THE STRANGENESS OF TRAGEDY

PAUL HAMMOND

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πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κοὐδὲν ἀν-
θρώπου δεινότερον πέλει.

SOPHOCLES

A NOTE ON TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

The plays are quoted from the following editions. Other editions which have been consulted are cited in the footnotes. Any unattributed translations are my own. Quotations from Greek texts are presented in Greek type, but citations of technical terms are transliterated for the convenience of the reader without Greek.

AESCHYLUS The Greek text is from Denys Page's Oxford Classical Texts edition, *Aeschyli Septem Quae Supersunt Tragoedias* (Oxford, 1972), though I have not followed his use of the lunate sigma and iota adscript; the English translations (unless otherwise stated) are from *Aeschylus: Oresteia*, translated by Hugh Lloyd-Jones (London, 1982).

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SENECA The Latin text and English translation are reprinted by permission of the publishers and the Trustees of the Loeb Classical Library from *Seneca: Tragedies*, Loeb Classical Library ® Volumes 62 and 78, translated by John G. Fitch, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Copyright © 2004 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. The Loeb Classical Library® is a registered trademark of the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

SHAKESPEARE Shakespeare is quoted from *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, edited by Herbert Farjeon, The Nonesuch Shakespeare, 4 vols. (London, 1953), which reprints the First Folio text verbatim. This edition is used with the kind permission of the Nonesuch Press and Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd. Since this edition does not give line numbers, these have been added from the most recent Arden editions.

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RACINE *Phèdre* is quoted from the most recent Pléiade edition, Racine, *Œuvres complètes: I: Théâtre-Poésie*, edited by Georges Forestier (Paris, 1999), which calls the play *Phèdre et Hippolyte* following the first edition (1677); it was retitled *Phèdre* for the second edition in 1687. To avoid confusion I have used the customary, revised title.

ABBREVIATIONS

Chantraine	Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* (Paris, 1968; second edition 1999)
LSJ	*A Greek—English Lexicon*, compiled by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, revised by Sir Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford, 1940, revised edition with supplement 1996)
OED	*The Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition on CD-ROM 2002
OLD	*The Oxford Latin Dictionary*, edited by P. G. W. Glare (Oxford, 1982, corrected reprint 1996)

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Prologue

Quis hic locus, quae regio, quae mundi plaga?[1]

In Seneca's *Hercules*, the protagonist in his madness believes that he is making an assault upon the heavens; in fact, he is slaughtering his own wife and child. For this tragic moment he moves on a plane which he alone inhabits; others can only watch in horror. He lapses into sleep. When he awakes, unaware of what he has done, he fails to recognize the world into which he is returning, and asks what place this is:

> Quis hic locus, quae regio, quae mundi plaga?
> ubi sum? sub ortu solis, an sub cardine
> glacialis Ursae? numquid Hesperii maris
> extrema tellus hunc dat Oceano modum?
> quas trahimus auras? quod solum fesso subest?
> certe redimus: unde prostrata domo
> video cruenta corpora? an nondum exuit
> simulacra mens inferna? post reditus quoque
> oberrat oculis turba feralis meis?[2]

What place is this, what region, what tract of the earth? Where am I? Beneath the sun's rising, or beneath the turning point of the icy Bear? Can this be the limit set to Ocean's waters by the farthest land on the western sea? What air do I breathe? What ground lies under my weary body? Certainly I have returned: why do I see blood-stained

[1] Seneca, *Hercules*, l. 1138: 'What place is this, what region, what tract of the earth?' The line was quoted redemptively by T. S. Eliot as the epigraph for *Marina* (1930).

[2] *Hercules*, ll. 1138–46.

> bodies in a ruined house? Has my mind not yet cast off images from the underworld? Even after my return does a throng of the dead wander before my eyes?

He sees both the house around him and the underworld, laminating one kind of space upon another. He sees both blood-stained bodies and the wandering shades of the dead. Theseus and Amphitryon hide their faces, and cannot bring themselves to answer Hercules' questions: *Tacita sic abeant mala* ('These troubles must just pass in silence').[3] Once he realizes what he has done, Hercules summons land, sea, and sky to punish him, before resolving to immolate himself in order to cleanse the earth and escape to the underworld. His father Amphitryon manages to dissuade him, and when Hercules asks what region can possibly tolerate him as an exile, Theseus offers his own land as a place of refuge and of cleansing:

> Nostra te tellus manet.
> ....
> illa te, Alcide, vocat,
> facere innocentes terra quae superos solet.[4]

> My land awaits you . . . That land summons you, Alcides, which customarily restores gods to innocence.

In his tragic dementia, Hercules has moved into a dimension of his own imagining; as he recognizes what he has done—and the recognition is no less tragic than the killing—he seeks oblivion, seeks a place of annihilation; finally, he is offered a place of healing. The tragic protagonist has been displaced into a form of space which no one else shares. His time is not their time, either, for his act endures impervious to the motions of change and decay which are the rhythms of the ordinary world:

> Arctoum licet
> Maeotis in me gelida transfundat mare
> et tota Tethys per meas currat manus,
> haerebit altum facinus.[5]

[3] *Hercules*, l. 1186. [4] *Hercules*, ll. 1341–4.
[5] *Hercules*, ll. 1326–9. For Shakespeare's echo of this idea in *Macbeth* see p. 140 below.

> Though chill Maeotis should pour its northern seas over me and all the Ocean stream across my hands, the deed will stay deeply ingrained.

Haerebit... facinus: the crime will stick fast; the verb combines the spatial (remain attached, adhere) and the temporal (abide, continue). He speaks a language which is not that of the bystanders, who shield themselves in silence.

The case of Hercules exemplifies a mode of estrangement which seems to be characteristic of tragedy, a movement of translation and of decomposition. The protagonist is translated out of his normal time and space into forms of these which others cannot inhabit. The space in which he stands is one which has been transformed by his imagination into a terrain contoured by guilt or ambition or desire; shaped by loyalty to the dead, to their realm and their laws; providing the ground on which fantastically imagined narratives unknown to others can be played out. The time in which he moves is not the time of his neighbours, but a dimension in which what they would call the past is urgently present to him, or in which the future seems already to have happened; laws of sequence, of cause and effect, no longer apply. Language no longer joins the protagonist to his social milieu: he speaks his own idiolect, uses the concepts of his homeland to build an alien world. As Jean-Pierre Vernant writes:

> Les mots échangés sur l'espace scénique ont moins alors pour fonction d'établir la communication entre les divers personnages que de marquer les blocages, les barrières, l'imperméabilité des esprits, de cerner les points de conflit. Pour chaque protagoniste, enfermé dans l'univers qui lui est propre, le vocabulaire utilisé reste dans sa plus grande partie opaque; il a un sens et un seul. A cette unilatéralité se heurte violemment une autre unilatéralité.[6]

[6] Jean-Pierre Vernant, 'Tensions et ambiguïtés dans la tragédie grecque', in Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1972–86; reprinted 2001), i 35: 'The function of the words used on stage is not so much to establish communication between the various characters as to indicate the blockages and barriers between them and the impermeability of their minds, to locate the points of conflict. For each protagonist, locked into his own particular world, the vocabulary that is used remains for the most part opaque. For him it has one, and only one meaning. This one-sidedness comes into violent collision with another.' (*Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, translated by Janet Lloyd (New York, 1988), p. 42.)

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And yet these self-enclosed idiolects which combat one against the other are themselves fissile, and decompose.

Such tragic metamorphoses translate the central figure of the drama into new modes of being, and into new, only half-comprehensible languages, but this translation is not the carrying across (*translatio*) of an integral being: there is a decomposition of the self, a deformation which may sometimes render that figure sublimely heroic, but is also liable to make him estranged and fractured.[7]

The strangeness of such tragic transformations is a estrangement of the protagonist from his home territory, or from what had seemed to be home ground. Indeed, what tragedy takes apart is the very notion of the homely, of the self and its rootedness. In his essay *Das Unheimliche* (usually translated as 'The Uncanny'), published in 1919, Freud explains how in German the words *heimlich* (homely, familiar) and *unheimlich* (strange, uncanny) appear to be opposites, but actually have overlapping semantic fields, so that *heimlich* means both 'what is familiar and agreeable' and 'what is concealed and kept out of sight', and in this latter sense 'inaccessible to knowledge, hidden and dangerous'—and therefore *unheimlich*.[8] The *unheimlich* is also that which 'ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light'.[9] The private and intimate is made public and visible. These two terms—which are two keystones of the human world, two essential means through which we define ourselves and others—do not simply change places or cancel each other out; rather, they remain distinct and necessary terms, but now each is shown to have the potential to decompose into the other. Though Freud's *unheimlich*

[7] This combination of failed translation between key terms and the decomposition of an integral self and of unitary meaning might appropriately be termed 'deconstruction', had not that term been excessively and too loosely used. Nevertheless, I acknowledge a general debt to the work of Jacques Derrida in my approach to tragedy. Tragedy is, *par excellence*, a deconstructive medium.

[8] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey et al., 24 vols. (London, 1953–74), xvii 220–6; the German text is found in Sigmund Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, edited by Anna Freud et al., 18 vols. (London and Frankfurt, 1940–68), xii 227–68.

[9] Freud, *Standard Edition*, xvii 225.

is normally translated as 'uncanny', that word has connotations of encounters with the supernatural which make it a potentially misleading term; 'unhomely' might be a better rendering. Freud's exploration of the *unheimlich* or unhomely also discusses the phenomenon of people seeing doubles, and in such encounters, he says,

> the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self. And finally there is the constant recurrence of the same thing—the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names through several consecutive generations.[10]

The *unheimlich* describes the condition of being displaced; one's grasp of 'home' (*Heimat*) is undone, as the distinction between home and foreign is elided; one becomes divided or multiplied, as events seem to be repeated and time no longer seems to follow its normal course: man is no longer at home in the world.[11]

It is in such a sense that this book will explore the strangeness which tragedy fashions. Through the estrangement and the decomposition of the tragic protagonist we are brought face to face with the fragility of our identity, and the fragility of the languages through which we make sense of that identity. The space which we think of as home—and by space here I mean both geographical space and conceptual space, both the literal hearth and that framework of familiar assumptions which holds our selves in place—such a space is labile; we discover that our home ground is *unheimlich*, that a foreignness haunts the familiar. Tragic protagonists are displaced from their *heimlich* spaces, and find their

[10] Freud, *Standard Edition*, xvii 234: 'so daß der eine das Wissen, Fühlen und Erleben des anderen mitbesitzt, die Identifizierung mit einer anderen Person, so daβ man an seinem Ich irre wird oder das fremde Ich an die Stelle des eigenen versetzt, also Ich-Verdopplung, Ich-Teilung, Ich-Vertauschung—und endlich die beständige Wiederkehr des Gleichen, die Wiederholung der nämlichen Gesichtszüge, Charaktere, Schicksale, verbrecherischen Taten, ja der Namen durch mehrere aufeinanderfolgende Generationen.' (*Gesammelte Werke*, xii 246).

[11] There is a Heideggerian resonance to the idea of being 'at home in the world', to which we shall return in the Epilogue.

identities fissured or multiplied. 'Wir selbst Fremdsprachige sind', said Freud,[12] 'We ourselves speak a language that is foreign'; but if this is the common condition of all speakers, it is pre-eminently the tragic protagonist whose language becomes foreign, who speaks a *parole* which no longer quite meshes with the *langue* of those around him. Tragedy translates the protagonist into his own dimension, separated from the social world around him, and now inaccessible to others.

The space of tragedy is often liminal.[13] Characters such as Agamemnon or Oedipus stand on the threshold of something beyond the ordinary which is nevertheless already theirs; they are no longer grounded in the life of the everyday, but neither have they yet passed beyond into the grave or into some communion with the gods. One of the elements which makes the staged spaces of tragedy so unstable is that they seem to abut onto, or to open out into, other spaces which we cannot quite grasp: these are not contiguous places, but other kinds of space, other ways of inhabiting or perceiving. In *Oedipus the King* our attention is repeatedly drawn to those spaces which we do not see: to Mount Cithaeron where the baby was exposed, the crossroads where Laius was killed, the bed where Oedipus and Jocasta conceived their children, the inner house where Jocasta hangs herself and where Oedipus puts out his own eyes; and to the underworld where Oedipus knows that his parents await him. Such spaces haunt—that is, destroy the coherence of—the spaces which we do see. And because we are repeatedly made aware that actions in the present have their causes elsewhere, off-stage in a plane which we never touch (as Phèdre says, 'Mon mal vient de plus loin'[14]), these actions never exist solidly and squarely in the present space, in the space that is visible to the eye, following the normal logic of cause and effect, but decompose into events which stretch towards us from a space that is visible only to the

[12] Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, xii 232; *Standard Edition*, xvii 221.

[13] A classic study of the symbolic spaces and structures with which tragedy engages is Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne*. For the spaces of Greek tragedy see also André Bernard, *La Carte du tragique: La géographie dans la tragédie grecque* (Paris, 1985).

[14] 'My trouble [or 'evil'] comes from further back [or 'further away']': Racine, *Phèdre*, I iii 269.

mind's eye, a space whose contours and frontiers are as intermittent and ungraspable as those of a dream.

And so it is that the time of tragedy is also transformed.[15] It is an obvious characteristic of tragedy that its protagonist is not granted time to change, to repent, to restore. By contrast, the genre of comedy, however occasionally cruel, seems to be ultimately forgiving in allowing time for the characters to change, for events to be reversed, for entanglements to be sorted out. It inhabits a holiday time.[16] In the comic twin which haunts the tragedy of *Othello*, always subliminally suggesting an alternative outcome, Emilia would discover the significance of the handkerchief in time to tell Othello, Iago's lies would be exposed, and Othello enabled to ask Desdemona's forgiveness for aspersing her. Romeo would arrive at Juliet's tomb just as she wakes from her sleeping draught; Edmond would repent in time to prevent Cordelia from being hanged. But tragedy forces events to their conclusion, refusing time for reflection and repentance and recovery. The protagonist has moved, or has been moved by forces which we cannot quite name, into a new kind of time; as Iago says of Othello:

> Not Poppy, nor Mandragora,
> Nor all the drowsie Syrrups of the world
> Shall ever medicine thee to that sweete sleepe
> Which thou owd'st yesterday.[17]

It is not only a particular past time which is made irrecoverable, but the very mode of existence which had made those previous experiences possible. Iago prefaces the words just quoted by saying to the audience, 'Looke where he comes': Othello has already passed into another form of time and space, a place of the imagination which Iago can delineate and exhibit to us, but which he does not himself share.

But there is another way in which we might understand tragic time. Protagonists never quite inhabit their present: their time, like their

[15] For time in Greek tragedy see Jacqueline de Romilly, *Le Temps dans la tragédie grecque*, second edition (Paris, 1995).

[16] See Charles Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton, 1959).

[17] Shakespeare, *Othello*, III iii 333–6.

space, decomposes, for as we are aware that an event in the present has roots in the past, this past is brought into the present in a way which disturbs it, troubling it and undoing its coherence without ever making those causes and origins accessible for confrontation or repair. 'Mon mal vient de plus loin' is a temporal as well as a spatial reflection. The past is never quite past, never completed, but always alive in its potential to undermine the autonomy and integrity of the present. Freud cites the usage of *heimlich* to refer to a family: 'they are like a buried spring or a dried-up pond. One cannot walk over it without always having the feeling that water might come up there again.'[18] This could be a description of Argos or Thebes, Elsinore or Dunsinane.

The language of tragedy likewise slips from coherence. There is in all literary texts a troubling of linguistic and semantic order, a solicitation or shaking of the structures of meaning and thought.[19] When language is viewed as a system of traces, there is a continual movement away from the present towards another field (not necessarily a temporal past, and hardly ever an actual historical past) which is itself a fiction of coherence and stability, and as such beyond reach. Any literary text, by compelling our attention to the semantic play of its words, may surprise us into seeing the complexities of the linguistic field, the gaps and doublings of language. But tragedy does this most ruthlessly, for one of the tragedies which it holds out to us is that human language has no *signifié transcendantal*,[20] no ultimately fixed point, no ground. Linguistic signs beckon us into a world of receding traces, a world elsewhere, an ever-shifting mirage of coherence. In tragedy, rigorous coherence and full intelligibility are indeed a mirage: here 'nothing is, but what is not', as Macbeth says.[21]

[18] Freud, *Standard Edition*, xvii 223; *Gesammelte Werke*, xii 234: 'es kommt mir mit ihnen vor, wie mit einem zugegrabenen Brunnen oder einem ausgetrokneten Teich. Man kann nicht darüber gehen ohne daß es Einem immer ist, als könnte da wieder einmal Wasser zum Vorschein kommen.'

[19] I draw here on Jacques Derrida, especially *L'Écriture et la différance* (Paris, 1967, reprinted 1994) and *De la grammatologie* (Paris, 1967).

[20] Derrida, 'La Structure, le signe, et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines', in *L'Écriture et la différance*, p. 411.

[21] Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, I iii 142.

Though the great concepts which define us as human—God, Nature, Reason, Truth—are the currency of tragic speech, the work of tragedy is to place these concepts *sous rature*,[22] visible but cancelled, necessary but impossible, no longer guarantors that human thinking is coherent and viable, but relics now of a struggle in which these cherished terms have been irrecoverably damaged. They no longer match the actual grain of tragic experience. There is, then, a tragedy of language, as well as a tragedy of individuals and of societies. The shared language fractures, but so too does the linguistic bond which connects the tragic figure with his peers. The individual's idiolect separates the protagonist from those around him, becoming a form of prison, for signs no longer connect him with his hearers. His own semiotic system becomes self-enclosed, self-referential, and autistic, increasingly unintelligible to those who try to speak to him.

The individual is now not *individuus*, neither undivided in himself or inseparable from others,[23] for he loses his coherence, through fissuring and through doubling. This capacity of the tragic genre to estrange one from oneself is symbolized in the earliest forms of tragedy through the use of the mask[24] and the invocation of Dionysus the god of ecstasy (in Greek ἔκστασις: 'displacement', 'standing aside'). Nietzsche saw Apollo as the god of individuation, Dionysus as the god of union,[25] but if tragedy unites the subject it does so with a strange force, one which abolishes the Apollonian integrity of the rationally based, rationally intelligible human. Tragedy prevents a

[22] Derrida's typographical technique in *De la grammatologie*, which cancels a problematic term by placing a cross through it, so that it remains legible but is marked as a word which cannot be allowed to function normally in the sentence, or operate unchallenged in the conceptual structures which he is analysing.

[23] The word has two distinct meanings: *OED s.v.* individual *adj.* 1 ('forming an indivisible entity'); 2 ('inseparable', e.g. from a friend; the first example of this sense is from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*). The Latin *individuus* likewise has the two principal meanings 'indivisible' and 'inseparable' (*OLD* 1, 2).

[24] For a recent study of the tragic mask see David Wiles, *Mask and Performance in Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 2007), and for the mask in the wider context of Greek identities see Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, *Du Masque au visage: Aspects de l'identité en Grèce ancienne* (Paris, 1995).

[25] In *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (1895).

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