarding their easy characterizations, in refusing to "equal himself," Odysseus exhibits the unfinalizability he affirms in Ajax. By viewing Ajax as a "fully valid 'thou'" Odysseus himself becomes, to use Bakhtin's phrase, "another autonomous 'I'" (*PDP* 63). In order to do so, he must reject from Athena's influence, a move that is nowhere anticipated in literature preceding *Ajax*. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus stands by Athena wholeheartedly, and his relationship with her is elsewhere in tragedy portrayed as strong (cf. *Ph.* 134). In *Ajax*, his defiance of Athena is subtle and understated, but powerful nonetheless in showing the limitations of the divinity's authority and a change in literary perspective.<sup>17</sup>

The fact that Sophocles shows the limitations of Athena's influence in order to give autonomy to his hero(es) exemplifies the need for what Bakhtin calls a "revolt" of sorts. And still more revolts are required; further attempts at totalizing definition await

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Garvie (1998), 135, who writes of Odysseus' rejection of Athena's values.

<sup>16</sup> Translation is modified from Murray, A. T., trans., Dimock, G. E., rev., *Homer: Odyssey, Books 1-12* (Cambridge 1995).

<sup>17</sup> That the opening lines of the play, spoken by Athena, seem to "reaffirm in a quite particular way the traditionally close relationship between herself and her favorite", Seale, D., *Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles* (Chicago 1982), 144, only makes more startling the gap that appears between their perspectives, as Athena seems to misjudge her "favorite" and Odysseus distances himself from the worldview of his patron goddess.

Ajax. They are dramatized through two social institutions: prophecy, an arm of Greek religion, and sophistic debate, an instrument of Athenian democracy. These forces are incarnated, respectively, in the messenger who reports Calchas' mantic pronouncements on Ajax' past culpability and present chances at life (748-83) and in the Atridae, who seek at the play's end to discredit Ajax among the Argives (1047-1162, 1226-1317). Calchas' prophecies about Ajax are not incorrect, nor does he seem to intend him harm, but his prophetic intervention is one more finger pointing at Ajax, laying blame for his past and constraining his future. This is prophecy with a reifying edge. The Atridae seek more directly to destroy Ajax and try to use the strength of their political authority and the sophistry of their arguments to condemn him.

Not without insight is Peter Sellars and Robert Auletta's 1987 adaptation of *Ajax*, in which the play is envisioned as a case of martial law with Athena as the judge and jury, Odysseus as an investigative agent, and Menelaus and Agamemnon as a prosecuting team.<sup>18</sup> In this context, Bakhtin's view of Dmitry's investigation and trial in *The Brothers Karamazov* is illuminating:

The investigators, judges, prosecutor, defense attorney, and commission of experts are all equally incapable of approaching the unfinalized and undecided core of Dmitry's personality....They seek and see in him only the factual, *palpable definitiveness* of experiences and actions, and subordinate them to already defined concepts and schemes (*PDP* 62).

Ajax' world, like Dmitry's, is filled with systems that seek to determine who he is and what will become of him. Besides being spied on, defined, and prophesied about, he has also been falsely judged in the competition for Achilles' arms, maddened, and humiliated.

The deficiencies of the Homeric tradition, divine and prophetic oversight, and political hierarchy are all exposed as inadequate to the audience so that Ajax can escape reification. The value of human consciousness, as exemplified by the consciousness of one man, is at stake. Bakhtin writes of a character who perceives the threat of becoming "something totally quantified, measured, and defined to the last detail" (*PDP* 58). Perceiving the "falseness of such an approach," the hero revolts:

The serious and deeper meaning of this revolt might be expressed this way: a living human being cannot be turned into the voiceless object of some secondhand, finalizing cognitive process. *In a human being there is*

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<sup>18</sup> Rose P., "Historicizing Sophocles' *Ajax*", 59-90, in Goff, B., ed., *History, Tragedy, Theory: Dialogues on Athenian Drama* (Austin 1995), 65-66, perceives a somewhat different courtroom metaphor at work with Sophocles himself as "a brilliant trial lawyer in an apparently open-and-shut murder case" into which "a few mitigating elements are unobtrusively slipped in" which eventually "culminate in a crescendo of defense." This version of events underestimates Ajax' role in his own defense, but points to the overarching threat in the play of presumed condemnation. Knox (1961), 7, aptly labels Athena a "minister of justice."

*always something that only he himself can reveal, in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalizing secondhand definition (PDP 58, Bakhtin's emphasis).*

With this perspective in mind, let us examine the nature of Ajax' revolt.

## II. The Hero Against the World

Peter Rose writes that Ajax "faces the total obliteration of the basis of his identity."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, *Ajax* begins and ends with the forces that seek to reify its hero: delusion at the start and dishonor after death. (Death is, for Bakhtin, the ultimate form of reification [*PDP* 73].) The delusion causes Ajax, according to the account of his concubine, Tecmessa, to converse with a shade (301-2), but, as the audience already knows, the shadow that truly haunts Ajax is the "Ajax" that Athena has constructed, the one who pronounced his words but spoke Athena's meanings, rather like the "double" portrayed in an early work of Dostoevsky, who follows the protagonist around, aping his tone, movements, and style. When Ajax regains sanity, he must reckon with how he has been made into a double of himself, one that disgusts him. Bakhtin writes of this painful recognition in Dostoevsky's fiction:

He forces his heroes to recognize themselves, their idea, their own words, their orientation, their gesture in another person, in whom all these phenomena change their integrated and ultimate meaning and take on a different sound, the sound of parody and ridicule (*PDP* 217).

Ajax is compelled to recognize words and gestures that are nominally his made foreign or *other* through a sinister ventriloquism: "Alas, the laughter! How insulted I have been!" (367). Sophocles (as Dostoevsky in his later works) has no need for another individual, a true double, to show the "dramatized crisis of [his hero's] self-consciousness" (*PDP* 217). Parody and ridicule are pronounced through Ajax' own ravings.

When Ajax re-enters the scene, he must reckon with an environment that is keenly antagonistic toward him on both the human level and the divine:

For I no longer deserve to look for any help to the race of gods or of men who live but for a day. Rather, the mighty goddess, daughter of Zeus, tortures me to destruction...And the whole army would murder me with sword in hand (397-403, 408-9).

Ajax is immersed in a crisis with his world in every sense: his entire society either advances menacingly or, in the case of his chorus of sailors and his concubine, assails him with entreaties for protection: "on you does my entire salvation depend. Be mindful even of me" (519-20). In Bakhtinian terms, it is entirely appropriate for a character whose consciousness is being fully explored to exist in such demanding surroundings:

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<sup>19</sup> Rose (1995), 77.

Not a single element in this atmosphere can be neutral: everything must touch the *character* to the quick, provoke him, interrogate him, even polemicize with him and taunt him; everything must be directed toward the hero himself, turned toward him, everything must make itself felt as *discourse about someone actually present*, as the word of a “second” and not of a “third” person (*PDP* 64, Bakhtin’s emphasis).

In terms of Greek tragedy, Ajax’ words are delivered at this point with great emotional impact: they are sung in a lament called a *kommos*, a song of anguish that is exchanged between the grief-stricken protagonist and the chorus. That the chorus only responds to his lyrics in spoken iambs increases the impression of his pain and isolation. The extent to which this lament demonstrates the depth of Ajax’ crisis is communicated in several additional ways. First, the audience hears of Ajax’ previous view of lamentation from Tecmessa:

And straightaway he broke out into painful lamentations,  
 which I had never heard from him before.  
 For he always used to explain that such laments  
 were the mark of a bad and dejected man;  
 rather, without any sound of shrill wailing  
 he used to utter low moans, bellowing like a bull (317-22).

From this portrait it is understood that Ajax is confronting a catastrophe of self. His clash with the world has upset the tenets of his character and released him from his own standards. The result is a man, previously a fierce, animalistic fighter (“bellowing like a bull”),<sup>20</sup> whose self-consciousness is now bursting forth into the world, fully articulate in the language of lament.

Notwithstanding the mild admonishments of the chorus (386) and the long and thoughtful petition of Tecmessa (485-524), the figures that Ajax argues with exist essentially within his imagination and are relevant insofar as they refract his

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<sup>20</sup> As Segal, C., *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles* (Cambridge 1981), 129, points out, Ajax’ whole experience with madness has brought him deeply into the world of beasts: “in his madness Ajax not only confuses beasts with men but also enters the beast world.” Yet the experience of mingling with beasts has initiated an unexpected shift in his character, displacing the heroic sort of bestial fierceness with a very verbal kind of consciousness. In this reading, I explicitly disagree with Segal (1981), 134, who misreads line 322 as meaning that Ajax is *presently* “roaring like a bull”, a reading utterly at odds with Tecmessa’s continued use of the imperfect tense to denote a description of Ajax’ *past* behavior. I also depart here from Garvie (1998), 155, who does not misread the line but does, along with Segal, interpret Ajax’ loss of a “bull-like roar” with a loss of language. This “bull-like roar” strikes me as starkly inarticulate by comparison to the eloquence of Ajax’ four speeches in the play; this is in fact the first time in literary history that Ajax is given such verbal fluency (cf. Pindar, *Nem.* 8.24, who labels Ajax “ineloquent” [ἄγλωσσον]).

consciousness. Even the physical danger of his situation absorbs him only inasmuch as it signifies society's ridicule ("they laugh at me because they have escaped,/ not with *my* consent" [454-55]).<sup>21</sup> When he considers various escape-routes from his dilemma, he does so in the structure of an argument with himself, with each alternative voicing the viewpoint of others, including the gods, the army, the environment itself, his father, and his enemies:

And now what should I do? I who am clearly hated by the gods, and whom the Greek army loathes, and whom all these Trojan plains detest.  
Am I to cross the Aegean sea for home, leaving my station where the ships are anchored and the Atridae all alone?  
Then what countenance shall I show to my father, Telamon, when I appear? How will he ever tolerate looking upon me, appearing naked of the prizes of valor, for which he himself gained the great crown of glory? To do this would be unbearable.  
But then should I go to the Trojan ramparts, fighting one and one and performing some benefit until I finally die? But, by doing thus, I would doubtlessly give pleasure to the Atridae. This cannot be.  
Some other way must be sought out, by which I can prove to my aged father I was not born from him a coward in nature (457-72).

Each external perspective is layered with his own, giving his words the "double-voiced" quality that Bakhtin has ascribed to an interior monologue of Raskolnikov, the hero of *Crime and Punishment*:

...all these future major characters of the novel are already reflected here in Raskolnikov's consciousness, they have entered into a thoroughly dialogized interior monologue, entered with their own "truths," with their own positions in life, and Raskolnikov has entered into a fundamental and intense interior dialogue with them, a dialogue of ultimate questions and ultimate life decisions. From the very beginning he already knows everything, takes everything into account, anticipates everything. He has already entered into dialogic contact with the whole of life surrounding him (*PDP* 74).

Ajax too anticipates every option and objection. There is the phase of his argument in which he plays out his predicament from the point of view of the gods and the entire army, a subsequent phase that deals with his father's perspective and expectations, a confrontation with the Atridae, and finally a return to his thoughts of his father, which get the closest to the core issue of self with which Ajax is wracked. Indeed, much of Ajax' anxiety regarding his identity is expressed as anxiety over his father's past (434-440) versus his present predicament and, later, his present predicament versus his son's future ("my son, may you be more fortunate than your father, but in other respects like him")

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Seale (1982), 153: "He sees himself as an object of sight, pointing repeatedly to the spectacle of his humiliation."

(550-51)).<sup>22</sup> Ajax views both his father and son as reflections of himself.<sup>23</sup> The absence of his father and muteness of his son only deepen his engagement with his imagined, reflective images of himself in them.

Ajax is generally concerned with how others affect or determine his identity. His view of all his relationships and hardships is haunted by this preoccupation, which finds expression in his punning interpretation of his own cry “αἰαῖ”: “Aiai! Who would have thought that my name would/ so correspond to my misfortunes?” (430-31). Thus each bit of Ajax’ social and linguistic environment is drawn into his overwrought consciousness. The world, from the point of view of Ajax, is significant only insofar as it signifies something about himself. In this way, Ajax is well-described in Bakhtin’s account of the dialogic hero:

Consequently those elements out of which the hero’s image is composed are not features of reality—features of the hero himself or of his everyday surroundings—but rather the *significance* of these features for the *hero himself*, for his self-consciousness. All the stable and objective qualities of a hero—his social position, the degree to which he is sociology or characterologically typical, his habitus, his spiritual profile and even his very physical appearance—that is, everything that usually serves an author in creating a fixed and stable image of the hero, ‘who he is,’ becomes in Dostoevsky the object of the hero’s own introspection, the subject of his self-consciousness (*PDP* 48, Bakhtin’s emphasis).

Although it is rarely recognized, Ajax’ penchant for introspection is one of his most constant and compelling characteristics.<sup>24</sup> The result of Ajax’ introspection and arguments is his decision to commit suicide. When Ajax exits at line 595, his mind is apparently made up and his character appears to have hardened through firm resolution. This is the claim he makes to the entreating Tecmessa: “you seem to me to be thinking foolishly, if even now you have it in mind to school my character” (594-95). Here is a moment at which Ajax appears “absolutely equal to himself.” His character (ἦθος), decisions, and forthcoming suicide all seem determined and clear to the audience.

But this is not the end for Ajax. Rather, a sort of sea-change overtakes him. Before the audience’s eyes, Ajax’ character slips from their grasp, and indeed from that of his compatriots when he delivers the soliloquy widely known as the “deception speech.” There is no indication of what has altered Ajax, but when he re-enters the stage at the midpoint of the play, it is clear that he has entered a liminal space, a moment of strange peace and resolve that lies between his tumultuous past and suicidal future. Bakhtin writes that Dostoevsky “always represents a person *on the threshold* of a final

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Winnington-Ingram, R. P., *Sophocles: An Interpretation* (Cambridge 1980), 30-31.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Seale (1982), 155-56.

<sup>24</sup> This aspect of Ajax is usually more pejoratively referred to as self-absorption, as in Seale (1982), 153. Knox (1961), 12, seems to touch on the introspective aspect of Ajax when he remarks that when delivering the “deception speech,” Ajax is “talking to himself.”

decision, at a moment of *crisis*, at an unfinalizable—and *unpredeterminable*—turning point for his soul” (*PDP* 61, Bakhtin’s emphasis). Such a “threshold” moment has befallen Ajax. There appears a “gap between his authentic essence and its external manifestation” (*DI* 34) that restores to Ajax the capability of defining himself. His own knowledge of himself exceeds ours. For, in a turn of events that has long fascinated and baffled critics,<sup>25</sup> Ajax reports that he has changed his mind. He declares that he will yield to the gods, to fate, and even to the loathsome Atridae, claiming that he now understands that all things change with time:

Therefore I should know in the future to yield  
to the gods, and we will learn to respect the sons of Atreus.  
They are the rulers, so it is necessary to yield. How could it be otherwise?  
For even things that are terrible and strongest  
bow down to what is held in honor: there is the snow-tracking  
winters that give way to summer with its lovely fruits.  
The eternal cycling of night withdraws  
for day with its white horses to kindle its light.  
The breath of terrible winds puts to sleep  
the groaning sea. And even omnipotent sleep  
frees that which it has bound, nor does it hold its catch forever.  
How then shall I not learn to be of sound mind?  
I shall (666-78).

His speech seems to express a renunciation of his previous will to commit suicide. It suggests that he will return to his previous role as protector of Tecmessa, his son, and his soldiers, who are assured by the calm authority with which his lines are invested. But whence arises this authority? Certainly it is not drawn from his function as military leader or from any strength previously associated with Ajax, who is known in the *Iliad* as man of few and blunt words. Rather his new authority springs from a sort of poetic wisdom that radiates from his language:

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<sup>25</sup> No consensus has been reached on how to interpret this speech. The issue is divided between the idea that Ajax is honest but misunderstood and the view that deliberate deception is involved. Bowra, C. M., *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford 1944), Welcker, F. G., “Ueber den Aias des Sophokles”, in *Kleine Schriften Zur Griechische Literaturgeschichte* (Bonn 1845), 264-355, Whitman (1966), Sicherl, M., “The Tragic Issue in Sophocles’ *Ajax*”, *Yale Classical Studies* 25 (1977), 67-98, and Reinhardt, K., Harvey, H. D., trans., *Sophocles* (Oxford 1979), and hold the former position, proposing that Ajax intends to speak the truth but unintentionally speaks in obscure ambiguities. Jebb, R. C., *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments with Critical Notes, Commentary, and Translation in English Prose, Vol. 1-7* (Cambridge 1889-1908) and Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, T. von, *Die Dramatische Technik des Sophokles* (Berlin 1917) argue for the latter position, that the speech is straight, deliberate deception. Moore, J., “The Dissembling-speech of *Ajax*”, *YCIS* 25 (1977), 47-66, performs a high-wire act of arguing that Ajax deceives, but does so using “unnatural language” in order to avoid “verbal untruth” (55). This is not an exhaustive account of the vast bibliography on this speech.

Long and immeasurable time reveals  
 all that is obscure and, once brought to light, buries them again.  
 There is nothing that should not be expected, but even a terrible oath  
 and over-strict minds are conquered (646-49).

There is a stark quality of abstraction in most of this speech: it seems to speak *past* other people rather than to them (until the very end of it when he doles out orders [684-691]). Despite the fact that this soliloquy describes the movement of actions and reactions in the world, it lacks the dialogic structure of argument and counterargument apparent in his earlier speeches. This foreclosure of connections to others in his society suggests that Ajax' newly acquired authority is derived from a source other than his previous social role, though the audience does not discover the origin of Ajax' insights or his reasons for stating them. The audience does not even know whether Ajax believes what he is saying. This speech is the epicenter of dramatic indeterminacy in *Ajax*.

No part of the play is more engaged in the greater dilemmas of the drama than this one. For, throughout this speech, Ajax expresses a grievance with the play itself, as opposed to with one of its characters.<sup>26</sup> His descriptions of time and its fluctuations, his acknowledgements of the inevitability of change and the necessity to yield do not apply to him at all.<sup>27</sup> Rather, they describe the play as a whole and reveal its outcome. Ajax is taking issue with events that seek to finalize him, chiefly by defining him posthumously. One instance of revelation comes when Ajax begins a section of rumination by noting that even the institution of enemies is not a stable one: "for I only now understand that/

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<sup>26</sup> This dislocation of tone from the moment and the relevance of Ajax' insights to the whole of the play have often been noticed and variously interpreted by critics. In a recent article, "Weapons and Day's White Horses: The Language of *Ajax*", in De Jong, I. J. F., and Rijksbaron, A., ed., *Sophocles and the Greek Language: Aspects of Diction, Syntax and Pragmatics* (Leiden 2006), 13-23, Buxton, R. G. A. suggests that "there is [in the speech], as one might expect from a prophet, a broader perspective" (19). Buxton attributes this sudden shift in Ajax' perspective to a "[partial] de-coupling of language from character" due to "his extreme *position*" (22-23). This interpretation recalls an argument made by Perrotta, G., *Sofocle* (Milan 1935) that Ajax speaks as a mouthpiece for Sophocles, rather than speaking as a character whose concerns are internal to the play. The view of Sicherl (1977) is similar. Though at first he allows that Ajax has exceptional insight into the world ("[h]e sees his destiny deeply anchored in the law of the world, which applies to mankind as well as to the cosmos, to moral as well as to physical nature" [86]), he ultimately awards this insight to Sophocles, rather than to Ajax himself: "Ajax' speech... is a soliloquy designed by the poet to interpret his hero's fate to the spectators" (89). The argument of Taplin, O., "Yielding to Forethought: Sophocles' *Ajax*", in Bowersock, G. W. et al., ed., *Arktouros: Hellenic Studies Presented to Bernard M. W. Knox on the Occasion of His 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday* (Berlin 1979), 122-29, that Ajax has futuristic insight into the world after his death similarly disconnects Ajax from the temporal and dramatic setting of the speech.

<sup>27</sup> As Vidal-Naquet, P., "Ajax ou la mort du héros", *BAB* 74 (1988), 463-86, 480 has written: "The entire discourse is a description of a world in which Ajax is not able to live" [Tout le discours est une description du monde dans lequel Ajax ne peut pas vivre].

our enemy should only be hated to the extent/ that he will later become a friend" (678-80). This comment does not reflect his own experience directly (all his friends remain friends and enemies remain enemies, insofar as he is concerned), but it corresponds to the experience of the audience, who observes Odysseus' surprisingly compassionate attitude at the start of the play and soon sees his enmity towards Ajax disappear at the end. Further, when Ajax proclaims in his opening sentence that "there is nothing that should be unexpected" (648), he anticipates his half-brother's discovery of Odysseus' unknowability (discussed above), using the same root (ἐλπ-) for "unexpected" (ἄελπτον) that his brother will use for his false "expectation" (ἐλπίδος).

Ultimately, Ajax anticipates the final conflicts of the play. His observations on the power of time, pronounced by a voice not formerly recognizable as his own, are spoken as if applicable to himself, but none of the changes or revelations he promises is fulfilled in a straightforward manner. His words report one thing (his salvation) but allow for the possibility of another (his death):

But in these matters all will be well...  
For I am going to where I must journey, but you do what I tell you,  
and perhaps you may soon learn  
that even if I am unhappy now, I have been saved (684, 690-92).

Is he lying? Or honestly speaking misread truths? The answers to these questions are simply not available to the audience. Ajax' character has taken wing, and no one except him has access to any final elucidation of his consciousness.

In his final speech, just before his suicide, Ajax returns to an openly dialogic tone. This speech and his suicide seem to contradict the intentions expressed in the "deception speech," but neither Ajax nor the play makes any apology for this incongruence. Rather, Ajax opens what Bakhtin might call a "loophole" of consciousness:

The loophole makes all the heroes' self-definitions unstable, the word in them has no hard and fast meaning, and at any moment, like a chameleon, it is ready to change its tone and its ultimate meaning.

The loophole makes the hero ambiguous and elusive even for himself. In order to break through to his self the hero must travel a very long road (*PDP* 234).

Despite the intensity of Ajax' arguments with his friends, family, and enemies, he remains free of their characterizations of him and finally disentangles himself from them altogether. His last speech is not an interface with the particular characters of the play but with gods, space, causation, and reality. After personifying the sword with which he will kill himself ("The killer stands..." [815]), he engages in lengthy requests and prayers to Zeus, Hermes, the avenging Furies, the sun, death, and several significant landscapes in an ascending frenzy of address:

Oh light, oh holy soil of my native Salamis, oh foundation of my father's hearth, and famous Athens, and the race that has grown up with me, these springs and rivers, and the Trojan plains I call on, farewell, my nourishment (859-63).

It is no mistake that Ajax' farewell includes an apostrophe to Athens and the Athenians: he is carrying on an exchange with the audience.<sup>28</sup> The limits of Ajax' engagement are not set by the author at the character's expense. He compels the world to recognize his unfinalized life, even as he paves his way to death. As he fervently addresses the world with "thou," even the audience cannot help but "thou" him back. Bakhtin's discussion of the power of address in Dostoevsky is relevant here:

The element of *address* is essential to every discourse in Dostoevsky, narrative discourse as well as the discourse of the hero. In Dostoevsky's world generally there is nothing merely thing-like, no mere matter, no object—there are only subjects. Therefore there is no word-judgment, no word about an object, no secondhand referential word—there is only the word as address, the word dialogically contacting another word, a word about a word addressed to a word (*PDP* 237).

The frequency of address in Ajax' speeches, particularly this final speech, commands the active participation of everyone and everything called upon.

Ajax' death, an eloquently prefaced suicide, is acutely demonstrative and dynamic. It is what Bakhtin called a "death-act" instead of a "death":

In Dostoevsky's world, strictly speaking, there are no deaths as objectified and organic facts in which a person's responsively active consciousness takes no part; in Dostoevsky's world there are only murders, suicides, and insanity, that is, there are only death-acts, responsively conscious (*PDP* 300).

Bakhtin equates suicide and insanity, but for Ajax these two experiences are sharply opposed. His insanity was imposed. His suicide is his own act of will and is performed according to the dictates of his personality and desires. Although Ajax dies, he is still not finished. His last words before his suicide exemplify how empty he renders the category "last words": "this is the last word Ajax utters to you;/ the rest, I will tell to those down below in Hades" (864-65). His death does not constitute complete closure or finalizability, for he has not finished speaking, questioning, and arguing. Bakhtin writes of death in Dostoevsky as a departure: "The person has departed, having spoken his word, but the word itself remains in the open-ended dialogue" (*PDP* 300). Ajax' words do not stop; his words exceed his life.

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<sup>28</sup> Rose (1995), 70, rightly refers to this as an instance of "interpellation" of the audience, with the intention to "evoke for the Athenian audience a very strong identification with Ajax and his followers."

Homer terminates his version of Ajax in the *Odyssey* with silence, but Sophocles' Ajax does not agree to be silenced. He is not an epic hero according to Bakhtin, for whom "[t]here is not the slightest gap between his authentic essence and its external manifestation" (*DI* 34). Rather, Sophocles' Ajax is a product of the playwright's "multiperspectival presentation" that allows Ajax to "develop...as a fragmented, conflicted image of his epic counterpart."<sup>29</sup> Scholars are not successful in putting together the fragments of Ajax' character, because he is not meant to be made final and complete. Ajax' decisions are not explained, for his words obscure his intentions rather than reveal them. His thoughts are not ours to judge. Far from being the object of dramatic irony, he alone is able to access the knowledge that the audience is compelled to desire, but cannot have. Only Ajax knows Ajax.

Fifth-century Athenian tragedy opened up possibilities not dissimilar to those Bakhtin exclusively granted to the novel, which he calls the "only developing genre," adding "[o]nly that which is itself developing can comprehend development as a process" (*DI* 7). I have argued in this paper that many qualities attributed by Bakhtin to Dostoevsky are equally applicable to Sophocles. Similarly, many of Bakhtin's observations about the novel are not limited to this one form of literature and can offer insight to the dynamics of other genres as well. Greek tragedy, like the novel, was a genre that constantly developed and changed with its time. Accordingly, many tragedies from the fifth century are concerned with the intricacies and conflicts of consciousness.<sup>30</sup> Sophocles made the autonomy of consciousness his subject, as is especially evident in *Ajax*.<sup>31</sup> His hero's fate is circumscribed, but his character is unbound.

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<sup>29</sup> Segal, C., *Sophocles' Tragic World: Divinity, Nature, Society* (Cambridge 1995), 23.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Vernant, J-P., "Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy", in Vernant, J-P. and Vidal-Naquet, P., Lloyd, J., trans., *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York 1990), 31: "the tragic consciousness is born and develops along with tragedy. It is by being expressed in the form of an original literary genre that tragic thought, the tragic world, and tragic man are created."

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Whitman (1966), 64: "For Sophocles the character of the hero is the core. Hence the violent acts of Ajax, though not condoned, are not specifically analyzed; they are left to be what they are, while the man himself creates the drama."