

“A single day”

Three short stories

By Philippe-Alain Michaud

“When the poet has made himself master of his own spirit, when he has felt and retained, when he has taken possession, made sure of the collective soul, common to all yet personal to each, when, in addition, he is sure of freedom of movement, of the alternance and harmonic tension by which the spirit is disposed to reproduce itself (in itself and in others), sure also of the fine progression traced in the spirit’s ideal, and sure of its poetic logic; when he has acknowledged that an inescapable antagonism arises between the mind’s most basic demands, the demand for community, for the unified simultaneity of all the parts, and the other demand, which exhorts him to come out of himself, to reproduce himself within himself and within others via a fine progression and alternance – the antagonism which retains him and guides him on the path of realisation; when he has realised also that this community, this relationship between the parts, this spiritual content, would not be perceptible at all if the parts (in respect of their tangible content, their degree, even if we take no account of their harmonic alternation, even if the spiritual form were equal throughout – with simultaneous coexistence) were not different from each other, and the harmonic alternance, the need for progression would not be felt, would be reduced to an insubstantial phantasmagoria if the alternating parts, even when the difference in content is perceptible, and via the alternance and need for progression, were not still equal as regards their *tangible* form; when he has understood that *this antagonism between the spiritual content* (the affinity between the parts) and *spiritual form* (the alternance of the parts), between immobility and progression, *is resolved precisely* because, as the spirit progresses, in the alternance of the *spiritual form, form and matter remain identical in all their parts*; that it replaces all that the harmonic alternance has inevitably caused to be lost of the original affinity and unity of the parts, that it constitutes the objective content, by contrast with the spiritual form on which it has conferred its full significance; that, on the other hand, *the material alternance of matter* which accompanies what the *spiritual* content possesses that is eternal, its multiplicity, satisfies the demands of the spirit *in the course of progression*, demands that are held in check constantly by *the need for unity and eternity*; and that it is precisely this material alternance which constitutes the objective form, the figure, as opposed to the spiritual content; when he has acknowledged that, in addition, the *antagonism* between material alternance and material affinity is resolved by the dwindling of material identity, of impassioned progression, which evades interruption, is counterbalanced by the *spiritual content*, whose constant resonance creates equilibrium, and that the dwindling of material diversity resulting from accelerated progression toward the culmination, towards the culminating impression of this material identity is counterbalanced by the ideal spiritual form, in continual alternation; when he has grasped that, on the contrary, the antagonism between the stable spiritual content and the alternating spiritual form – in their irreconcilable aspect – as with the antagonism between *identical* material alternance and material progression towards the defining moment, in their irreconcilable aspect, renders them *sensitive* to one another; and finally, when he has noticed how the antagonism between spiritual content and ideal form on one hand, and between alternance and the need for identical progression on the other are reconciled during periods of repose, and climactic moments and that, to the extent to which they are irreconcilable, it is in themselves and because of this that they become sentient and

tangible; when the poet has understood this, all will depend upon him, from his receptiveness to material to the ideal content and form.”¹

The long disquisition (one sentence) which opens the essay that Hölderlin devotes to the approach to the poetic spirit, written during the period of *Empedocles* (1798-1800) might serve as a commentary to the first of Michel Lorand's *Three short stories*. The tragic poem translates the basic need for division that inhabits the One, the primordial rending that precedes and foretells the differentiation of the identical: it is born from the expansion of thought, caught in an irreversible process of exteriorisation, an eccentric progression similar to the progressions of circles produced by a stone hitting the surface of water. As Hölderlin teaches, Michel Lorand's *Medea* embraces the movement of emergence from oneself by which “the spirit is inclined to reproduce itself in itself and in others”, a movement which is also the movement of the spoken word being used as a scenic device.

Four monitors are placed facing each other on each side of a large, square table made of dark wood; the table is lit by four desk lamps, fixed at each corner, which create an arena of light. On three of the screens appear three motionless characters. They read one after the other from a text that can also be read as it moves across the fourth screen – Medea's monologue at the moment just before the murder of her children. The voices on the screens are those of the four protagonists who present the scene in its four constituent phases. They represent respectively the author, the director, the actress and the spectator. Only the faces of the author (Michel Lorand), the director (Hanna Schygulla) and the actress (Alexa Doctorow) appear, speaking alternately: the fourth screen, which represents the position of the spectator, displays the written text. The imperceptible differences between the four versions of the text are emphasised by the use of four distinct grammatical tenses: present, past, future and conditional (or unreal present) which infer the distance and the specific position of the speaker taking over the text, unique and specific to itself, of which he or she is required to present one aspect. A number of copies of the screenplay are placed on the table. These are intended for the visitor who thus discovers the text in three forms, printed, on the screen and spoken, like so many projections emanating from the kernel of meaning which constitutes Medea's expressionless monologue. We can only access it via its temporal and spatial variations: by rendering its “objective content” tangible in a pre-determined place and time, these various different presentations give the narrative material depth, and provide access to its actualisation.

The actress's text is spoken in the first person (“I, Medea”), those of the author, the director and the spectator are in the third (“she”). The personal pronouns are nothing more than the exteriorisation and individual appropriation of pure expressive form, placed within the boundaries of intuition. In the intimacy of the *psyche*, the oration has no imputation. By being fragmented into alternating points of view, which apparently reflect one another, it takes on a shape, and is dispersed in the dislocation of the voices gravitating around this opaque zone, as if piled in a heap in the centre of the table, where the narrative is concentrated before being spoken.

¹ Friedrich Hölderlin, [La démarche de l'esprit poétique]. *Oeuvres*, translated into French by Philippe Jacottet, Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), Paris, 1967, pp. 610-612.

The grammatical determination of the voice simultaneously situates the text in space and time: in space, by reducing it to a finite point of view, by assigning it to a place and a speaker; in time, by unfolding the spectre of its accomplishment. The director speaks in the future, preceding the character and projecting herself into it; the actress speaks in the present tense: she brings the narrative into reality; the spectator's text is in the past tense: the action has already taken place and can now only be described after the event. Finally, the author speaks in the conditional: it is his responsibility to invent the narrative. From the conditional to the future to the present and the past, a temporal axis is beginning to take shape. However, this axis is a closed circuit, an endless loop created by the succession of voices, alternating in regulated fashion; the faces on either side of the table create a circumscribed field of operations: the field is the realisation of the poem at the nodal point at which the voices meet, in the artificial light of the lamp. Each voice marks its differences, all repeat, moving between the four cardinal points of space and time.

By being projected through these different temporal and spatial events, the narrative is dissociated from itself; but this movement of dissociation simply causes it to contradict itself. All the perspective devices of the text (imagination, presentation, anticipation, recall) look back (in the final analysis) towards the undivided unity of a narrative reflected in its own singular modalisations, reducing its impact by taking on a finite mode – a narrative which is created from words with no context, nothing prior to the discourse, rather than effective words. Although by appropriating this discourse the voice is able to identify consciousness and language, the identification remains false. Because this transformation of speech that is mythical but unattached (apart from the thought as it is expressed, given immediate life in the circular distribution of the text) allows us to see and to hear its passage towards representation, beyond the acquisition of meaning.

The temporalisation of the text and its division between the different voices matches the apprehension, the takeover by the person speaking, who abandons his subjectivity in order to become an actor, the agent of a modification. But the takeover by which the narrative takes shape in its spoken version is only partial. By making it finite, by giving it a double temporal (alternation) and double spatial (distribution) expression, it makes it exist, but in an ephemeral manner which is both curious and spurious: ephemeral and curious because each voice in turn is silent and then speaks; spurious, because the installation dreamed up by Michel Lorand is an ineffective device. The dematerialisation of the bodies transformed into surface images, facing each other around the empty table like masks of tragedy, confronting each other and answering each other, marks the annihilation of the living body and of exteriority. This annihilation is the form that the discourse takes, immediately, without substance, unfurling its words in the interior of a subject focused on its own representation. The entire sphere of action is carefully negated: games, gesture – the actor's entire repertoire on the stage and in the world: all that remains is intonation and its visual counterpart, the image, centred and drawn together in its own ground, the image of a face which gives life to the utterance and to the utterance alone. The device produces an unfurling interior monologue, unfurled in the intimacy of a soul and preceding (and in some ways excluding) any spoken resolution. The division of the voices answering one another like as many different modalities of the original text simply represents the self-differentiation of the *logos* which makes itself heard, opens itself to time and tense, in the closed world of the mind.

Consciousness, the moment when the *logos* is reflected in a subject and rendered into grammar, is therefore indissociable from the voice: not the physical voice or the sound substance which makes itself heard in language without communicating the interior monologue, but the voice “which continues to speak and to present to itself – to *understand* itself – when there is no-one there.”² So, within the constitution of this singular entity in which the presence of a subject can be discerned, a plurality of voices affect its revelation; through this plurality of voices the temporalisation of consciousness becomes a reality. The stage will be the location of the realisation of an essential link between *logos* and polyphony, between the spoken word as it is articulated in language and meaning, and the spoken word as it *addresses itself*, thereby producing the form *a priori* of a community.

The temporalisation of consciousness is given its form by the character of Medea. More than any other tragic figure, she appears as the protagonist of the progress from a cyclical conception of time to a linear conception of time, progress which also involves two concepts of the world and of the subject. The granddaughter and a priestess of the sun, Medea is trying to reconstitute the sacred relationship with reality which she lost at the time when she abandon the land of Colchis: in her love for Jason she finds a substitute for her lost religion and for her empathy with the powers of nature. Once repudiated, she undertakes to make peace with the principle of differentiation which rejected her; beside herself, she gets rid of what is externally closest to her, by killing her children. Medea is henceforward the absolute stranger: everything that connects her to the world can now only be viewed in its relationship with this death. The murder of her two sons thus takes on a dialectical significance: it ritualises the mourning for her love, and her immediate regression into the ontology of nature – this anyway is the way Pasolini interprets her tragic gesture³; in the sacrifice of what is most dear to her, Medea prolongs the solar rituals she used to carry out in Colchis, irrigating the earth with blood from the cut throats of her massacred victims. But the sun of Corinth is not the god of fertility, the ascending god who rises from the bosom of the earth: it is the sign of death, of depth and decline. The myth whose instrument Medea appears to be gives structure to this mourning for the world which will later only appear in the theme of loss. In other words, in the element of its representation.

In Michel Lorand’s installation, the text read by the actors concentrates on the instant preceding the murder of the two children and corresponds, in Euripides’ tragedy, to the long monologue preceding Medea’s irreversible gesture:

“And now I am setting out on a most sorrowful road, and shall send these on one still more sorrowful, I wish to say goodbye to my children. (*She makes a sign towards the house. The children reappear.*) Give your mother your right hands to kiss. (*She embraces her children and covers them with kisses*). O dear, dear hand. O dear, dear mouth, dear noble faces! Happiness be yours – but not here. Your father has stolen this world from you. How sweet to touch, the softness of their skin, the sweetness of my children’s breath! Away, Away! (*She pushes them away and signs to them to go back into the house*) I have not strength left to look at my sons, my misery

² Jacques Derrida, *La voix et le phénomène*, Quadrige/Puf, Paris, 1967, pp. 15-16.

³ Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Visioni della Medea (trattamento)”, *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo, Edipo re, Medea*, Garzanti, Milan, 2006, p. 483.

overwhelms me. Yes, I realise the terrible crime I am about to commit; but passion overrules my resolutions, passion that causes most of the human misery in the world.”⁴

This moment of calm and violent tension, when Medea by turns summons and dismisses her children to shift them to another stage (“Happiness is yours, but not here!”) marks a hiatus in the unfolding of the plot, a pause between the time before and the time after: it is a sign of nearness to the verge, of a break in proceedings from which the time of tragedy is born: not cyclical time, based on eternal repetition of the same (like the time in Homeric poetry), but linear, discontinuous time which represents the irrevocable nature of causality; this time is focused on human existence and the power of human action. If tragedy, as Euripides repeats so often, must take place “in a single day”⁵, a day is no longer the natural unit of classical poetry, but the place in which the future emerges, and the place in which instability is brought inside man’s being. Tragedy, says Aristotle, “is at pains to be contained as closely as possible in the time represented by a single revolution of the sun”⁶. After Medea’s sacrifice, however, this revolution cannot lead to a cyclical repetition of the same; it is followed by darkness, indefinite, featureless darkness. The second and third of the *Short Stories* seem to resonate to the tune of Medea’s action: they take place in the aftermath of a night that has become a metaphor for the world, outside and beyond the cut that marked the birth of a new concept of time; the sorceress’s monologue prophesied its non return.

Cut: At night, along a motorway in an anonymous suburban environment. A man walks quickly: the black and white images flowing past him in an endless ribbon create a dehumanised space, broken rhythmically by the synthetic light of the lamp standards and criss-crossed by the bright beams of cars’ headlights: the landscape of tragic night. The off-screen voice of a woman describes, in the first person and the past tense, how she drifted in the city of Shanghai for seven days and seven nights, in the company of a man from the West. She dwells on the distance and on the proximity of their two bodies. Six monitors on the ground show six filmed promenades filmed by hand-held camera in the centre of Shanghai, as if to illustrate the narrative spoken by the voice by deconstructing it: as they contrast ebb and flow, day with night, colour with black and white, the erratic movements of humans with the linear trajectory of the motor traffic, the six monitors respond word for word to the big screen which appears to offset what is on their screens, like a device for resolution or mourning. The real world is delivered only by pretermission: the tale told by the female voice, relegated to a dream space or foreclosed time, now serves only to link a group of traces or visual memories – the collection of maps scattered over the ground.

⁴ *Médée*, lines 1067-1080, translated by Louis Méridier, in Euripides, *Tragédies*, Belles Lettres, Paris, 1983, pp. 162-163.

⁵ “A single day” destroyed everything that Hecuba possessed (*Hecuba*, 285); “A single day” put an end to Amphytrion’s celebrated happiness (*Heracles*, 510): “destiny stole her from me like a feather lifted into the air by a breath of wind, in a single day”. This is how “a single day” can raise a man up or finish him off. What does the day hold in store for us? is the question that the choir, in *Hippolytus* (369) asks Phaedra. And in fact when Phaedra is dead, the young man cries out: “She whom I left but a short while ago, whose eyes, a moment ago, were open to the light!” (lines 907-908”. Jacqueline de Romilly, *Le temps dans la tragédie grecque*, Vrin, Paris, 1971, p. 106.

⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b.

The indefinite opening of *Cut* meets a response in the closed world of *Camera obscura*: inside the darkened room a sequence showing a car driving at night along a deserted road is being projected on to the screen. The tremulous, blurred images have been refilmed by hand-held camera from a projection. Outside the darkened room, two female voices can be heard discussing light and darkness, without addressing one another (“to be in the light and to see nothing/ to be in the dark and to look”); with non-dialectical tension they construct an insoluble oxymoron,.

Changes of speed, scattered monitors, the dissociation of image and sound; but also the incommunicability and the division of languages, nocturnal wanderings, the voices talking of disappearance (love, light), the refilming, the panning of the camera, the dim light of the *camera obscura*... The confined spaces of *Medea*, *Cut* and *Camera obscura* contrast with open space; circular mythical time contrasts with linear, tragic time; theatrical form contrasts with an explicit filmic device – even the titles of two of the pieces make explicit reference to editing (*Cut*) and projection (*Camera obscura*). The cinema is realist in essence, because it is the medium of a separation which finds its ultimate expression in the blank screen of *Epilogue* – not the immaculate white of the fabric screen which precedes a viewing, but the white of the screen as it is after a projection, in the absence of any image, blemished by particles of dust, scratches and dirty marks, caused simply by the passing of time. On the sound track, the voice of a woman (Hanna Schygulla) describes the irremediable character of loss and the unreality of encounter: there is no presence, nor any other person, only a voice without material presence evoking figures that have never had substance.

In his *Natural history of aggression*, Konrad Lorenz recounts an experience (by way of an apologia) which sets up a curious resonance with Hölderlin’s intuition of the tragic stage conceived as the realisation of pure intuition. Having separated a black-headed pigeon from its mate, Lorenz noticed the way, as time passed, the bird’s behaviour altered progressively: a few days after the female had gone, he noticed that the male was ready to pay court to a white pigeon which he had previously ignored. A few days later he was bowing and cooing in front of a stuffed pigeon, and later in front of a piece of rolled fabric. Finally, after a few weeks’ solitude, he continued his love play with the empty corner of his cage where the convergence of straight lines gave him at least something on which to focus his eyes.⁷

In its extreme solitude, Lorenz’s Hölderlinian dove, by replacing the absent female by absence itself, had reconstituted the transcendental framework of the appearance of the other. “At the extreme of anguish, nothing remains but the conditions of time and space”, writes Hölderlin in his “Remarks on Oedipus”⁸: of this intuition, which mingles with tragic experience, Hölderlin will attempt to provide a mimetic equivalent by reconstructing the progress of the poetic spirit, beyond all content and meaning, in a purely rhythmical construction. When reality runs short, the pure conditions of expressivity, the glittering of the image remain; also remaining are the regular throb of the length of time into which the memory of what is no longer given obstinately returns, in the form of aimless scansion. Michel Lorand’s polyptych, which progressively divests itself of all content to give the appearance of

⁷ Konrad Lorenz, *L’agression, une histoire naturelle du mal*, translated by Vilma Fritsch, Flammarion, Paris, 1969, p. 57.

⁸ Friedrich Hölderlin, “Remarques sur Oedipe”, *Oeuvres, op. cit.*, p. 958.

disappearance, is the setting for this intuition – even to the last words, which close the film *Epilogue*: “So we resolve then to accept this habit of life, but (we do not know why) something deep inside can no longer stem the tears.”