

SYMMETRY AS SPATIAL PATTERN IN RACINE'S *PHÈDRE* & *HIPPOLYTE**

By Ivan Barko

My topic tonight is "Symmetry as a Spatial Pattern in *Phèdre*". I will be concerned as much with the concept of spatial elements in the linear, temporal art form we call literature, as with Racine's masterpiece. My passion for Racine is an old love, which has not diminished with the passing of the years, and what I have to say tonight about symmetry in *Phèdre* is not so much the result of recent discoveries, but a new formulation of ideas which I have nurtured for over a decade and which form part of a reading of Racinian tragedy that has remained stable in its spirit and inspiration, if not in its detail. My interest in literary theory is more recent, but constantly growing, and it is shared by several colleagues in the Department of French Studies. In choosing a topic which allows me to present both aspects of my personal interests, I have therefore selected one which partly reflects the teaching and research preoccupations of our Department, since our syllabi, including our undergraduate syllabi, aim at introducing students not only to specific works of literature, but to the idea of literature and to a better understanding of how literature works. The same emphasis on conceptual frameworks and the explicit formulation of assumptions behind empirical study prevails in our other two fields of specialisation, French Language and Linguistics, and the Cultures of the French-speaking world.

Indeed, the title of my lecture would be singularly misleading if it suggested to you that we are a predominantly literary department, exclusively concerned with the masterpieces of the past. In fact we have broadened our horizons considerably, reaching out towards linguistics, as well as the study of cultures and societies, and we are committed to interdisciplinary approaches based on our own resources as well as the specialised help we are generously given by historians, anthropologists, sociologists and linguists. In his inaugural lecture nearly five years ago my predecessor¹ explicitly mapped out a blueprint for the development of French Studies, in which he put the emphasis on a "healthy interdisciplinarity between the different branches of the subject" and "the cultivation of theoretical thinking in each branch, so that interchange can become much less a

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¹Ross Chambers, "The Language of Poetry: an Example from Baudelaire", in *Arts* (VIII, 1973) pp. 5-15.

haphazard exchange of insights and much more a conscious process of disciplined research". This policy, formulated in the early seventies, remains valid in the mid-seventies, and it gives me great personal pleasure to report that the major re-organisation of our course structures last year, far from being a reversal of that policy, was aimed at giving it formal recognition and status, offering students maximum flexibility of choice, whilst retaining the principles of both coherence and some spread. But perhaps the most elating aspect of that re-organisation was its collective nature, and the Department's profound commitment to it, a commitment which can exist only when decision-making is also collective.

Let me now turn to the concepts of Time and Space in literature, and to Symmetry, as one of the spatial patterns intruding on the basically temporal, linear sequence of the literary text.

Indeed, Lessing, in his *Laocoon*, enunciated a principle which has a profound relevance to recent literary theory, namely that whilst painting is a spatial art, literature, by nature, is linear, sequential, temporal.

"If it be true", said Lessing, "that Painting, in its imitations, makes use of entirely different means and signs from those which Poetry employs; the former employing figures and colours in space, the latter articulate sounds in time, (. . .) then co-existent signs can only express objects which are co-existent, or the parts of which co-exist, but signs which are successive can only express objects which are in succession, or the parts of which succeed one another in time."²

I should like to suggest that this self-evident principle is one of the basic and most fecund insights from which to begin to understand the nature of literature, and probably the nature of the finearts as well.

A few decades senior to Lessing, Montesquieu, in his *Essai sur le goût*, specifically chose symmetry as a spatial form and ascribed it to objects which theoretically we can see at a glimpse, gaining an immediate synthetic impression. Modern theory disputes this view and claims that not even a painting can be seen synthetically: it needs to be inspected progressively, in some temporal order. However, let us follow Montesquieu for the time being: "[Les choses] que nous apercevons d'un coup d'œil doivent avoir de la symétrie; ainsi, comme nous apercevons d'un coup d'œil la façade d'un bâtiment, un parterre, un temple, on y met de la symétrie, qui plaît à l'âme par la facilité qu'elle lui donne d'embrasser d'abord tout l'objet."³ Sequential art forms, such as music or literature, must, Montesquieu informs us, possess greater variety and, I presume, greater complexity of structure, and our soul has no difficulty in discovering it progressively.

And in this travel back in time I have now reached Racine's own age, with this little

²Lessing, *Laocoon*, transl. Sir Robert Phillimore (London, George Routledge & Sons, [n.d.]) Chap. XVI, p. 131.

³Montesquieu, "Essai sur le goût" in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. André Masson (Paris, Nagel, 1950) T.I, p. 622.

known thought of his contemporary, Pascal: "Symétrie en ce qu'on voit d'une vue" ("Symmetry in what we can see at a glimpse"). And Pascal says elsewhere that we cannot think of two things at a time: "une seule pensée nous occupe: nous ne pouvons penser à deux choses à la fois".⁴ God alone achieves complete simultaneity; Man is subject to spatial and temporal limitations, not only in his physical existence but in his mental world as well.

If these convergent analyses reveal something fundamental about the nature of the spatial arts and the sequential, temporal arts, they only provide a starting point for aesthetic analysis, and need to be refined considerably to be of some use. My quotations have been selective and I have deliberately neglected the views of those theorists who have tried to draw together the spatial and temporal arts, such as the English author Sir Henry Wotton in his *Elements of Architecture* in 1624 where he identifies architectural proportions and musical harmony, or the Abbé Batteux⁵ who in eighteenth century France reduced all arts to common principles. Such views open other perspectives to reflection and research, but they are not our concern tonight.

Whilst recognizing the fundamentally temporal or linear nature of literature, a contemporary theorist such as Roman Jakobson offers a far more sophisticated and illuminating analysis than Lessing did, by defining literature precisely as an introduction of non-temporal, non-linear elements (which I have called spatial elements) into the sequential word-chain of the text. Elements such as metaphors, repetitions, parallelisms, symmetries are projected onto the temporal, linear axis of the text. This is what Jakobson meant when, in the late fifties, he defined literature as the projection of the principle of equivalence (that is repetitions, parallelisms, symmetries, metaphors) from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.⁶

At first sight Jakobson's pronouncement may seem obscure in its dense formulation, especially when the concepts of "principle of equivalence" or "axis of selection" are replaced by the cognate notion of "paradigmatic axis", and the concept of "axis of combination" by "linear sequence" or "syntagmatic axis". But once the terminological obstacle has been overcome and the statement fully assimilated, it emerges as one of the simplest and at the same time the most seminal insights into the functioning of the literary text formulated in any period of the history of literary theory. It is therefore not surprising that modern scholars return to it time and time again, and find it equally illuminating for the study of the verbal or stylistic level of the text (the micro-level), and the investigation of literary texts as wholes, embracing action, character, theme and other macro-structural elements.

⁴Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Louis Lafuma (Paris, Delmas, 1960), fr. 974, p. 418 (Michaut no 320, Brunschvicq no 28), and fr. 264, p. 174 (Michaut no 286, Brunschvicq no 28).

⁵Abbé Charles Batteux, *Principes de littérature*. Tome premier contenant *Les Beaux Arts réduits à un même principe* (Göttingue et Leide, E. Luzac Fils, 1755).

⁶Roman Jakobson, in T. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language* (Cambridge [Mass.], M.I.T. Press, 1966), p. 358. The paper was originally read at the 1958 Bloomington (Indiana) conference.

Later in this paper I will be mainly concerned with the text of *Phèdre* as a whole, or larger segments of it, such as scenes and acts, and I will attempt to show how Racine overcomes the temporal limitations of literature in general, and drama in particular, projecting symmetries, parallelisms onto the axis of the basically linear substance of the story, the plot. Drama is doubly temporal, since words are not only recorded on paper in a linear form, but they are spoken sequentially on the stage. Whilst I readily recognize the very important rôle of the spatial factor in the set, properties, costume and principally the physical presence of the actors, that vast and fascinating area is outside my terms of reference tonight. I will confess, however, that I have often dreamt of producing *Phèdre*, applying on the stage Jakobson's metalingual metaphor of "projection from the axis of selection onto the axis of combination" *literally*, by physically projecting pictures on a screen while the play was being performed, thus illustrating and emphasizing the symmetries and other "equivalences" which the verbal texture of the tragedy contains, in order to bring out their impact in all their complexity – an impossible task even for the greatest of actors, whose art is capable of simultaneity only to a limited extent.

I will leave aside the insoluble question of whether Racine created symmetries deliberately or unconsciously. It is very unlikely that an artist as highly conscious as Racine was unaware of so important a device in a play which he spent a year or two to meditate although probably only a few days to write. Many will remember the well known anecdote told by his son Louis: Racine used to say that his tragedy was finished, it only remained for him to write it.⁷ Clearly Racine considered that his major task was the construction, the design of the work – writing it up was an easy and pleasant duty. I am therefore tempted to venture that the symmetries I will be talking about were intentionally woven into the fabric of the text, carefully "programmed" by Racine himself, and not just read into it by the modern reader. But in his correspondence or theoretical writings there is no sign of a theory of spatial devices in tragedy, no theory of symmetries or parallelisms, whilst there is ample evidence, for instance, that he was conceptually aware of the mechanism of dramatic irony, and without using the word was able to describe it with great lucidity.⁸ Dramatic irony can sometimes use symmetry as its vehicle, but the two concepts do not significantly overlap, and we must therefore admit that Racine never discussed his use of symmetries in his theoretical statements. Perhaps the reason for this is that Racine (together with most of his contemporaries) was strongly inhibited by the principles embodied in Aristotle's *Poetics*, and in particular the misleading notion that art is imitation of nature. Consequently, against their better judgement seventeenth century French artists often concealed the magnitude of the structuring of reality they rightly and legitimately practised. At the conceptual level Art for them was not an ordering of the chaos of the world through their own distorting

⁷Louis Racine, *Mémoires sur la vie de Jean Racine* (Lausanne, Marc-Michel Bousquet, 1747), pp. 116-17.

⁸Jean Racine, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Raymond Picard (Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1966) T.II, p. 855. See also *Principes de la tragédie*, ed. E. Vinaver (Paris, Nizet, 1951) pp. 22-25 and 50-51.

prism or a value-laden re-organisation of reality, but, in the words of a painter of Racine's generation, "le suprême mérite de la peinture est la ressemblance exacte et fidèle aux objets qu'on représente". The ultimate achievement of the painter is the accurate reproduction of the object represented. Similarly in literature, verisimilitude, "la vraisemblance", diversely interpreted (or rather explained away) by different authors, was an unchallenged dogma. The modern French art historian Pierre Francastel would no doubt have shocked Racine and his contemporaries if he had suggested to them that art was founded on "the ordering function of the mind" – "[le] rôle ordonnateur de l'esprit"⁹ and that in a work of art even a concept such as symmetry, although deeply embedded in the physical structure of the world and of living organisms, was *not* a natural reflection of the outside world, but "a social phenomenon" turned into an artistic convention. Francastel's pronouncement is clearly in harmony with recent literary theory which negates the representational function of literature in general and poetry in particular, and emphasizes its autonomous, self-oriented nature. A work of art refers less to the outside world than to the world created by the artist, a world which has its own structure and code. It is the ordering function of the artist's *esprit* that counts, not so much in its deliberate intentions but rather in its objective effects.

Such a notion of art emerges in the work of creative artists in the second half of the nineteenth century in France, and becomes a general European phenomenon by the beginning of the twentieth century. Scholars only came to grips with the theoretical problem after several generations of painters had abandoned figurative art and several generations of novelists had done away with the traditional "story". In a superb essay originally published in the *Sewanee Review* in 1945 Joseph Frank analyses the revolution which took place in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Frank's brilliant essay which oscillates between English, French and German references, asserts that in a text such as Eliot's *The Waste Land*, "syntactical sequence is given up for a structure depending on the perception of relationships between disconnected word-groups. To be properly understood these word-groups must be juxtaposed with one another and perceived simultaneously. Only when this is done can they be adequately grasped; for, while they follow one another in time, their meaning does not depend on this temporal relationship. The one difficulty of these poems, which no amount of textual exegesis can wholly overcome, is the internal conflict between the time-logic of language and the space-logic implicit in the modern conception of the nature of poetry. Aesthetic form in modern poetry, then, is based on a space-logic that demands a complete reorientation in the reader's attitude toward language. Since the primary reference of any word-group is to something inside the poem itself, language in modern poetry is really reflexive. The meaning relationship is completed only by the simultaneous perception in space of word-groups that have no comprehensible relation to each other when

⁹Pierre Francastel, "Aspects sociaux de la symétrie du XVe au XXe siècle", in *La Réalité figurative. Eléments structurels de sociologie de l'art* (Paris, Gonthier, 1965), p. 193.

read consecutively in time. Instead of the instinctive and immediate reference of words and word-groups to the objects or events they symbolize and the construction of meaning from the sequence of these references, modern poetry asks its readers to suspend the process of individual reference temporarily until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity." And then Joseph Frank goes on to trace this revolution back to Mallarmé who, in his opinion, "dislocated the temporality of language far more radically than either Eliot or Pound has ever done."¹⁰

My purpose tonight is not to dwell on experimental poetry or the picture poems of the kind created by Mallarmé or Apollinaire, the former in *Un coup de dés* and the latter in *Calligrammes*, or Michel Butor's more recent visual experiments, where sequential language is replaced or supplemented by pictographic elements. These avant-garde works, however, certainly draw our attention to the time/space problem in the literary text. Mallarmé and Apollinaire also anticipated more recent theoretical discussions of the spatial dimension of the printed text, seen not so much as a linear and temporal sequence, but rather as the visual, two-dimensional reality of print on paper, in physical space. Whilst the problem is particularly fascinating in our era of audio-visual information, it is not my intention to discuss it tonight.

My topic is symmetrical patterns in *Phèdre* at the level of "play-design" — I would have said "structure" if the word had not acquired connotations which are not relevant in this context. In seventeenth century France more often than not the word "symétrie" was taken to mean "just or harmonious proportion". This was its etymological and traditional meaning, which Vitruvius defined accurately when he said that "Symmetry results from proportion. [...] Proportion is the commensuration of the various constituent parts with the whole."¹¹

François Blondel, in his seventeenth century *Cours d'architecture*, makes the contrast with the modern meaning of "symétrie" even more explicit: "La symétrie consiste en l'union et en la conformité du rapport des membres d'un ouvrage à leur tout, et de chacune des parties séparées à la beauté toute entière de la masse, eu égard à une certaine mesure; en la manière que le corps humain est fait avec symétrie par le rapport que le bras, le coude, le doigt, et ses autres parties ont entr'elles et à leur tout."¹²

In its archaic sense, then, "symmetry" denotes in the human anatomy not the similarity of the left and right, but rather the harmonious proportions of the arm, the elbow, the finger, and all the other parts of the body between them. Needless to say that I am not concerned with symmetry in this obsolete sense.

The history of the concept has been masterfully traced by Pierre Francastel.¹³

¹⁰Joseph Frank, *The Widening Gyre* (Bloomington, Indiana U.P., 1963), pp. 12-13.

¹¹Vitruvius, quoted by Hermann Weyl, *Symmetry* (Princeton, Princeton U.P., 1952), p. 3.

¹²François Blondel, *Cours d'architecture*, quoted by H.R. Jauss (ed.), in Charles Perrault, *Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes* (Munich, Eidos, 1964), p. 76.

¹³Pierre Francastel, *op. cit.*

Francastel shows that the modern concept of symmetry dates back to the Italian Renaissance, and perhaps even to the Burgundian and Flemish artists of the fourteenth century. The word "symétrie" with its modern meaning is occasionally found in sixteenth century French texts; it becomes more common in the seventeenth century and prevails by the beginning of the eighteenth.

By the sixteen-seventies Félibien, in his *Des principes de l'Architecture, de la Sculpture, de la Peinture, et des autres arts qui en dépendent*, defines symmetry as the left/right correspondence: "[...] Symétrie en François [...] veut dire le rapport que les parties droites ont avec les gauches, & celui que les hautes ont avec les basses, & celles de devant avec celles de derrière."¹⁴ Félibien therefore sees bilateral symmetry as either horizontal, or vertical, or three-dimensional, but it is basically a bilateral relationship, implying an axis, and no longer just a matter of harmonious proportions.

Modern science, I understand, distinguishes between 232 different types of symmetry. You will be pleased to know, I am sure, that it is not my intention to review all 232 here. In fact I will restrict myself to four basic types, which will suffice for our purpose.

A great deal of interesting work has been done on symmetry, partly in relation to science and partly outside it. The writings of the main French authority Jacques Nicolle, Hermann Weyl's influential book on *Symmetry*, Pierre Francastel's study, which I have referred to several times today, Roger Caillois' recent essay, *La Dissymétrie*, and an excellent shorter study of symmetry in literature by Daniel Laferrière, published in the journal *Semiotica* in 1974, have proved to be particularly useful.¹⁵

The four main types are:—

1. Mirror symmetry, or axial, bilateral symmetry, which could be expressed in the formula $a b a$. (This is the most common form of symmetry, in which the left and right are mirror images of each other and therefore are not superimposable: when you place your right hand over your left hand, the two shapes, although identical in one sense, are different directionally, and do not coincide. At the stylistic level mirror symmetry is called a chiasmus.)
2. Mirror anti-symmetry, corresponding to the formula $a b -b -a$. This pattern is again axial, bilateral, but it is antithetic: we are confronting opposites rather than identical terms. This is contrasted mirror symmetry.
3. Translational symmetry or parallelism: the pattern is $a b a b$, and can be repeated as many times as you like — translational symmetry or parallelism is an open pattern,

¹⁴ [Félibien], *Des principes de l'Architecture, de la Sculpture, de la Peinture, et des autres arts qui en dépendent* [...] (Paris, J.-B. Coignard, 1676), p. 745.

¹⁵ Jacques Nicolle, *La Symétrie* (Paris, P.U.F., 1957); Roger Caillois, *La Dissymétrie* (Paris, Gallimard, 1973); Daniel Laferrière, "Automorphic Structures in the Poem's Grammatical Space", in *Semiotica* (X, 1974), pp. 333-50.

whilst mirror symmetry is a closed pattern. The units can be superimposed.

4. Translational anti-symmetry or contrasted parallelism : the formula is a b -a -b. The pattern is more likely to be closed than open, but the constituting elements are capable of being repeated and of forming different figures.

Having described the four basic types of symmetry which are of concern to the literary scholar, I do not intend to label each occurrence of the pattern in *Phèdre*, and this for the very simple reason that most occurrences are likely to be mixed types. Perfect mirror symmetry or perfect parallelism would be deadly : in literature, just as in the fine arts, and sometimes even in architecture, the similarity is toned down by the deliberate introduction of minor or major variations. In practice, therefore, symmetry and anti-symmetry are inseparable. All occurrences of symmetry are partially contrastive. Even literal repetition, when it occurs, is likely to be contrastive, since the same words cannot have the same impact or function in two different contexts. In Iouri Lotman's recent book on *The Structure of the Artistic Text*,¹⁶ this distinguished Russian scholar puts forward the interesting paradox that parallelisms emphasize contrasts when the constituents are located close to each other, and highlight similarities when they are remote. Without wishing to submit this interesting insight to closer analysis here, I agree with Lotman that symmetries in literature are always more or less contrastive, and mostly contain, deliberately, elements of dissymmetry.

Perfect symmetry in art, in literature, would be unbearable — a sign of fossilized, petrified immobility. Life requires an element of rupture and disharmony. The human body itself presents a mixture of symmetry and dissymmetry : the left and right are slightly differentiated at the surface level, and radically differentiated at the deep level, at the functional level. The brain, the heart, the limbs all reflect the concealed dissymmetry of the body, and it is often claimed, rightly or wrongly, that symmetry reflects an anthropomorphic idea of Art.

Therefore when we speak of symmetrical patterns in Racine, we do not have the formalised sameness of Versailles in mind (although not even Versailles is free of dissymmetries), but rather, to take another example from the fine arts, the distribution of masses practised by classical painters such as Poussin. When human subjects are introduced, perfect symmetry must give way to mixed patterns of contrasts and similarities. Symmetry, as I see it, does not imply identity, nor inverted identity : it is one of the most powerful manifestations of the principle of equivalence, projected onto the sequential axis of the text. It manifests itself both at the verbal, stylistic level, and at each of the other, higher, levels at which literature can be examined. In *Phèdre* I will be mainly concerned with these higher levels : play-design as it affects the segmentation of the text, action, characters, themes and, through them, the ideology embodied in the text.

¹⁶Iouri Lotman, *La Structure du texte artistique*, trans. Anne Fourniet et al. (Paris, Gallimard, 1973), p. 198.

My contention is that symmetries are amongst the main structuring patterns used in *Phèdre* to change a story into a work of art, that these symmetries are built around characters (not so much as psychological entities but as *dramatis personae* carrying themes and embodying values), and that in the play symmetries are not just gratuitous structural devices but they create meaning, and, as sources of meaning, are at least as reliable as the verbal information contained in the text.

Racine built a whole network of symmetries, contrasts, parallelisms and contrasted parallelisms into his play design. The most important of these is undoubtedly the Phèdre-Hippolyte symmetry in which almost equal weight is given to similarities and oppositions. Another meaning-laden symmetry is the father-son, Thésée-Hippolyte, parallelism, once again simultaneously positive and negative in content. Thirdly and fourthly, the secondary figure of Aricie can be seen both in opposition to Phèdre and in parallel to Thésée. I will concentrate my discussion on the first two of these, the Phèdre-Hippolyte and the Thésée-Hippolyte symmetries, whilst paying only limited attention to those symmetries of which Aricie is a constituent part. Time prevents me from discussing the roles of the two *confidants*, Œnone and Théramène, who also participate in symmetrical relationships in the play, and I have deliberately ignored the relationships of the two natural couples, husband and wife, Thésée and Phèdre, and the young lovers, Hippolyte and Aricie, on the assumption that in a work of art data given directly in the text through the plot, at a literal level, must be taken for granted. They are the raw material of literature rather than literature itself.

Perhaps one of the finest lines in French poetry is Hippolyte's protestation of his innocence:

"Le jour n'est pas plus pur que le fond de mon cœur" (line 1112). Through the impact of its sheer beauty this line seems to offer a poetic evidence of truth, almost irresistibly imposing the image of a pure and virtuous Hippolyte. It is true that Racine's Hippolyte is innocent of the crime he is accused of by Phèdre's nurse, Œnone, so that her mistress's reputation can be protected: Hippolyte is not in love with his step-mother, Hippolyte did not make love to Phèdre. And as a result, a superficial audience, the superficial reader, will be tempted to contrast a guilty Phèdre with an innocent Hippolyte. But *Phèdre* is a complex tragedy, not a melodrama with heroes and villains. Hippolyte is both innocent and guilty, just as Phèdre is both guilty and innocent. Racine himself warns us in the preface that he wanted to make Hippolyte guilty, guilty of a lighter crime, that of transgressing his father's taboo. Indeed, Hippolyte falls in love with a remote cousin, Aricie, captive in Thésée's court, condemned to celibacy, so that she cannot produce a rival claimant to the throne of Athens.

"J'ai cru devoir donner [à Hippolyte] quelque faiblesse qui le rendrait un peu coupable envers son père, sans pourtant lui rien ôter de cette grandeur d'âme avec laquelle il épargne l'honneur de Phèdre et se laisse opprimer sans l'accuser. J'appelle faiblesse la passion qu'il ressent malgré lui pour Aricie, qui est la fille et la sœur des ennemis mortels de son père." It is significant that the theme of Hippolyte's guilty love for a young

princess was not part of the literary tradition exploited by Racine – it was his own invention, and must therefore be considered as particularly meaningful.

The intention of the preface is translated into artistic expression at more than one level. At the verbal level, Phèdre's guilty passion for her step-son and Hippolyte's guilty love for Aricie are described in almost identical words, through the image of a hidden, unknown disease :

Phèdre, atteinte d'un mal qu'elle s'obstine à taire (1. 45), says Thérémène, Hippolyte's tutor;

Vous périssez d'un mal que vous dissimulez (1. 136), says Thérémène to his young master;

Elle meurt dans mes bras d'un mal qu'elle me cache (1. 146), says Œnone, Phèdre's nurse, of her mistress, only ten lines after Thérémène's reference to Hippolyte's disease.

The hidden disease is passion, experienced by the self as guilty passion, devouring both Phèdre and Hippolyte. Racine places the last two statements very close together, so that we cannot fail to register their symmetry.

Another phrase, *fol amour*, applied by Hippolyte to himself in Act I (1. 113), and by Phèdre to herself in Act II (1. 675), provides another example of an important verbal parallelism, depicting the similarities between Phèdre's and Hippolyte's condition. "Fol" in "fol amour" refers to the foolish, unlawful nature of their emotions, rather than their intensity.

But Racine is not content with verbal symmetries, he uses the design of his first two acts, the segmentation of the dramatic text into scenes, to emphasize the similarities between Phèdre and Hippolyte. (In other words, he uses structure in the traditional sense to convey structure in the modern sense.)

Jean-Louis Barrault, the celebrated actor-producer, was one of the first modern critics to draw attention to the symmetrical construction of each of Acts I and II.¹⁷ Act I begins with Hippolyte's confession to his tutor, Thérémène, of his guilty love for Aricie, and continues with Phèdre's confession to her nurse, Œnone, of her guilty love for Hippolyte. Similarly, Act II contains Hippolyte's direct confession of his love to Aricie, and continues with Phèdre's direct confession of her love to Hippolyte. Not only are the two main scenes of Act I and the two main scenes of Act II structurally and semantically parallel, but Acts I and II are also parallel *between them*. This symmetrical design is discarded by Racine in Act III in the very middle of the tragedy, when Thésée unexpectedly returns from Epirus. His arrival is announced by Œnone in lines 825 and 828. The geometrical centre of this 1654-line play is between lines 827 and 828. The symmetry could hardly be more precise. The first half of the play was dominated by Thésée's absence, and the concealed passions of Phèdre and Hippolyte only surfaced

¹⁷Jean Racine, *Phèdre, Mise en scène et commentaires par J.-L. Barrault* (Paris, Seuil, 1946), pp. 21, 67, etc.

because of the absence of the King, husband and father to them respectively.

I am not suggesting that Hippolyte's guilt is of the same intensity as Phèdre's — Racine portrayed sexual guilt in two different registers. Symmetry in literature implies similarity and contrast, not perfect identity. But he clearly designed the plot so as to bring about this essential parallelism between Phèdre and Hippolyte.

The whole of the first part of the play is then centred on passion, guilty passion (in *Phèdre* all passion is guilty), passion striving to express itself. It is ironical that Phèdre's love for Hippolyte is matched by Hippolyte's love for Aricie — symmetry here carries a strong load of irony as it often does. The expression of sexual guilt is no doubt chronologically conditional on Thésée's absence, but otherwise in Racine sexual guilt is timeless and universal. In a temporal, linear medium such as literature and drama, simultaneity expressed through spatial devices such as symmetry suggests a generalised, timeless experience. I therefore see symmetry as a spatial means of conquering linear time and transcending it.

I would also like to recall here that originally the title of the play was *Phèdre et Hippolyte*, emphasizing forcefully the symmetrical construction of the work. Racine changed the title to *Phèdre* ten years after he had conceived, written and published the play, for a later, collected, edition of his works (1687). The first title reflects the main lines of the original design much more strikingly than the amended title. I do not wish to speculate over Racine's reasons for the change, but it is not impossible that the rôle of Phèdre (played at the Hôtel de Bourgogne by la Champmeslé) so overshadowed Hippolyte's part that Racine felt compelled to adjust the title of the work accordingly. But in its first version *Phèdre et Hippolyte* it was.

Thésée's return to the court destroys the balanced symmetry of structure which prevailed in the first half of the play. However, a sense of symmetry, thematic rather than formal, is restored when in Act V both Hippolyte and Phèdre die, undoubtedly under very different circumstances, but with the result of restoring order in the world. Both deaths are sacrificial deaths, cathartic and redeeming in their effect. There is a strong sense of reconciliation both in Hippolyte's dying words, reported by Théramène, and Phèdre's unforgettable lines in the final scene of the tragedy:

Déjà jusqu'à mon coeur le venin parvenu
 Dans ce coeur expirant jette un froid inconnu;
 Déjà je ne vois plus qu'à travers un nuage
 Et le ciel et l'époux que ma présence outrage;
 Et la mort, à mes yeux déroband la clarté,
 Rend au jour qu'ils souillaient, toute sa pureté. (11.1639-1644)

The parallelism of the two deaths is not immediately obvious, and it could be claimed that at the ostensible level of the plot Hippolyte's destruction is brought about by Phèdre's silence, Cœnone's unjust accusation, Thésée's blind readiness to believe Cœnone and Neptune's eagerness to carry out Thésée's wish to punish his son.

It is also tempting to see in the sea monster, symbolically representing Phèdre's own monstrosity, the direct cause of Hippolyte's death. However, a more careful reading of the text clearly shows that Hippolyte, far from being destroyed by Phèdre, the metaphorical monster materialized in the sea-monster, defeats and destroys it (and her). Hippolyte's end is brought about by his own horses, symbols of his lost innocence and purity. Earlier in the play, Racine carefully establishes the image of Hippolyte as a sportsman, lover of nature, Hippolyte the horse-tamer, the worshipper of Neptune, not Neptune the sea-god but Neptune the tutelary god of horse-tamers, and shows how the young man changes his lifestyle when he falls a victim of Venus, when he discovers love. In Théramène's words,

Avouez-le, tout change, et depuis quelques jours
 On vous voit moins souvent, orgueilleux et sauvage,
 Tantôt faire voler un char sur le rivage,
 Tantôt, savant dans l'art par Neptune inventé,
 Rendre docile au frein un coursier indompté.
 Les forêts de vos cris moins souvent retentissent;
 Chargés d'un feu secret, vos yeux s'appesantissent.
 Il n'en faut point douter : vous aimez, vous brûlez;
 Vous périssez d'un mal que vous dissimulez. (11.128-36)

Hippolyte himself recognizes that love made him change his allegiance from Neptune, the god of horse-tamers, to Venus, the goddess of love.

Mon arc, mes javelots, mon char, tout m'importune;
 Je ne me souviens plus des leçons de Neptune;
 Mes seuls gémissements font retentir les bois,
 Et mes coursiers oisifs ont oublié ma voix. (11.549-52)

These same horses, long neglected by their master, no longer recognizing Hippolyte's voice bring about the young hero's destruction. Beyond the ostensible reasons provided by the plot, at the deeper, thematic level Hippolyte dies a victim of his love for Aricie just as Phèdre dies a victim of her love for Hippolyte. The symmetry of the first half of the tragedy is restored at the dénouement.

Phèdre's guilt is obvious, whilst her paradoxical innocence resides in her awareness, her remorse, her exacting moral conscience, her full commitment to the divine law which she transgressed. Hippolyte was innocent of the crime he had been accused of, but paradoxically he was guilty of another sexual passion, transgressing the King's taboo, his father's taboo, a human rather than a divine law. In Hippolyte's words :

Quel funeste poison
 L'amour a répandu sur toute sa maison (11. 991-992).

The symmetrical pattern illustrates the ambiguity of the human condition and the all-pervading ravages of passion.

Whilst the Phèdre-Hippolyte parallelism is central to the tragedy and is projected onto the linear axis of the plot at several levels (verbal, semantic-thematic and structural), the Father-Son symmetry fulfils a secondary rôle, and is restricted to the semantic-thematic level. The requirements of the action assign different functions to Hippolyte and Thésée, the son first attempting to assert himself in the absence of the father, and on the return of the latter instinctively accepting to be the object of an action of which his father is the subject. Such radical differentiation between the two *dramatis personae* at the level of the plot makes play-design symmetries between them virtually impossible. As a result Racine will use semantic and thematic symmetries to explore in depth the father-son relationship.

The parallelism, direct and contrasted, will develop along three thematic lines:

- Father and Son, and the gods
- Father and Son, and the slaying of monsters
- Father and Son, and sexual passion.

In each of these registers the Thésée/Hippolyte relationship is ambiguous and frequently ironical.

The most explicit expression of the Thésée-Hippolyte parallelism is their sharing of the same tutelary god, Neptune. However, paradoxically, they share the divinity in two different capacities. Thésée's Neptune is the sea-god, Hippolyte's Neptune is the god of horse-tamers. There is a brilliant discussion of this ambiguity in Leo Spitzer's essay on "The 'Récit de Théràmène'",¹⁸ published in the late 'forties. Whilst Thésée implores the sea-god to punish his son for a crime he did not commit, the same god, wearing another cap, has Hippolyte destroyed for a flaw (his forbidden love for Aricie), for which he *was* responsible. Clearly symmetry here is a superb vehicle for dramatic irony. The monster theme, which Racine works out at two levels, literal and metaphorical (*monstres* standing for those guilty of violating divine, natural or human laws), is a very complex one in the play. The verbal economy, the density of Racine's allusions to monsters rest on the cultural code of his time, namely the audience's close familiarity with classical mythology.

Briefly, Thésée is presented in the opening scene of the play as both a heroic slayer of monsters and the unfaithful, all-conquering lover. He is clearly a virile figure, but one to whom his son reacts ambiguously. Hippolyte dreams of emulating the hero, the upholder of justice and order, the slayer of monsters, but he is deeply perturbed by Thésée's amorous prowesses, and would like to bury in oblivion that unworthy half of his father's past. The ambiguity of Thésée is well brought out in Hippolyte's view of him: the King figure, the Father figure, the Guardian of Order is guilty of countless sexual disorders. Later in the play he will prove to be blind, insensitive and cruel as well – the play contains a strong implicit protest against the injustice of both the divine order and the human order, of which Thésée is the main representative.

¹⁸L. Spitzer, "The 'Récit de Théràmène'", in *Linguistics and Literary History* (Princeton, Princeton U.P., 1948).

The parallelism between father and son is limited, but it is very real. Hippolyte, in the last moments of his young life, fulfils his long-standing wish of emulating his father : he slays the sea-monster, symbolically destroying Phèdre, the metaphorical monster. "Digne fils d'un héros", we are reminded by Théramène. Hippolyte, very much in spite of himself, also emulates his father in his less worthy exploits : he too discovers passion and ironically but no doubt also symbolically falls in love with the only woman his father forbids him to love. Even the potentially pure love of Hippolyte for Aricie is guilt-laden : thus the parallelism with Thésée is complete.

Father and son, at once different and identical, are drawn together at the thematic level : symmetry (here semantic rather than formal) abolishes the temporal dimension of the plot, and establishes a deeper, timeless link between Thésée and Hippolyte. Structure as underlying relationships overrides structure as plot.

All three of the *dramatis personae* we have analysed so far, Phèdre, Hippolyte and Thésée, are mythological or legendary figures. But more significantly Racine presents them surrounded by the aura of myth. Although he subtly makes it possible for the sceptical reader to interpret the play at a purely human level (as when, evoking the apparition of a god, he disclaims all responsibility for the veracity of the vision : "on dit qu'on a vu même . . . [1.1539]), Phèdre descends from Helios, the Sun-God, her father is Minos, the judge of the Underworld, and the Minotaur, slain by Thésée, was her half-brother. Thésée and Hippolyte descend from the Earth Goddess, Gaia. However, this very connection of Thésée with the Earth symbolizes his oscillation between the world of myth and the world of men. Attracted by the dark caves of Epirus, fascinated by Death and the Underworld, nonetheless Thésée is above all the guardian of human order, social order, political order. When both Phèdre and Hippolyte die in Act V, the mythical dimension of the play is abolished and the final lines announce the coming of a new age, a purely human era; an era beyond tragedy. This new era is represented by the only survivors, the un-tragic figures of the play. They are Thésée and Aricie. Whilst at the level of action Thésée and Aricie have very little in common, at the thematic level, at the level of values, they are drawn together as the sole representatives of human society and history. In the final, anticlimactic lines of the play, Racine brings them together at the very level of the plot. The Aricie-Thésée parallelism is completed by the Aricie-Phèdre contrast. Whilst Thésée oscillates between myth and history, Aricie lives entirely in a world of relative, social values. Hence her survival. Phèdre is at the other extreme: she lives entirely in the dimensions of myth. Her values are absolute values, her self-condemnation is pitiless, her yearning for truth and justice eventually prevails. Between the two women, Phèdre and Aricie, myth and history, the absolute and the relative, the divine and the human, the two men, father and son oscillate, Hippolyte ending up on Phèdre's side, and Thésée on Aricie's. At this level, which is the level of themes and values, even the global construction of the play is symmetrical. Beyond the contingencies of the plot it is these patterns of equivalences, these symmetries which structure the tragedy and carry its profoundest meaning.

One of the most gratifying phenomena in recent literary scholarship has been the large measure of consensus of critics, especially those of my generation and our younger colleagues. This paper had been ready in my mind (it only remained for me to write it, to paraphrase Racine) when I read two outstanding articles, one by J. Hoyt Rogers in a 1972 issue of the American *French Review*, and the other by the brilliant young North-American scholar, Timothy Reiss, in the most recent issue of our own *Australian Journal of French Studies*.¹⁹ These readings, although focussing on different aspects of the play, overlap to some extent, complement each other harmoniously and confirm and consolidate each other's conclusions in a most satisfying way. My remarks on the Thésée-Aricie symmetry were largely drawn from J. Hoyt Roger's paper, and my brief analysis of the shift from myth to history was inspired by Timothy Reiss's essay.

Apart from my long-standing passion for Racine, I had another reason to speak of *Phèdre* tonight. Racine's masterpiece was first performed in January 1677. 1977 is the *Phèdre* tri-centenary year. Racine scholarship has probably made more progress in the last thirty years than in the preceding 270. The seminal books of Lucien Goldmann, Charles Mauron and Roland Barthes²⁰ in France were matched by many substantial contributions from the Anglo-American school. British Racine scholars have more than redeemed the unsympathetic representation, or rather misrepresentation, of Racine by D.H. Lawrence who made him Lord Chatterley's favourite reading. I doubt whether in 1977 any critic would dare say as, with due respect, Sir Maurice Bowra dared, over twenty years ago, that "Racine is singularly free of double or ulterior meanings, vague echoes, symbolical intentions, and indeed most means which seek to extend the domain of poetry beyond its immediately intelligible subject".²¹

Modern criticism, enlightened by the practice of creative artists over several decades, has completely renewed our understanding of Racine. Hence the feverish critical and scholarly activity around his work over the last twenty or thirty years, which has surprised every outside observer. Recent literary theory has given us greater understanding of how it all works. And as far as *Phèdre* is concerned, I am happy to be able to report, to paraphrase Baudelaire, that this 300-year old lady continues to fascinate her lovers.²² Or should I rather say, to conclude on a touch of cultural symmetry?:

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety.²³

¹⁹J. Hoyt Rogers, "The Symmetry of *Phèdre* and the Role of Aricie", in *The French Review* (XLV, 4, 1972), pp. 65-74;
Timothy J. Reiss, "Of Time and Eternity : from *Phèdre* to History", in *Australian Journal of French Studies* (XIII, 3, 1975), pp. 225-43.

²⁰Lucien Goldmann, *Le Dieu caché* (Paris, Gallimard, 1955);
Charles Mauron, *L'Inconscient dans l'oeuvre et la vie de Racine* (Aix-en-Provence, Ophrys, 1957);
Roland Barthes, *Sur Racine* (Paris, Seuil, 1963).

²¹Sir Maurice Bowra, "The Simplicity of Racine" (1956 Zaharoff Lecture), in R.C. Knight (ed.), *Racine. Modern Judgements* (London, Macmillan, 1969), p. 47.

²²Charles Baudelaire, "La Beauté", line 12, in *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

²³Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, II, ii, 234-35.