

I Want to Die, I Hate My Life—Phaedra's Malaise¹

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FACED WITH THE EVER-ENLARGING incoherence of the present, characterised by war without end, the increasingly frantic shoring up of the *imperium*, the deepening contagion of ethnic, religious, and civil conflict, and the fatuous theologization of political life with the categories of good and evil, I would like to turn to seventeenth-century neoclassical French drama, in particular the case of Jean Racine's 1677 tragedy, *Phèdre*, "the masterpiece of the human mind," as Voltaire declared. I must confess at the outset that the reasons for this choice are not entirely clear to me and this essay is not intended as allegory. But I cannot deny that it was written with an eye to the present. I will let the reader make of this what he or she will and turn in detail to the play and its fascinating philosophical implications.

My focus is on the character of Phaedra and the nature of her malaise. I begin by trying to elicit the dramatic pattern of Phaedra's confessions of her desire, a desire that produces a guilty subjectivity that I illustrate with reference to Augustine's *Confessions*. I go on to describe Phaedra's existence as defined by the fact that, unlike the conventional tragic hero, she is unable to die, that existence is, for her, without exit. I pursue this thought by turning to Emmanuel Levinas's brief reading of *Phèdre* and linking it to what is arguably the enabling motif of his work, namely that existence is not the experience of freedom profiled in rapture, ecstasy, or affirmation, but rather it is that which we seek to evade in a movement of flight that simply reveals—paradoxically—how deeply riveted we are to the fact of existence. Counterintuitively perhaps, I try to show how this Levinasian thought has its home in Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, in particular in his treatment of the concept of *Befindlichkeit* (state-of-mind or attunement) and its relation to thrownness and facticity. This is the ontological meaning of Phaedra's guilt: one's fundamental self-relation is to an unmasterable thrownness, the burden of a facticity that weighs one down without one's ever being able to pick it up. I try to show how this experience of guilt injects a fearful *languor* into Phaedra's limbs, a languor that I trace to the experience of erotic stupefaction: Phaedra is hypnotized by the desire that she loathes and it is here that she languishes. After linking languor to the concept of

original sin, I seek to take seriously the possibility of *Christian* tragedy, that is, an essentially antipolitical tragedy that would consist in the rejection of the worldly order and the radical separation of subjectivity and the world. I conclude with a remark as to how Racine's *Phèdre* might lead us to question some of our critical and theoretical *doxai* about the nature of tragedy.

I want to die, I hate my life. Such is the malaise of Phaedra. Yet why does Phaedra feel this malaise? Well, adultery, incest, and murder of an innocent are not mere moral baubles, even for one descended from the line of the gods. Phaedra was the daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë, and granddaughter of Pasiphaë's father, the Sungod or Helios, whose light burns Phaedra's eyes and whose scorching gaze she cannot bear, but from whom she cannot hide. The Sun watches her throughout the play: silent, remote to the point of absence, but of piercing intensity, like the *Deus absconditus* of Jansenism. Her father was King of Crete and later judge in Hades. She married Theseus, King of Athens, who brought her back to Greece after slaying the Minotaur in the Cretan labyrinth. Aphrodite, as she is wont, inflamed Pasiphaë with a monstrous passion for a bull. Daedalus, the artificer, made a hollow wooden cow where Pasiphaë could crouch to be fucked by the bull. From this union was born the Minotaur. It is the overwhelming power of her mother's predestined passion that now flows through Phaedra's veins.

Venus is in Phaedra's blood: it flows through her like a virus, the sickness of illicit erotic desire. With Theseus away for over six months on one of his adventures, she burns with passion for Hippolytus, Theseus's virginal son and her stepson. When Phaedra first saw Hippolytus, she declared, "darkness drenched my eyes." She languishes in dark desire, Venus clawing at her heart, her mother's sin boiling in her blood. Worn down by the guilt of this passion, and the division it creates within her, she resolves to die. This is how we first encounter her in the play, dragging herself into the light to greet her grandfather, the Sungod, for the last time, "Soleil, je te viens voir pour la dernière fois."²

Phaedra's silence about her sin is broken on three occasions, in three confessions that mark the dramatic highpoints of the play. Believing Theseus dead and at the promptings of her Iagoesque confidante Oenone, Phaedra with great reluctance confesses her love for Hippolytus:

PHAEDRA: Tu vas ouïr le comble des horreurs.
J'aime . . . A ce nom fatal, je tremble, je frissonne.
J'aime...
OENONE: Qui?
PHAEDRA: Tu connais ce fils de l'Amazone,

Ce prince si longtemps par moi-même opprimé?

OENONE: Hippolyte! Grands Dieux!

PHAEDRA: C'est toi qui l'as nommé.

[PHAEDRA: Prepare to hear the crowning woe.

I love ... I tremble, shudder at the name;

I love ...

OENONE: Who?

PHAEDRA: You know that prince whom I myself

So long oppressed, son of the Amazon?

OENONE: Hippolytus?

PHAEDRA: *You* have pronounced his name.] (1.3)

This is why Roland Barthes calls *Phèdre* a nominalist tragedy.³ Phaedra's culpability is crystal clear to her from the beginning of the drama; the only issue is getting her to name it, to break her silence. As Theramenes says in the first scene, she suffers from a malady "qu'elle s'obstine à taire." The central issue in the tragedy is the naming of the monstrous, the monstrous desire that produced the Minotaur, the monster that Theseus killed, the desire for his virginal son that now courses through Phaedra's body. She names the truth a second time in a scene of awesome erotic intensity, where Phaedra, in a sort of trancelike rapture, confesses to Hippolytus:

Hélas! Je ne t'ai pu parler que de toi-même.

Venge-toi, punis-moi d'un odieux amour.

Digne fils du héros qui t'a donné le jour.

Délivre l'univers d'un monstre qui t'irrite.

La veuve de Thésée ose aimer Hippolyte!

Crois-moi, ce monstre affreux ne doit point t'échapper.

Voilà mon Coeur. C'est là que ta main doit frapper.

Impatient déjà d'expier son offense,

Au-devant de ton bras je le sens qui s'avance.

Frappe. Ou si tu le crois indigne de tes coups,

Si ta haine m'envie un supplice si doux,

Ou si d'un sang trop vil ta main serait trempée,

Au défaut de ton bras prête-moi ton épée.

Donne.

[My foolish heart, alas, too full of you,

Could talk to you of nothing but yourself,

Take vengeance. Punish me for loving you.

Come, prove yourself your father's worthy son,

And of a vicious monster rid the world.

I, Theseus's widow, dare to love his son!

This frightful monster must not now escape.
 Here is my heart. Here must your blow strike home.
 Impatient to atone for its offence,
 I feel it strain to meet your mighty arm.
 Strike. Or if it's unworthy of your blows,
 Or such a death too mild for my deserts,
 Or if you deem my blood too vile to stain
 Your hand, lend me, if not your arm, your sword.
 Give me it!] (2.5)

Phaedra is making two extraordinary demands here marked by the two monosyllabic exclamations that break up the rhythm of the alexandrine line: "Frappe," "Donne" (strike, give). If Hippolytus will not strike at the monstrous desire within Phaedra with his physical ardor, piercing her heart with his arm as she rises to meet him, then she will take his sword from him and do it herself: "give." She removes his sword from him in a gesture that it would simply be too facile to describe in terms of castration.

Hippolytus—the chaste, the hunter; and Artemis, the goddess of hunting, is also the goddess of chastity—is appalled. He flees. When rumors of Theseus's death come to appear somewhat exaggerated, Phaedra concocts the story that Hippolytus had raped her in order to protect herself. After learning this news from sly Oenone, Theseus banishes Hippolytus, damning him with a prayer for vengeance to the god Neptune. Resolved to tell the truth to Theseus, events take a sudden turn for Phaedra when she learns that Hippolytus, whom she believed indifferent to all women, loves Aricia, last surviving descendent of the line of kings of Athens usurped by Theseus. Hippolytus could love, but loved not Phaedra. Suddenly consumed by jealousy, she stands in silence while Hippolytus is violently and rather operatically drowned by Neptune's sea monster. Phaedra takes poison and, after confessing her guilt to Theseus, dies. Theseus—poor, wooden, uncomprehending, two-dimensional comic-book hero that he is—concludes the play: "D'une action si noire / Que ne peut avec elle expirer la mémoire!" (5.7).⁴ He embraces Aricia as his daughter and exits stage left to find his son's body. Such is the story.

She wants to die, she hates her life. But does Phaedra die? Well, yes and no. I would like to look at Phaedra's third and final confession that effectively concludes the drama at the end of act 4—act 5 is little more than dramatic housekeeping, tidying up a few loose ends. Still burning for Hippolytus, Phaedra sees that she has sunk into a web of criminal deception fueled by incestuous desire. In her wretchedness, she turns to face her ancestors, the gods. Let me cite the text in Paul Schmidt's free and muscular rendering and then in the original French:

Oh, Oenone! . . . am I going mad?
 How can I ask a husband I've betrayed
 To avenge my sinful love for his son?
 I'm sinking in a sea of criminal designs:
 Adultery, incest, and murder of an innocent—
 Tell me to stop! Tell my ancestor the sun
 To burn away my pain to paltry ashes.
 My grandfathers were gods, the stars above
 Shine in the shape of my ancestral lineage;
 The universe is part and parcel of my blood.
 Where can I run? How can I ever get away?
 My father is the fatal judge of Hell,
 What will he do when he sees his daughter confess to crimes that
 Make the demons stare?
 Become my executioner?
 Find me a fitting form of eternal punishment?
 Tell him the family curse lives on.
 Oh god, if only I'd enjoyed my love! Just once!
 To die like this, unsatisfied,
 And full of nothing but remorse!

Que fais-je? Où ma raison se va-t-elle égarer?
 Moi jalouse! Et Thésée est celui que j'implore!
 Mon époux est vivant, et moi je brûle encore!
 Pour qui? Quel est le cœur où prétendent mes vœux?
 Chaque mot sur mon front fait dresser mes cheveux.
 Mes crimes désormais ont comblé la mesure.
 Je respire à la fois l'inceste et l'imposture.
 Mes homicides mains, promptes à me venger,
 Dans le sang innocent brûlent de se plonger.
 Misérable! Et je vis? Et je soutiens la vue
 De ce sacré Soleil dont je suis descendue?
 J'ai pour aïeul le père et le maître des Dieux;
 Le ciel, tout l'univers est plein de mes aïeux.
 Où me cacher? Fuyons dans la nuit infernale!
 Mais que dis-je? Mon père y tient l'urne fatale.
 Le sort, dit-on, l'a mise en ses sévères mains:
 Minos juge aux enfers tous les pâles humains.
 Ah! Combien frémira son ombre épouvantée,
 Lorsqu'il verra sa fille à ses yeux présentée,
 Contrainte d'avouer tant de forfaits divers,
 Et les crimes peut-être inconnus aux enfers!
 Que diras-tu, mon père, à ce spectacle horrible?
 Je crois voir de ta main tomber l'urne terrible,
 Je crois te voir, cherchant un supplice nouveau,
 Toi-même de ton sang devenir le bourreau.
 Pardonne. Un Dieu cruel a perdu ta famille:
 Reconnais sa vengeance aux fureurs de ta fille.

Hélas! Du crime affreux dont la honte me suit
 Jamais mon triste coeur n'a recueilli le fruit.
 Jusqu'au dernier soupir, de malheurs poursuivie,
 Je rends dans les tourments une pénible vie.

[What am I doing? I have lost my mind!
 I, jealous? And 'tis Theseus I implore!
 My husband is alive and yet I pine.
 For whom? Whose heart have I been coveting?
 At every word my hair stands up on end.
 Henceforth the measure of my crimes is full.
 I reek with foulest incest and deceit.
 My hands, that strain for murder and revenge,
 Burn with desire to plunge in guiltless blood.
 Wretch! And I live and can endure the gaze
 Of the most sacred sun from which I spring.
 My grandsire is the lord of all the gods;
 My forebears fill the sky, the universe.
 Where can I hide? In dark infernal night?
 No, there my father holds the urn of doom.
 Destiny placed it in his ruthless hands.
 Minos judges in hell the trembling dead.
 Ah! How his horror-stricken shade will start
 To see before him his own daughter stand,
 Forced to admit to such a host of sins
 And some, perhaps unknown even in hell!
 What, father, will you say to that dread sight?
 I see your hand slip from the fateful urn;
 I see you searching for new punishments,
 Yourself and your own kin's executioner.
 Forgive me. Venus's wrath has doomed your race.
 Your daughter's frenzy shows that vengeance forth.
 Alas, my sad heart has never enjoyed
 The fruits of crimes whose dark shame follows me
 Dogged by misfortune to my dying breath,
 I end upon the rack a life of pain.] (4.6)

Burning and wretched, she turns to face the Sun, her grandfather. In this movement of turning, she reveals the division at the heart of her subjectivity. Phaedra is watched throughout by the Sun and she is acutely conscious of being watched by this silent, distant, but omnipresent Jansenist God. The Sun is a murderous power, inescapable and distant, a divinity much closer to Yahweh than to an incarnate, loving Christ or any being in the Greek pantheon. As Lucien Goldmann persuasively argues, at the center of the tragic vision of Racine and Pascal is a God who is hidden to the point of absence, who never intervenes in the

drama of the world, and yet who watches intensely and who, for the tragic hero, is more present than anything else: "[T]he God of tragedy is a God who is always present and always absent."⁵ What Goldmann is bringing to bear on Racine is Georg Lukács's understanding of tragedy in an essay from his first book, *Soul and Form*. The first lines of the essay seem to capture precisely Phaedra's situation: "A drama is a play about a man and his fate—a play in which God is the spectator. He is a spectator and nothing more; his words and gestures never mingle with the words and gestures of his players. His eyes rest upon them: that is all. 'Whoever sees God dies,' Ibsen wrote once; 'but can he who has been seen by God continue to live?'"⁶ Phaedra's answer to this last question is a resolute "no," but, as we shall see, it is a negativity that must remain an aspiration.

Against the divinity of the Sun, there is the virus of Venus in her blood, "a cruel God," the darkness of her mother's desire. Phaedra's subjectivity is torn between these two poles, the Sun and Venus, which could be redescribed as the call of conscience and the pressure of libidinous desire. But Phaedra's experience of her subjectivity is cosmic, her forebears fill the skies, the universe is constituted by the opposed forces aiming at her tragic destruction. These forces are metaphorically coded in the imagery of light and dark that fills the play. The merciless light of the sun is obscured by the shadow of Venus, producing what Phaedra oxymoronically calls "une flamme si noire," "such a black flame."⁷ Phaedra's guilt—and all guilt I would be tempted to add—is experienced as movement, an oscillation between opposites. Guilt is stretched between these two poles of conscience and desire, of the Sun and Venus. It is in this movement that Phaedra's subjectivity is rent.

Phaedra is a paradox: she detests her desire, yet she cannot give way on it; she fears the burning conscience of the Sun, yet she constantly calls to him. The gravity of her desire is constituted by her will to pull free of it in the experience of conscience. The promised ecstasy of libidinous transgression is directly proportionate to the power of moral prohibition. For Phaedra, and this is her paradox once again, her sad heart has never experienced the fruits of the crimes that she has committed. Hers is a sin of the heart, not a sin of the flesh. She never experiences erotic pleasure with Hippolytus, she never couples with the bull like her mother, and the truth is that she could not because her conscience would not let her, not even if some crafty Daedalus built her a wooden engine of disguise. She is unable to sin fulsomely. This is why she ends her life upon a rack of pain. For this, finally and pathetically, she asks forgiveness, in a simple "Pardonne," which echoes and qualifies the "Frappe" and "Donne" of the previous scene.

To my mind, what Racine is dramatizing here is the inner conflict that constitutes Christian subjectivity in Augustine's *Confessions*, a work whose

influence on the theology of Jansenism cannot be overstated. Cornelius Jansen's 1,300-page commentary on Augustine was posthumously published in 1640 and quickly condemned as heresy by the Inquisition, the Jesuits, and the Pope himself. In book 8 of the *Confessions*, Augustine describes himself as "still tightly bound by the love of women," which he describes as his "old will," his carnal desire.⁸ This will conflicts with his "new will," namely his spiritual desire to turn to God. Alluding to and extending Paul's line of thought in Romans 7, Augustine describes himself as having "two wills," the law of sin in the flesh and the law of spirit turned towards God. Paralyzed by this conflict and unable to commit himself completely to God, these two wills lay waste Augustine's soul. He waits, hesitates, and hates himself. Seeing himself from outside himself, from the standpoint of God, Augustine is brought face-to-face with his self and sees how foul he is, "how covered with stains and sores" (C 193). He continues, "I looked, and I was filled with horror, but there was no place for me to flee away from myself." But where Augustine finds peace in conversion to God at the end of book 8, Phaedra continues to burn in the dark fire of self-division, unable to free herself.

Such are the fatal circuits of what Foucault would call the Christian hermeneutics of desire opposed to the pagan aesthetics of existence.⁹ In a seminar at New York University in 1980, Foucault is reported to have said that the difference between late antiquity and early Christianity might be reduced to the following questions: the patrician pagan asks, "Given that I am who I am, whom can I fuck?" The Christian asks, "Given that I can fuck no one, who am I?"¹⁰ Foucault's insight is profound, but let me state categorically and without a trace of irony that, as a committed atheist, I side with the deep hermeneutics of Christian subjectivity against the superficial pagan aesthetics of existence. The question of the being of being human—who am I?—the fundamental issue of philosophical anthropology that begins with Paul and is profoundly deepened in book 10 of the *Confessions* arises in the sight of God. The problem is how that question survives God's death. This is Rousseau's question in his *Confessions*, it is Nietzsche's question in *Ecce Homo*, and it is Heidegger's question in *Sein und Zeit*.

Everything wounds Phaedra. When she first appears onstage, she is barely able to bear the weight of her body, her knees—trembling—threaten to give way: "mes genoux tremblants se dérobaient sous moi" (1.3). Her jewels, veils, and the very braiding of her hair are felt as afflictions. Her first action onstage, in one of Racine's rare stage directions, is to sit, "elle s'assied" (1.3). She experiences her existence as a sheer weight, as the body being pulled to earth by the gravity of erotic desire, the virus of Venus. Existence is not something to be affirmed; nor

is it the ground for one's freedom, understood as a projective leap towards the future. No, life is pain. Destiny is predestined. Existence is thrown. It is to this thrownness, this rack of pain, that Phaedra is *riveted*. She is riveted to herself, to her curse, to the sin that flows in her blood, to the sheer fact of her life. That is the cause of her malaise.

So, where can she hide? Nowhere. What is unique about Phaedra's life—and this is the crucial point for my interpretation—is that it cannot be escaped in death. Death brings no end to her malaise because death, for her, is not an end. In the cruel words of Theramenes in the first scene of the play, Phaedra is “une femme mourante et qui cherche à mourir” (1.1). Her existence is what Barthes calls “une mort-durée.”¹¹ With this in mind, consider again Phaedra's third confessional speech: her ancestors were gods, the sun and stars above shine in the shape of her ancestral lineage, the universe is part and parcel of her blood, her cosmic subjectivity. But if her forbears fill the sky, dividing her guilty subjectivity between conscience and desire, then can she escape into the dark infernal night of Hades? Can she escape from this rack of pain by killing herself? No, because her father is the fatal judge of hell, and holds the urn of doom. And what will he do? Forgive her? Forgive such unspeakable crimes that continue the horror of the family curse? It is hardly likely. Will he kill her? He cannot, as she is already dead. He will therefore have to find some fitting new form of eternal punishment.

If Phaedra's existence is defined by malaise, then this malaise will continue after her death. Which is to say that death is not death, but simply a deeper riveting to the fact of existence and its eternal curse. Phaedra's discovery is death's impossibility. Death is not the possibility of an escape hatch, something she can dispose of through the controlled leap of suicide. Rather, there is a fate worse than death, namely that of an existence without end, whether here-above in the sight of her grandfather, Helios, or there-below at the mercy of her father, Minos. After her death at the end of the play, Phaedra's sufferings will continue only more intensely in the dark suffocacy of Hades. Existence is without exit.

Which raises the following question: if Phaedra does not die, then of which subject is this play the tragedy? Who or what dies in this tragedy? In my view, the corpse on stage at the end of the play is not that of Phaedra, but that of the city, the state, the world. The moral of the tragedy is that life in the world is impossible. I will come back to this.

She hates her life, she wants to die, but she cannot. Learned readers might have noticed that I have been glancing over my shoulder at Levinas while pondering Phaedra's malaise. Levinas cites part of the above passage from Racine—together with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* and modern examples from Poe and Maupassant—in his discussion of what he calls the *il y a* in *De l'existence à l'existent*:

Le ciel, tout l'univers est plein de mes aïeux.
 Où me cacher? Fuyons dans la nuit infernale!
 Mais que dis-je? Mon père y tient l'urne fatale.¹²

For Levinas, Phaedra confronts what he calls "le 'sans issus' de l'existence," the exitlessness of existence. With the *il y a*, Levinas asks us to undertake a thought-experiment, "Let us imagine all beings, things and persons, reverting to nothingness" (*EE* 93). But what would remain after this reversion? Nothing? Levinas's claim is that the very nothingness of all things is experienced as a kind of presence: an impersonal, neutral, and indeterminate feeling that "quelque chose se passe," what he elsewhere calls "an atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence."¹³ The *il y a* is this murmuring, the indeterminate sense of something happening in the absence of all things, expressed with the neutral or impersonal third-person pronoun. The present absence of the *il y a* is a descendent of the hidden Jansenist God.

To illustrate phenomenologically the experience of the *il y a*, Levinas writes, "We could say that the night is the very experience of the *il y a*" (*EE* 94). This is what Maurice Blanchot calls the essential or other night towards which the desire of the artist tends. The night into which all familiar objects disappear, where something is there but nothing is visible, the experience of darkness, the density of the void where lucid objectivity collapses into a swarming of points. This is the night of insomnia, the passive watching in the night where intentionality undergoes reversal, where we no longer regard things, but where they seem to regard us: *la nuit me regarde*. This is what Levinas calls "la veille," which denotes both watchfulness and wakefulness, a vigil, a night-watch, but also the state of being on the brink or verge (*EE* 111). Borrowing Blanchot's definition of the artist, we might say that Phaedra is "l'insomniaque du jour," the insomniac of the day.¹⁴ Like all of Racine's tragic heroes, she cannot sleep. During her first appearance on stage, Oenone says, "Les ombres par trois fois ont obscurci les cieux / Depuis que le sommeil n'est entré dans vos yeux [Thrice have the shades of night darkened the skies / Since sleep last made its entry into your eyes] (1.3). One is reminded of Pascal's extraordinarily austere words, "Jesus is suffering the torment of death until the end of time. We must not sleep during that time."¹⁵ These words find a more or less direct echo in Estragon's words in *Waiting for Godot*, in what is possibly the best line ever written: "Was I sleeping while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now?"¹⁶ In her sleeplessness, and on the brink of madness, Phaedra watches wakefully and is watched constantly by the sleepless gods, whether the vengeful transcendence of the Sun or her father's eternal night in Hades.

The mood that accompanies this experience of being riveted to existence is not anxiety or fear, but rather *horror*. As is so often the case, Levinas is using Heidegger as a critical lever to open his own thought. In *Sein und Zeit*, anxiety is the basic or fundamental mood experienced in the face of being-towards-death. Therefore, the most horrible thought would be that of conceiving the possibility of my own death, of that fatal moment when I slip over into nothingness. Against this, Levinas claims that “horror is in no way an anxiety about death” (EE 99). What is most horrible, then, is not the possibility but rather the impossibility of my death. “Demain, hélas! Il faudra vivre encore”¹⁷—such is the sentiment of the world of horror, the world of vampires and zombies, the undead and the living dead. What is truly horrible is not death, but the irremissibility of existence, of awakening underground in a coffin with nobody to hear your sobbing or your fingers scratching on the wood; of being paralysed and speechless while a team of doctors casually discuss what they diagnose as your permanent vegetative state, and so on and so on. Horror is possession by that which will not die and which cannot be killed—something wonderfully demonstrated by Maupassant in his short story “The Horla.” Phaedra feels herself possessed by that which she cannot escape, both by the sin of Venus in her blood and the mute presence of the Sun in her conscience. Of course—and this is the entire paradox of horror—what she is possessed by is herself, by her consciousness of sinfulness. The subject of horror is the subject’s horror at itself, at that demonic hither-side of itself that it seeks to evade. There is no need for demons—it is the subject itself that is demonic.¹⁸

Phaedra’s horror at herself provokes malaise, but what is it exactly to be *mal à l’aise*? Levinas writes the following in his stunning first original essay from 1935, “De l’évasion”: “Le malaise n’est pas un état purement passif et reposant sur lui-même. Le fait d’être mal à son aise est essentiellement dynamique. Il apparaît comme un refus de demeurer, comme un effort de sortir d’une situation intenable. . . . C’est une tentative de sortir sans savoir où l’on va, et cette ignorance qualifie l’essence même de cette tentative” (Malaise is not a state that is purely passive and reposing upon itself. The fact of being in a state of malaise is essentially dynamic. It appears as a refusal to remain, as an effort to leave an untenable situation. . . . It is an attempt to leave without knowing where one is going, and this ignorance qualifies the very essence of the attempt).¹⁹ Thus, malaise is not a passive or quiescent state, it is a dynamic state, even a dramatic state, that arises as a refusal to remain in existence. Malaise is a movement that attempts to *evade* existence. Phaedra is riveted to her existence and this fact provokes a malaise that makes her want to evade it. This is how I understand what might otherwise appear to be her madness: “Insensée, où suis-je? Et

qu'ai-je dit? / Où laissé-je égarer mes vœux et mon esprit" [Madness! Where am I, what have I said? / Whither have my desires, my reason strayed] (1.3). She would like to be "insensée," but she is not insane. Madness would be an escape, an evasion from her curse, but she remains tragically lucid throughout.

She wants to die, but she cannot. She would be mad, but remains sane. In the agonizing meanwhile of her suffering, she seeks to evade herself. In what? In death, but she cannot die. In eroticism, but she cannot even commit the sins for which she lacerates herself. In the Wooster Group's extraordinary version of the play, Phaedra is submitted to violent and noisome enemas as if seeking to evacuate and evade her own body. Around her, the other characters abstractedly play badminton. This is the world, it would appear: a distraction, a farce, a comic game. Phaedra tries to play, but lacks the strength even to lift the "birdie" or "shuttlecock" (possibly an even sillier word than "birdie"). Phaedra is enchained to the fact of herself and this is what she wants to evade by fleeing towards the world. Existence, the being of being human, is not something to be embraced, it is rather that in the face of which we take flight towards the world in a movement that Levinas calls "excedence": "Ainsi, au besoin d'évasion, l'être n'apparaît pas seulement comme obstacle que la pensée libre aurait à franchir, ni comme la rigidité qui invitait à la routine, exige un effort d'originalité, mais comme un emprisonnement dont il s'agit de sortir" [Thus, for those needing to evade, being does not simply appear as an obstacle that the free movement of thought would be able to cross, nor as a routine-producing rigidity demanding an effort of originality, but rather as an imprisonment which it is a question of leaving behind] (DE 377). Being is not our home; its house is a prison, the cell of the self constantly surveyed by the murmuring of the *il y a*. This prison is airless and Phaedra is constantly close to asphyxiating. The space of the drama is claustrophobic and enclosed. The tragic hero is a captive. There is no wind and the characters in the drama cannot breathe. One has the sense of the action taking place in a box, a lit-box that is being watched, not just by the audience, but by the players and by the gods themselves. It is a little like the play within the play in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—*The Mousetrap*—an intrigue by which players are caught, guiltily riveted to themselves, where "conscience does make cowards of us all" (3.2, 3.1). After noting that the desire for evasion can "revêt une forme dramatique,"²⁰ Levinas goes on, "Dans l'identité du moi, l'identité de l'être révèle sa nature d'enchaînement car elle apparaît sous forme de souffrance et elle invite à l'évasion. Aussi l'évasion est-elle le besoin de sortir de soi-même, c'est-à-dire *de briser l'enchaînement le plus radical, la plus irrémédiable, le fait que le moi est soi-même*" [In the identity of the ego, the

identity of being reveals the nature of its enchainment because it appears under the form of suffering and it invites evasion. Thus, evasion is the need to leave oneself, that is, *to break the most radical and irremissible enchainment: the fact that the ego is itself*] (DE 377). Existence is enchainment not emancipation. Phaedra experiences it as suffering and as the desire to evade oneself, to flee towards the world, to exend herself in empty distraction by playing badminton or whatever. But the movement of flight is held tight by the chain that binds me to myself. Such is the basic fact of the human condition: that I am myself, *hélas!*

Counterintuitively perhaps, the Levinasian thought with which I am trying to understand Phaedra's experience has its home in *Sein und Zeit*, but it is a Heidegger read very much against the grain. It is specifically the concept of *Befindlichkeit* that is of interest here: state-of-mind, attunement or already-having-found-oneself-there-ness. Heidegger's claim is that I always already find myself attuned in a *Stimmung*, a mood or affective disposition. Such a mood discloses me as *geworfen*, as thrown into the "there" (*Da*) of my being-in-the-world. For Heidegger, these three terms—*Befindlichkeit*, *Stimmung*, and *Geworfenheit*—are interconnected in bringing out the nature of what Heidegger calls *Faktizität*, facticity. Heidegger's early work—and this is a debt that Levinas repays from the first to the last word of his published work, despite his unflinching horror at Heidegger's political commitment—is a hermeneutics of facticity, a description of the everyday ways in which the human being exists.

In being disposed in a mood—and here we begin to hear Phaedra's voice—Dasein is satiated or weary (*überdrüssig*) with itself, and as such its being becomes manifest as a burden or load (*eine Last*) to be taken up. The burdensome character of one's being, the sheer weight of the "that-it-is" (*Das es ist*) of existence, is something that I seek to evade. Heidegger writes, "Im Ausweichen selbst ist das Da erschlossenes" (In evasion itself is the there disclosed).²¹ This is fascinating, because Heidegger is claiming that the being of Dasein's *Da*, the there of its being-in-the-world, is disclosed in the movement that seeks to evade it. Evasion discloses that which it evades. It is precisely in the human being's turning away (*Abkehr*) from itself that the nature of existence first becomes manifest. I find myself as I flee myself and I flee myself because I find myself. Heidegger rather enjoys the paradox "gefunden in einem Finden, das nicht so sehr einem direkten Suchen, sondern einem Fliehen entspricht" [found in a finding that corresponds not so much to a direct seeking, but to a fleeing] (SZ 135). What is elicited in this turning away of Dasein from itself is the facticity of Dasein's being

delivered over to itself (*Faktizität der Überantwortung*) and it is this that Heidegger intends by the term thrownness, *Geworfenheit*.

The parallels between Heidegger and Levinas in the above-cited passages, although striking, should not be overstated. True, the concept of *Befindlichkeit* reveals the thrown nature of Dasein in its falling movement of turning away from itself. But two paragraphs later in *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger will contrast this movement of evasion with the concept of *Verstehen*, understood as ability-to-be, which is linked to the concepts of *Entwurf* (projection) and *Möglichkeit* (possibility). That is, Dasein is not just thrown into the world, it can throw off that thrownness in a movement of projection where it seizes hold of its possibilities-to-be. This movement of projection is the very experience of *freedom* for Heidegger. Dasein is a thrown project—but where Heidegger will place the emphasis on projection, possibility, and freedom as the essential elements in the movement towards *authenticity*, Levinas might be read as following out another possible trajectory of the existential analytic of *Sein und Zeit*. This trajectory is what might be called “originary inauthenticity.” Let me explain myself.²²

Originary inauthenticity begins by accepting that what I reluctantly confront in my evasive turning away from myself is the fact of my facticity. This stares back at me like an enigma, the enigma of who I am, the past whose opacity constantly threatens to overwhelm me, like the virus of Venus in Phaedra’s blood. In the wisdom of Paul Thomas Anderson’s 1999 movie *Magnolia*, “You might be through with the past but the past isn’t through with you.” Originary inauthenticity is the thought that human existence is fundamentally shaped in relation to the brute fact of a thrownness that cannot be mastered through any existential projection. The virile surge of freedom is the mere rattling of bars in a prison cell. Authenticity slips back into a prior inauthenticity from which it cannot escape but which it would like to evade. From this perspective, human existence is something that is first and foremost revealed as a burden, a weight, a load, as something to which I am riveted without being able to know why or know further. This is how we first meet Phaedra in Racine’s drama. Inauthentic existence has the character of an irreducible and intractable *thatness*, what Heidegger called “das Daß seines Da.” I feel myself bound to “the that of my there,” the sheer *Faktum* of my facticity.

Dasein learns to take up this burden in the experience of guilt (*Schuld*), understood as indebtedness (*Verschuldung*) or existential lack. As Heidegger writes in his extraordinary pages on guilt, Dasein is a thrown basis (*ein geworfene Grund*). As this basis, Dasein continually lags behind itself, “Being a basis [*Grund-seiend*], that is to say existing as thrown [*als geworfenes existierend*—one of Heidegger’s nicely oxymoronic

formulations], Dasein constantly lags behind its possibilities" (SZ 284). The experience of guilt reveals the being of being human as a lack, as something wanting. In the light of these remarks, we might say that the self is not, as many would have Heidegger believe (and arguably as he believed himself at the time of writing *Sein und Zeit*), the ecstasy of a heroic leap towards authenticity energized by the experience of anxiety and being-towards-death and consummated in the moment of vision (*der Augenblick*). Such would be the reading of the existential analytic that sees its goal in *autarky*, self-sufficiency or self-mastery. Rather, the self's fundamental self-relation is to an unmasterable thrownness, the burden of a facticity that weighs me down without my ever being able to pick it up. Expressed temporally, one's self-relation is not the living present of the moment of vision, but rather a delay with respect to oneself that is perhaps best expressed in the experience of fatigue and languor. This, I would claim, is the ontological meaning of Phaedra's guilt, its existential movement, prior to any ontic penumbræ.

Phaedra desperately tries to project or throw off her thrownness through life in the world. But this movement of throwing off catches her in its throw and inverts the movement of possibility. She finds herself, mood-wise as Heidegger might have said, riveted to the fact of her self, to her facticity. Phaedra's word for facticity is *blood*, which is not to be understood biologically. Rather, there is a whole metaphysics of blood at work in Racine's tragedy: blood is the existential mark of the past, of one's bindedness to a past that you might think you are through with, but which is not through with you. Contaminated by the virus of Venus that flows in her veins, Phaedra cannot exist in the present, let alone the future of projective freedom. Rather, she is a prisoner of her past, the facticity of her mother's monstrous desire and her grandfather's conscience. Phaedra's present continually lags behind itself. She cannot make up her time. She is always too late to meet her fate and this is why she is so utterly fatigued.

The horror of being riveted to one's facticity injects a fearful *languor* into Phaedra's limbs. The virus of Venus that flows in her blood weighs her down. She writhes, she burns. Her body possesses or is possessed by an unbearable gravity that pulls her earthwards. Languor is her affective response to the exitlessness of existence, to the fact of being chained to herself. What interests me greatly here is the experience of languor as a bodily response to facticity, of the body being coursed through by a desire that is experienced as alien, the virus of Venus in the veins. This desire overtakes me and slows me down, inducing a languid sluggishness, a lethargy, a creeping inertia, a sort of *Trägheit*—which is Freud's

word for describing the death-drive, that cosmic-sounding force that provides a compelling analogue to the world of Phaedra's experience.

Languor makes me an enigma to myself. I find myself enchained to a facticity whose very nearness makes me lose focus and unable to catch my breath. I burn, breathless, in my languor. This experience is wonderfully described by Augustine in *Confessions*, book 10, where he is agonizing about the virtue involved in the sensual pleasure of religious music. He writes, and think here of Phaedra's sense of being watched by God, "But do you, O Lord my God, graciously hear me, and turn your gaze upon me, and see me, and have mercy upon me, and heal me. For in your sight I have become a question to myself and that is my languor [*mihi quaestio factus sum et ipse est languor meus*]" (C 262). Augustine's words are cited here in Jean-François Lyotard's remarkable, and remarkably obscure, posthumously published *La confession d'Augustin*, an extremely Christian text for such an avowed pagan.²³ My languor is the question that I have become for myself in relation to the present-absent *Deus absconditus* who watches me, who may heal and have mercy upon me, but whom I cannot know and whose grace cannot be guaranteed. The questions I pose to God make me a question to myself. Lyotard adds, gnomically, "*Lagaros*, languid, bespeaks in Greek a humor of limpness, a disposition to: what's the point? Gesture relaxes therein. My life, this is it: *distentio*, letting go, stretching out. Duration turns limp, it is its nature" (CA 18).

The experience of languor, for Lyotard, is both the body's limpness, its languid quality, and time as distension, as stretching out, procrastination. In languor, I suffer from a delay with respect to myself, my suffering is experienced as what Lyotard calls, in language reminiscent of Blanchot, "waiting": "The *Confessions* are written under the temporal sign of waiting" (CA 70). Originally inauthentic, the weight of the past makes me wait, and awaiting, I languish. I grow old, I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled. I am filled with longing. Lyotard, close to dying as he is writing, quotes the above passage from Augustine for a second time, and adds, "*[I]pse est languor meus*. Here lies the whole advantage of faith: to become an enigma to oneself, to grow old, hoping for the solution, the resolution from the Other. Have mercy upon me, Yahweh, for I am languishing. Heal me, for my bones are worn" (CA 70).

Phaedra languishes. In an existence without exit, time stretches out and she waits for an end that will not come. She experiences languor as a mental and physical weariness, a sheer fatigue in the face of her thrownness. But her languor also has strong erotic overtones: it is a feeling of dreaminess and laxity, closer to the Middle English "love-longing" and the German *Sehnsucht*, yearning.²⁴ This is the sort of eroticized sickness that afflicts Troppmann, the hero of Georges Bataille's

Le bleu du ciel, languishing in his disgrace and burning with hallucinatory sexual desire and thoughts of his own death. The book begins, "I know. I'm going to die in disgraceful circumstances."²⁵ In Phaedra's confession to Hippolytus, she says, "Oui, Prince, je languis, je brûle pour Thésée" [Yes, Prince, I languish, I burn for Theseus] (2.5). And again, "J'ai languì, j'ai séché, dans les feux, dans les larmes" [I languished, I dried up, in the fire, in tears] (2.5).

Phaedra's malaise is the experience of languor as an affective response to the fact of being riveted to herself. Guiltily bound to the fire of Venus that burns in her blood with the distant Sungod watching impassively, she languishes sensuously in this captivity. Life is a trance for Phaedra, a sort of agonized fainting away that produces moments of erotic stupefaction where she is hypnotized by the desire that she loathes. In this trance, past and present merge and she finds in Hippolytus the image of Theseus, so that when she says to the former that she burns for the latter, then these words are directed to the same erotic fantasm.

If *Phèdre* is a nominalist drama, then there is a name that my entire discourse is dishonestly circling around without discussing, namely *sin*. Might not originary inauthenticity be another name for sin? Is this entire project not therefore an attempt to recover the concept of sin? This remains an open—if not gaping—question.

Immersed as he was in Christian theology, Heidegger's existential analytic is alert to this question and neatly sidesteps it. First, he insists that his concept of falling, *das Verfallen*, should not be understood as a fall from a state of grace to a state of sin (SZ 280). Second, Heidegger rather cutely claims that as sin is ontic and the Dasein-analytic is ontological, his concept of guilt proves nothing either *for* or *against* the possibility of sin (listen to the sound of a philosopher eating his cake and having it). Now, such a move would be justified if one could restrict the concept of sin to the ontic domain. But I have my doubts: if the concepts of falling and guilt can be raised to the dignity of ontology, then why not also sin? I do not mean sin as an ontic feature of everyday (im)moral action, but rather as an essential feature of the being of being human. This would exclude venial, mortal, or actual sin, which might indeed be classed as ontic, but include original or hereditary sin, which is a claim about the being of being human. All that I have said about the inauthentic subject finding itself in flight, disclosing itself in its evasive turning away from itself, might be redescribed as an attempt to recover the notion of hereditary sin. For what is hereditary sin but the claim that the being of being human is originally constituted as a lack, as a radical indebtedness to a past that cannot be made up by the subject's own

volition? Original sin constitutes the subject in a state of want, as a thrown basis that cannot throw off that thrownness in a movement of free projection. Existence is that load or burden to which I am enchained and in which I languish. I languish in sin, like Oswald at the end of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, whose final Phaedra-like words before he collapses into the languor of his hereditary sickness are "the sun, the sun."²⁶

Heidegger, however, comes close to acknowledging the ontological status of original sin in the protocol of a two-part talk given in Rudolf Bultmann's seminar in 1924, "The Problem of Sin in Luther." Although the original manuscript was lost and the short published text is a student transcript written in reported speech and consisting largely of quotations from Luther, Heidegger speaks of the movement of sin as an experience of flight: "He who flees once flees in such a way that he constantly wishes to distance himself further."²⁷ More intriguingly, Heidegger endorses Luther's critique of the scholasticism of Catholic theology and follows the Protestant emphasis on the ontological centrality of sin, writing that the "the being of man as such is itself sin," and again, "sin is not an affixing of moral attributes to man but rather his real core. In Luther, sin is a concept of existence" (PS 108). The perspective of authentic faith can only be attained when one has fully understood the originally inauthentic being of sin. The difference between Heidegger and Luther consists precisely in the attainability of authentic faith: for Heidegger, it is my ownmost possibility which I can seize hold of by affirming my finitude, whereas for Luther it is God's possibility, namely the giving or withholding of grace.

I would like to conclude with a remark about tragedy and comedy. Racine's *Phèdre* is a tragedy, is it not? Yet, what happens in a tragedy? Why is tragedy tragic? Tragedy is tragic because someone dies, sometimes a whole stageful of personae. If Phaedra is the tragic heroine, then we have seen that her death is at least ambiguous and possibly, on the view argued for in this paper, impossible. She dies, but her existence does not come to an end. It continues in the twilight of Hades with the same awful languor and malaise, the same experience of being riveted to the original sin of who she is, with the gods still watching on. Is Phaedra therefore a tragic figure? One might wonder whether her fate is more tragic than tragedy, inspiring not so much pity and terror as horror.

But, if Phaedra does not die, then of whom is this drama the tragedy? Who is the subject of this tragedy? On this point, Goldmann's interpretation of *Phèdre* proves once again invaluable in leading us back to Racine's Jansenist inspiration.²⁸ At the core of Jansenism is a refusal of the world and a turning of the subject towards a hidden, watchful God. In what Goldmann calls Racine's "tragedies of refusal," what gets shown

is the impossibility and futility of life in the world. What therefore happens at the end of *Phèdre* is not so much her actual death as her death to the world. What Phaedra is forced to renounce is the temptation of life in the world, of the temporary satisfaction of desire, of some sort of contentment.

The world is a farce, a mere bauble, a comic illusion where individuals appear light, empty, and two-dimensional. To a much stronger degree than any other tragedy I know, Phaedra is not only the eponymous protagonist of the drama, but also the only substantial character onstage. The other onstage characters are slight and, indeed, slightly comic: Oenone is little more than a sounding board for Phaedra's essentially solitary dialogues, Theseus is something of a flatfooted oaf throughout, and poor, virginal Hippolytus is an unworthy object of such ferocious desire. Besides Phaedra, the only real characters are offstage: the gods and ancestors to whom Phaedra addresses her monologues. In the face of the farce of the world, it is to the gods that Phaedra is obliged to confess. No one else has the capacity to understand. She is a deep Christian trapped in a superficial pagan world. To this extent, the drama of *Phèdre* once again presses against the limits of the genre of tragedy and one wonders whether its depiction of the world is not in fact closer to Hegel's understanding of the world of comedy as that of illusion, deception, and insubstantiality. At times, Phaedra appears like some lost beautiful soul withdrawn from an uncomprehending world.

This brings me back to the Wooster Group's dramatisation of *Phèdre—To You, the Birdie!*—which is deeply comic, often farcical, and where bathos replaces tragic pathos. The weapons of tragedy—swords, shields, and daggers—are comically sublimated into badminton racquets and shuttlecocks. The comic effect is reinforced by the Wooster Group's use of technology, where the performance is punctuated with noises reminiscent of some anachronistic video game or an imagined soundtrack to a silent movie. Unwittingly or not, the Wooster Group are true to the Jansenist inspiration of the play. By playing tragedy as comedy, what is achieved is the radical separation of the character of Phaedra from the noisy and senseless sport of the world that surrounds her.

Is this to say that the tragic, the truly and deeply tragic—the experience of being riveted to the sheer fact of existence, and the games we pursue to evade this fact—is something that can only be played comically? Does the tragic have to be comic for us, here, now, whosoever we are and whatever moment of history this passes for? One might speak of tragic-comedy, after all there are good Beckettian precedents. Is the tragic only tragic as the comic? If it is—and I am inclined to think so—then this is not funny, not funny at all.

This is how I would read another stunning contemporary rewriting of the Phaedra story, *Phaedra's Love* by Sarah Kane from 1996.²⁹ Turning the

previous versions of the play on their head, Hippolytus is here pictured as an inert, heartless, sexual hedonist sprawled on a sofa surrounded by electronic toys, eating hamburgers and crisps while he masturbates pleasurelessly into a sock. After confessing her love for him, Phaedra gives Hippolytus oral sex, after which he reveals both the fact of his gonorrhoea and that he has already slept with Phaedra's daughter. For his sins, he is eventually castrated and disembowelled by Theseus, giving Hippolytus the only glimmer of pleasure that he feels in the entire play. But what I find particularly compelling is the way in which the bleakness of Kane's drama is sustained by moments of deliciously dark humor. For example:

DOCTOR: Does he have sex with you?

PHAEDRA: I'm sorry?

DOCTOR: Does he have sex with you?

PHAEDRA: I'm his stepmother. We are royal. (PL 66)

Or again:

PRIEST: Love never dies. It evolves.

HIPPOLYTUS: You're dangerous

PRIEST: Into respect. Consideration. Have you considered your family?

HIPPOLYTUS: What about it?

PRIEST: It's not an ordinary family.

HIPPOLYTUS: No. None of us are related to each other. (PL 93)

Returning to Racine, but keeping both the Wooster Group and Sarah Kane in mind, it would seem that *Phèdre* is not exactly the tragedy that one might imagine. Something dies, but it is not Phaedra. What dies is the world, and the corpse onstage at the end of the play is not Phaedra's, it is that of the illusion of the polis, the city, the state, the political order. The tragedy here is that of the political order, of Helleno-Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*, or Heideggerian *In-der-Welt-Sein*. As with Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, a tragedy almost contemporary with *Phèdre*, the ship of state is a wreck at the end of the play. Built up through war, conquest, bloodshed, and usurpation, it is destroyed by them too. The moral inference is that life in the world is a game of power, a farce of force, a murderous illusion. It is senseless.

The antipolitical nature of Racine's tragedy is what arguably separates it most profoundly from the entire spirit of ancient Greek tragedy. Attic tragedy dramatizes the *agon* at the heart of the constitution of the political order, whether that between the old and new gods (Orestes versus the Furies) in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* or between the laws of the family and the laws of the polis (Antigone versus Creon) in Sophocles'

Antigone. The essence of Attic tragedy is the conflict between opposed, yet mutually justified, claims to justice. Such conflict results either in the dissolution of an unjust polis, as is the case with the *Antigone*, or the institution of a new political order of justice, as in the *Oresteia*. Attic tragedy concerns the conflictual nature of political substance. Seen from this perspective, *Phèdre* is something completely different. It is what Nietzsche would see as a monstrous contradiction in terms: a *Christian* tragedy. Antipolitical in its essence, the moral of *Phèdre* is the utter rejection of the temporal world. The true life is elsewhere.

The differences between Attic and Christian tragedy become obvious when one compares *Phèdre* with Euripides' *Hippolytus*.³⁰ Although there are many obvious Euripidean borrowings in Racine, it is the additions and subtractions that catch the eye, most strikingly the terrible economy of Racine's verse in comparison to the slight loquaciousness of Euripides. As the play's title would suggest, Phaedra is more marginal to the action in Euripides than in Racine, where Phaedra's subjectivity is center stage. The chorus, which plays a large role in Euripides, is absent from Racine, as is much of the moralizing judgment one finds in the former. The character of the nurse is more central in Euripides and she is presented as a more caring and interesting character. Also, Hippolytus's loathing of women is much more obvious, which makes his death by a bull emerging from the waves all the more poignant. But the main thematic action is in terms of the divine opposition between Artemis (hunting and chastity) and Aphrodite (eros). Hippolytus is the enemy of the latter and friend of the former and the drama consists in the revenge of Aphrodite, the Cyprian as she is called, upon Artemis. Sin is central to the *Hippolytus* but it is here that the difference with Racine is most clearly marked. Theseus sins in killing his son by bringing down Poseidon's curse upon him, but this sin is *pardoned* and pardon is the central theme of the drama, with characters requesting forgiveness for their actions. This is crystallized in the closing scene, where Artemis appears in a *deus ex machina* and pardons Theseus in front of his dying son, "Men may well sin, when gods so ordain." This forgiveness is then echoed by the expiring Hippolytus, who breathlessly mutters to his father, "No, you are free. I here absolve you of my death." That is, sin can be forgiven, which is unthinkable in Racine, whereas Phaedra expires asking for but not receiving forgiveness: "Pardonne."

For Racine, only Phaedra lives in the truth. And she lives in the truth by refusing to live in the world. It is the world that dies in the tragedy and Phaedra who lives . . . after a fashion. This gives a very intriguing twist to the Aristotelian conception of tragedy characterized by *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*. Having resolved to die at the beginning of the play, Phaedra becomes persuaded to live in the world. Her recognition at the

end of the play is that this is impossible and she resolves to die once again, only to discover that this is also impossible. Aristotle might understandably have been perplexed.

The truth of subjectivity has to be lived apart from the world. Such is the tragic vision of Jansenism and its many heirs, from Kantian moral autonomy in a political kingdom where means are justified by ends, to Levinas's defense of subjectivity as separation in a world dominated by the political horror of war. There are many other heirs. But how far apart are subjectivity and the world? Here we confront the most acute dialectical paradox of *Phèdre*. If the lesson of Racine's tragedy is that life in the world is impossible, that the true life transcends the world, then I am still obliged to live in the world. The world is the only reality of which I can be sure and there is no question of a mystical intuition or a higher state of authentic awareness within the tragic vision. I live immanently in a world which is real and of which I can be sure, yet I experience a demand for transcendence that exceeds the world, but also my powers of cognition: the incomprehensible source of the moral law in Kant, the transcendent ethical demand of the other in Levinas. Hence the need, in Pascal, for the wager, which is not some intellectual game for a sceptical, urbane, seventeenth-century audience, but is rather the best bet of that which I cannot be sure. The tragic vision is a refusal of the world from within the world, as Goldmann writes, "Tragic man is absent and present in the world at one and the same time, exactly as God is simultaneously absent and present to man."³¹

The human being, like Phaedra, is a paradox: we are ineluctably *in* the world, but we are not *of* the world. That is, *we are not what we are in*. Such is the curse of reflection. We are confronted with a world of things, but we are not at one with those things, and that experience of not-at-one-ness with the world *is* the experience of thinking. In other words, the human being is an eccentric creature, an oddity in the universe. Such eccentricity might be described as tragic, but it might be even better approached as comic.

Without God, the drama of Racine's *Phèdre* is reduced to being some story about a crazy woman trying to commit incest at court. We have to believe *that* Racine believed. Yet, what if we do not believe *what* he believed? What if we want to accept a tragic vision without God? Can that thought really be endured? Can it? Really? We will have to find out for ourselves.

NOTES

1 These thoughts were initially prompted by an invitation from Andrew Quick and Adrian Heathfield to respond to the Wooster Group's version of *Phèdre*, entitled "*To You, the Birdie!*" performed at the Riverside Studios, London, May 2002, directed by Elizabeth LeCompte, with Kate Valk as Phaedra and Willem Dafoe as Theseus. I make extensive use of Paul Schmidt's excellently direct unpublished version of Racine's text, prepared for the Wooster Group for the original New York production. Aside from its presentation to generous audiences at London, Cork, New York, and Iceland, this text was the 2003 Simone Weil Lecture at the Australian Catholic University in Sydney and Melbourne. I am grateful to Rita Felski, Rai Gaita, Tom McCarthy, and, in particular, Jill Stauffer and Gabriela Bastera for their responses. All references to *Phèdre* are to the Pléiade edition, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 1, ed. Raymond Picard (Gallimard: Paris, 1950). With minor adaptations, I have used the John Cairncross translation in *Phaedra and Other Plays* (London: Penguin, 1963). All subsequent page references will be given in the text by act and scene number.

2 "Sun, I come to see you for the last time."

3 See Roland Barthes, *Sur Racine* (Paris: Seuil, 1960), 115–22.

4 "With her, such a black act cannot be expunged from memory."

5 Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God. A Study of A Tragic Vision in the "Pensées" of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, trans. P. Thody (London: Routledge, 1964), 50, and cf. 36–37.

6 Georg Lukács, "The Metaphysics of Tragedy," in *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1974), 152. Interestingly, one can also find the words "Whoever sees God dies," without acknowledgement to Ibsen, in Maurice Blanchot's "Literature and the Right to Death," *The Gaze of Orpheus* (New York: Station Hill, 1981), 46.

7 For a helpful discussion of the imagery and language of *Phèdre*, see Edward James and Gillian Jondorf, *Phèdre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 19–52.

8 *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans J. K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 188–89; hereafter cited in text as *C*.

9 Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1985), 5–6, 11–13.

10 I owe this anecdote to conversations with Bernie Flynn.

11 Barthes, *Sur Racine*, 116

12 Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existent*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1986), 102; hereafter abbreviated *EE*.

13 Emmanuel Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989), 26.

14 Maurice Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 185.

15 Cited in Goldmann, *The Hidden God*, 67, 80.

16 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 1986), 84.

17 "Tomorrow, alas! it will still be necessary to live."

18 I owe this remark to conversations with Rudi Visker.

19 Emmanuel Levinas, "De l'évasion," *Recherches philosophiques* 5 (1935–36): 380; hereafter cited in text as *DE*.

20 "... take on a dramatic form"

21 Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 15th ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1984), 135; hereafter abbreviated *SZ*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson as *Being and Time* (New York: Harper, 1962).

- 22 My overall interpretation of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* can be followed in more detail in Simon Critchley, "Enigma Variations: An Interpretation of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*," *Ratio* 15.2 (2002): 154–75.
- 23 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, trans. Richard Beardsworth (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 18, 55; hereafter cited in text as *CA*.
- 24 Longing is interestingly discussed by Lukács in "The Metaphysics of Tragedy," 162.
- 25 Georges Bataille, *Blue of Noon* (London: Boyars, 1979), 23.
- 26 Henrik Ibsen, *Four Major Plays*, ed. James McFarlane, trans. James McFarlane and Jens Arup (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 164.
- 27 Martin Heidegger, "The Problem of Sin in Luther," in *Supplements*, ed. John Van Buren (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 109; hereafter cited in text as *PS*.
- 28 *The Hidden God*, 371–91.
- 29 Sarah Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, in *Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001), 63–103; hereafter cited in text as *PL*.
- 30 Euripedes, *Three Plays: Hippolytus, Iphigenia in Tauris, Alcestis*, trans. Philip Vellacott (London: Penguin, 1953), 81–128.
- 31 *The Hidden God*, 60.