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Nina Ekstein

The Weight of the Future in Racine's Theater

The future has a curious status in the theater. Like the past, it cannot be represented on stage, but is limited to the field of discourse. The future can be spoken, but not literally pre-figured. Purely textual, lacking any referent, concretized or otherwise, the future appears essentially alien to the theater. For Anne Ubersfeld, “le problème fondamental du temps au théâtre est qu’il se situe par rapport à un *ici-maintenant* . . . le théâtre est ce qui par nature nie la présence du passé et du futur. L’écriture théâtrale est une *écriture au présent*.”¹ Yet the future constitutes an important portion of theatrical discourse and is a rich source of dramatic force. In this brief examination of the future, I will limit myself to the works of Jean Racine, although much of what I will say has broader import.

The future can be expressed in a number of ways in French. The most obvious, of course, are the simple future tense and the go-future (“aller” + infinitive).² The frequency of these future tenses (considered together) in Racine’s theater is quite stable, ranging from .04 (4% of the lines in the play contain a future tense) to .085, according to my calculations. The second means of articulating the domain of the future is through the imperative voice. This is the most obviously dramatic vehicle for futurity onstage because it implies the presence of two individuals, and, further, it involves their interaction. The imperative, at least in its second-person form, suggests the attempt of one person to coerce the future actions of another.³ The future and the individual will to control are thus profoundly linked. The imperative voice is used more frequently in Racine’s theater than the future tense (with a mean of .118), perhaps because it is a dramatic link between the present and the future. Finally, the future may be represented by certain substantives (“demain,”

“bientôt”) as well as non-factive modalities (obligative, volitional-desiderative and intentive, which are often expressed through the subjunctive mood).⁴ Such occurrences are frequent; intent, desire, and obligation are obvious mainstays of this theater. It is clear that the future, however it is evoked, is a regular and non-trivial presence in the plays of Racine.

In the universe of the here and now represented on stage, the future and the past are pendants, both limited in their dramatic expression to language, and to temporal and spatial otherness. But the opposition between the two domains is not a balanced one:⁵ while the past is not represented on the stage, the future is not representable. The past is a more monolithic, imposing entity than the future: it has a real-world referent. References to the past, be they made in passing or constituted into lengthy *récits*, carry the weight of truth and reality. The future, in contrast, is a necessarily speculative realm, an open, easily malleable repository for hopes, desires, and fears. In Marie-Laure Ryan’s terminology, the past belongs to the “factual domain,” while the future is an actualizable domain.⁶

Because neither the past nor the future may be represented on stage, their presentation is limited to the perception and verbalization of these domains by the characters. Allowing, for the purposes of this discussion, the construct “character” as a center of consciousness, it is clear that both past and future are bound to the subjective needs and the “present” speech situation of the speaker. But again, the symmetry is unbalanced, as the degree of subjectivity increases radically with the verbal representation of the future. With the rare exception of prophecies, whose referential status is assured by convention, the future is an imaginary realm. The past may be distorted to serve one’s ends, but the future can be invented.

As spectators, we are in a curious position with regard to the future and its articulation within the dramatic universe. First, the future is implicit in the theater as well as in narrative by virtue of the simple structure of suspense: something must happen, something will change. Convention assures that the end of the play be different from the beginning. The spectators, like the characters, are caught up in this forward propulsion.

As spectators of classical tragedy, we are not drawn toward the future merely by suspense. Typically, the spectator knows the outcome

before the play begins: Athalie will die, as will Phèdre and Hippolyte, and Néron will kill Britannicus. Curiously, this foreknowledge does not dispel all suspense. As Roland Barthes noted, the reading of tragedy is perverse, the reader/spectator is split, simultaneously knowing and not knowing the outcome.⁷ This seeming paradox may reveal much about our psychological relationship to the future and why neurotic behavior often includes the compulsive repetition of certain acts and situations. Thus the future for the spectator of a Racinian tragedy is known but not fully taken into account.

The spectator is in fact engaged in a complex interplay of futures. First, there is the future we know before the play begins: how it will end. Then there are the references to the future with which the characters assail each other, desiring, threatening, cajoling, and foreseeing. The relationship between the two futures is not a simple one. Out of the juxtaposition comes a high degree of dramatic irony. The characters’ vision of the future is susceptible to an ironic doubling as a result of the superior vision of the spectators.⁸ The discordances between the two (or more) futures also give rise to an understanding of the tenuous grasp that the characters (and, by extension, the spectators) have of their futures.

The weight of the past in Racine’s dramatic universe is well known. In many respects the future is an extension of that weight, once again an off-balance pendant to what has already occurred. The future, like the present, cannot escape from the determining nature of the past. For Georges Poulet, a Racinian character’s prescience is a kind of internal fatality: “sa prévoyance ne diffère point de sa mémoire. Elle est de même nature.”⁹ To elaborate on what Barthes has said, what was, is, and will be.¹⁰ Jacques Scherer too blends past and future: “comme le passé, l’avenir a pour fonction essentielle d’écraser et de culpabiliser le présent.”¹¹ J. B. Ratermanis posits that the future, as well as the past, constitutes a fundamental means of enriching the suggestive density of the Racinian text: he notes that “pour peu qu’une réplique s’allonge, elle comporte les trois temporalités diversement énoncées.”¹² The future thus appears with considerable frequency in the speech of the characters. On a larger scale, the weight of the future sometimes shapes the plot of individual plays. The post-dramatic future of the Trojan War and the attendant realization of certain oracles casts a heavy shadow on the

action of *Iphigénie*. In *Bérénice*, the use of the future is in part a result of the need to draw the action out, to slow the tempo. Much of the play consists of conflicting visions of the future and Titus's tactics delaying direct discussion of what is to occur. Whatever the level, the future is a fundamental component of the temporal system of Racine's theater.

The same may be said, of course, of the past. Not infrequently, references to the past are fairly substantial and are organized so as to constitute a *récit*, a unified series of chronologically ordered events situated in the past. A similar structure can unify references to future events: passages may be constructed so as to articulate a temporally layered vision of what will occur. Once again, there is considerable disproportion between the future and the past: narratives depicting the past are far more numerous than those concerning the future.¹³ This is not surprising considering the nature of narrative. As Gerald Prince has pointed out, "the hallmark of narrative is assurance."¹⁴ And while the past can be recounted with some certainty, such is not the case for the future. Novels are not usually written in the future tense. They may be situated in the future, as in the case of some science-fiction literature, but the events recounted are always anterior to the instance of narration. Even references to the future in narrative (prolepses) refer to the past when understood from the point of view of the narrator. On the rare occasion when one encounters a reference to the future that is not anchored by a posterior instance of narration, it is considered quite strange.¹⁵ In the theater, unlike in narrative, there is no narrator who is situated at a point posterior to the events recounted. Dramatic speakers are firmly linked to the present moment of speech.

The realm of the future may carry the same assurance as that of the past only in those cases where the speaker is divinely inspired. When references to the future are thus presented as prophetic, the veracity of the prediction is beyond doubt. Such future narrative is the pure inverse of the traditional past narratives. In arguably the most complex of the future *récits*, Agrippine presents a detailed relation of what lies ahead for Néron, specifying eight events, including five temporally discrete moments:

Je prévois que tes coups viendront jusqu'à ta mère.
Dans le fond de ton cœur je sais que tu me hais;
Tu voudras t'affranchir du joug de mes bienfaits.

Mais je veux que ma mort te soit même inutile,
Ne crois pas qu'en mourant je te laisse tranquille.
Rome, ce ciel, ce jour que tu reçus de moi,
Partout, à tout moment, m'offriront devant toi.
Tes remords te suivront comme autant de furies;
Tu croiras les calmer par d'autres barbaries;
Ta fureur, s'irritant soi-même dans son cours,
D'un sang toujours nouveau marquera tous les jours.
Mais j'espère qu'enfin le ciel, las de tes crimes,
Ajoutera ta perte à tant d'autres victimes;
Qu'après t'être couvert de leur sang et du mien,
Tu te verras forcé de répandre le tien;
Et ton nom paraîtra, dans la race future,
Aux plus cruels tyrans une cruelle injure.
Voilà ce que mon cœur se présage de toi.

(*Britannicus* V, vi, ll. 1676-93)¹⁶

Like the standard dramatic *récit*, the future narrative runs the risk of seeming awkward and artificial. Racine takes great pains to minimize both potential problems. Agrippine's prophecy, precisely because it is a prophecy, does not admit of any response. To avoid awkwardness, Racine nonetheless places it in a dramatic context: Agrippine speaks not to the audience or a confidant, but to Néron. While his reaction cannot be read explicitly in the text, her words effectively reduce him to speechlessness and absence: he exits with a simple "Narcisse suivez-moi" (l. 1694) and is seen no more on the stage.¹⁷ In her *récit*, Agrippine moves from her own death to Néron's. The mother who has repeatedly attempted to castrate her son figuratively uses her words to kill him figuratively: he has disobeyed her, and she in a sense retaliates, tracing his future through and beyond his own death. The future narrative, then, is fully engaged in the dramatic action represented on stage. The dramatic force of this narrative is qualitatively different, however, from that of Agrippine's colossal past *récit* in Act IV (sc. ii, ll. 1117-1222). There she recounted all that she had done for Néron—crimes, sacrifices, and compromises—in order to secure his position on the throne. Her goal seemed focused and pragmatic: to arouse guilt in her son so that he would go along with her plans for a marriage between Junie and Britannicus. In the case of Agrippine's future narrative, there is no specific, pragmatic goal, but rather an annihilistic rage raining death on speaker and addressee alike. The differences between the two narratives are in part a function of the position of the speaker. In the past narrative,

Agrippine speaks from the position of the present, fully engaged in the action. Here, Agrippine speaks from an almost supernatural viewpoint, simultaneously within and outside the onstage moment.

Agrippine's position suggests the second problem faced by any narrative: artificiality. A prophetic speech in the mouth of a woman whose relationship to the divine has been conspicuously absent certainly raises the issue of *vraisemblance*. The use of "j'espère" and "ce que mon cœur se présage" subjectivizes Agrippine's vision of the future, while not stripping it of its fearsome majesty. The artificiality of the prophecy is also tempered by the simple fact that the spectator knows that what Agrippine says will indeed occur. The speaker of a prophecy enjoys a privileged relationship with the spectator: both have foreknowledge alien to the conditions of normal existence posited by the rest of the play.

The role of the narrative form in mitigating the *invraisemblance* of Agrippine's prophetic speech may be seen by contrasting her words with the other major example of prophecy in Racine's theater, Joad's bleak recital of Joas's future and the eventual rebirth of Jerusalem in *Athalie* (III, vii, ll. 1142-74). In this case, Racine eschews narrative form. Joad seems to slip into a divine trance (heralded by music) during which he sees and articulates, rather than foresees, the future. The differences in the two prophecies may be related to the differences between the two plays. God is an active force (an "actant") in *Athalie*, while a divine presence is not to be found outside of the prophecy in *Britannicus*. The structure of narrative combined with the use of the future tense establishes the prophetic force of Agrippine's discourse. In *Athalie*, the future tense is seemingly replaced by the annunciatory symphony and Joad's explicit pronouncement: "les siècles obscurs devant moi se découvrent" (III, vii, l. 1132). The presence of narrative in the case of the prophecy in *Britannicus* functions as a solid framework for a type of discourse alien to a secular dramatic universe. Reality is bound to a chronological organization; by tying the prophecy to the same form of organization, Racine naturalizes it.

The future has a special role in *Britannicus*. While the outcome of the play is known to the spectators, the action involves Néron's choice of a future: will he pursue the path outlined by the first three years of his reign or follow his desires and appetites? The characters around him are pulling in different directions. One means at their disposal is to paint the

future for him. *Britannicus* can be read as the play of alternative futures. Indeed, Burrhus and Narcisse each employ the future tense far more frequently than is the norm.¹⁸ Furthermore, six of the seventeen future *révélés* in Racine's tragedies occur in this play.¹⁹ Burrhus, trying to dissuade Néron from killing Britannicus, describes the probable consequences of the proposed murder:

Mais si de vos flatteurs vous suivez la maxime,
Il vous faudra, Seigneur, courir de crime en crime,
Soutenir vos rigueurs par d'autres cruautés,
Et laver dans le sang vos bras ensanglantés.
Britannicus mourant excitera le zèle
De ses amis tout prêts à prendre sa querelle.
Ces vengeurs trouveront de nouveaux défenseurs,
Qui, même après leur mort, auront des successeurs.
Vous allumez un feu qui ne pourra s'éteindre.
Craint de tout l'univers, il vous faudra tout craindre.
Toujours punir, toujours trembler dans vos projets,
Et pour vos ennemis compter tous vos sujets.
(IV, iii, ll. 1343-54)

Burrhus's future narrative is both powerful and dramatically effective in that Néron agrees, at least provisionally, to reconcile with his brother. This narrative is not a prophecy: it lacks the specificity of Agrippine's discourse as well as its self-conscious status as a vision located outside the action of the play. But the implacable logic that Burrhus employs strengthens the *vraisemblance* of the vision of the future he offers.

Narcisse twice narrates possible futures for Néron. First, he foresees (albeit incorrectly) Junie's capitulation in the face of Néron's attentions (II, ii, ll. 449-58). Later, balancing and overriding Burrhus's *révélés* above, he tries to convince Néron to go through with his brother's murder by recounting what might happen if he does not:

Cette offense en son cœur sera longtemps nouvelle.
Il n'est point de secrets que le temps ne révèle:
Il saura que ma main devait lui présenter
Un poison que votre ordre avait fait apprêter.
Les Dieux de ce dessein puissent-ils le distraire!
Mais peut-être il fera ce que vous n'osez faire.
(IV, iv, ll. 1403-08)

Narcisse's and Burrhus's future narratives, while offering essentially opposing visions, find their unification in Agrippine's prophecy. All three suggest future violence, and specifically, all three point to Néron's death. Supported by spectator foreknowledge as well as these three narratives, Néron's death is overdetermined. The play thus reaches beyond the confines of the dramatic present to provide a dénouement that is complete. Britannicus, Junie, and Narcisse have met their fates during the course of the play; Néron's and Agrippine's deaths are laid out and confirmed for the future.²⁰ In fact, all five characters die (or disappear) in pure discourse. We see the action of the play, but not the outcome. Whether for reasons of unity of time, unity of place, or *bienséances*, the fates of all of the characters are confined to narrative, past or future.²¹

The future in Racine's theater extends from the expression of personal visions to a more interactive use, where it is motivated by the interlocutor's presence and potential reactions. The future is the natural domain for the expression of one's plans and projects, whether expressed in narrative form or not. Jocaste repeatedly voices her hopes for her sons' reconciliation (*La Thébàide* I, iii); Pharnace suggests a plan to take over Nymphée before Mithridate's return (*Mithridate* I, v). From projects and desires it is a small step to almost hallucinatory images of the future. Phèdre imagines the moment when she will appear before her father, Minos, who judges all those who enter Hades:

Ah! combien frémit son ombre épouvantée,
Lorsqu'il verra sa fille à ses yeux présentée,
Contrainte d'avouer tant de forfaits divers,
Et des 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.
(IV, vi, ll. 1281-88)

Beyond merely expressing a desired or imagined view of the future, a character may seek to control the future through a more coercive

articulation of his/her own vision. It is precisely in this interactive use that the domain of the future is most dramatic. Visions of the future are posited to arouse guilt in the addressee ("N'accorderez-vous rien aux larmes d'une mère?" *La Thébàide* II, iii, l. 503), to get him or her to do one's bidding ("Caché près de ces lieux, je vous verrai, Madame," *Britannicus* II, iii, l. 679), or to placate ("Vous aurez tout pouvoir ou je ne pourrai rien," *Alexandre* III, iii, l. 832). Emblematic of the coercive power of the articulation of the future is the discourse of suicide. More frequently posited than enacted in Racine's theater, the threat of suicide is almost invariably articulated in the future tense.

Atalide
Les noeuds que j'ai rompus
Se rejoindront bientôt, quand je ne serai plus
(*Bajazet* V, vi, ll. 1607-08)

Eriphile
Je périrai, Doris, et par une mort prompte
Dans la nuit du tombeau j'enfermerai ma honte
(*Iphigénie* II, i, ll. 525-26)

In the last scenes of *Bérénice*, all three main characters threaten suicide, each using the projected image of their own death as a means of coercing the other two. Both Andromaque and Hermione project their own suicides in the form of narratives, Andromaque in conjunction with her plot to obtain Pyrrhus's protection for her son (*Andromaque* IV, i ll. 1086-99) and Hermione as a logical and even romantic outcome of murdering Pyrrhus herself (IV, iii, ll. 1241-48).

Neither Andromaque's nor Hermione's plans work out as they had foreseen. It is characteristic of the future in Racine's theater that the plans of the individual not be realized. Agrippine plots to reveal to the army Néron's illegitimate ascension to the throne (*Britannicus* III, iii, ll. 839-56), but never does so; Mithridate projects a glorious attack on Rome, but barely leaves Nymphée (*Mithridate* III, i, ll. 785-843); and finally, Hippolyte plans his marriage to Aricie at the temple which, of course, he never reaches (*Phèdre* V, i, ll. 1399-1406). All of these projects take the form of a narrative, a chronological organization of reality. Tragedy, however, does not partake of this same organization: the future of the characters, as is eminently clear to the spectators, has

been predetermined and is not open to change as articulated by their carefully organized personal visions.

References to the future, whether in narrative form or not, operate as a means of expanding the temporal confines of the stage. The unity of time is counter-balanced by a discourse that encompasses distant pasts and futures. It is not just time that is expanded in this fashion, but often space as well. Frequently the future is articulated as occurring in some particular place. Again, this is true for both narrative and non-narrative futures, but the former, by virtue of their development, are more likely to encompass space as well as time. Andromaque imagines herself committing suicide at the marriage altar, Mithridate is off to Rome, Hippolyte's marriage will take place at the temple, and Clytemnestra envisions her daughter's death at the sacrificial altar (*Iphigénie* IV, iv, ll. 1301-12). There is a profoundly ironic aspect to this use of a future discourse to expand the temporal and spatial limits of the stage. As Bernard Dort has noted, the Racinian character is doubly confined: he can not leave the space in which the play unfolds and he has no future, whatever his illusions may be.²² The future in this theater, with the rare exceptions of prophetic discourse, must be read under the sign of irony.

Notes

¹ *Lire le théâtre* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1977) 198.

² In discussing these two forms of the future, Suzanne Fleischman concludes that a "combination of factors mitigates strongly in favor of regarding the go-paradigm as a legitimate future tense-form. But the go-future has retained, as an important overtone on its basic future meaning, a connection with the speaker's present which is lacking in the simple future and which translates into grammar as an aspect of prospection." *The Future in Thought and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982) 97. The go-future is in no way limited, however, to expressing the proximal future (83). While the link to the present of the go-future provides a simple means of joining the absent future to the onstage present, it does not appear that Racine makes any meaningful distinction between the simple future and the go-future.

³ The order conveyed by the imperative voice is delivered in the time frame of the present, but that order can only be carried out in a more or less distant future. Paul Imbs concludes, "l'impératif est donc nécessairement un présent-futur indivis." *L'Emploi des temps verbaux en français moderne* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1960) 149.

⁴ Fleischman 133. The works of Imbs and Fleischman both contain extensive discussion of the future and the nuances of its expression.

⁵ Benveniste has noted the asymmetry of past and future marking systems, which reflect the difference in our experience of the past, which is considerable, and of the future, which is only a possibility. *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1974) 2: 76.

⁶ "The Modal Structure of Narrative Universes," *Poetics Today* 6 (1985) 720.

⁷ *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973) 76.

⁸ A. Kibédi Varga reflects on the tragic nature of one aspect of this dramatic irony: "le spectateur averti ressent toute mention d'un projet 'pourdemain' comme profondément navrante." "Scènes et lieux de la tragédie," *Langue Française* 79 (1988) 87.

⁹ *Etudes sur le temps humain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1949) 155.

¹⁰ "Ce qui a été est." *Sur Racine* (Paris: Seuil, 1968) 48.

¹¹ *Racine et/ou la cérémonie* (Paris: PUF, 1982) 218.

¹² *Essai sur les formes verbales dans les tragédies de Racine* (Paris: Nizet, 1972) 399.

¹³ Using the same basic definition, I found 17 future narratives in Racine's 11 tragedies, as opposed to 187 past *récits*. See my *Dramatic Narrative: Racine's Récits* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986) for extensive discussion of past narratives.

¹⁴ "The Disnarrated," *Style* 22 (1988) 4.

¹⁵ Consider the last sentence of Sartre's *La Nausée*: "demain il pleuvra sur Bouville." Roquentin's subjective propulsion into a future realm contributes to the difficulties readers have in interpreting the end of this novel. See Terry Keefe, "The Ending of Sartre's *La Nausée*," in *Critical Essays on Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Robert Wilcocks (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988) 182-201, and Gerald Prince, "*La Nausée* and the Question of Closure," *Yale French Studies* 67 (1984) 183-90.

¹⁶ Jean Racine, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950). All further quotations of Racine's plays are from this edition.

¹⁷ Néron "reappears" only through a *récit* told by Albine in the last scene of the play. The two appearances are linked by the loss of the power of speech: "Chacun fuit son silence farouche. / Le seul nom de Junie échappe de sa bouche" (ll. 1755-56).

¹⁸ Their frequency is .11 and .12 respectively.

¹⁹ With the exception of the prophetic *récit* that I have examined, most are neither long nor complex.

²⁰ Agrippine's death is the cause of Néron's in her prophecy. Given that Néron's death has been overdetermined and Agrippine's discourse is the most authoritative of the three, her fate is no less certain than his. John Lapp speaks of how Racine, on several occasions, bursts the play's terminal point so that the action embraces the post-dramatic future. *Aspects of Racinian Tragedy* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1955) 58.

²¹ Britannicus's assassination is presented in Burrhus's *récit* (V, v, ll. 1619-46), and Albine recounts both Junie's flight to the vestal virgins and Narcisse's death (V, viii, ll. 1721-62).

²² *Théâtre public: essais de critique* (Paris: Seuil, 1967) 37.