Neurologist Antonio Damasio argues that nature evolved from animal to human consciousness, and human conscience, as a progression from proto-self to core self, plus autobiographical and extended selves (*Feeling* 16–17, 135–37, 230, 310). Even if there is not a single homunculus as *cogito* controlling a Cartesian Theatre within the mind, Damasio finds this humans generate not only a “movie-in-the-brain,” but also the “appearance of an owner and observer for the movie within the movie” (11, 160).¹ He argues that emotions existed in animals, prior to human evolution, but “were entirely unknown to the organisms producing them” (30). Consciousness evolved with humans as nature invented a “rightful owner of each individual life”—through the “apparent self [that] emerges as the feeling of a feeling” (30–31).²

As explored in chapters 1 and 3 here, Dennett and Ramachandran argue, through philosophy and neuroscience, that the individual Self as owner and spectator of the theatre in the mind—or of the movie in the brain—is illusory. Yet, Damasio’s insistence upon the foundation of a nonconscious proto-self in animals, evolving to a conscious core and autobiographical self in humans, from body and emotions to conscience, also bears validity (*Feeling* 22). If the mind’s internal theatre/cinema evolved as nature’s great experiment to know itself feelingly (or as a random game of survival that led eventually to our self-conscious species), then the various ghosts and gods in different human cultures express a further extension of the Self, both illusory and true, knowing a life beyond mortality. The apparent drive toward self-awareness in the evolution of the human species may be just a fortuitous accident or an unlucky sidetrack, rather than the
inherent teleology or etiology of nature itself. But Damasio’s notion that nature invents the “rightful owner of each individual life” with human consciousness as the emergence of a reflective self, through the feeling of feelings beyond animal emotions, also indicates an immortal drive toward higher-order consciousness (or toward God in/as all of nature/culture, becoming aware of its Self). Even if the human Self is a phantom, it may be symptomatic of a material force within nature—a struggle toward the survival and procreation of the fittest to know as well as act. But such super-natural knowledge also becomes unbearable in many human beings and thus shielded by various masks of Self, by external spectral apparitions, and by a ritual reliance on the divine as author, director, or spectator.

Orestes, Atreus, and Thyestes appeal to and yet challenge the immortal gods watching their dramas. Aeschylus’s tragicomic hero survives the hound-like Furies of his animal brain, and the vengeance of his mother’s ghost, with the help of Apollo and Athena, as his frontal-lobe advocate and judge. Orestes acquires a new communal Self in Athens, despite the rage of the Furies and split decision of the human jury—as the collective Other determining his fate, along with the mediating audience of gods. Atreus, however, like his grandfather, wants to challenge the divine audience with his superior evil. “I’m striding as high as the / stars, I’m above everyone, / my head’s touching heaven. . . . / . . . / . . . I / do wish I could stop the gods / escaping and drag them all / to see my revenge” (Seneca 33). Thyestes, in the horror of his tragic fate, despairs that any mediating gods could be watching. “Earth, how can you / bear all this evil? / . . . / . . . But earth is / unmoved. Heavy and still. The gods have left” (37–38).

Created two thousand years ago, in an earlier stage of human cultural evolution, the expressions of Seneca’s characters prefigure the transcendent evil of dictators and the existential abjection of their victims in many eras after his time, especially in the holocausts of recent centuries. Because of the long timeframe of biological evolution, we have the same basic brain structures as the ancient Greeks and Romans. But we must bear even more horrendous histories, with greater dangers in current human technologies—while interrogating the ghosts and gods of postmodern culture, projected by theatre and film makers.