

The Ode on Man in Sophocles' *Antigone*

by *Martin Heidegger*

We read the first chorus from the *Antigone* of Sophocles (lines 332-75). First we listen to the Greek words in order to get some of the sound into our ears. The translation runs:

There is much that is strange, but nothing
that surpasses man in strangeness.

He sets sail on the frothing waters
amid the south winds of winter
tacking through the mountains
and furious chasms of the waves.

He wearies even the noblest
of the gods, the Earth,
indestructible and untiring,
overturning her from year to year,
driving the plows this way and that
with horses.

And man, pondering and plotting,
snares the light-gliding birds
and hunts the beasts of the wilderness
and the native creatures of the sea.

With guile he overpowers the beast
that roams the mountains by night as by day,
he yokes the hirsute neck of the stallion
and the undaunted bull.

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And he has found his way
to the resonance of the word,
and to wind-swift all-understanding,
and to the courage of rule over cities.
He has considered also how to flee
from exposure to the arrows
of unpropitious weather and frost.

Everywhere journeying, inexperienced and without issue,
he comes to nothingness.
Through no flight can he resist
the one assault of death,
even if he has succeeded in cleverly evading
painful sickness.

Clever indeed, mastering
the ways of skill beyond all hope,
he sometimes accomplishes evil,
sometimes achieves brave deeds.
He wends his way between the laws of the earth
and the adjured justice of the gods.
Rising high above his place,
he who for the sake of adventure takes
the nonessent for essent loses
his place in the end.

May such a man never frequent my hearth;
May my mind never share the presumption
of him who does this.

The following commentary is necessarily inadequate, if only because it cannot be built up from the poet's entire work or even from the whole tragedy. Here I shall not be able to go into the choice of readings or the changes that have been made in the text. Our interpretation falls into *three phases*, in each of which we shall consider the whole poem from a different point of view.

In the first phase we shall set forth the intrinsic meaning of the poem, that which sustains the edifice of words and rises above it.

In the second phase we pass through the whole sequence of strophes and antistrophes and delimit the area that is opened up by the poem.

In the third phase we attempt to take our stand in the center