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The Tragedy of Roland Barthes

John McKeane

In the work of Roland Barthes, tragedy is subject to a series of striking reversals. Whilst *On Racine* is well known for denouncing the deathly effects of canonization, earlier texts on tragedy defend it as the birth of Western reason. And whilst his 1963 text is not without a hubristic rebelliousness recalling the events of *Oedipus Rex*, in Barthes's later work tragedy, having been rejected, returns with a vengeance symbolized by the now-destitute *Oedipus at Colonus*. Tragedy shifts strikingly from a theatrical practice – as a student, Barthes belonged to an Ancient Theatre Group for which he played Darius in Aeschylus's *Persians* – to an object of literary and theoretical reflection, before bursting through in its most destructive form, that of lived experience. As I hope to show, all of this means that various important aspects of his thinking demand to be known as the tragedy of Roland Barthes.

His role as Darius is itself narrativized when he includes a photo of the production in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Not included in the work, however, was a statement originally rejected for publication but nonetheless noteworthy on the subject of tragedy. In it, he states that

Long ago, in bourgeois circles, the claims of homosexuality could not be made in contestatory, leftist fashion [...]. Homosexual discourse could only exist through a sublimated, formalized mediation: that of ancient Greece with its value as high culture, which happily itself was passably queer.¹

The formal, aestheticized, distanced quality of Greek tragedy when conventionally staged, so often criticized for elitism, is thus presented as providing a refuge for a gay discourse still seeking to find a directly political voice.² Beyond this, Tiphaine Samoyault's recent biography cites a letter of 1950 in which Barthes writes: 'I am not far away from comprehending a certain tragic materialism – which in my maturity will perhaps be the position bringing together my two youths'.³ Doubtless 'materialism' here refers to his left-wing activities as a *lycéen*, and perhaps to the sceptical mind that would pinpoint the mythologies operative in

bourgeois culture. But his other youth is presented as being under the sign of tragedy.

Indeed, it is striking that of Barthes's dozen or more articles and reviews directly addressing tragedy, none post-dates the mid-1960s: it is as if tragedy were his youth. And as is well known, the theme did not withdraw quietly, but amidst the sound and the fury of the dispute with Raymond Picard. This dispute is often presented as heralding a shift in generation, the arrival of *la nouvelle critique*, and as such we can ask whether it can be considered – in terms of course provided by tragedy – as an Oedipal scene. I shall return to this conflagration of Barthes's thematizing interest in tragedy, before moving on to tragedy's different modes of presence in his late writing. But in order to get there, let us look first at two earlier texts.⁴

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In 1941, Barthes submitted a dissertation for the Master's-level *diplôme d'études supérieures* entitled 'Evocations and Incantations in Greek Tragedy'.⁵ At this stage, Greek tragedy (specifically that of Aeschylus, rather than Sophocles or Euripides) was therefore not merely one interest amongst many, but the central concern of Barthes's academic interest.

The dissertation grew out of a desire to study the mechanisms of catharsis in tragedy, especially those reliant on music, even though no Greek music has survived in written form. Perhaps due to this difficulty, the dissertation's actual focus is on evocations (of the dead) and incantations (of the gods), two notions that Barthes sees as inextricable from one another. Such perspectives – where tragedy is seen as a genre oriented towards forms of otherness such as music, the dead, and the gods – suggest that Barthes was drawing on challenging, modern thinking of the genre. And indeed, Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* features in both the bibliography and the argument.⁶ This dissertation causes us to ask: what is the relative importance of this modern, philosophical approach to tragedy on the one hand, and of a traditional literary approach on the other? For alongside Nietzsche there is much analysis of metre and rhythm, seen by some as reified forms, the study of which distracts us from the ritual aspects of tragedy. In pausing briefly over this dissertation, we can explore this tension as well as its significance for narratives of Barthes's thought: in 1941, was tragedy already allowing him to deconstruct the literary canon, or should his attention to it be classed as mere juvenilia?

For Nietzsche, tragedy is a composite form featuring both what he names the Apollonian (form, representation: emblematised by statues) and the Dionysian (force, shapelessness: emblematised by music). The cohabitation of the two is by no means abstract, but based in Athenian stage practice: the Dionysian being represented by the singing and dancing chorus, and the Apollonian by the individual, named protagonists and antagonists. Indeed, for Nietzsche and others the interaction of the two elements changes over the history of tragedy, which at its birth was wholly Dionysian, a religious ritual, before developing into a composite form when the first actor, the first thespian – Thespis – stepped forth from the chorus to speak individual lines. Barthes adopts this view of tragedy as a composite, Apollonian-Dionysian form, a view that establishes premises for his later attacks on uses of *Phaedra* in bourgeois theatre as entirely focused on the aristocratic individual (representing the Apollonian) and without concern for ritual or collective structure (the Dionysian). Indeed, he sees the radically disruptive force both in the chorus, and in the evocations and incantations on which his dissertation focuses. He writes:

Æschylus's incantations are, above all, movement; in them, feelings reach a violence that is all the greater because they have to be materially efficient. These stasima are not assuaging; in them, the chorus is not limited to the role of a philosophizing pacifier. In them, everything contributes to passionate or dramatic reactions. These incantations set the tragedy in motion, and magnify it. They are summits, points of election, where the horizon changes utterly, where the drama changes course and widens.⁷

Here Barthes rejects literary or reified forms of tragedy where the chorus has shrunk to a mere narrator function: its role is not to provide a detached, pacifying, 'philosophizing' commentary, but to represent the massed audience on stage, thus erasing the boundary between audience and stage, confirming tragic theatre as a religious ritual. The language of 'summits, points of election' is clear in the importance it gives to the chorus and incantations.

In his dissertation as a whole, however, Barthes does not go so far as to argue that these moments of passion prevent tragedy from being the crucible of Western reason, democracy, and civilization. He is willing to accept that it is a genre that makes space for the Dionysian, but he nonetheless places significant emphasis on the Apollonian too: this is a composite genre.⁸ He proposes an understanding of tragedy that

is less radical – but also less destructive, more sustainable – than those of Hölderlin before or the Living Theatre after him. This is to say that the polemical, deconstructive force of his later writings is not yet present in this Master’s dissertation: instead his emphasis on the various ironies and paradoxes of tragedy as a composite genre fits snugly within the French academic *esprit de synthèse* (the ability to demonstrate the underlying unity of apparently disparate phenomena, still explicitly valued today). For instance, we can read that:

For [the Greeks] the moments of deep emotion, of total lyricism, of the greatest musical inebriation, coincide to the point of confusion with moments of intense deductive will, of the greatest logical rigour of thought. For us, who have grown used to accompanying the noun reason with the adjective cool, there is nothing stranger. But this is the Greek miracle: at the deepest point of Dionysian inebriation there is Apollonian lucidity. This chapter would like its lesson to be that there is no possibility of conflict here, but instead the reign of perfect coincidence and a sameness [*identité*] in nature.⁹

Whereas for the modern subject reason is cool and calculating, reading the Greek tragics allows us to speak not of cool reason, but of hot reason. Having made a place in his system for otherness in the form of incantation and evocation, Barthes is able to proceed to show how his thesis is not radical, does not – as it were – frighten the horses as regards the values of his time and his context: deduction, logical rigour, lucidity. Later, we read that ‘incantation is logical’ and that the relation between Apollo and Dionysus is a ‘dialectic’.¹⁰ Where in the passage above Barthes cites this lack of conflict, lack of polemic between the two elements as ‘the Greek miracle’, in closing his dissertation he writes as follows: ‘Here is a process that is unique in the history of the human mind [*esprit*], a rare and solitary moment, a perfect miracle in which the romantic and cartesian peoples can be recognized with equal justification’.¹¹ Of course, it is somewhat unfair to critique what was a Master’s dissertation and remains an unpublished archival document. Whilst showing a clear engagement with the radically disruptive influence of Dionysus through the thought of Nietzsche, Barthes’s dissertation remains a document which aimed to prove its institutional, academic value. We can perhaps say that this young Barthes was already a tragic, but precisely one of the line of tragic characters who insist on the viability of synthesis, comprehension, analysis; forebodingly so.

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The second early Barthes text on tragedy I wish to look at is from 1955, when alongside two reviews of productions of *Oedipus Rex* published that year, he reviewed the *Oresteia* directed by Jean-Louis Barrault. The title of his article asked the key question: 'How can what is ancient be represented[?]'¹² Was one to emphasize the primal, archaic, Dionysian elements of Greek tragedy, or was one instead to underline mankind's heroic, Apollonian struggle against such obscure forces?

For Barthes, Barrault's production attempted to both, and ultimately did neither. It had the merit of seeking to be Dionysian, but did not have the confidence in itself necessary to completely reject Apollo. In terms that are clearly problematic today, and show that in this instance Barthes drew upon a colonial imaginary we might have expected him to deconstruct, he defined the production's Dionysian elements as the exoticism of a 'negro festival'. Thus he wrote that

[The] only justification [for exoticism] would have been that it physically transformed the spectators, making them uncomfortable, fascinating them, placing them under its spell. But here there is nothing like that: we remain cold, at an ironic distance, unable to believe in partial panic, having already been inoculated by the efforts of the 'psychological' actors. It was necessary to choose: either the negro festival [*fête nègre*], or Marie Bell. In trying to play on both levels (Marie Bell for humanist criticism and the negro festival for the avant-garde), it was inevitable that they would lose out across the board.¹³

By failing to choose between the ancient and modern elements of Greek tragedy, the production was therefore doomed to fail. It is interesting that Barthes reads these elements in terms of their place within twentieth-century debates in theatrical practice: critics interested in the psychology of the individual are said to be 'humanist', whilst those interested in the disruptive force of the 'negro festival' represent the avant-garde. Clearly there is a prefiguring here of the attacks in *On Racine* on those who see *Phaedra* in terms of the inner psychology of the bourgeois individual.

Barthes's thesis *The Fashion System* is also prefigured in this review's attention to the semiology of the costumes worn during the production. He writes as follows:

In temporal terms, *The Oresteia* contains three levels: the supposed era of myth, Æschylus's era, and the era of the spectator. One of these three levels of reference should have been chosen and stuck to, for [...] our only possible way of relating to Greek tragedy is to be aware of its historical situation. [...] Agamemnon and Clytemnestra are dressed in barbarian fashion, committing the tragedy to an archaic, Minoan meaning, an approach that would be totally legitimate if adopted across the board. But then we see Orestes, Electra, and Apollo who quickly gainsay this choice: they are fifth-century Greeks, and counter the monstrously gigantic proportions of the primitive clothes with the grace, harmony, simple and sober humanity of the silhouettes of classical Greece.¹⁴

This analysis of fashion and stage design does not exclude humour: Barthes at one point mentions 'a carpet that has come directly from Hermès (the boutique, not the god)'.¹⁵ But what is more important is the underlying historical schema: a distinction is drawn between the period when the mythic events are supposed to have taken place, the fifth century BC when Æschylus wrote the drama, and the contemporary moment. More than this, values are ascribed to these different periods: the mythical time is said to be 'barbarian', whereas the fifth century denotes 'the grace, harmony, simple and sober humanity of the silhouettes of classical Greece'.

What is being outlined here is nothing other than a narrative of progress, the received story of the birth of Western democracy and reason in fifth-century Athens. For all the foreshadowing of Barthes's later, deconstructive work on Racine and on fashion, such statements align strikingly well with the secular humanism of the French educational and intellectual establishment, albeit progressive and left-leaning. This becomes more clear as we read further in the article:

When placed back in its era [...], *The Oresteia* was undeniably a progressivist work; it bore witness to the move from a matriarchal society, represented by the Erinyes, to a patriarchal society, represented by Apollo and Athena. [...] *The Oresteia* is a profoundly politicized work [...] [it] tells us what the men of that time were trying to overcome, the obscurantism that little by little they were attempting to enlighten; but it also tells us that these efforts are anachronistic for us, that that they new gods that they attempted to enthrone are gods that we in our turn have

overcome. There is a march of history, a difficult but undeniable removing of the barriers of barbarism, a progressive assuredness that mankind has within itself the remedy to its evils; we must endlessly make ourselves aware of all of these, because seeing the distance we have travelled allows us to take courage and hope for all that still remains to be done.¹⁶

The extremely general ‘we’ – presumably representing the Western subject – that is spoken of is said to have progressed beyond the matriarchal laws of archaic Greece, and also beyond the patriarchy that replaced them in the Athenian *polis*. But the underlying movement of progress is doubtless the same: the ‘march of history’ has merely advanced to a new stage, and from this we are able to take ‘courage’ and ‘hope’. In short, Barthes’s 1955 article adopts wholesale a raft of the received ideas of the French (and Western) educational and intellectual establishment. If confirmation of this were needed, we can find the opposition evoked above between ancient and modern in the language of ‘obscurantism’ and ‘enlighten[ment]’; shortly afterward, he even goes so far as to speak of ‘the only relationship that today we are able to have with ancient tragedy, which is one of clarity’.¹⁷ The clarity of thought, enlightenment through progress: such is the project that the tortuous writing of Derrida would seek to undermine less than ten years later. Indeed, ‘clarity’ is one of the sacred cows of French literary criticism that Barthes attacks in *Criticism and Truth* of 1966.¹⁸ But a decade earlier, it was a central tenet of his approach.

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How did one state of affairs become the other? The circumstances of and polemic surrounding Barthes’s *On Racine* (1963), a slim volume containing reprintings of three essays (first published in 1958-1960), have been covered by critics on multiple occasions.¹⁹ There is doubtless much work to be done on the influence on Barthes of works such as Lucien Goldmann’s *The Hidden God: a Study of Tragic Vision in the ‘Pensées’ of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine* (1955) and Charles Mauron’s *The Unconscious in the Work and Life of Racine* (1957), as well as on the role of Brecht in revolutionizing his views of the theatre.²⁰ Such would be the way to properly assess the material presented by the slim volume *On Racine*; this study will pass over this material, perhaps in the manner of a tragedy which allows the events it speaks of to take

place off-stage, instead concentrating on how they are narrativized by and for the protagonists concerned, in our case: Roland Barthes.

We have already seen Barthes's statement that, alongside materialism, tragedy was his other youth, and indeed considered that we can at some level read tragedy as: youth. But is it possible to go further and to view the rejection in *On Racine* of many aspects of tragedy as an Œdipal crisis in which youth, childhood, or infancy are abandoned? The dispute following *On Racine* certainly seems to rely on Œdipal energies in the prominent place it takes in narratives of the period; see for instance Louis Althusser: 'At last someone saying that Racine's famous "psychology", that the famous, so violent, so pure and so savage, Racinian passions... don't exist! Someone saying that it is really just literature....'.²¹ There is doubtless a pleasure – a cathartic pleasure – in throwing off the weight of tradition in this way, in slaughtering the sacred cow. But whilst enjoying our pleasures, enjoying our symptoms – in the words of Althusser's colleague and rival at the *École normale supérieure*, Jacques Lacan – we must also be wary of them.

To see an Œdipal crisis as the crisis in or after which tragedy is abandoned would of course be ironic insofar as Œdipus is a tragic figure. But there *is* irony in his fate: not only does he kill his father, but he becomes King in his place, in that sense becoming his own father. The model of rejecting tragedy on one level, the better to find it once more on another, is certainly present in Barthes's thinking. For instance, the same critique of theatrical practice levelled at *Phaedra* was also made regarding *Œdipus Rex*: 'however it is staged, Sophocles's *Œdipus* proves boring to us'. And yet, he continued, '[t]he myth is alive: named by Freud, henceforth read avidly into a thousand novels, films, new stories and fragments of real situations, once more it is astonishing us, fascinating us, enveloping us in a sort of obscure terror'.²² In other words, we lose the theatrical Œdipus, reified in the form of mere literature, but we gain the myth or the theory of Œdipus, imbued with a new vitality and applicable in a thousand situations.²³

What's more, Barthes's writing on Racine – drawing on Mauron's psychocritical analysis of the playwright and his work – suggests that such an Œdipal model might well be applicable to the dispute over tragedy in the mid-1960s. For the figure of the Father is a crucial part of the analyses of Racine by Barthes. He directly adopts Mauron's structuralist method of superimposing the various plays on one another in order to locate the underlying, essential myth or drama (a term meaning 'action').²⁴ And this method tells us that a correspondingly

essential Father-figure determines much of Racine's drama. Barthes writes:

It is not necessarily either blood-relations or gender that make up [the Father], nor even power; his being is his anteriority: what comes after him has issued from him, and is inevitably engaged in a problematic of fidelity. The Father is the past. And because what defines him lies far beyond his attributes (blood relations, authority, age, sex), he is truly, and forever, a total Father; beyond nature, he is a primordial, irreversible fact: that which has been *is*, such is the status of time in Racine.²⁵

The fact that this is a Father rather than a father, which is to say that it is a transferable, mobile symbol, is crucial here. For it tells us that this Father represents 'anteriority' in general: not merely a given father as – by definition – older than his son or daughter, but the entirety of the past. And we might add that if the father is rejected in the Œdipus scenario as it is described by psychoanalysis, it is not due to anything that any particular father has or has not done, but simply due to the structural position of the Father-figure. Anyone acting out an Œdipal scenario is bound to reject whatever authority, whatever representative of the past, stood over their youth.

In classical psychoanalytic theory, the Œdipus crisis passes from being an aspect of the theory of infant development to one of the major structures informing the culture and society of adults. It is said to follow earlier developmental stages in which a relation to an object external to itself is formed (the oral stage, the anal stage, and so on).²⁶ Whilst it becomes a general structure governing human relations, no longer strictly applicable to one's own parents, this does not make its influence on adult actions any less real. What are we to make of this scenario in relation to Barthes? Is it possible to say that *On Racine* and the reaction to it constitute an Œdipal crisis? Certainly, the parallel is an attractive one, especially given that Barthes emerged from the polemic as the figurehead of *la nouvelle critique*, the newly crowned King: Œdipus Rex. But if we return momentarily to psychoanalytic theory, we notice that even the stages mentioned above, let alone the Œdipus stage which follows them, rest upon the axiom of the infant developing a series of relative, distanced relations to its mother. And in short, although it is not my intention to psychoanalyze Barthes as an individual through the strict application of Freudian theory, it seems clear that it is a difficult task to base any reading upon a sense of distance between this thinker

and his mother.²⁷ One could mention his *Mourning Diary* published following her death, the photograph of her that he pointedly does not include in *Camera Lucida*, or more anecdotally, her presence in the front row as he gave his inaugural lecture at the *Collège de France*.²⁸ Therefore it seems that the idea of *On Racine* as an Œdipal crisis could only be accepted on condition that it be a crisis that never truly began (and perhaps for that reason, never truly ended either). Such, perhaps, is what sets up in his later life and his later works – to which we now turn – another tragedy of Roland Barthes.

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Properly speaking, Barthes's later writings do not have a relation to tragedy, in the sense that all relations imply a distance: they do not have a relation to tragedy, in that tragedy is never extensively thematized or discussed. But it does feature, fragmentarily, and in ways that – I argue – suggest that the later Barthes can have no *relation* to tragedy quite simply because he *is* tragic.

First of all, there is Œdipus. His viability as a model or parallel has been considered, with *On Racine* setting off something akin to an Œdipal crisis in French thought (if not precisely in Barthes's own development). Where Œdipus's solving of the riddle led to him becoming a philosopher-king, Barthes's text led to attempts to crown him as a theorist-king. But uneasy lies the head that wears the crown, especially if it never wanted to do so, and Barthes's refusal to take part in May '68 showed his disquiet with any role as leader of a new radical generation. Œdipus's fate after the tragic realization of what he has done is of course the subject of a further drama by Sophocles, *Œdipus at Colonus*. And it is noteworthy that this mad, wandering, destitute Œdipus is referred to on several occasions in the fragments on Morocco contained in Barthes's *Incidents*. First we read that: 'Two elderly American women take hold of a tall, old blind man and force him to walk across the street. But what this Œdipus would have preferred was money: money, money, not assistance.'²⁹ And shortly afterwards: 'An old blind man with a white beard, wearing a djeballa, is begging: he is stately, impassive, ancient, Sophoclean, classically tragic [*odéonesque*].'³⁰ In both cases, encountering a Moroccan who is old, blind, and poor brings Œdipus to Barthes's mind: not the young Œdipus whose narrative is one of sex, violence, and power, but the one who suffers the consequences of his earlier *hubris*. His eyes have been blinded in a symbolic self-exclusion from the all-seeing comprehension he boasted of – and similarly,

Incidents is from the period when Barthes moved away from structuralist theory (*θεωρία* meaning in Greek: vision). And he wanders in a foreign land, Colonus rather than Thebes, just as Barthes finds himself not in France but in Morocco.

These would remain isolated incidents – precisely – were it not for the defining episode of Barthes's final years, the death of his mother, and the resultant *Mourning Diary*. To see this, we must recall the notion that tragedy is a total state: in the sense that any tragic figure is wholly, existentially, absolutely affected by whatever tragedy has befallen them. Tragedy is irrecuperable, withdrawn from time and history; in other words, any tragedy from which one recovers is not a tragedy (this thinking is present in Goldmann's work, on which Barthes drew in *On Racine*).³¹ Such a model of tragedy is crucial to Barthes in his *Mourning Diary*, insofar as this totalizing model excludes any *relation to* tragedy: one cannot calmly relate to tragedy – or put differently, anything to which one can calmly relate is not tragedy. Tragedy is a drama or action rather than a play, staging, or representation: it is anterior to any such representation and destructive of it. Accordingly, we see Barthes explicitly rejecting any theatre of his emotions. In the *Mourning Diary*, he writes: 'Despair: the word is too theatrical, a part of language' and that 'the notion of "theatralizing" my mother's death would have been intolerable for me'.³² Thus just as above we saw him rejecting theatrical practice and insisting that Oedipus lived on only in psychoanalytical theory, now we see him again rejecting the notion of theatre, with the implication that no form can contain the burning pain of tragedy experienced.

What is true for theatrical form (even understood virtually) is also true of dialectical schemas. Thus whilst for the Master's dissertation of 1941 tragedy was a site of dialectical 'miracle' allowing for the synthesis of suffering and its comprehension, for the *Mourning Diary* death 'is no longer an event, it is another *duration*, compressed, insignificant, not narrated, grim, without recourse: a true mourning not susceptible to any narrative dialectic'.³³ The total or absolute situation in which this death has placed him is described as '[t]he high seas of suffering – the shores left behind, nothing in sight' or even more simply – in almost absolute simplicity, with no verb, no syntax, and the noun that is present is that of inorganic stasis – with the words 'a stone'.³⁴ Such is one possibility of fragmentary writing – separation, stasis, stagnation.

At moments in the *Journal* there are attempts to pull in the opposite direction. Indeed, on three occasions Barthes himself dramatizes the debate between the easy heterogeneity of his previous

1970s texts – we recall the critical attack on him entitled *Le Roland-Barthes sans peine*³⁵ – and the absoluteness of the tragic situation:

A stupefying, though not distressing notion – that she has not been ‘everything’ for me. If she had, I wouldn’t have written my *work*. Since I’ve been taking care of her, the last six months in fact, she *was* ‘everything’ for me, and I’ve completely forgotten that I had ever written. I was no longer anything but desperately hers. Before, she had made herself transparent so that I could write.³⁶

On the one hand, she wants everything, total mourning, its absolute (but then it is not her, it is I who invest her with the demand for such a thing). And on the other (being then truly herself), she offers me lightness, life, as if she were still saying: ‘go on, go out, have a good time...’.³⁷

I waver – in the dark – between the observation (but is it entirely accurate?) that I’m unhappy only by moments, by jerks and surges, sporadically, even if such spasms are close together – and the conviction that *deep down, in actual fact*, I am *continually*, all the time unhappy since *maman*’s death.³⁸

It seems clear that in these passages the same question is returning to trouble Barthes: is there a possibility of lightness, freedom, movement, or has his mother’s death sucked all the air from his activities? Is the only thing to be said: ‘a stone’? It is tempting to use what we know of Barthes’s final two years (his inability to write, his refusal to fight for life following his road-traffic accident) to conclude that he was indeed now ‘*deep down, in actual fact* [...], *continually* [...] unhappy’.

But instead of doing so, let us instead use his strictly autobiographical – or autothanatographical – remarks to think further about this issue. When in the *Mourning Diary* the topic is not his relation to his mother, but simply himself, there seems very little doubt that the argument for the absoluteness of his situation wins out. He writes: ‘Today, around 5:00 in the afternoon, everything is just about settled: a definitive solitude, having no other conclusion but my own death.’³⁹ Elsewhere we read that

To think, to know that *maman* is dead *forever, completely* (‘completely’, which is inconceivable without violence, nor can one abide by such a thought for very long), is to think,

letter by letter (literally, and simultaneously), that I too will die *forever and completely*.

There is then, in mourning (in this kind of mourning, which is mine), a radical and *new* domestication of death; for previously, it was only a *borrowed* knowledge (clumsy, had from others, from philosophy, etc.), but now it is *my* knowledge. It can *hardly* do me any more harm than my mourning.⁴⁰

In an effect of repetition between his mother's and his own situations, he adopts the characteristics of being dead '*forever and completely*' (terms he underlines). Similarly, his knowledge of death is at last fully his own knowledge, a knowledge that no one else can know to the same extent, or in his place.⁴¹ He can be said to be a tragic figure insofar as he is definitively fixed by the relation to his death: like Lewis Payne on death row in the photograph discussed in *Camera Lucida*, we can say of him: 'He is dead and he is going to die'.⁴²

Such of course is also the situation of Phaedra, whose first words are famously 'let's go no further, but stop here': Racine's play is co-extensive not with her death – which has in a sense already been decided on – but with its cruel and unusual consequences for those around her.⁴³ By the time the play begins, her tragedy has already been decided on, with the gods instilling in her a desire that she knows cannot be realized, that she knows signals that she can no longer live in the world. Her tragic drama is forever prior, withdrawn, ab-stract and ab-solute with regard to any subsequent effects on her relations to those around her, or the staged representations of those effects.⁴⁴ And a similar sense of absolute or ab-solute tragedy can be seen in Goldmann's work on Racine, when he states that: '[a] Jansenist who was consistent in his views would not have *written* tragedies, and a man who was wholly at home and integrated in the world would not have written *tragedies*'.⁴⁵ This raises the possibility of there existing within the Jansenist movement to which Racine belonged something like an unwritten, absolute tragedy, something utterly irrecuperable that burns and corrodes any container in which it is placed.

Racine's long silence after *Phaedra* has famously haunted literary criticism. After his tragic youth, after the quasi-Oedipal scene of the polemic around *la nouvelle critique*, and most of all after the death of his mother, it seems that there was a new silence, a new inability to write, a new tragic drama that precluded all possibility, even that of life itself: that of Roland Barthes.

Notes

¹ Roland Barthes, *Le Lexique de l'auteur: Séminaire à l'École pratique des hautes études 1973-1974, suivi de fragments inédits du Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, ed. by Anne Herschberg Pierrot (Paris: Seul, 2010), p. 323. The translation is my own, as are those that follow, unless indicated otherwise. The titles of untranslated books and articles have been left in French.

² At what would turn out to be the end of his life, Barthes could be found thinking of a particular intimate relationship in terms of tragedy. He laconically noted: 'Olivier crisis → *On Racine*' in *Mourning Diary: October 26, 1977 - September 15, 1979*, ed. by Nathalie Léger, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Notting Hill, 2011), p. 105. This seems to be a reference to Barthes's lover of 1956-1961, Olivier de Meslon. Cf. Tiphaine Samoyault, *Roland Barthes: Biographie* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), p. 407.

³ Barthes quoted in Samoyault, *Roland Barthes*, p. 232.

⁴ Further texts addressing tragedy, which I do not have the space to explore, are the following, collected in Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, rev. ed., ed. by Éric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 5 vols, vol. I: 'Culture et tragédie' (1942), pp. 29-32; 'Le Prince de Hombourg au TNP' (1953), pp. 245-52; 'Pouvoirs de la tragédie antique' (1953), pp. 259-67; 'Fin de "Richard II"' (1954), pp. 467-71; "Ruy Blas" (1954), pp. 486-88; 'Une tragédie sans public' (1954), pp. 493-96; "Œdipe roi" (1955), pp. 594-95; "Œdipe roi" (1955), pp. 608-09; and 'Tragédie et hauteur' (1959), pp. 974-76. Volume II of the same *Œuvres complètes* contains 'Lettre au sujet du group de théâtre antique' (1962), pp. 25-26; 'Fragment (sur une représentation moderne d'"Œdipe")' (1964), p. 559; and 'Le Théâtre grec' (1965), pp. 724-46.

⁵ 'Évocations et incantations dans la tragédie grecque' is available for consultation at the BNF manuscripts department under reference NAF 28630. I wish to thank Andy Stafford, Claude Coste, and Marie-Odile Germain for their help in directing me to this holding.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Origine de la tragédie* (Paris: N.R.F., 1939).

⁷ Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', p. 133.

⁸ For Nietzsche too, of course, the Apollonian and the Dionysian are not in any straightforward or even dialectical relation: the Dionysian is too destabilizing to ever appear in its own right, it can only be thought of by recourse to notions such as a lost origin, it is forever somewhere beneath the Apollonian, and in need of it.

⁹ Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', p. 89.

¹⁰ Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', pp. 108-09, 137.

¹¹ Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', p. 138.

¹² Barthes, 'Comment représenter l'antique' (1955), in *Écrits sur le théâtre* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), pp. 147-55. Although the title has no question mark – perhaps through error – the opening pages confirm that this is not meant to be

a programmatic article, i.e. one with a title translatable as ‘How what is ancient should be represented’.

¹³ Barthes, ‘Comment représenter l’antique’, p. 148.

¹⁴ Barthes, ‘Comment représenter l’antique’, p. 149.

¹⁵ Barthes, ‘Comment représenter l’antique’, p. 150.

¹⁶ Barthes, ‘Comment représenter l’antique’, p. 154.

¹⁷ Barthes, ‘Comment représenter l’antique’, p. 153.

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, trans. by Katrine Pilcher Keuneman (London: Athlone, 1987), pp. 46-52.

¹⁹ Picard’s work *Nouvelle critique ou nouvelle imposture?* (Paris: Pauvert, 1965) seems to have reacted less to Barthes’s book itself than to what he perceived as an uncritical reaction to it. See Philip Thody, ‘Racine, Quarrels and Criticism’ (1977), in *Roland Barthes: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, ed. by Neil Badmington (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2010), 4 vols, vol. II, pp. 44-58; and Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Paris: Minuit, 1984), pp. 151-56. For a more recent account of Barthes’s work itself, see Claude Coste, ‘Bêtise en littérature’, in *Bêtise de Barthes* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2011), pp. 117-56. By contrast, René Pommier’s *Le ‘Sur Racine’ de Roland Barthes*, rev. ed. (Paris: Eurédition, 2008) presents itself as a defence of Racine against Barthes.

²⁰ Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God: a Study of Tragic Vision in the ‘Pensées’ of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, trans. by Philip Thody (1955; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964); Charles Mauron, *L’Inconscient dans l’œuvre et la vie de Racine* (Gap: Ophrys, 1957).

²¹ Samoyault, *Roland Barthes*, pp. 400-1.

²² Barthes, ‘Sur une représentation moderne d’Œdipe’, p. 559.

²³ In saying this, Barthes was actually very close to Aristotle, who discusses tragic dramas as essentially narratives, which the actors on stage did little more than depict in the fashion of *tableaux vivants* (cf. Claire Nancy, ‘La Raison dramatique’, unpublished text, p. 14); and he was close to Hegel, whose famous discussion of the *Antigone* focuses entirely on its narrative or drama, as if Antigone and Creon were historical figures, downplaying its status as theatre or art.

²⁴ It stems from the verb *δρᾶν*, ‘to do, act, perform’ (O.E.D.).

²⁵ Roland Barthes, *On Racine*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983), p. 38. Translation modified.

²⁶ See Roger Perron and Michèle Perron-Borelli, *Le Complexe d’Œdipe*, 4th ed. (Paris: P.U.F., 2005), pp. 56-64.

²⁷ Of course, the choice to write on *Phaedra*, a play depicting the desire of a mother for a son – and notably discussed by Proust’s narrator – must also form part of the background to these questions. See Mounir Laouyen, ‘L’imago maternelle dans *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*’ in *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, 68 (fourth quarter, 2002), 129-41.

²⁸ See the following statement by one of Barthes's biographers: 'The "great oedipal frustration" evoked by Barthes, with no father to kill, with no family to hate or milieu to disapprove of, corresponds to the idea of an incomplete "oedipus" in Sartre: "against who, against what would I have revolted: never had the caprices of another claimed to be my law"'; Samoyault, *Roland Barthes*, p. 263.

²⁹ Roland Barthes, *Incidents*, trans. by Teresa Lavender Fagan (London: Seagull, 2010), p. 24.

³⁰ Barthes, *Incidents*, p. 33.

³¹ See Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God*, trans. by Philip Thody (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964) and *Racine: essai* (Paris: L'Arche, 1970); as well as a text that influenced Goldmann, György Lukács, 'The Metaphysics of Tragedy: Paul Ernst' (1910) in *Soul and Form*, trans. by Anna Bostock (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 175-98.

³² Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, pp. 111, 128. Translation modified in both cases.

³³ Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 50. Translation modified.

³⁴ Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, pp. 213, 111.

³⁵ Michel-Antoine Burnier and Patrick Rambaud, *Le Roland-Barthes sans peine* (Paris: Balland, 1978). This title can be translated as *Roland Barthes Easily*, or more literally as *Roland Barthes Without Punishment/Pain*.

³⁶ Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 16. Emphases in original.

³⁷ Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 32.

³⁸ Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 124.

³⁹ Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 35.

⁴⁰ Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 119. Emphases in original.

⁴¹ Heidegger approached death as precisely this type of ultimate guarantee or authenticity, whereas Blanchot and Levinas instead saw it as what I can never know – for them, death is always other people's death.

⁴² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 95.

⁴³ Jean Racine, *Phaedra*, in *Britannicus, Phaedra, Athaliah*, trans. by C. H. Sisson (Oxford: O.U.P., 1987), p. 84.

⁴⁴ Compare the following: 'As Narrative (Novel, Passion), love is a story which is accomplished, in the sacred sense of the word: it is a *program* which must be completed. For me, on the contrary, this story has *already taken place*; for what is event is exclusively the delight of which I have been the object and whose aftereffects I repeat (and fail to achieve). Enamoration is a *drama*, if we restore to this word the archaic meaning Nietzsche gives it: "Ancient drama envisioned great declamatory scenes, which excluded action (action took place before or behind the stage)." Amorous seduction (a pure hypnotic moment) takes place *before* discourse and *behind* the proscenium of consciousness'. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, pp. 93-94. Emphases in original).

⁴⁵ Goldmann, *The Hidden God*, p. 372. Translation modified to restore Goldmann's emphases.

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