

Roland Barthes: Terror in Poetry

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The title of this paper pays homage to the subtitle ('Terror in Literature') of the famous essay *The Flowers of Tarbes* (1941), the masterpiece of bad-tempered but critical sharpness in which Jean Paulhan defended rhetoric against misology, that is, the art of writing against that hatred of language which seemed, in a rather affected way, to dominate French literature during the 1930s and 1940s.¹ For Paulhan, feeling obliged to innovate imposed a 'terror in literature', unlike rhetoric which could be seen to have a more peaceful dialogue with tradition. Therefore, we will see in a moment how bringing Roland Barthes and Paulhan together is not as incongruous as it might at first appear. But for the moment we can simply pay a homage that will be explained in due course, in relation to a word that we will then explore.

In fact, terror – and the intellectual violence that it presupposes – might be a good way in which to consider the enigma that preoccupies so much of Barthes's readership: why did he write so little on poetry?² Of course, the genre of poetry is neither forgotten nor even neglected in his Complete Works. We find Greek tragedy, German romantic poetry, Mallarmé and the French symbolists, the haiku, poetry in the Arab world (Morsi, Khatibi, the love poetry of Majnoun Leila) and even in Sephardic ... Far from ignoring the question, Barthes's first book, *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), features a chapter called 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?' that is often cited and which shows a marked interest in poetry. But this is meagre compared to the work on the novel, on Proust, on theatre, on Brecht, on history and on Michelet.

Terror

Terror is present at the very start of Barthes's complex relations with poetry. Wondering, in *Writing Degree Zero*, about the very existence of a

‘poetic writing’, he sets up a fundamental distinction between classical and modern poetry (Rimbaud, and not Baudelaire, being the poet who inaugurates the new era). So, for the classics, prose comes first, as it presents the fundamentals of language for which poetry is merely the ornamentation; moreover, the word, which cannot exist on its own, is shown as just one element caught in a syntactical chain, be it discursive or narrative. Modern poetry, by contrast, is characterised by a fundamentally different regime of prose, which relies on the word-thought (in which signified and signifier are inseparable), on the autonomy of the word and its polysemic status. We can see quite clearly how, within this antithetical mode of analysis, Barthes tends to take the side of the modern; at the same time, we may be struck by the non-irenic, that is painful and anxious, way in which it accounts for contemporary poetic creativity. Indeed, there is little doubt that the most enticing values of poetry are to be found in the classical domain: sociability, conversation, tenderness, etc., in opposition to the ‘modern terror’ of poetry:

These unrelated objects – words adorned with all the violence of their irruption, the vibration of which, though wholly mechanical, strangely affects the next world, only to die out immediately – these poetic words exclude men: there is no humanism of modern poetry. This erect discourse is full of terror, that is to say, it relates man not to other men, but to the most inhuman images in Nature: heaven, hell, holiness, childhood, madness, pure matter, etc.³

What then will be Barthes’s attitude when confronted with these realities that are so full of terror, and which seem to be linked to the human condition whilst questioning the gains of humanism? The theme of madness in general is barely given any space in his *œuvre*. For Barthes, trying to write in an extreme and violent way is but part of an illusion, affected even. If the dionysian spirit or the neurosis can be written, madness thwarts all attempts to be put into words, as we are reminded at several stages in Barthes’s 1973 essay *Pleasure of the Text*.⁴ And what about childhood? It is often present, but usually as something of a happy period (despite reference to his paternal bereavement). Defined by boredom, by embarrassment due to lack of finances, Barthes’s childhood, closely protected by his mother, points to no specific link to terror. However, death – omnipresent, obsessional – stalks his whole life’s work, from his (unpublished) 1941 postgraduate dissertation on

evocations and invocations in ancient Greek tragedy (which we will consider in a moment), up to the (posthumous) publication of his *Mourning Diary* in 2009. One or two examples will suffice. In his 1954 book *Michelet*, the role of the historian consists in giving voice to those who do not or no longer have the ability to speak, that is ordinary people and the dead; indeed, the troubling figure of the living dead moves from *S/Z* (1970) (in which the elderly castrato Zambinella is presented as a walking corpse) to the 1973 piece 'Textual Analysis of a Tale by Edgar Allan Poe'.⁵ In Poe's 'The Facts of the Case of M. Valdemar', a man, hypnotised at the moment of his death agony and therefore suspended between life and death, suddenly wakes up and cries out 'I am dead' before turning into a liquefied mass in front of our very eyes.

As we can see, existential terror is never far away from Barthes's world, but the way he treats it does not, or very rarely, pass through poetry. It is probably his 1980 essay *Camera Lucida* which shows most clearly what is at stake in death. At the end of the book, the search for an essence of photography has borne fruit: it is Time and therefore death at work which haunt each photograph, like an unspeakable *punctum*. What should we do once confronted with this obvious fact which each of us keeps on discovering throughout our lives? Before the brute terror of 'it-has-been', we hesitate between two contradictory (or perhaps complementary) options:

Society is concerned to tame the Photograph, to temper the madness which keeps threatening to explode in the face of whoever looks at it. To do this, it possesses two means.

The first consists of making Photography into an art, for no art is mad. [...]

The other means of taming Photography is to generalize, to gregarize, banalize it until it is no longer confronted by any image in relation to which it can mark itself, assert its special character, its scandal, its madness.⁶

As someone not interested in how gregariousness operates, Barthes is clearly relying on how art does. But which art should we choose if we are not ourselves photographers? How do we accommodate death (which does not mean denying or hiding from it) when all we have are the words of literature and when today's model for poetry tends to go towards feelings of terror?

Power of the Word

In order to reply to this crucial question, we must go back to one of the defining characteristics of modern poetry: the autonomy and the power of the word. We only have to remind ourselves of the taste for the word that Barthes's work displays, for the way it opens up thought, imagination or writing. Thus, in his 1967 essay 'Proust and Names', the hypothesis – albeit false – consists in making *A la Recherche du temps perdu* emerge from the unfolding and unfurling of its proper names; similarly, the article on Loti's novel *Aziyadé* asserts the poetic power of the heroine's name, as it evokes, and draws us into, its oriental trail.⁷ The fascination for the word, common to Barthes and to modern poetry, was already well attested in Barthes's postgraduate dissertation 'Évocations et incantations dans la tragédie grecque', supervised by the influential Hellenist at the Sorbonne Paul Mazon and conferred in 1941.⁸ In the Introduction, the young Barthes – 26 years old at the time – presents his project thus:

The origin of this dissertation is the aim to study a number of aspects of the problem of musical catharsis in Greek tragedy. [...] This meant returning to the study of those incantations and evocations in which, by word, gesture, sound and thought, the man-actor tries to have an effect upon the gods or the dead. (Barthes, DES, p. 2)

Thus, a fascination for the world beyond, the wish to make a bridge between two incompatible worlds, men and gods, the dead and the living, becomes a key feature of Barthes's intellectual and emotional life.⁹

Of all the means at man's disposal with which to reach out to the world beyond, the 'word' becomes a privileged tool. As Barthes puts it in the Introduction to his 1941 dissertation: 'The intrinsic power of the word is enormous; once used it has incalculable consequences' (DES, pp. 27-28). However, what does he mean by 'word' and in the singular? We are surely bound to generalise it: thus the 'word' implies all words and it refers to how the whole of human speech is implicated in the evocations and incantations. But before being plural 'the' word is a word as solitary in Aeschylus as it will be later in modern poetry. Many passages of the dissertation are very explicit on this:

In all primitive peoples the word possesses a magic power. The Greeks did not escape this belief, but they dressed it up using a very subtle deployment of their imagination: a name has an influence on destiny (Ajax, Œdipus, Helen, Ulysses, etc.). (DES, p. 27)

In reformulating once again the main idea of his dissertation, Barthes slips from 'word' into 'name', from generality into singularity. Just as every name determines the individual who carries it, so every word comes to take the form of an autonomous and special power:

There is something profound and frightening in this unbreakable power of the word for the Greeks. Their whole theatre seems to be built on a pessimistic idea: namely that destiny is what has been said, is the word pronounced previously, something that comes out of man and is superior to him; is that which is set in motion by him and cannot be stopped. There is nothing more frightening than a *thing* that *acts*. (DES, p. 27)

The power of speech is first and foremost the power of a noun on its own, be it a proper or a common noun; it is also when words begin to come together, making a short formula that is linked to destiny.¹⁰ But the 'word' in Barthes's writing never designates a discourse that is developed.¹¹

Does the insistence on the singular form ('the word') not remind us – or rather, does it not announce – the famous development in modern poetry and the autonomy of the sign? We will recall the erratic and hieratic characterisation of 'word-objects' in *Writing Degree Zero* cited above.¹² This is the way in which Barthes describes the evocations and invocations in Aeschylus' theatre:

With its intense use of the asyndeton, nominal phrases, short, chopped periodology, alliterations, repetitions, the whole style of tragic incantation is designed to give the maximum efficiency to the word: lyrical efficiency for those who wish, at all cost, to express a rare and violent feeling, and a magical efficiency for those who wish, via an ennobled, to reach the most profound essence of death and of divinity. (DES, pp. 40-41)¹³

From the one text to the other, the similarities are striking, as if, within twelve years (from 1941 to 1953), the characteristics common to Greek

tragedy found themselves transposed to post-war France. But if Aeschylean tragedy and modern poetry both become conscious of the very power of the word, it is not certain, from the one text to the other, that the philosophy of life and the aesthetic treatment of it are at all the same, nor that the place of terror remains identical.

Presence

The same question returns insistently: how to face up to the power of the word and the terror that it liberates? The reading by Yves Bonnefoy of *Writing Degree Zero* in relation to poetry will possibly allow us to see things more clearly.¹⁴ Describing the famous Barthesian distinction between ‘language’, ‘style’ and ‘writing’ [‘écriture’], the poet-theoretician rules out any apprehension of literature that valorises concepts, analytical commentary, to the detriment of ‘presence’. According to Bonnefoy, who is in favour of a less intellectual use of language, authentic poetry is that which succeeds in restoring the materiality of the world:

I call poetry memory that maintains itself within us, within us who speak, from the instants of presence that we have lived – often in childhood – to the contact with things in the world; it is [thanks to] a memory of these instants, and then, immediately, the desire to find them again, and then, suddenly, the discovery, using the route that is the sound of the word carried by the rhythms and therefore the metres, that a return will perhaps be possible, that all we need to do is to hold fast to our specific attention to this deep sonority, to this chorus itself that emerges from the chords of this mysterious instrument. (Bonnefoy, *Le degré zéro*, p. 184)

For Barthes, on the contrary, whether he is defining concepts (‘language’, ‘style’, or ‘writing’) or drawing mathematical equations with which to visualise the opposition between classical poetry and modern poetry, ‘presence’ is, we might say, absent; the ontological search (‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’) is restricted to general considerations that are almost entirely devoid of any examples or names of poets (with the exception of René Char).¹⁵

However, very curiously, and perhaps because he is looking for a foil to his own system, Bonnefoy overlooks anything in Barthes’s texts

that is travelling in the same direction as he is. Indeed, is the way in which the word is used in modern poetry so far removed from 'presence'? Any reader of *Mythologies* (1957) will recall how the Barthes of the 1950s defends a distinctly Sartrean conception of poetry, defined as the expression of the very meaning of things. Between myth and 'semioclasty' (or, semiology involved in a battle), there emerges a third way:

Here is another language that resists myth as much as it can: our poetic language. Contemporary poetry is a *regressive semiological system*. Whereas myth aims at an ultra-signification, at the amplification of the first system, poetry, on the contrary, attempts to regain an infra-signification, a pre-semiological state of language; in short, it tries to transform the sign back into meaning: its ideal, ultimately, would be to reach not the meaning of words, but the meanings of things themselves.¹⁶

As we can see, the two approaches are far from irreconcilable; and it is not by chance if both writers display the same fascination for the Japanese haiku, a form of poetry which precisely valorises the autonomy of the word and aims to restore the presence of the world. The sections in *The Empire of Signs* (1970) that Barthes gives over to the haiku come across as a happy reply to madness, to childhood and to death, thereby choosing a very different route from those suggested by Greek tragedy and modern poetry:

Western art transforms the 'impression' into description. The haiku never describes; its art is counter-descriptive, to the degree that each state of the thing is immediately, stubbornly, victoriously converted into a fragile essence of appearance: a literally 'untenable' moment in which the thing, though being already only language, will become speech, will pass from one language to another and constitute itself as the memory of this future, thereby anterior.¹⁷

The very precious formulation used here – using so many *chinoiseries* to describe Japan – is connected to Proustian memory, to Bonnefoy's 'presence', and to verbal power in Aeschylus. Thus the haiku, according to Barthes, connects with the erratic word in modern poetry, with the power of the proper noun, with the *punctum* of photography, and with

the power of evocation and even of invocation.¹⁸ With the haiku, a form which belongs neither to tradition nor modernity in the West, poetry can evoke an apparition, without any hint of madness.

Unfortunately, any dream of a poetry of the word, of an aesthetic conjuring away of terror, is never able for Barthes to get beyond theoretical description, the construction of a utopia (so, there is indeed a sense in which Bonnefoy's view is correct). Indeed, in its deep links to Japanese language and culture, the haiku is impossible in French. The failure is played out in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977) where Barthes or rather the person who speaks has a go at writing haikus, but they always miss their target. And, in his admiration for a form capable of evoking emotion, Barthes proposes two ways of attempting to write, the one as inconclusive as the other:

On the one hand, this is saying nothing; on the other, it is saying too much: impossible to *adjust*. My expressive needs oscillate between the mild little haiku summarising a huge situation, and a great flood of banalities. I am both too big and too weak for writing: I am *alongside it*, for writing is always dense, violent, indifferent to the infantile ego which solicits it. Love has of course a complicity with my language (which maintains it), but it cannot be *lodged* in my writing.¹⁹

As a poetry *par excellence* of the word and of presence, of the word serving presence, the haiku so dear to Bonnefoy fascinates Barthes as an unreachable model. If the elegant pages of *Empire of Signs* are able to give full homage to a foreign form, Barthes does not practise it himself.

What is then the solution which allows us to accommodate the word, whilst maintaining all its powers, and without giving into brute terror? The question still awaits an answer. In her recent biography, Tiphaine Samoyault has published a crucial 'fiche' which explains why Barthes might have, in relative terms, sidelined poetry.²⁰ This is what Barthes's lucid little note says:

Indirect. Explain why (the following paradox): RB, although greedy about language (and especially about the word), has never been interested in *Poetry*. That is because he needs the *indirect*, that is, a greedy prose (or a prose poetry: Baudelaire).²¹

Quite mysteriously, the 'fiche' relies on two words that are at once redundant and complementary: 'indirect' and 'greedy'. The former is connected to the oft-cited passage from the preface to his 1964 collection *Critical Essays*. Reflecting on the expressive aridity of the word 'condolences' (in this case, the word shows itself incapable of facing up to terror or death), Barthes finds the solution, when wishing to express his emotion, in valorising an art of the indirect, an art of detour which consists in dressing up a word in other words, in making up sentences, going fully into what we call 'literature'. This then explains the adjective 'greedy': in moving from the ascetism of the solitary or autonomous word to the gorging on the prose sentence, Barthes realises that the hieratic word, as a block removed from all constructions, gains from being reintegrated into a structure. What is then needed is to find a form of coupling, of continuousness, something which, paradoxically, reminds us of the virtues of classical poetry and its ability to accept and tame the word. This is a social and human linking, but which is also aesthetic, in meter, syntactical: no form of construction must be overlooked. Is good that which transcends the word abandoned to terror or to impotence.

The Sentence

As we might expect, Barthes does not turn to classical poetry (in the widest sense of the word); this form belongs to history and no spiral now will bring it frontstage. The solution lies perhaps in the 'fiche' that Tiphaine Samoyault publishes in her 2015 biography cited above. In his hierarchising of forms of expression, Barthes privileges the sentence over the word, prose over verse. It is his way of escaping terror, countering the solitude of the word by the coupling of a microstructure that owes nothing to meter.

Might then we consider his love of the sentence to be both a response to the solitude of the word and a substitute for an impossible poetry? The move away from verse towards prose, from structured metre to phrasal structure is part of an old feature of literature which goes back perhaps to Flaubert. If we think of the tendency of giving to the prose in a novel as great a prestige and as great a necessity as we would give to verse, the 'Style as Craftmanship' that Barthes attributes in *Writing Degree Zero* to the author of *Madame Bovary* and *Salammbô* becomes a major point of reference.²² Fascinated by Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Barthes devotes part of his 1976 seminar at the University of Paris-VII

to a commentary on seven sentences from the novel, beginning with the famous *incipit* of the first chapter: 'With the temperature at 33 degrees centigrade, the Boulevard Bourdon was absolutely deserted'.²³ In his magisterial analysis, Barthes explains to his students the way in which a sentence can seduce us as it finds a balance between the 'too much' and the 'not enough', competing with the alexandrine through its formalised character and sufficiently ironic not to be taken in total seriousness (as an already useless, if not obsessive, precision, the '33 degrees centigrade' detail is typical of the world of Bouvard and Pécuchet).²⁴

This cult of the sentence as transcendence of the word, as a model of linking words, can be explained in several ways. The prose sentence is central to everyday language, even if in life we never finish our sentences; it is like a social language *par excellence*, both the most basic and the most sophisticated of forms, capable of federating everyday words. Where verse is beholden to a unity in metre and rhythm (in French, there must be twelve syllables and two accentuated moments to make an alexandrine), the sentence by contrast acquires a semantic unity, something that corresponds to Barthes's taste for the intelligible, to his keenness to make signification the starting- and finishing-point of any reading. Thus there is a real distinction between Barthes and Bonnefoy to be made: in his keenness to get back to presence, the latter counts first and foremost on metre, whereas the former relies on the sentence to speak and understand the world – 'I idolize the sentence', writes Barthes in 'Deliberation'.²⁵

It is highly typical of Greek tragedy – and especially of the scenes of evocations and incantations – to put on stage the double birth of the sentence and of the verse as ways of transcending the word. Aeschylus' text commented by Barthes allows us to follow the genesis of the word, of syntax and metre, the move from cry to exclamation and towards poetry.²⁶ Barthes writes:

In a language as sensitive as Greek, the word is by nature very close to the emotion that lies beneath it. We need to feel that in the incantations of tragedy the word possesses a dignity all of its own: it obviously gets this from the religious aspects that we have mentioned. But Aeschylus managed, without abandoning the level of magic, to use aesthetic procedures alone. In his work, religion and stylistics come together, the one receiving its dignity from the other. (DES, p. 28)

The stylistics deployed in Aeschylus' tragedies afford a central place to verse; and, in the final section of his dissertation, Barthes analyses at length the rhythms and sounds of the evocations and invocations. But the dissertation also spends a long time on the shift, crucial in his view, from the word to the sentence. When do we have a sentence? Does it depend on there being a noun? Or a verb? What is its essential ingredient? The reply relies on Paul Valéry, whose lecture course Barthes followed at the Collège de France the very same year that he was writing his dissertation with Mazon. So, between the word (that is, solitary) and the verbal phrase (that is, completed), it is useful to leave space for the nominal phrase as a necessary stage for the gestation of the syntax:

The nominal phrase itself can be considered as an interjection that is shot-through with intelligence, a cry that is immediately included in the word, but not yet incorporating a perception of the complexities of temporal links and of the person that the verb represents. In this respect, the verbal structure of tragic incantations seems to back up Valéry when he does not place the verb in first place in the psycho-linguistic hierarchy. (DES, pp. 30-31)

Barthes adds a footnote to explain the reference: 'For Valéry, the human being's linguistic reactions follow this order: first there is exclamation (cry), then adjective, followed by noun, and then verb [Cours du Collège de France. 1940-41]' (DES, p. 31). Now Barthes returns to Aeschylus:

Nominal phrases are numerous here. During important moments of movement, the verb, at least in its temporal specificities, is absent. Thought moves quickly, saying the crucial words without taking the time to integrate them into a syntactic system that is by necessity a complex one (Using just one verbal form implies a host of difficult questions to ask oneself). Without exaggerating the meaning of a well-known usage in classical languages of Greek and Latin, the repeated use of the nominal phrase might look like an example of religious archaism, of part of the almost magical character of tragic incantations, with the requirement we have mentioned already of giving to the word, in all its nudity, the greatest possible weight and force. (DES, p. 31)

‘Subject, verb, complement’: the French education system has never refrained, since the end of the nineteenth century, from reminding us of the importance of this new trinity.²⁷ And even if a place must be given to the nominal phrase (the exception which confirms the rule), the true sentence, the sentence completed as a sentence, owes its existence to the verb, the ‘doing word’. In one way, Barthes behaves as the good pupil or simply like a good Frenchman of his time. Like the expansion of the word, the nominal phrase still belongs to an archaic world crying out for something new to take its place. It was during the second half of the twentieth century that we see how its use in the contemporary novel grew rapidly, to the point that sometimes it becomes a real literary mannerism. If the verb is not first in genesis (In the beginning was not the verb), the sentence has an immediate need of it in order to access thought, to become a fully elaborated form capable of transforming emotion into intelligibility. This impressive cathartic project – the transformation of brute sensation into clear intellection – will be with Barthes throughout his creative life. Sensitive to the ‘Greek miracle’, he holds aloft, in a lyrical way, the balance between body and spirit, percept and concept, sensation and its elucidation:

By studying the logical structure of the incantations, we have become convinced of something very moving, because it enlightens our general acquaintance with the Greeks: we now know that they had moments of deep emotion, of total lyricism, of the highest musical intoxication, coinciding – to the point of confusion – with the moments of intense desire to make deductions, of the greatest logical rigour of thought. For us today, who are used to attaching the adjective ‘dispassionate’ to the substantive ‘reason’, there is nothing stranger. But that is the Greek miracle: in the depths of Dionysian intoxication there is Apollonian lucidity. What we have learned in this chapter may be that there is no conflict where there reigns perfect coincidence and natural identity. (DES, p. 88)

At the end of his life, in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes remembers the following impressive project: in proposing ‘to *put forward* my moods’,²⁸ that is, to shift from the most physiological and emotional substratum to the light of knowledge, reconciling the untreatable singularity and the generality of science, he returns to the preoccupations of his student dissertation – or rather, he never stops combining in his work what he called the ‘two sexes of the mind’.²⁹

The potential of the sentence is at the heart of this apprenticeship. For Barthes, as for a number of writers of his generation, an incomplete sentence always has something slipshod, a little disjointed to it. For example, the ellision of the subject in the diary ('this evening, watered the flowers) invites a jump without which diary prose can never reach the status of the authentically literary. His article 'Deliberation' (1979), in which Barthes wonders about what is good about keeping a diary, puts the syntactical requirement at the centre of his preoccupations (the diary he dreams of will be like 'a workshop of sentences').³⁰ A *fiche* (card) in his 'Fichier vert' talks about the same requirement.³¹ Whilst preparing his *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, the author rereads all of his books and notes down his reactions there and then. One remark in particular will hold our attention: Barthes appears very happy and very proud of having avoided, throughout his career, not only the abuse of, but the very use of the nominal phrase. Perhaps we need to check this assertion; but, in the final instance, the precise outcome is of little importance. By practising or by praising a syntax that fits with French canons and with cathartic ideals, Barthes makes manifest an attachment to the sentence that without doubt is a key constituent and one of the most basic constants in his poetics.

However, in giving up on verse as an expansion of the word, Barthes sounds the death-knell for the beauty of an ancient Greek harmony that played with all types of expression. In placing meaning before rhythm, he is showing his essayistic interests, that is, those of the writer-intellectual; he also accepts that we have to give up on the assurances of metre so that we can enter fully into the modern era of critical questioning. There is nothing easier than to write an alexandrine (and we are not talking about its quality), but nothing less debatable than the succession of twelve syllables and the distribution of emphases. On the contrary, when do we actually finish a sentence? Always catalysable, always susceptible to being lengthened or enriched, a sentence never shows at first – and sometimes never at all – the absolute necessity that imposes and justifies the choice of and number of words. In privileging the sentence, in rejecting the comfort of the major metre forms, which in any case have become impossible to use, Barthes accepts a modern form of uncertainty: standing in opposition to the finished verse form is the precariousness of the sentence which constantly has to invent its definition. Where the classical verse would frame the word, and modern poetry grows in stature by announcing the terrifying solitude of words, the sentence for Barthes fights against madness, death and the ghosts of childhood by engaging in an activity whose outcome is

never certain. In order to do away with the impotence or the terror of the word, the sentence proposes a 'modern' solution (if we live in the era of disenchantment) or a 'postmodern' one (if it is the end of 'grand narratives'). In either case, the writer goes forth without the assurance provided by the ideological or aesthetic orderliness of a form: the sentence-maker stands half-way between the anguish of dereliction and the freedom of invention.³²

The Sentence: And After?

Writing is forming a sentence, and for Barthes it is chaining together a subject, a verb and a complement; but it is also looking beyond, associating, chaining together the sentences, that is, thinking about and implementing a larger form, one that is better at inhabiting duration and constructing time. But which discourse and which rhetoric should we adopt? It is then not by chance that we return to Jean Paulhan and his criticism of misology, as he argues in favour of a reconciliation of literature with the world of writers and with language. Only Barthes represents both sides of the debate (though isn't he more in agreement with Paulhan?): he shows a suspicion of language, of rhetoric, and, at the same time, the desire to rediscover sociability, humanism (just as Barthes writes in his preface to his 1964 collection *Critical Essays*: 'rhetoric is the amorous dimension of writing').³³ How do we give form to and expand these complete sentences, constituted as they are in opposition to the cry and the emotions which nevertheless underpin them?

We find then in Barthes's work fleeting attempts at valorising certain forms of poetry, those that promote forms of linking up; for example prayer, which pops up in a fugitive fashion in his first lecture series at the Collège de France, *How To Live Together*, when he refers to complines.³⁴ As the final prayer of the evening, the collective nature of this poetry must have allowed the monks to face up together to the entry into the night, into the terror of the night – Racine's *Athaliah* is here somewhere: 'It was in the horror of the blackest of nights'.³⁵ This oft quoted passage reminds us, in its own calmer and more discreet way, of the religious and collective dimension to the famous evocations and incantations of Aeschylean tragedy.

However, Barthes is not really a man of prayers. In its regular occurrences it is love poetry, poetry relating both to the couple and to the culture of a community, that plays a central role in *A Lover's*

Discourse, owing to the many references to Heine or to minor French poets – such as Jean Lahor’s verse ‘In the loving calm of your arms’.³⁶ And when it comes to love poetry, it is often linked to music, that is, communing with a form that works on harmony, in all senses of the term: prosody, tonality, the art of balance, are all elements in our distant memory of the ‘Greek miracle’. The musical poetry of Heine and Schumann stages the desire for fusion with the loved one just as tragedy exalted in the unity of the city over and beyond the trials and tribulations of its heroes.³⁷ Whereas the Romantic song [lied] celebrates, in both music and words, the dreamed union of the lovers, French melody is presented by Barthes as a set of assumptions by the French language, as if the music were prolonging the ‘significance’ of the words.³⁸

As a profoundly musical form, ancient Greek poetry was already playing with all the possibilities of the sign and its political construction was linked to the symphony of signifieds and signifiers:

With its religious origins, this respect for the sonorous substance of the word, led in Aeschylus himself to an acting aesthetic of an incredible refinement and influence. And even today we are not fully aware of what there is in it: our ears are too little used to perceiving the sonorous shimmer of this Greek language, with its infinite vocalic variations, its complex play of consonants whether aspirate or not, its elisions, its contractions, its musical emphases, its delight in alliteration or in contrasts: it is a sensual and religious language in which the sonorous substance of the word reigns and shines with an Apollonian brightness, decorates the slightest thought with the infinite prolongations of the music; in which the word, in how it looks and sounds, is no less dignified than the thought that it ‘achieves’ – however virtual this may be – and that it eternalises. (DES, p. 34)

Once again, it is a poetry deeply marked by the Greek example that inhabits Barthes’s world, without ever proposing any models that are immediately transposable. Indeed, the temptation of poetic prayer, lovers’ fusion in romanticism, or the advantages of prosody, never detain him very long. As we know, poetry is not really Barthes’s interest, even if its presence haunts his work.

Tragedy and the Novel

Though an adept of the discontinuous, Barthes never gives up on the continuous in prose. For him, writing consists less in valorising the detail or the structure, than in harmonising aspirations that are apparently contradictory. Every writer has to find their own form, that is, to find the best way to transcend the terror of the word and to assemble sentences. So his final books – *A Lover's Discourse*, *Camera Lucida* – all appear to be different attempts to articulate fragment and totality. Composed of a series of figures, classified in alphabetical order, the former finds its unity in the discourse of love and its dynamism in the barely hidden move from first meeting to union of the lovers. The latter, driven by the search for the essence of photography and structured in two parts that are deeply supportive of each other, is made up of a series of short chapters benefiting from a relative autonomy.

In his attempt to design a major writerly form capable of transcending word and sentence, Barthes never forgets the lesson of tragedy. Torn from the cry, the sentence is thus formed; and, saying it gradually leads to a mastery of its terror as this orchestrates all the figures of amplification and transformation. The art of Aeschylus is thus to have raised magic, the cultural and the religious, to a new dimension. Thanks to tragedy, a formulation becomes a form, and a simple sentence theatre.³⁹ Barthes goes on:

[I]n turn, in grasping hold of the word at the very centre of their supplication, men make the word into a weapon of attack; they brandish it towards heaven and hell and then throw this dead object which, acting like a shot-put, is alive and murderous; it is now that the word sees its function and its essence increase, developing in a supernatural way similar to Hugo's *Satyre*⁴⁰ who gradually fills and covers the world; the word becomes filled with all the pleading that has launched it; it absorbs human suffering, enriching itself with and invigorated by it, thereby becoming something enormous and personal, a gigantic force which nobody, even a god, will resist. (DES, p. 137)

Such homage to the power of literature and to the arts has rarely been seen in Barthes's writing. Of course, for someone who was often suspicious of language – 'language is fascist', he once suggested⁴¹ – it is difficult in his work to show such confidence. At the end of the

twentieth century, no one is able to write tragedy any more, at least not in the different forms emerging from the past – Greek, Elizabethan, French... Only an echo, the memory, the spirit of tragedy are still a possibility (some have read *Camera Lucida* precisely as a modern form of tragedy). Impossible in today's formal terms, tragedy does not directly interest Barthes. As we know, it is the novel, for a long time rejected, which preoccupies him at the end of his life; and it is the novel which, to his mind, seems the best response to putting words together, to creating a moment of anger, a movement capable of dissipating terror once it has been named.

So is the novel a means of getting beyond the poetic word? This comes across very clearly in *The Preparation of the Novel*, his final lecture series at the Collège de France.⁴² Here the haiku, suggested at the start as a model of notation, is quickly shown to be deficient when it is a question of thinking about duration. Barthes suggests a transcendence of these short poems (of presence) by using a vast narrative form that is yet to be invented. We might suggest a snappy formula here: the sentence is to verse what the novel is tragedy. If, as Barthes suggested in 1978, 'poetry is in some sense the effort that a language makes to show itself its own power', then the job of writing is to devise the form of substitution which will tame the word and harness its force.⁴³ The verse form that has been handed down by poetic tradition and the tragedy that has been so important in Western culture both offer models, or controlling features, that are unlikely to be used today. With the decline of the alexandrine across the twentieth century, combined with the glorious downgrading of tragedy to a museum piece in national culture, today's writer is not interested in the comfort offered by the most obvious and non-controversial forms available. Reduced to the sentence and the novel, to that which is formless, the modern writer confronts the precarious nature of a historical and cultural situation in which nothing is self-evident, and everything is to be reinvented. There is nothing more terrifying than warding off terror; but nor anything more up-lifting.

We thank Malcolm Heath for his assistance with the preparation of this translation.

Notes

¹ Jean Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes or, Terror in Literature*, trans. by Michael Syrotinski (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

² With its wide-ranging bibliography made up mainly of articles, Laurent Zimmermann's *Roland Barthes. Pas sans la poésie* (Paris: Cécile Defaut, 2016) is a useful resource. [Not yet available in English - translator's note.]

³ [Translations from the works of Roland Barthes are taken from the published versions; all other translations are my own – translator's note.] Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), p. 56. Here are the terms that are close to those in *Writing Degree Zero* used by Barthes to describe the poetry of Edoardo Sanguinetti: 'this language can disorder itself without liberating something unknown; hence there is, through a critical baroque, a liberating descent into the crucible (might we say, into the Hell?) of primitive meanings, of essential images, of unconscious figures, of alchimic, erotic and dream-like connections'. See Roland Barthes, 'Edoardo Sanguinetti', in *Oeuvres complètes*, new edn, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols. (Paris, Seuil, 2002), vol. III, p. 1241. Further references to the *Oeuvres complètes* will be signalled by 'OC' followed by volume and page number.

⁴ 'Thus every writer's motto reads: *mad I cannot be, sane I do not deign to be, neurotic I am*'. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1976), p. 6.

⁵ In Roland Barthes, *The Semiotic Challenge*, trans. by Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), pp. 261-93.

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Fontana, 1984), pp. 118-19.

⁷ Barthes's essays 'Proust and Names' and 'Pierre Loti: *Aziyadé*' are collected in *New Critical Essays*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 55-68 and pp. 105-21, respectively. Sometimes, contrary to this, the word is more like a crystallisation of previous elements that have not been formulated (for example, the discovery of the word 'idiorhythmy' launches the lecture series *How To Live Together* by giving form to a phantasm which up until then had been merely a word).

⁸ Barthes's qualification in 1941 was called the 'Diplôme d'études supérieures' (DES) and is roughly the equivalent of an MPhil or an MA by research in British universities. The dissertation on Ancient Greek evocations and incantations, which can be consulted in Barthes's archives at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, is currently being edited for publication by Christophe Corbier, Claude Coste and Malika Bastin-Hammou. We will be citing long passages from this unpublished dissertation, thereby allowing English-speaking readers to have a glimpse of this hugely important document for an understanding of Barthes's thought and educational training. Henceforth

it will be referenced as 'DES', with the number corresponding to the pagination of the typed document conserved in Barthes's archives.

⁹ As a member of the 'Groupe de théâtre antique de la Sorbonne', Barthes played Darius in a 1935 production of Aeschylus' *The Persians*. The dead king appears at one point in order to answer the calls of the living people who have invoked him. Barthes discusses this experience in a passage in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: MacMillan, 1977), p. 33.

¹⁰ 'The intrinsic power of the word is enormous; once used it has incalculable consequences. Greek literary know-how took hold of this theme and gave it dramatic and poetic elaborations: "The Seven Against Thebes" was the outcome of an oral formulation, reaching via the force of things its full realisation' (DES, pp. 28-29).

¹¹ If the 'word' is not to be conflated 'words' nor with discourse, the 'word' has the structuring capacity to launch the dramatic dialogue: 'The real echo – so characteristic of the genre – relies on the following procedure: a word uttered by an actor amounts to an obstacle for the next actor, whose mind suddenly stops at the image evoked by the previous speaker, gets hold of the theme of the lamentation. [...] These words – or more accurately, these images – act like a crack of the whip and they heighten and intensify the rebound of the incantation's movement. Aeschylus understood the authenticity of this image of the word as crack of the whip: [...] "The word that I have just heard is a crack of the whip for my heart"' [translator's note: This is a quotation from Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Maidens*, in *The Persians, The Seven Against Thebes, The Suppliant Maidens, Prometheus Bound*, 3rd edn, ed. by David Grene et al. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 139) (DES, pp. 67-68).

¹² See *Writing Degree Zero*, p. 56; however, the extant English translation, inexplicably, does not translate the whole expression 'mots-objets'.

¹³ The *rapprochement* between Greek tragedy and modern poetry is, in some sense, prefigured by the epigraph of his dissertation which Barthes borrows from Paul Valéry: 'Ancient rhetoric considered as ornaments and artifices those figures and relations which successive refinements by poetry have come to call essential; and which the future progress in analysis will one day designate as effects of deep properties of what we might call *formal sensibility*'. Paul Valéry, *Tel quel I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1941), p. 185.

¹⁴ Yves Bonnefoy is a well-known French poet whose '*Le degré zéro de l'écriture et la question de la poésie*' was a lecture given in 2000 and published in *Le siècle où la parole a été victime* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2010).

¹⁵ 'Poetry = Prose + a + b + c / Prose = Poetry – a – b – c' (*Writing Degree Zero*, p. 47).

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today' [from *Mythologies*], in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. by Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 120. Barthes also reminds us here how much poetry, by its very ambition, becomes prey to myth.

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983), p. 77.

¹⁸ We find the same idea in relation to Jean Cayrol's poetry: 'There is in it a crucial restoration of language: the word signifies the object without mediation nor auxiliary, without qualification nor its surroundings which disappear: the word *is* the object. This might seem to be a proposal that might look like a truism to common sense; but it is one which is proven throughout the history of literature, starting with the very notion literature, to figure an almost ideal state of human language, because perhaps, it is the state that is the most *human* of language'. Roland Barthes, '*Les mots sont aussi des demeures*', *OCI*, p. 256.

¹⁹ See 'Inexpressible Love', in Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2002), pp. 97-100 (p. 98).

²⁰ Starting in the 1950s, Barthes kept a card system which was both a tool for work and a personal diary. This card system – or rather, collection of card systems – can be consulted at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris.

²¹ Tiphaine Samoyault, *Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), p. 581.

²² The chapter in *Writing Degree Zero* called 'Style as Craftmanship', pp. 68-72, is concerned principally with Flaubert.

²³ Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, trans. by Alban Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1976), p. 21. [Translator's note: I have modified the extant translation ('up in the nineties') with '33 degrees centigrade' not in order to promote metric over imperial measures, but to convey the obsessive precision of Flaubert's description, related to the novel's two protagonists, that Barthes notices and which is lost with 'up in the nineties'.]

²⁴ Barthes's 1975 analysis of these seven sentences in Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet* has been edited by Claude Coste and published in Roland Barthes, *Album, Correspondance, Inédits, Varia*, ed. by Éric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 2015), pp. 257-81.

²⁵ Roland Barthes, 'Deliberation', in *A Barthes Reader*, pp. 479-95 (p. 482).

²⁶ 'The magic word emerges out of the exclamation: the language of ritual is very much one of exclaiming; the interjection, which is the spontaneous objectification of a desire, of a fear, of an appeal, moves towards the word, that is towards generality. This movement ends up in the lyrical' (DES, p. 29); and Barthes adds in a footnote: "Lyric poetry developed out of the exclamation". Valéry, *Tel quel I*, p. 179... – The proof comes through its opposite: "The impassioned language finds it easy to turn into music, as Carlyle and Spencer have shown..." Delacroix [translator's note: Henri Delacroix, *Le langage et la pensée* (Paris, F. Alcan, 1930)] p. 133 – And from Valéry once more: "Lyric poetry is the type of poetry that presupposes the *voice in action* – the voice directly emerging from or provoked by, – things that are seen or are felt as *present*". *Tel quel I*, pp. 179-80 – And Claudel says the following about the two notes that Japanese musicians like to be heard: "...it is the cry of the animal

working vaguely towards the word, the ceaselessly thwarted thrust of the voice, an effort of desperation, a painful and vague attestation.” (*Oiseau Noir dans le Soleil Levant*, Paris, Gallimard, 1929, p. 92). In their incantations, their ultra-lyrical sections, Greek Tragedies remain very much in the line of religious and magical traditions: the lamentation of incantation which connects with the dead is above all a long cry that uses an infinite variety of vocalisations’ (DES, p. 29).

²⁷ On this see Gilles Philippe, *Sujet, verbe, complément, Le moment grammatical de la littérature française (1890-1940)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002). Coll. ‘Bibliothèque des idées’.

²⁸ [Translator’s note: See *Camera Lucida*, p. 18. I have felt compelled to modify significantly the translation that has incorrectly rendered ‘argumenter’ in French as ‘remonstrate with’ in English.]

²⁹ For this expression borrowed from Michelet, see the chapter ‘Ultra-sex’ in Roland Barthes *Michelet*, trans. by Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) in which the historian is dreaming of a reuniting of the heart with reason.

³⁰ Barthes, ‘Deliberation’, p. 481.

³¹ The ‘Fichier vert’ is the main index of Barthes’s extensive card system.

³² On this question, see Barthes’s seminar ‘La phrase’, edited by Éric Marty and published in *Genesis*, 31 (2010), and the seminar devoted to *Bouvard and Pécuchet* (in *Album*).

³³ Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. by Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. xvi.

³⁴ ‘As night falls: Compline (just before bed)./ The idea of compline: beautiful. The community prepares to brave the night (imagine a countryside far away from anywhere, with no lights, so where nightfall really means the threat of darkness). Living-Together: perhaps simply a way of confronting the sadness of the night together. Being among strangers is inevitable, necessary even, except when night falls’. Roland Barthes, *How To Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 129.

³⁵ Says Athaliah in Act II scene 5 of Jean Racine’s *Athaliah* (1691). See Jean Racine, *Britannicus, Phaedra, Athaliah*, trans. by C. H. Sisson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 161.

³⁶ Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, pp. 104-05.

³⁷ ‘Indeed, phonetic interjections are particularly numerous in the chanted parts of the incantations in tragedy. These exclamations are always justified by the intensity of the feeling in any one passage of the incantation; but we must not lose sight of the *sonorous* role of these interjections, of the musical backup that they afford (which Euripides exploits, see *The Frogs*): skilfully distributed, the exercise in singing style intensifies the musical emotion, reuniting for a moment the listener to that which is expressed only through the music, and plunging

them into the primordial world of the exclamation that is freely modulated' (DES, p. 29).

³⁸ In this context, 'significance' is found in the sensual dimension of language and meaning.

³⁹ He writes: 'In all the incantations, except the two benedictory choruses, we have found the outline of the ancient cult hymn. This structure is probably a natural reaction of the mind in a position of supplication and which is the basis of incantation. But the most important point is to appreciate the procedures by which Aeschylus hijacks this cultural structure in favour of the drama; this is very clear in *The Choephoroi* and in *The Suppliant Maidens*. The freedom, the suppleness of the ritualistic structure always hides a dramatic, even metaphysical richness. Everything that Aeschylus touches is magnified; he eliminates nothing from the forms that the past hands down to him, he transforms and amplifies everything. In his work, ancestral religion takes on new resonances; like the masks that – to great effect – his actors wore, he is the dramatic resonator, the amplifier, and to a certain extent the deformer – if we accept that we have to deform in order to deepen – of the strangest and most profound forms of universal and human supplication' (DES, p. 114). Elsewhere Barthes suggests: 'Whether on the formal or the internal level, the incantations in Aeschylus' work are above all movements; the sentiments in them reach a level of violence all the greater that they have to be materially effective. These *stasima* are not there to calm; the chorus in them is not restricted to the role of philosophical pacifier. Everything is there to invite passion or drama. These incantations put the tragedy into motion and amplify it. They are the high points, the moment of a choice, where the horizon topples over, where the drama changes direction and widens out. At these moments, each spectator must have been bowled over and intoxicated to the depths of their soul; they must have ardently asked themselves questions about what was going to happen next' (DES, p. 133).

⁴⁰ [Translator's note: Barthes is referring to Victor Hugo's four-part poem 'Le satyre' (written in 1859) in which the promethean and highly procreative eponymous character is found to be living, to the consternation of the gods, on Mount Olympus.]

⁴¹ Roland Barthes, 'Inaugural Lecture', in *A Barthes Reader*, pp. 457-78.

⁴² Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel. Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978-1979 and 1979-1980)*, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁴³ Roland Barthes, 'La minorité des minorités', *OC V*, p. 450.

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