“Vivons, si vers la vie on peut me ramener”: Nature, Divinity, and the Afterlife of Tragedy

Carrie Heusinkveld
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In Seneca’s tragedy *Phaedra*, Theseus, weeping over the corpse of his son Hippolytus, is rebuked for his sorrow: he is told that “[o]ne cannot sincerely weep over getting what one wanted,” to which the grieving father replies, “Yes, one can. I think the pinnacle of misfortune is to be forced by chance to want things one should loathe” (IV.1118-1120) (Wilson 33). Such a quandary encapsulates the essence of tragedy as a dramatic form, in which “the fierce sport of human hatreds and the wanton, mysterious choice of destiny” result in an “ironic abyss” between knowledge and action (Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* 5-7). George Steiner asserts in *The Death of Tragedy* that “[a]ll men are aware of tragedy in life. But tragedy as a form of drama is not universal ... The idea and the vision of man which it implies are Greek. And till nearly the moment of their decline, the tragic forms are Hellenic” (3). Derived from Euripides’ and Seneca’s adaptations of the Phaedra\(^1\) myth and strictly adhering to the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action, Jean Racine’s play *Phèdre* is an archetype of Hellenic tragedy within the French neoclassical tradition. A drama in which crime and punishment are never commensurate and the brutality and chaos of the mortal world are regarded with cool detachment by the onlooking deities, *Phèdre* embodies the ideals of the tragic form delineated by Steiner, which he defines as an art that “requires the intolerable presence of God” in a world “without rational explanation or mercy” (*The Death of Tragedy* 65). An example of tragedy *par excellence*, *Phèdre* is, according to Steiner, one of the last survivors of the damage inflicted by rationalistic Enlightenment thought upon the tragic form. However, while Steiner reads *Phèdre* as one of the last true tragedies, the work may be viewed as an example of a tragic form unrepresented by the

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\(^1\) Throughout this thesis I use the anglicized forms of Greek proper names.
rather limited scope of his definition - one that originated in the early modern period and continues into the modern. I argue that Racine’s *Phèdre* and Robert Garnier’s *Hippolyte*, an earlier adaptation of the Phaedra myth, may be considered prototypical examples of a tragic form over which nature, rather than God, presides.

Viewed within this framework, Jansenist theology, a religious doctrine often associated with Racine’s tragic drama, represents a lens uniquely suited to the examination of the theory and aesthetics of the tragic form and its continuation in the modern era. Stridently criticized by the Jesuits, who accused Jansenism of “divesting free will of all reality” and condemned the Calvinist undertones of its emphasis on divine grace, the seventeenth-century Christian theological movement exerted a profound influence on Racine’s tragic vision (“Jansenism”). The Jansenist subtext is particularly prevalent in the depiction of the natural world in *Phèdre*, which reflects the paradoxical dualities of the god of tragedy, who, like the Jansenist deity, “is always present and always absent” (Goldmann 36). The same theological paradox haunts Garnier’s tragedy *Hippolyte*, an adaptation of the Phaedra myth published over a century before Racine’s play. Though products of radically divergent political, religious, and literary contexts, profound thematic harmonies exist between the two texts. Having preceded both *Phèdre* and the birth of the Jansenist movement, Garnier’s oeuvre is not generally associated with Jansenism, but echoes of Jansenist ideology are nevertheless apparent in his work. In both renderings, the depictions of intergenerational crime and hereditary culpability are evocative of the Jansenist emphasis on original sin, calling the nature and existence of free will into question. Temporal boundaries, as well as distinctions between the human and the animal, the natural and the divine, are obscured or partially erased, so that nature itself assumes the simultaneous immanence and remoteness of
the Jansenist God. Phèdre and Hippolyte may therefore be considered prototypes of a tragic form in which nature subsumes the place of the Deus absconditus, or hidden God, of classical tragedy.

I will first examine Steiner’s account of the death of tragedy in the post-Enlightenment world, then turn to an analysis of Phèdre and Hippolyte as examples of a tragic form unrepresented in his argument. Steiner attributes the dissolution of tragic literature to a paradigmatic shift in Western thought in the seventeenth century, which turned away from an acceptance of irrationality and inexplicability and toward an emphasis on reason and order. He identifies the rationalism that characterized both Enlightenment Christianity and philosophy as the primary culprit, arguing that tragedy cannot exist in a society that believes in the human capacity to determine destiny through the power of reason. According to Steiner, “the controlling habits of the Western mind were symbolic and allegoric” until the seventeenth century, when there “supervened between understanding and expression the new languages of mathematics and scientific formulas” (The Death of Tragedy 196). Poetic tradition has now been supplanted by a new mythology which leaves no room for the tragic vision: “The myths which have prevailed since Descartes and Newton are myths of reason, no truer perhaps than those which preceded them, but less responsive to the claims of art” (Steiner, The Death of Tragedy 321). The rationalist breed of Christianity that emerged during this period is likewise antithetical to the tragic vision, emphasizing a logical world order dictated by a rational God. A fundamentally optimistic ideology, it offers man “an assurance of final certitude and repose in God” (Steiner 332). It depicts original sin as no more than “a joyous error,” through which humanity “shall be restored to a condition far more exalted than was Adam’s innocence” (The Death of Tragedy 332). Thus, according to Steiner, tragedy “is now dead because [God’s] shadow no longer falls upon us as it did on Agamemnon or Macbeth or Athalie” (The Death of Tragedy 353). When the
question of God’s presence or absence becomes “an archaic irrelevance, the cardinal axiom of human estrangement from at-homeness [sic] in this world, the dialectic of enmity between human fate and some enigma of culpability at the outset, loses hold” (“Tragedy Reconsidered” 7). In a secular society dominated by certainty in humanity’s capabilities and its eventual salvation, the tragic vision, which presupposes the existence of a world “without rational explanation or mercy,” loses its reality (Steiner, The Death of Tragedy 65).

In The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine, Lucien Goldmann likewise argues that Cartesian logic is essentially atheistic. According to Goldmann, the rationalists, “full of confidence in man and human reason...are certain that God is present for the human soul” (37). This unequivocal conviction in God’s presence paradoxically renders him superfluous. According to rationalist logic, God exists only to “guarantee the existence of order and the eternal truths” which in turn assure “man’s right to free himself from any external authority, and to follow where his strength and reason may guide him” (Goldmann 37-38). The rationalist God thus “has no longer any personal reality for man”: he ensures harmony and continuity between human reason and the external world, but leaves humanity alone in the midst of “a silent and static world of things and individuals” (Goldmann 37-38). However, while the dominant Christian theology of the period was simplified and sanitized by this terminal certainty, an alternative deity emerged from the religious upheaval of the Renaissance and Enlightenment in the form of the Jansenist Deus absconditus, or hidden god. Adopting a predestinarian vision of human life, Jansenists rejected the concept of free will and maintained that divine grace alone determined God’s elect, emphasizing the entirely arbitrary nature of this salvation.
This doctrine, “the tragic counterstatement to Christian guarantees of remission and salvation,” treats with heavy skepticism the “therapeutic promises of orthodox Catholicism,” representing instead a state of mind embodied by “the apprehension, voiced by Pascal, that ‘Christ would be in agony until the end of time’” (Steiner, “Tragedy Reconsidered” 12-13). The Jansenist God never reveals himself to man or speaks directly to him, but nevertheless “judges man and makes demands on him;” he interdicts “the slightest degree of compromise” between absolute values and the fragmentary incompletions that characterize terrestrial existence (Goldmann 38). Unlike the rationalist deity, a logical certainty that ensures precise theoretical continuity in the universe, the God of Jansenist theology is a contradiction in terms: he “is both present and absent, not sometimes absent and sometimes present. He is always absent and always present” (Goldmann 37). For Blaise Pascal, the philosopher who articulated the Jansenist vision most clearly, “God was Totality in the fullest meaning of the word, that is to say both the opposition and contrast of extremities and what links them together and divides them” (Goldmann 186). The Jansenist conception of God is therefore a paradox in itself: God represents both the origin and the final synthesis of the warring antagonisms inherent to human life, both the hope of salvation and its denial.

From the Jansenist insistence on the arbitrariness of predestination and the irremissible stain of original sin emerges another contradiction central to its theology: that of the righteous sinner. According to Goldmann, “[If] the Jansenist doctrine of grace is taken to its logical conclusions, what we find is the paradoxical notion expressed in the Pensées and Phèdre: that of the just man to whom grace has been refused, that of the just man in a state of mortal sin” (53). This idea stands in stark opposition to the traditional teachings of Catholicism: as Goldmann writes, “The Church had condemned such a person as an essential element of Jansenist heresy ...
It was, however, if not the absolute essence then at least the permanent temptation and the final limit of extremist Jansenism – so much so that without it we should not be able to understand the two most important works that have come down to us from Port-Royal: *Phèdre* and the *Pensées*” (160). The figure of the righteous sinner underwrites the conflicting demands placed upon humanity, which render its position in the universe fundamentally tragic: “Man is a paradoxical creature who is both great and small, strong and weak. He is great and strong because he never gives up the demand for pure goodness and truth unmixed with baser matters; he is small and weak because he can never even draw near these values, to say nothing of attaining them” (Goldmann 196). In his fallen state, man’s reason and passions are in irreconcilable conflict, preventing him from ever resolving the tensions and ambiguities of existence and thus becoming one with God. Paradox, according to the Jansenist vision, is therefore the only valid representation of reality.

This conclusion leads directly to Pascal’s conception of faith as a wager, which extends “uncertainty and paradox to God himself, to the God whom man’s heart can feel, but whose existence is both certain and uncertain, presence and absence, hope and risk” (Goldmann 198). According to Goldmann, “Pascal carried Jansenism to its logical conclusion when he ceased to wonder whether a particular individual was damned or saved, and introduced doubt as to whether or not God himself really exists” (Goldmann 55). At face value, this skepticism of a divine presence appears to render Jansenist philosophy more atheistic than even Enlightenment rationalism. However, Pascal’s wager conveys the fact that certainty obviates the need for faith, striking at the heart of the tragic vision: man is tragic because he must wager, and the very nature of a wager presupposes that it is possible to lose. Tragedy thus hinges on the conception of God as an entity of which man can never be entirely certain; hence Goldmann’s declaration, “At the
very moment that God appears to man, man ceases to be tragic” (37). The beginning lines of George Lukacs’ essay “The Metaphysics of Tragedy” precisely articulate the relationship between the tragic vision and the Jansenist wager: “Tragedy is a game, a game of man and of his destiny, a game which is watched by God. But God is nothing more than a spectator, and he never intervenes either by word or deeds, in what the actors are doing. 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?’” (175). Goldmann identifies this last question as “the central one of any tragic vision”: at the heart of tragedy lies the conviction of “an unbridgeable gulf between human life and the divine presence,” between terrestrial existence and totality, fragmentation and synthesis (175).

This conception of God as a remote and uninvolved spectator embodies the dilemma tormenting Phaedra, the titular heroine of Racine’s most celebrated tragedy. Throughout the play, she is watched constantly by the Sun, an entity who is “silent, remote to the point of absence, but of piercing intensity, like the Deus absconditus of Jansenism” (Critchley 18). This gaze robs the realm in which the tragedy unfolds of all temporality and relativity: the sins of the past bleed into the present, destroying the logic of cause and effect imposed on the world by human rationality. For the God of tragedy, “there is no relativity, no transition, no nuance. His glance robs every event of all that is temporal and local about it. Before God, there is no difference between seeming and substance, appearance and idea, event and destiny. The question of value and reality loses all its meaning” (Lukacs 177). Phèdre is thus, as Racine notes in his preface, a play in which “Les moindres fautes…sont sévèrement punies; la seule pensée du crime y est regardée avec autant d’horreur que le crime même; les faiblesses de l’amour y passent pour de vraies faiblesses” [“The slightest faults…are severely punished; the mere thought of crime is
regarded with as much horror as the crime itself; the weaknesses of love pass for true weaknesses”] (3-4). At first, Phaedra regards the mere thought of her passion for her stepson as criminal, according it an enormity far out of proportion with its initial gravity: “Grâces au ciel, mes mains ne sont point criminelles. / Plût aux dieux que mon coeur fût innocent comme elles!” (I.iii.221-222) 2 [“Thanks to heaven, my hands are not criminals. / Would the gods my heart were innocent as well!”]. 3 Richard Wilbur states in the introduction to his English translation of Phèdre that “[s]ince the criminal passion central to the play is erotic in nature, [Venus] is often said to have caused it, but we are never for a moment told why” (xiv). He cites one explanation for this persecution found in the eighth book of the Odyssey: “because the Sun had revealed the guilty loves of Venus and Mars, Venus thereafter persecuted the descendants of the Sun” (Wilbur xiv). While this rationale is never explicitly mentioned in the play, the first description of Phaedra, which identifies her as “la fille de Minos et de Pasiphaë” (I.i.36) [“the daughter of Minos and Pasiphae”] 4 emphasizes her inescapable bondage to her familial past. This condition resonates profoundly with the Jansenist emphasis on original sin and hereditary culpability, in which a single act of wrongdoing reverberates through time, blighting all future generations. Viewed within the framework of Jansenist theology, “Venus’ persecution is God’s chastisement of the non-elect, the Sun is his all-seeing eye, and the shade of Minos is the executor of His judgement” (Wilbur xiv). Thus, as Wilbur observes, Phaedra’s “hereditary sufferings” are evocative of Exodus 20:5, in which God is said to visit “the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation” (xiv). This fixation on hereditary culpability passed from one generation to the next is also one of the predominant concerns in tragic

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2 Jean Racine, Phèdre, edited by Raymond Picard (Gallimard, 2017).
3 All translations of Phèdre are by A.S. Kline unless otherwise noted.
4 This translation is my own.
literature. According to John Lyons, the opening of Aeschylus’ *The Libation Bearers*, in which a chorus of slave women offer conciliatory offerings to Agamemnon’s spirit in the hope of placating the dead king who continues to haunt his murderers, is illustrative of this abiding motif: “In one of the earliest forms of a question that echoes through the millennia of the tragic tradition they ask, ‘What can wash off the blood once spilled upon the ground?’ The living try to cleanse the violence of the past, to make, as it were, a clean start. And yet in tragedy the libations are generally insufficient” (72). The same question is posed in both *Phèdre* and *Hippolyte*, in which atonement is impossible and sinners are punished far in excess of their guilt. A fundamental concept of Jansenism therefore echoes one of the enduring themes of the tragic tradition: the intrusion of the past upon the present and the resulting cycle of intergenerational brutality.

This subjugation of the present by the pervasive and inescapable influence of the past is a central preoccupation in both *Phèdre* and *Hippolyte*. The crushing weight of familial history and the uneasy coexistence of the past and the present is reflected in the palace of Troezen, the setting of *Phèdre*. As Lyons observes, “The home is the figure of the family itself… the site of endlessly repeated, mindlessly mimetic violence that passes from one generation to another – in sum, the essence of the tragic” (41). Wilbur notes that Theramenes’ speech in the first act, detailing his long and wide-ranging search for Theseus, sketches the grandeur of the mythological realm in which the play is set. “A whole Mediterranean world, full of names like Scythia and Mycenae, surrounds Troezen”: the destinations of Theramenes’ journey encompass “les deux mers que sépare Corinthe” (I.i.11) [“the two seas Corinth’s heights divide”], taking him to Elis⁵, Taenarus⁶, and “la mer qui vit tomber Icare” (I.i.14) [“the sea that saw the fall of Icarus”] (Wilbur xiii). The expansiveness of the outside world contrasts sharply with the

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⁵ One of the city-states that participated in the Trojan War, mentioned in the *Iliad* (Homer 119).
⁶ One of the entrances to the Underworld, according to the *Metamorphoses* (Ovid 222).
claustrophobic atmosphere of Troezen, in which the landscape progressively constricts around Hippolytus. The opening lines of *Phèdre* declare his intention to depart: “Le dessein en est pris, je pars, cher Théramène” (I.i.i) [“My plans are made, dear Theramenes, I go”], but his efforts are continually thwarted. These repeatedly unsuccessful attempts to flee the palace are indicative of the sinister power of the setting. As Anne Ubersfeld observes, Troezen is “defined by this movement of perpetually frustrated flight, like that of a bound animal at the end of its chain or a bird tugging at the string which keeps it prisoner” (206). Phaedra, after making the fatal declaration that precipitates the tragedy’s downward spiral, later provides a fleeting, poignant glimpse of Hippolytus’ ship awaiting his departure in the harbor, its prow pointed towards Athens, emphasizing both the necessity and the futility of escape.

The status of Troezen as a dark marginality is further developed through intertextual associations that link it with the land of the dead. As Ubersfeld also observes, Troezen is repeatedly connected with the morphemes ‘bords’ and ‘rivage(s)’ (‘shores’ and ‘coasts’ or ‘strands,’ respectively), words which are in turn associated with death. The word “shores” in connection with Troezen appears in the first scene of the first act, when Hippolytus speaks of the change occasioned by Phaedra’s arrival: “Cet heureux temps n'est plus. Tout a changé de face / Depuis que sur ces bords les dieux ont envoyé / La fille de Minos et de Pasiphaé” (I.i.34-36) [“Glad times are no more. All’s changed since the day / That, to our shores, the gods despatched the daughter, / Of Minos King of Crete: Pasiphae her mother”]. The connection is reprised by Oenone when Phaedra confesses the reason for her despair: “Voyage infortuné! Rivage malheureux! / Fallait-il approcher de tes bords dangereux?” (I.ii.267-268) [“Unfortunate voyage! O, miserable shore! / Why did you come then to this place of danger?”]. The word “bords” or “shores” is first associated with death in Theramenes’ description of his search for Theseus, in
which he tells Hippolytus, “J'ai demandé Thésée aux peuples de ces bords / Où l'on voit l'Achéron se perdre chez les morts” (I.i.11-12) [“I have sought news of Thesee on the shores / of Acheron, the river of the dead”]. Ubersfeld notes that the association is made once more by Phaedra, who does not share Hippolytus’ hopes that Theseus will return: “On ne voit point deux fois le rivage des morts, / Seigneur. Puisque Thésée a vu les sombres bords, / En vain vous espérez qu'un dieu vous le renvoie (II.v.623-625) [“We cannot view the shores of the dead twice, my Lord. / Since Theseus has already seen those sombre shores, / The hope some god may send him back to you is vain”]. The interlocking chain of linguistic associations that connects Troezen with the land of the dead establishes its relegation to the border between life and death, the past and the future: like the three-way crossroads alluded to in Oedipus Rex, it occupies an interstitial space shadowed by a conditional quality, reminiscent of the fleeting, ineffable moment in time when possibilities transition to inevitabilities. Haunted by both the figurative and literal specters of the past, Troezen thus represents “an infernal threshold, a gateway to evil and death, a crossroads where all the ways leading from Epirus to Attica, from Crete to the Land of the Dead, meet and cross each other; a border region where…land and sea, life and death, innocence and sin, touch each other,” a fateful point of intersection of the threads of fate (Ubersfeld 203).

The sinister implications that Troezen holds for Theseus’ family are further underlined by infrequent yet telling allusions to Aegeus’ wife Medea, underwriting the symbolic significance of the familial home in tragic literature. In both Hippolyte and Phèdre, hereditary sin and intergenerational violence are embodied in the figure of this infamous sorceress and poisoner, a looming specter from the past who casts a long black shadow over the living. Furthermore, Medea’s role in the events preceding those related in the Phaedra myth shed light on the

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7 Translation by Anne Ubersfeld.
significance of the poison motif in both plays. In Euripides’ tragedy *Medea*, Aegeus first encounters Medea on his way to Troezen and promises her sanctuary in exchange for a cure for his sterility. He later fathers Theseus with Aethra, the daughter of his friend Pittheus, king of Troezen. As Theseus comes of age in Troezen, Aegeus, ignorant of his son’s existence, grants asylum to Medea after she flees Corinth and eventually marries her. When Theseus travels to Athens in search of his father, she divines his identity and persuades Aegeus, who does not recognize his son and regards Theseus with suspicion, to poison him at a banquet. However, Aegeus recognizes Theseus just in time by the sword that he had long ago entrusted to Aethra, a moment of peripeteia that is tragically distorted in *Phèdre* and *Hippolyte*, in which Theseus’ recognition of Hippolytus’ weapon in Phaedra’s hands convinces him of his guilt. Though Aegeus denounces Medea and is happily reunited with his heir, her presence continues to haunt Troezen. In Racine’s adaptation, Phaedra specifies the poison with which she ends her life as one that Medea originally brought to Athens, a reference that initiates a cascade of interconnected allusions. The parallel between Medea’s failed attempt to poison Theseus and Phaedra’s unsuccessful seduction of her own stepson is sharpened by the frequent comparisons of love to venom, a motif that appears throughout Garnier’s play and a connection made all the more explicit by Phaedra’s self-accusations of having poisoned Hippolytus through her passion: “Thésée s’en peut garder, mais de mon cœur malin / Vous n’avez, Hippolyte, évité le venin” (V.2198-2199) [“Thesues was able to protect himself from my evil heart, / But you Hippolytus, could not avoid its venom”]. Thus, as Amy Wygant observes, “the story of Medea in Athens and the story of Phèdre in Troezen are profoundly permeable to each other’s motifs:” Phaedra’s attempted seduction of Hippolytus “is not material, but metaphorical poison; Theseus’s recognition of the sword does not save his son but condemns him. And the poison destined for
the stepson circulates through the themes of the stories of Medea and Phèdre until it finds its final victim in the stepmother herself” (65-66). When viewed in the light of these intertextual allusions, the sole mention of Medea in Garnier’s version, in which Hippolyte cites her as an archetypal example of feminine deceit, acquires a new significance, foreshadowing Phaedra’s treachery and his resulting death: “Je ne veux que Medée et ses actes infames / Pour montrer quelles sont toutes les autres femmes” (Act.1273-1274) [“I need look no further than Medée and her infamous acts / To illustrate the nature of all other women”]. Intimately linked to the setting of Troezen, the mythology surrounding Medea is emblematic of the inescapable weight of the past: seemingly inconsequential details and encounters—a chance meeting on the road, be it to Thebes or Troezen—can hold profound consequences not only for one man, but for all his descendants.

The characterization of the palace of Troezen as a border region balanced on the edge of life and death, shadowed by Aegeus’ attempted infanticide and by Phaedra’s familial curse, thus establish it as a topographical metaphor for the perpetuation of familial violence. As Lyons notes, “Since antiquity the ‘house’ and the ‘family’ are so intertwined as to be spoken of with the same terms: the oikos, the noble maison” (52). The home therefore functions as “a metonym of the collective identity of people who are born of one another and who will eventually kill or die together” (Lyons 19). The home lies at the center, or heart, of the family, representing the point of intersection where the threads of lives from multiple generations meet and fatefully intertwine. The palace, Phaedra’s affliction, and her resulting suicide are intimately connected to the poison motif: both feature imagery related to the heart and the bloodstream, drawing a textual parallel between the familial home and a body ravaged with the torments of love. When describing her vain attempts to suppress her emotions, Phaedra characterizes her passion as “une ardeur dans
mes veines cachée” (I.iii.305) [“an ardour hidden in my veins”]. Poison, which forms a dark vein running through both the literal and figurative house, reappears in her declaration of love to Hippolytus, and returns again in Phaedra’s monologue before her death, along with the word “veines”: “J'ai pris, j'ai fait couler dans mes brûlantes veines / Un poison que Médée apporta dans Athènes / Déjà jusqu'à mon coeur le venin parvenu / Dans ce coeur expirant jette un froid inconnu” (V.vii.1638-1640) [“I have taken...I have spread through my burning veins, / A poison that Medea brought to Athens. / Already the venom flows towards my heart / An unaccustomed chill pierces my dying heart”]. An embodiment of the insidious violence of intergenerational crime, Medea’s poison also functions as a poetic symbol of Phaedra’s hereditary passion, an association underscored by Hippolytus’ exclamation, “Que dira le roi! Quel funeste poison / L'amour a répandu sur toute sa maison!” (III.vi.991-992) [“What will the King say? What deadly poison / Has spread through his whole house with this passion!”]. Just as the chaotic, forking pattern of veins ultimately converges and feeds into the heart, so an act of evil, no matter how long-buried, eventually returns to haunt a house and its surviving members.

Phaedra and Hippolytus are both irrevocably cursed by their ancestry, deemed guilty by association and charged with a vague and nameless sin, the atonement for which permanently eludes them. A profound silence answers every appeal for help, reflecting Goldmann’s observation that “the idea of the righteous fallen into sin…[implies] the idea of a sincere prayer which is not granted” (162). The deities in Hippolyte remain apparently unmoved by human suffering, a fact manifested by the muteness that greets the prayers of both Phaedra and Hippolytus. Pascal’s famous dread of the “eternal silence of infinite spaces” echoes the anguish occasioned by this lack of response (Goldmann, 231). According to Goldmann, the concept of geometrically infinite space, one of the great mathematical achievements of the seventeenth
century, represents the inevitable conclusion of Enlightenment philosophy, embodying the essential atheism inherent in its rejection of any limitations, physical or moral, on the power of human reason: “In the infinite space of rational science God falls silent, because in elaborating this concept man has been obliged to give up any genuinely ethical norm” (Goldmann 232). The individualistic vision of rationalism categorically denies “any supra-individual reality capable of guiding man and offering him genuinely transcendent norms,” abolishing the sense of community that links a person to the universe and to other humans (Goldmann 232).

Rationalism, according to Goldmann, “destroyed the two closely connected ideas of the community and the universe, and replaced them by the totally different concepts of the isolated individual and of infinite space” (27). Enlightenment philosophy, which envisions humans “only as isolated individuals for whom other men exist only as objects,” therefore leaves man stranded in the blank desert of his own individuality, wandering aimlessly among empty expanses peopled by other static monads (Goldmann 248).

Like Goldmann, Steiner maintains that the rationalist conception of the world is characterized by a fundamental lack of connectivity between humans and their own world. He argues that once empirical explanations are imposed upon natural phenomena, the continuity between nature and man is broken. According to Steiner, this discontinuity is antithetical to the tragic vision: “In tragedy, lightning is a messenger. But it can no longer be so once Benjamin Franklin (the incarnation of the new rational man) has flown a kite to it” (The Death of Tragedy 194). He regards a “mythology of animate creation” and “the nearly tangible awareness of a continuity between the human and the divine order” as essential elements of tragedy: classical mythology, from which tragedy derives, “[orders] the manifold levels of reality and moral value along an axis of being which extends from brute matter to the immaculate stars” (The Death of
Tragedy 196). However, I argue that the paradoxical and tragic nature of humanity’s position is intensified rather than diminished by the implications of the Enlightenment worldview and the disconnect between man and the natural world described by both Steiner and Goldmann. The unbridgeable gulf between humanity and nature is a reflection of the void that separates man from god in Jansenist theology: just as the Jansenist deity is “both present and absent, unreachable and even unapproachable,” so the natural world eternally eludes the grasp of human reason (Goldmann 320).

In both Phèdre and Hippolyte, the characterization of Hippolytus, his fundamental disconnect from the civilized world, and his relationship with the other characters capture the dynamic between man and nature in microcosm. Portrayed as an outsider to human society who seeks refuge in the natural world from the violence that he views as endemic to civilized life, he rejects civilization and political life, preferring the woods and hills to the “tumulte pompeux d'Athènes et de la cour” (I.i.32) [“tumultuous pomp of Athens and her court’’. The significance of his name, which means “horse-liberator” or “horse-loosener” is reflected by his affinity with his stallions: in the first scene of the play, Theramenes describes him as “[s]avant dans l’art par Neptune inventé,/ [il rend] docile au frein un Coursier indompté” (I.i.131-132) [“(s)killed in the art Neptune himself made plain / Breaking an untamed stallion to the rein’”] (Howey 138). According to Nicholas Hammond, “The strong implication is that [Hippolytus] manages to control his horses because he is like them. Although he may practice the ‘art’ of taming his horses, his skill is undoubtedly linked to his being understood by them” (44). This pronounced affinity with the nonhuman contrasts sharply with his fraught relationship with the other human figures and society at large: his ideals and motivations are continually misjudged, his personality and desires remain largely incomprehensible to the other characters, and his rapport with the
natural world is regarded with suspicion and mistrust. This fundamental disconnect is illuminated in his conversation with Phaedra’s nurse in *Hippolyte*. While Hippolytus “holds sanguine passion in cool contempt” and vows to remain faithful to his own chaste, bucolic ideal, the nurse argues that romantic love plays an indispensable role in the natural order (Szabari, 126): “Jupiter le grand Dieu…/Nous a donné l’amour, pour laisser une race, / Qui nous survive morts, et tienne nostre place” (III.1243-1250) [“Jupiter, the great deity…/Gave us love, so that we would leave behind a race / To survive us and take our place”]. The nurse indicates that the perpetuation of the human race is a universal responsibility, thus implying that Hippolytus’ renunciation of marriage and domestic life is in fact a dereliction of societal duty. His rejection of Phaedra and the entire female sex is tantamount to a repudiation of civilization in general, rendering him doubly guilty in the eyes of society. He symbolizes an existential threat to the world order encapsulated in the nurse’s speech: guilty of rejecting both female companionship and human society more broadly, he stands accused of an even greater sin than Phaedra.

Hippolytus’ culpability is further illustrated by the outcome of his sacrifice to Jupiter, in which his fate is prefigured by the slaughter of the lamb, to which he is symbolically linked. In his narration of the ritual, he describes the ominous implications of the fact that the priest interpreting the portents was unable to locate the lamb’s liver. The symbolic linkage between Hippolytus and the sacrificial victim implies that “[si] le prêtre ne trouve pas de foie à l’intérieur de la brebis, c’est peut-être qu’il manque effectivement quelque chose au trop chaste Hippolyte” (Le Blanc 91) [“if the priest finds to liver inside the lamb, it is perhaps due to a fundamental lack in the too-chaste Hippolytus”]. The skepticism with which Hippolytus is regarded by the nurse is mirrored in the unfavorable light in which the priest interprets the sacrificial omens. Though ritual slaughter and augury appear both savage and nonsensical by modern standards, they are
practices analogous to the empirical science of the Enlightenment: both constitute methods of imposing human order and reason on the natural world and arise from a deep-seated need to render the ungovernable forces of nature comprehensible to the human mind. However, there is no guarantee that nature will conform to the mold cast for it by human constructs. The dangers posed by incorrect interpretations are forever imminent, the drastic consequences of which are apparent when the nurse, confronted with Hippolytus’ mangled corpse, realizes the extent of the damage she has caused: “Hé! Le pauvre jeune homme, il est par ma malice, / Comme le simple agneau qu’on meinte au sacrifice” (IV.1857-1858) [“Oh! The poor man, he has been (killed) by my malice, like the innocent lamb that one leads to be sacrificed”]. The imposition of subjective interpretations upon Hippolytus thus illustrates the dangers of imposing similar explanations upon the natural world, resulting in unforeseen and undesired sorrow for both humans and the natural world.

While Steiner argues that a sense of continuity between man and nature - an axis of being extending “from brute matter to the immaculate stars” – is an essential component of tragedy, *Phèdre* and *Hippolyte* are both plays whose tragedies stem from an irreparably broken connection with the natural world (*The Death of Tragedy* 196). Nature is perceived as a refuge from the violence and tyranny of the human world, but ultimately unknowable and inaccessible “through any paths of gradualness or degree,” retreating from every attempt to approach it (Goldmann 320). All endeavors to understand it, to establish some commonality between nature and man, are ultimately doomed. Hippolytus, an embodiment of the grace and beauty of nature, similarly eludes the other characters: representing both a threat and a promise, he slips further from their grasp with each attempt to decipher him, eventually retreating into death. Nature thus

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8 Translation by Szabari.
assumes the simultaneous immanence and remoteness of the Jansenist God, embodying both the hope of salvation and its denial. In Racine’s adaptation, Phaedra abstractedly speaks of preserving her honor in the midst of her confusion and mental anguish, “but her true and hopeless hunger is for innocence, for a state of soul called ‘purity,’” in which she is no longer torn by conflicting desires and obligations (Wilbur xiv). Her final words are a testament to this longing: “Et la mort à mes yeux dérobant la clarté / Rend au jour, qu'ils souillaient, toute sa pureté” (V.vii.1643-1644) [“And Death, from my eyes, stealing the clarity, / Gives back to the day, defiled, all his purity”]. Phaedra therefore equates purity, analogous to the final synthesis of all ambiguities and contradictions embodied by the Jansenist God, with the clean light of the Sun, forming an explicit connection between nature and totality.

Like the Deus absconditus of Jansenism, who created mankind only to inexplicably withhold salvation from some of these beings, nature embodies a set of paradoxical dualities. Phaedra’s lamentations over Hippolytus’ corpse reflect these inscrutable, contradictory elements: she likens him to “une belle fleur…/ Atteinte d'une gresle abas…/Devant que d'estaller sa richesse espanie. (V.2622-2624) [“a lovely flower…/ Struck down by hail…/ Before displaying its wealth in full bloom”], a comparison that captures the perversity of a world that creates merely to destroy its creations. Any semblance of inherent structure, the scaffold of a divine plan or “an axis of being,” is lost in the dissonance and white noise of constant genesis and destruction, of innumerable lives set in motion only to be snuffed out a few moments later (Steiner, The Death of Tragedy 196). The natural world, like the Jansenist God, makes impossible demands of man: the human being is a “creature torn apart by different tendencies, made up on every plane of antagonistic elements, each of which is both necessary and

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9 Translation by Wesley Scott.
inadequate: body and mind, good and evil, justice and power, form and content, the geometrical
and the intuitive mind, reason and passion” (Goldmann 219). His character, shaped by natural
forces, “impels him to strive after a synthesis – pure goodness, absolute truth, real justice,
immortality of the body as well as of the mind – on all and every plane” (Goldmann 219). Man
strives for synthesis and totality, but is prevented from achieving it by his own frailty and the
limited scope of his understanding. As Simon Critchley states, “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” (38). Racine’s Phaedra describes herself as “[une] triste rebut de la
nature” (V.vi.1241) [“sad, rejected by nature outright”], a characterization which accurately
summarizes the position of man in the natural world: although nature shapes all living beings, the
human is a creature who experiences only a fundamental disconnect from it, whose very
perception of consciousness evokes a sense of otherness.

Confronted with the overwhelming force of an inexplicable world, humankind is
overawed and overpowered. As Lyons notes, this encounter with the sublime “nowhere seems to
offer the opportunity to demonstrate our strength but rather to feel the limitless strength of the
dangerous world” (185). Driven by a series of conflicting impulses, man attempts to free himself
from nature by asserting his dominion over it, an endeavor that reflects the subordination of God
to Enlightenment philosophy. According to Goldmann, “The rationalist was quite willing to see
God as the author of the eternal truths, the creator and preserver of the world…but it was only on
condition that this God did not interfere with the way men behaved, and, above all, that he
refrained from casting doubt upon the absolute validity of human reason” (32). Even Voltaire,
Goldmann tells us, “was willing to build a chapel to a God who remained within such modest
limits” (32). Inverting the Biblical paradigm, rationalist man refashioned God in his own image, making him a mere extension of himself. Empiricist logic, with its absolute faith in the veracity of sense-experience, similarly transduces the natural world into an emanation of the mind of man, which can be manipulated as he sees fit. Nature, like God, becomes an adjunct to the human will, a subservient element that exists only to guarantee “the validity of [man’s] own strength and powers of reasoning” (Goldmann 33). The endeavor to subordinate the natural world and remold it in the image of man is reflected in Garnier’s Hippolyte. Hippolytus’ proximity to nature intensifies in the description of his death, reinforcing his close association with the natural world. Previously portrayed as an avid hunter of wild beasts, he is now likened to an animal himself: leaving a viscous trace of blood behind him, he is compared to “un limas qui rampe advantureux / Le long d'un sep tortu laisser un trac glaireux” (V.2121-2122) [“(A) snail that adventurously inches up / The stalk of a twisted vine and leaves behind a slimy trail”].

10 The placidity of twilight is likewise mirrored in his motionless body and dimming eyes: “De ses yeux etherez la luisante prunelle / Morte se va couvrant d'une nuit eternelle” (V. 2127-2128) [“The glistening pupils of his vacant eyes, now dead, / Start to glaze over with eternal night”]. While his body is colonized and fragmented by organic forces, Phaedra hopes to preserve a recognizably human form of his remains, deeming him worthy of immortalization among the constellations: “O digne, non de vivre en ce rond vicieux, / Mais au ciel, nouvel astre entre les Demy-dieux!” (V.2237-2238) [“Oh Hippolytus, one worthy not of living in this sinful world / But rather in the new starry sky among the demigods!”]. 11 Man is thus capable of viewing the world only through an anthropocentric lens, a limitation ultimately as harmful to himself as it is to nature.

10 Translation by Wesley Scott.
11 Translation by Wesley Scott.
Like the tragic man, the rationalist is compelled to strive for absolutes, “to create the whole and complete man...whose body will be immortal as well as his soul, the man who will unite in his own person the extreme intensities of reason and passion, the man who, on this earth, can never become a reality” (Goldmann 57). However, unlike the rationalist, the tragic man recognizes the paradoxicality of his situation. As Lukacs writes, “The wisdom brought by the tragic miracle is a wisdom of limits:” conscious of his own frailty, tragic man is acutely aware of the impossibility of ever attaining absolute values or of giving up his quest for them (Lukacs, 56). According to Goldmann, such a paradox cannot exist in the rationalist mind: it rejects all limitations, on geometric space and on the human intellect alike, that might hinder the achievement of its goals. However, paradox still defines the relationship of the rationalist to the natural world. While Enlightenment values glorified human abilities and achievements, the individualism implicit in this vision, which rejects the existence of values surpassing and existing independently of the individual, has left man more alone than he ever was before, cutting off all channels of communication with the universe and other humans. The parallel endeavor to subjugate nature is similarly harmful. As Terry Eagleton observes, “only by distancing ourselves from nature can we confront it, fend off its devastating threats to our existence, and so secure the conditions of happiness; yet this severing of ourselves from Nature is also a painful affair, a self-inflicted wound in the psyche which will never heal” (226). In attempting to force the natural world to conform to his own reason and rationality, man succeeds only in generating still more incoherence: their hands “tug willfully at the enigmatic yet obvious tangle of the threads of fate and, by entangling them more, achieve a perfect yet meaningless orderliness” (Lukacs 177). In the rationalist universe, which has abolished all threads of temporality and connectivity, leaving only the present moment, self-preservation has become an act of self-destruction.
The consequences of a worldview that rejects the concept of transcendence, glorifying the triumphs of scientific thought and technological progress of the current moment, while giving no thought to the next, are becoming alarmingly apparent. As Steiner observes in his essay “Tragedy Reconsidered,” “Historians put at hundreds of millions the sum of those done to death in wars, political and racial slaughter, deportation, famines, concentration camps...Nuclear and bacteriological weapons have been used...Arguably the threshold of our humanity, of that which elevated us above the bestial, has been irreparably lowered” (14). If rationalist man cannot perceive the paradox engendered by his own estrangement from the transcendence of nature, then the tragedy of the situation is sharpened rather than lessened. Aristotle speaks of \textit{anagnorisis}, or tragic recognition, as a prerequisite for tragedy, while David Hume states in his \textit{Treatise of Human Nature} that a person “is the more worthy of compassion the less sensible he is of his miserable condition,” identifying a particular poignancy in a “wretchedness which seem(s) unaware of itself” (Eagleton 5). Is there not a peculiarly tragic quality to the figure of the rationalist, who, supremely confident in the efficacy of human action, not only refuses to recognize any limitations to his own strength, but fails to perceive that such a denial is a limitation in and of itself? If tragedy, as Goldmann avows, turns on the concept of paradox, “[springing] from the contradictions inherent in a situation...then modernity is tragic in exactly the classical sense. It is the author of its own undoing, giving birth, as Marx sardonically put it, to its own gravedigger” (Eagleton 241). The position of humans at the nexus of innumerable natural pressures, with the weight of eons of evolutionary history behind them, therefore renders it necessary to situate the Fall in a new tragic context, not in a distant, half-forgotten garden, but in the parabolic arc of some future flight conjured in the opening scene of \textit{Phèdre}, with its passing mention of “la mer qui vit tomber Icare” (I.i.14) [“the waves that saw the fall of Icarus”].
Man is no longer doomed for what he was, but for what he increasingly threatens to become: the Fall is transformed from a long-ago transgression into an end to which humans are inexplicably and inescapably carried, borne aloft by wings of their own artifice.
Works Cited


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