

## Mythologies of Tragedy: Recovering Meaning Through Barthes

*Anick Boyd*

So much depends upon the death of tragedy. In comparison to the living form of the novel, Bakhtin, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, identifies tragedy as a closed form, going so far as to describe its “hardened and no longer flexible skeleton” (3). Already completed, tragedy had lived out its life, he claimed, by the time he was writing in 1941<sup>1</sup>. Allow me therefore to begin where tragedy ends. At the epistemological crossroads of Saint Augustine’s writings, we see a shift wherein Christianity’s eschatological promise sublimates suffering such that eternal life now provides promise and hope which undermine the value of tragedy altogether<sup>2</sup>. George Steiner, in his 1961 book, *The Death of Tragedy*, persuasively claims, with great success, that the advent of widespread Christianity precludes the possibility of tragedy. In Simon Goldhill’s words, “Steiner’s *Death of Tragedy* makes Christianity an angel of death for the truth of tragic despair” (638). For Steiner, what is ultimately at stake in tragedy is that, “men’s accounts with the Gods do not balance” (6). While he admits French neo-classicists and Shakespeare into the canon, the nineteenth-century novelists are summarily denied entrance and inclusion; Steiner is adamant that tragedy is marked by verse. The low mimetic form of the novel could never be properly considered as part of the genre of tragedy in Steiner’s canon as the novel is only capable of referring to a lost mythology in the hopes of invoking its former power symbolically.

Roland Barthes’ own allusions to the tragic transpire in a curious way. References to the tragic appear only sporadically in *Le degré zéro de l’écriture* but regularly enough so that its usage is consistent and one that warrants further investigation. Barthes’ particular sense of tragedy repositions the universal away from understanding myth as Steiner does, as an already decaying “organic worldview and of its attendant context of mythological, symbolic, and ritual reference” no longer representable, or perhaps relevant, to the writer (Steiner 292). Instead, Barthes positions the writer against the objective world yet distanced from her practice

---

<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel”. The metaphor’s importance is in reference to “historically documented observation” in relation to form.

<sup>2</sup> See Goldhill, “The Ends of Tragedy” for a summation of the problem of deferral.

through the short-sightedness of her bourgeois condition—the writer is trapped within ideology that prevents her objectivity such that literature becomes a “problem.” And this, he calls, a “tragic predicament peculiar to Literature” (60). Throughout *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* Barthes refers to various “tragic” problems in literature so that the tragic takes on a meaning in this text proper now only to the condition of writing.

Building a new tragic context, Barthes describes the writer as assuming a tragic positionality normally associated with the tragic hero. Whereas the arc of the tragic hero was to fight a futile battle against a catastrophic fate presented to her providentially by some system of present or absent gods, as the case may be, the writer's arc is to contend with the dogma of History and Tradition. It may be helpful here to think of Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* and Klee's *Angelus Novus*:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe that keeps piling ruin upon ruin and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 392-393)

Benjamin's interpretation of Klee's angel is significant in its capacity to depict history as a movement forward that is just as rightly directed backward. While the angel moves without will into the future, the piling ruin itself is unaffected by the storm of progress, remaining in the angel's fixed anterior view. Creating vertical and horizontal indices of historical interpretation, Benjamin builds a growing Tower of Babel into his account of the angel's sight so that it restructures time as much as it restructures event. This view of History that complicates teleological views of progress helps us to imagine the context of the tragic as Barthes seems to imagine it, one tied to concepts that remain fixed in our view.

Inasmuch as we might anticipate the correlation of writer to writer, the producer of tragic dramas to the producer of the novel, as a continuation of the repetition of writing, Barthes suggests another tragic paradigm for our understanding of the relationship of the writer as interpreter of myth within a system of signs. Whereas the writer of the tragic drama took well-known myths as their point of departure, modifying details to better subsume the

myths themselves into the tragic plot, the writer, as Barthes saw her, similarly uses familiar literary language to write Literature. And just as the writer contributing to the City Dionysia could not control the tastes of their audience, the modern writer, at the time that Barthes is writing, is made to be ever mindful that the consumers of literary language must be spoken to in the already established vocabulary, a language pregnant with past literatures. The problem has a double valence as Barthes describes it. Not only do the consumers of Literature speak a certain language as it has been taught to them by Literature, but the writers themselves are generally only fluent in the language as they know it, through the production of the Literature that has come before them. These are the conditions for the writer's "ambiguous reality" (16).

In this tragic situation of the writer facing an ambiguous reality, she is no longer the medium for the universal as the tragic poets were thought to be but rather beset by the language available to her which, as Marx theorizes in the *Grundrisse*, is always already inseparable from idea. Barthes explains: "on the one hand, it unquestionably arises from a confrontation of the writer with the society of his time; on the other hand, from this social finality, it refers the writer back, by a sort of tragic reversal, to the sources, that is to say, the instruments of creation" (16). Barthes calls upon tragedy for its recursive capacities to explain the predicament of the writer. When Barthes talks about tragic reversal, he is signaling Aristotle and the *Poetics* and the *peripeteia* that Aristotle thinks is best demonstrated by Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. In the moment that Oedipus realizes that the oracle has been fulfilled, that he has murdered his father and slept with his mother, comes the full realization of the tragic content: the irony that constitutes Oedipus's failure to escape the fate that he took action to avoid, eclipsing his attempt at another future. The task of the writer is tragic in Barthes's view because he works within the Signs of Literature, Totality, and History, which form a constraint that act like fate. The act of writing becomes a future that the writer tries to outrun, ultimately fulfilling the uncanny oracle that the bounds of language ironically impose in trying to create something new. The implication then is that language, and therefore the ideas that it carries, are inherited from the bounds of the totality of language and Literature. Additionally, the writer, in the moment of Aristotelian recognition, is made to see that she, like Oedipus, has created by "sowing the soil where [she] was sown, without a question, blind." The writer is therefore closer to Oedipus than Sophocles if we remember Oedipus not

only as the figure who fulfills the oracle but also as the liminal figure often argued to signal the effectuation between one moral era and another with the transition from the former gods associated with the Sphinx, to the Greek gods and the rituals that honored them. This perception of tragedy recalls Foucault's understanding of tragedy in *Madness and Civilization* as "[...] ultimately nothing but the confrontation of two realms," here the confrontation between a social finality and an author whose authority is compromised, as it were, through the instruments that constitute authorship (Foucault 110). This shifts the paradigm of the creative labor of writing so that the writer not only crafts language but must also, perhaps tragically in the end, tries to affect a new age of literature altogether through thinking Literature.

"His writing is a way of conceiving (*penser*) Literature," Barthes writes, "not of extending its limits" (15) and thinking Literature is meant to create *écriture*. Susan Sontag, in her 1968 introduction to the English translation of *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*, explains that *écriture* means more than just writing. In fact, she as she explains:

A more helpful translation of what Barthes means by *écriture*—the ensemble of features of a literary work such as tone, ethos, rhythm of delivery, naturalness of expression, atmosphere of happiness or malaise—might be "personal utterance." For Barthes a language and a style are "objects," while a mode of *écriture* (writing, personal utterance) is a "function." Neither strictly historical nor irredeemably personal, *écriture* occupies a middle ground; it is "essentially the morality of form." In contrast to a language and a style, *écriture* is the writer's zone of freedom, "form considered as human intention." (Sontag xii)

It should be remarked, however, that in the section entitled "What is writing?" (Qu'est-ce que l'écriture) there is an important discrepancy between *Writing Degree Zero*, the English translation, and the French original. Whereas Barthes writes in French:

On sait que la langue est un corps de prescriptions et d'habitudes, commun à tous les écrivains d'une époque. Cela veut dire que la langue est comme une Nature qui passe entièrement à travers la parole de l'écrivain, sans pourtant lui donner aucune forme, sans même le nourrir; elle est comme un cercle abstrait de vérités, hors duquel seulement commence à se déposer la densité d'un verbe solitaire. (11)

Annette Lavers and Colin Smith's translation however reads:

We know that a language is a corpus of prescriptions and habits common to all the writers of a period. Which means that a language is a kind of natural ambience wholly pervading the writer's expression, yet without endowing it with form or content: it is, as it were, an abstract circle of truths, outside of which alone the solid residue of an individual *logos* begins to settle. (9)

Not to mention the translation of Nature as natural ambience, which could prove problematic if imposed throughout the text, I draw your attention to the difference between Barthes's "*verbe solitaire*" and its translation as *logos*. Choosing not to translate *le verbe* as "spoken word" or "language" or even to substitute it with *parole* for all of its dense familiarity, they decide on *logos* as though it had been *le Verbe (majuscule)*, the word that becomes flesh and the second person of the trinity. The translation, however strangely it leads us back to the figure of a living word, is not groundless, however, given that Barthes will later refer to the possibility of "*un nouveau monde adamique où le langage ne serait plus aliéné*" in the section *L'utopie de langage* (65).

This image of *écriture* as a calling into the world through naming acknowledges a literary history beyond a Greek beginning that writing engages with. To be clear, I do not mean to suggest a hidden Christianity lurking in Barthes's text but it is worth remembering that Judeo-Christianity and Marxism alike are systems of doctrines that center around eschatological notions. They both constitute providential narratives. What I mean to underscore here is a tragic failure of the Barthesian brand in his own *écriture*. Alternately, we call this proving his own point. Lower case *verbe* is confused for upper case *Verbe* sending echoes all the way through literary history. If nothing else, the ambiguity of Barthes's vocabulary, in relation to his call for an Adamic language, serves to remind us how Marxist vocabulary appropriates the language of Christianity and its "second-order memory" along with it. These inherited mythologies which are not isolated from their new deployment only illustrate the ironic enclosure of the writer, now not as novelist but as theorist.

Barthes expresses concern about "lay[ing] down the conditions for historical crisis" when an "aesthetic aim no longer suffices to justify the convention which this anachronistic language represents" (63). Going back to tragedy, the kind that Steiner is concerned with, we can think of German idealism's attempt to resuscitate the tragic form: the image of Hölderlin

meticulously writing and re-writing his *Death of Empedocles* only to discover his failure each time. The center could not hold though Hölderlin did manage, along with Schelling, to create what Peter Szondi calls a “philosophy of the tragic” that imposed a new paradigm of meaning on tragedy dependent on internal reconciliation and continuing to the present to dominate theories of tragedy. Turning to Benjamin once more, “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it the ‘way it really was.’ (Ranke) It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger” (Benjamin 391). In fact, tragedy has been consistently invoked during moments of crisis as a way of addressing crisis itself time and time again, the sense of tragedy changing along with it each time.

A death of tragedy argues for a temporal break between a world that had and understood tragedy and a world that does not and never will again. Theories of tragedy such as Steiner’s treat tragedy as what Jean-Luc Nancy calls a “loss par excellence,” as a signified forever antecedent. “We can recite it, but not restore or reinvent it,” he writes in *Après la tragédie*. But Nancy, hesitates if Steiner does not: “Either we are nostalgic for a forever-lost moment, which has no doubt never been present, or else we wish to give rise to an absolutely-to-come, which no species of presence could ever precede.” It is only through death that we can know for sure what tragedy is, though apparently never what it was. But tragedy has always dealt in ghosts. It is the form that knows that the past cannot be contained, not even in death. Whether it was Clytemnestra’s ghost stirring the Erinyes, or Banquo sitting down at the dinner table to the horror of Macbeth, tragedy has traditionally recognized the power of the past to animate the present and to influence the future.

In Barthes’s *Mythologies*, in the section entitled “Racine est Racine,” he accuses the essentialist critics of treating Literature as a “vast warehouse of lost objects<sup>3</sup>” in which they go fishing for the ‘truth’ of past genius (*Mythologies* 91). Tragedy has been institutionalized such that it exists as a vast archive of the past and locating the tragic truth proves to be yet another academic grail. But the Sign of tragedy persists, though it surely does not contain the dignity that George Steiner would ascribe to it as necessary markers of its authenticity. Tragedy and the tragic linger on in our vocabulary with a magnitude indicative of its history. As Barthes writes in *Mythologies*, in “Myth Today”:

---

<sup>3</sup> Translation mine. Barthes writes: “Nos critiques essentialistes passent leur temps à retrouver la «vérité» des génies passés; la Littérature est pour eux un vaste magasin d’objets perdus, ou l’on va à la pêche”.

When it becomes form [the signifier of myth], the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains. There is here a paradoxical permutation in the reading operations, an abnormal regression from meaning to form, from the linguistic sign to the mythical signifier. . . . there is no fixity in mythical concepts: they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely. And it is precisely because they are historical that history can very easily suppress them. (Reader 103)

Our nostalgia is enough to inform us that, although they are betrayed in language, tragedy and the tragic, impoverished though they may be, reverberate forcefully, meaningfully, with the history of their myth. In the tradition of Barthes's reading of Racine, there is no degree zero of tragedy. There is Greek tragedy; Renaissance tragedy; Shakespearian tragedy; Elizabethan tragedy; the Birth of Tragedy; and the Death of Tragedy. And there is the impoverished Sign of tragedy that everywhere now stands as a *mise-en-abyme* for irreparable loss, grief, and injustice, dependent on "second-order memory" for meaning.

## Works Cited

- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by S.H. Butcher. London: Macmillan, 1961.
- Bakhtin, M.M., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist, Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, U of Texas Press, 1981.
- Barthes, Roland. *A Barthes Reader*. Edited by Susan Sontag. London: Macmillan, 1982.
- . *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1953.
- . *Mythologies*. Paris: Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957.
- . *Writing Degree Zero*. Translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2012.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott and Others. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2006.
- Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York, NY: Vintage-Random House, 2013.
- Goldhill, Simon. "The Ends of Tragedy: Schelling, Hegel, and Oedipus." *PMLA*, Volume 129, Number 4, October 2014, pp. 634-648.
- Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse*. Translated by Martin Nikolaus. London: Penguin, 2005.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. "After Tragedy." *Encounters in Performance Philosophy*. edited by Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca, A. Lagaay, Springer, 2014.
- Sophocles. *Oedipus Rex*. Translated by David Mulroy. Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 2011.
- Szondi, Peter. *An Essay on the Tragic*. Translated by Paul Fleming. Palo alto: Stanford UP, 2002.