'The Material Effectiveness of Music' in Barthes's 1941 Postgraduate Dissertation 'Évocations et incantations dans la tragédie grecque'

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Music and Tragedy: The Experience of the Ancient Theatre Group

Thanks to his triple role of actor, director, and translator in the Sorbonne Ancient Theatre Group between 1936 and 1937, Roland Barthes was particularly sensitive to the double dimension of sound and gesture in Athenian tragedy in his postgraduate dissertation for the diploma of higher studies, entitled 'Évocations et incantations dans la tragédie grecque', which he worked on during 1941 and submitted to the Hellenists Paul Mazon and Louis Séchan in October 1941. This practice of the theatre, whose memory is evoked in 1975 in the *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* in relation to the photograph of the young Barthes playing the role of Darius's ghost in Aeschylus's play *The Persians* in 1936, was consistent with his interest in literature and music from his adolescence onwards, which is manifested in the many letters addressed to his friend Philippe Rebeyrol between 1932 and 1947.

Although Barthes did not say so directly, his philological work on incantations and scenes of evocation in Greek tragedy derives from the activities of the Ancient Theatre Group.[1] This relationship is an early example of a constant feature of Barthes's production, namely the union of life and writing. With his friend Jacques Veil, a former pupil of the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, and literature students from the Sorbonne, Barthes founded the Ancient Theatre Group in January 1936 and was its President from March 1936 to April 1937. Although he left the troupe of amateur actors in March 1938 and ceased to participate in the Group's performances (after *The Persians* in 1936 and Plautus's *Amphitryon* in

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1937, the students would go on to perform Sophocles's *Antigone* in 1939), Barthes did not abandon his research in the field of Greek theatre. His dissertation in 1941 was a continuation of this activity. Although it has never been published (it is presented as a document belonging to the period before the 'entry into writing', which took place after his stay in the sanatorium), this text is a milestone in Barthes's journey, much like Albert Camus's 1937 dissertation for the diploma of higher studies on the relationship between Christianity and Neoplatonism, which contains reflections that are echoed in *The Myth of Sisyphus, Summer*, and *The Rebel*.[2]

Barthes's dissertation is not, as Camus's is, historical and philosophical. It belongs instead to the context of the philological research carried out on Athenian theatre by Paul Mazon, who was then one of the most important translators of Aeschylus, since he had produced a critical edition of the poet's seven surviving tragedies, published in the Collection des Universités de France between 1921 and 1925. Barthes undertakes to analyse the 'structures' of certain 'lyric' sections of Attic tragedy that are a particular feature of Aeschylus's works: rites of evocation and incantations that, by means of singing and dance, aim to call forth the soul of someone who has died. These rites are attested as far back as the Nekyia of Book XI of *The Odyssey*, the evocation of Tiresias's ghost by means of a sacrifice. But Barthes's project, announced in the opening pages, is above all to understand the phenomenon of 'musical catharsis', by examining 'those sections of the tragedy that are in themselves loaded with cathartic significance': 'this leads us to study the incantations and evocations in which, by means of word, gesture, sound, or thought, the man-actor tries to act upon the gods or the dead'.[3] It is therefore a question of explaining how sound and music relate to the dramatic representation, by analysing, in incantations and evocations, what Roman Jakobson would later call 'the conative function'.

This research programme was a continuation of the experiments conducted by the students of the Ancient Theatre Group according to a shared 'praxis', one that was both 'collective' and 'anonymous', as Barthes wrote in 1962.[4] The aim of their work, from the start of 1936, was the staging of *The Persians* and *Amphitryon*, the plays included in the Sorbonne's literature degree program for the years 1936 and 1937.[5] Barthes and his fellow students were therefore involved in a broad artistic movement to reconstruct ancient theatre, going back to the performance of Sophocles's *Antigone* in Potsdam in 1841 in a version staged by Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Donner, and Tieck with the assistance of the

philologist August Böckh.[6] In the years 1920-1930, many lyric and/or theatrical works inspired by Athenian tragedies were produced in France, on various stages: theatre, opera, *opéra comique*, open-air theatres. We might mention in particular the scandalous production of *The Libation Bearers* in 1919 by Paul Claudel and Darius Milhaud, which overturned the perception of tragic music by using percussion to reinforce the choir's singing; the free adaptation of Sophocles's *Antigone* in 1922 – 'as seen from an aeroplane' – by Jean Cocteau with the collaboration of Gabrielle Chanel and Arthur Honegger; the plays of Jean Giraudoux (*Amphitryon 38, The Trojan War Will Not Take Place, Electra*) and André Gide (*Œdipus* in 1932 and *Persephone* in 1934, with Igor Stravinsky); *Amphion* by Paul Valery and Honegger, a 'mimodrama' danced by Ida Rubinstein in 1931; and the staging of Aristophanes's *Birds* by Charles Dullin at the Théâtre de l'Atelier in 1932, with a score by Marcel Delannoy.

As for the Ancient Theatre Group, it belonged above all to a practice of student theatre that had already existed in England for a long time: students participating in the Cambridge Greek Play, founded in 1883, had been directing plays from ancient theatre with the help of their tutors since 1880; these performances were accompanied by scores written by Charles Villiers Stanford, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and Cecil Armstrong Gibbs. The Cambridge Greek Play appears to be one of the direct predecessors of the Sorbonne Ancient Theatre Group, since the two groups shared the same principles: an interest in the musical dimension and the role of the chorus, as well as collaboration between academics, artists, and students. In France, Barthes and his fellow students were more directly inspired by the Sorbonne Medieval Theatre Group, founded in 1933 by students of the literary historian Gustave Cohen. Jacques Chailley, the young composer and musicologist who would compose the score for *The Persians* in 1936, had composed for the 'Theophilians' the musical accompaniment for their first performance in 1933, Rutebeuf's *The Miracle of Theophilus*. The Ancient Theatre Group also secured the support of two prestigious academics, Paul Mazon and Maurice Emmanuel.

Before publishing his translations of Aeschylus, Homer, Sophocles, and Hesiod, Paul Mazon, whose 'very broad humanism' Barthes would recall in 1970, had defended a doctoral thesis at the Paris Faculty of Arts in 1904 on the composition of Aristophanes's comedies.[7] Mazon's interest in Athenian tragedy and comedy was combined with a taste for the theatre and music of his own time. Mazon knew Jacques Copeau and Louis Jouvet, as well as Louis Laloy, a Sinologist, Hellenist, and music critic; and like Laloy, Mazon admired Debussy and he also had a great passion for Wagnerian music. According to the anecdote reported by Alfred Merlin, 'he admitted to having seen *The Valkyrie* more than fifty times, and when he was in Dijon, he did not hesitate to make the trip to Paris for a performance'.[8]

Mazon's artistic views were similar to those of the Hellenist and composer Maurice Emmanuel, creator of the score for *Amphitryon*. Very well known as a Hellenist and composer in the 1930s, Emmanuel was a professor of the history of music at the Paris Conservatoire from 1909 to 1936, having defended a highly regarded thesis on 'Ancient Greek Dance' in 1896. His book, which was read throughout Europe and which inspired Paul Valéry to write *The Soul and Dance* in 1923, prefigured Louis Séchan's work of 1930, *Ancient Greek Dance*, which Barthes used in his dissertation. Emmanuel presented in his book a grammar of the movements of the chorus based on an analysis of the gestures of dancers depicted on vases and statues. In 1913 he published an influential study on ancient Greek music in Lavignac's and de la Laurencie's *Encyclopedia of Music*: in this article, which Barthes also mentions in his bibliography, Emmanuel analysed the structural elements of 'Greek musical language' (modes, rhythms, forms). He put his theories into practice in *Salamine,* based on Aeschylus's play *The Persians*; this 'lyric tragedy' was performed in 1929 at the Paris Opera.

As early as January 1936, the students of the Ancient Theatre Group used the works of Mazon and Emmanuel to make the tragedy of Aeschylus into a total 'spectacle', combining gesture, sound, and word, without aiming for an exact archaeological reconstruction at all costs.[9] In their approach to Athenian theatre, history and philology were combined with musical and theatrical practice. Therefore, in order to bring an ancient text back to life by means of a dramatic performance involving the voice and the body, Barthes and his fellow students called on professionals who had been influenced by Jacques Copeau (the actors Jean and Marie-Hélène Dasté, the director Maurice Jacquemont). This work led to the performance of Aeschylus's *The Persians* in the main courtyard of the

Sorbonne on 3 May 1936, and of Plautus's *Amphitryon* at the Institute of Art and Archaeology on 20 February 1937. In these two plays, which were performed in several French cities in 1936 and 1937 (Menton, Lyon, Provins, Vic-Fezensac), Barthes played important roles as an actor: the ghost of Darius in *The Persians* and Jupiter in *Amphitryon*.

The efforts made by the students of Mazon were rewarded by a positive critical reception to the plays: before 1940, the work of the Ancient Theatre Group was commended by directors (Gaston Baty, Léon Chancerel), writers (Georges Duhamel, Tristan Klingsor), and music critics (Emile Vuillermoz, Gustave Doret).[10] Their success was confirmed by a new performance of *The Persians* on 4 July 1937 in the main courtyard of the Sorbonne in the presence of the very Francophile diplomat Nicolas Politis, the Greek Ambassador to France, who then invited the students to perform in Greece during the summer. With the members of the Ancient Theatre Group, Roland Barthes made the trip to Greece between 23 July and 20 August 1937, and he played the character of Darios first at Epidaurus at the end of July, and then on 10 August in Athens.[11] The Greek conductor and composer Dimitri Mitropoulos, author of scores for Sophocles's *Electra* (1936) and Euripides's *Hippolytus* (1937), particularly praised *The Persians* in the Greek newspaper *Η Βραδυνή* (*I Vradini*) on 11 August 1937.[12]

How to Interpret the *Choreia*

When Barthes came to undertake the analysis of the *choreia* in 1941 in order to understand 'musical catharsis', it was therefore a continuation of these philological and artistic works. To accomplish this analysis, Barthes referred less to Aristotle's *Poetics* than to various other texts that had been foundational for music theorists since the Renaissance: Book VIII of Aristotle's *Politics* and Book III of Plato's *Republic*. Indeed, in the *Poetics*, music is ranked among the *hèdusmata* ('pleasant accompaniments'), and is therefore not studied specifically, since it is the arrangement of the *muthos* that lies at the heart of Aristotle's analysis.[13] However, in Book VIII of the *Politics*, Aristotle describes the functions of music, notably its didactic function, which is essential for a citizen's education, and its cathartic power: the purification or cleansing of the passions by certain *harmoniai* (musical modes). As for Book III of the *Republic*, it contains the classification of *harmoniai* according to their effects on the soul: some are

accepted in the future city, others are rejected because of their harmful effect on the ethical level.

What we call 'music' in ancient Greece was not limited to the organisation of sounds according to the rules of harmony and rhythm, as Barthes well knew. He therefore adopted an interdisciplinary approach to study the *choreia* and 'musical catharsis': anthropology, ethnology, philology, and musicology. This method allowed him to explain the functions of sound, music, and dance in the lyric sections, even though these elements have disappeared in their concrete reality. It applied particularly to the analysis of the scenes that Barthes carefully defined: scenes of incantations and evocations. The two terms, similar in meaning, relate to cases in which 'music', involving singing combined with the gestures of the officiant, is used in the rites that the poets, and especially Aeschylus, incorporated in their tragedies. By choosing these sections, Barthes directly addressed everything that makes Athenian tragedy into a 'ceremony', as Sartre would describe it in 1965 in relation to his adaptation of Euripides's *Trojan Women*.[14]

In order to explain the structure of these scenes, Mazon's student turned his attention less to Antonin Artaud than towards the philology, linguistics, and anthropology of the 1930s. He studied the Greek texts with the meticulousness of a true philologist's patient reading. Almost thirty years before writing the reading of Balzac's *Sarrasine* in his 1970 essay *S/Z*, the student Barthes applied himself to an analysis centred mainly on three passages of Aeschylus and Euripides: the evocation of Darius in *The Persians*; the *kommos* of *The Libation Bearers*, in which Orestes, Electra, and the chorus join in an incantation to bring forth the ghost of Agamemnon; and the *exodos* of Euripides's *Trojan Women*.

Barthes reads these passages through several levels of interpretation: anthropological and ethnological, linguistic and formal, and metrical and rhythmic. In a first chapter entitled 'Ritual Elements in the Incantations of Tragedy', he begins by studying the rite of evocation of the dead and belief in the survival of souls, drawing especially on the foundational book of Erwin Rohde, *Psychè* (1893), translated into French in 1928. In the next three chapters, he analyses the lexicon and phonetics of scenes of incantation and evocation, as well as the movements and gestures of bodies, and the rhythmic architecture of the strophic groups. The object placed under the Hellenist's gaze is therefore presented with its

multiple facets, yet without ever losing its unity. This unity is largely guaranteed by the central problem raised by Barthes: to understand the effect of these scenes on the spectator-listener on both visual and auditory levels.

To grasp what the element of sound in tragedy had been, and the musical component of the lyric sections, Barthes first applies the most rigorous philological work. One of the ways for the interpreter to access this 'musical' dimension is provided by the metre and rhythm. This field of study had been undertaken regularly since the beginning of the nineteenth century: studying metre was an essential step for any Hellenist with an interest in the musical elements of tragedy. This is what Maurice Emmanuel, in particular, had shown in his article on Greek music, in his teaching at the Paris Conservatoire, and in his practice as a composer.[15] From a technical perspective, the 'music' can be perceived indirectly through the change of metres, which relate to different tempos and movements, different gestures and affects. In his translation of Aeschylus's tragedies, Mazon had taken metre into account to indicate changes of pace in the lyric sections (distinguished from the spoken sections by the use of italic characters). By noting 'lively', 'slow', or 'moderate' at the start of a strophic unit, he aimed to suggest a general feeling that is perceptible through rhythm. It was a way to grasp the action of the chorus beyond the words of the text.

Barthes was sensitive to the elements of rhythm and metre (and we know that his interest in rhythm and form would stay with him, up until it emerged once again in his reflections on the metre of the haiku in *The Preparation of the Novel*), thus keenly remembering this particular characteristic of Mazon's translations. In the fourth and last chapter of his dissertation, '῎Ηθος or lyric character', he provides a study of the metrical structure of incantations and evocations, drawing on the work of Paul Masqueray, whose 1895 work on the theory of the lyric forms of Greek tragedy included many structural analyses.[16] Barthes shows how each metre expresses a particular *ethos*; on this basis, he establishes the 'law' of 'progressive rhythm', or the 'law of rhythmic progression', according to which the acceleration of pace, correlated with metric variety, corresponds to an increase in tension and exaltation. But the rhythm, even when it is 'lively', is never at a 'mad pace' in tragedy.[17]

As early as 1941, Barthes observed that rhythm is a fundamental principle of organisation, which makes possible the almost miraculous coincidence of action between individuals dispersed in space at the time of the incantation (an idea and image that would long remain present in his

future work). How was this coincidence presented to the public? Barthes tries to explain this at the start of the fourth chapter:

> In any case, the exact nature of the rhythms cannot be grasped on the stage. All the elements demanded a certain general slowing down: the number of chorus members, the large size of the theatre, the distance from the spectators, the open-air environment, buskins, masks, clothing. Every movement, every word, every note, required the material time to be carried out, deployed. The vastness of the setting obviously brought about visual and auditory loss. This loss was all the greater when the movements and sounds were fast. This therefore *required* a certain slowness, even for the movements that were supposed to be lively, and this slowness was not felt as such by the audience. When the rhythm tells us a movement is 'lively, light, keen' we must correct our first reaction, and understand that the 'allegro' of a Greek chorus is much slower than the same movement applied to the current realities of the theatre or cinema. We must therefore initially broaden out, mentally slow down all the rhythmic indications provided by the metre, and only ever consider them relative to one another.[18]

We can detect here Barthes bringing to bear everything that he learnt from his experience as an actor, singer, and musician in open-air theatres in France and Greece. But the study of incantations and evocations could not be limited to this narrow field of classical philology that is metre. An understanding of 'musical catharsis' requires taking the whole body into account. Barthes was therefore also interested in the Greek language, the use of the word, the mask, and the functions of gestures.

The Powers of Word and Gesture

The study of evocations and incantations raises two central questions, which go beyond the limits of text-centred philology. On the one hand, the question of signification based on the relationship between sound, rhythm, and meaning; on the other hand, the question of the performativity of language, which is approached here by the study of magical rites transposed into tragedy. Much later, in 1974, in an unpublished fragment of *Le Lexique de l'auteur* entitled 'The first word', Barthes was astonished to find this major orientation of his research already expressed in the quotation given as an epigraph, drawn from Paul Claudel's *The Black Bird in the Rising Sun*, with regard to Japanese Nô theatre: 'It is not an actor who speaks, it is the spoken that acts.'[19] This 'first word' therefore appears as early as 1941, and involves two terms: speaking and acting, the fundamental opposition between object-language and metalanguage, which would preoccupy Barthes continuously from *Mythologies* onwards. The relationship between speaking and acting would also be redefined in 1949 by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his article on 'symbolic efficiency', precisely through a study of shamanic incantation.

For now, in 1941, the student's project was to understand 'the material effectiveness of music' in tragedy.[20] To carry out this study, Barthes first analyses the 'verbal substance' in cries, interjections, and exclamations.[21] This auditory material lies at the origins of music, according to the traditional theory of lyric as an expression of passions and individual feelings. Several decades before Nicole Loraux's reflections on the meaning of tragic cries in *The Mourning Voice*, Barthes produced a phonetic and semantic analysis of the interjections that appear throughout the tragedies of Aeschylus and Euripides, and whose importance he considers to be just as fundamental as the rhetorical and stylistic processes aimed at influencing the deity or hero being invoked.[22]

Barthes also adopted an ethnomusicological perspective, extending the concept of 'music' to the study of auditory phenomena peculiar to the rites of evocation and incantation, which go beyond the modern concept of 'music'. Before the word is understood on an intellectual level, the sound first exerts an influence on the body and the psyche: an infra-linguistic phenomenon makes it possible to act upon nature, gods, or men. It is then a question of a study of the 'auditory substance'.[23] This must bring to light the 'magical power of the word':

> For the Greeks, Music has a universal power; it acts not only on the soul, but also on animals (myth of the eagle in Pindar *Pythian* I, 10-25) and things (myth of Amphion, Orpheus). Sound possesses a cathartic quality; in the Eleusinian Mysteries there was a purification by Music.
> Philosophy has confirmed the extreme material power of music. Music can heal or make you sick. It is endowed with a superhuman quality, allowing man to accomplish what his human condition normally prevents him from doing. It is a reflection of divine essence. Its material effects are so powerful that they sometimes become excessive. At Delphi, the emotional power of the flute was so great that it was forbidden. Musical catharsis extends even to the realm of the dead: Orpheus overcame the Underworld through music. Music for the dead has a particularly violent physiological action: it is a music without lyre (*Agam*[*emnon*] 990).[24]

In a ritual, you cannot dissociate the sound from either the word or the gesture: the 'music', or at least the auditory dimension, is an integral part of a whole that involves the language and the body of the officiant. Barthes restates this at the end of the introduction: 'We have only dealt with texts where the magical power of humans over gods or other humans by means of word, gesture, and thought was manifest'.[25] This explains his interest in the gestures of tragedy, divided into bodily movements, figures (*skhèmata*), and group movements (*phoraï*).[26] Mindful of what he would later call the informative 'polyphony' of theatre, the future theorist of the theatre therefore takes into account the role of the voice and gestures in the actor's performance, insisting, in the wake of Louis Séchan, on 'the magical power of dance and gesture'.[27] What strikes Barthes is that the gesture, both that of the actor and of the priest, obeys a symbolic system that reinforces the power of the word while imprinting a meaning on it. In this way, communication is established between the world of the living and the chthonian underworld. Word and gesture act to 'objectify prayer'; they 'detach' it from 'silence' in order to communicate it to a god with the greatest possible intensity:

> [...] An address to god must be projected with the brightness of the rising sun, with crowds of witnesses: its formulation must make use of all the possible processes of expression, from the fulguration of the word (chosen to be the most striking, the most musical expression possible) to the transparent mimicry of the gesture. The gesture too will be a

> symbol. With equal clarity, it will be conveyed to the back row of spectators in the theatre and understood by the slightest intelligence. The gesture helps one to understand the music, multiplies its power, and adds to it the brilliance of a visual symbolic system.[28]

In this portrait of the Greek theatre, the problem of signification, long before the revelations of Brecht, is already raised by the student. Everything must signify in a scene of evocation or incantation thanks to a visual symbolic system that accentuates the power of auditory phenomena and makes the scene intelligible to the totality of the spectator-listeners. It is clear that the experience acquired as an actor within the Ancient Theatre Group was instrumental in understanding the importance of this 'visual symbolic system'.

The pages devoted to the study of the gestures and figures carried out during incantations and evocations lead to a brief study of the 'coordination of stage movements', in which Barthes imagines how visual and acoustic relationships were created between actor and chorus, based on the model of responses and 'lyric echoes' between an individual and the collective.[29] As for the power exerted over the dead, its effectiveness also benefits from the technique of *drumming*:

> The ritual lamentations that prepare for the evocations are in the form of certain Eastern cults. The incantatory gesture of '*drumming*' (beating the ground with your hands, in a cadence suited to calling forth the dead), on which we have based our classification of certain incantations, was an essentially oriental gesture, practised across the Asian and African continents, wherever all-powerful rhythm willingly takes on an intensifying pace.[30]

Through such analyses as these, Barthes is evidently working in the wake of Nietzsche. Seventy years after the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music,* he took up the project of the German philosopher-philologist: to study Athenian tragedy with an emphasis on the musical phenomena that are its origins; to defamiliarise Greek theatre by revealing a new aesthetic based on the concepts of the Dionysian and Apollonian. Barthes had eagerly read *The Birth of Tragedy* in the 1930s, and alludes to it when he writes halfway through his dissertation:

> Through this study of the logical structure of incantations, we have acquired a moving conviction, because it sheds light on our general knowledge of the Greeks: we now know that, for them, moments of deep emotion, of total lyricism, of the greatest musical intoxication, coincide to the point of confusion with the moments of intense deductive will, of the greatest logical rigour of thought. For us, who have become accustomed to attaching the adjective 'cold' to the noun 'reason', nothing could be stranger. But this is the Greek miracle: in the depths of Dionysian drunkenness we find Apollonian lucidity.[31]

The dissertation's sources also reveal the use of various books that steered the student's philological studies towards anthropology. We find in the bibliography a large presence of the English anthropological school, including the studies of Gilbert Murray and the Marxist Hellenist George Thomson, as well as articles by Lawson and Headlam. But French researchers are not overlooked, since Barthes knew the work, already old by this time, of the musicologist Julius Combarieu *(Music and Magic,* 1909), and the even older works of Jules Girard. He also cites the Hellenist Louis Gernet (*The Greek Genius in Religion*, 1932), who, before being one of Jean-Pierre Vernant's teachers, had been part of the Durkheimian school, and the sociologist Gaston Richard, a defector of the Durkheimian School, who was well known at this time.[32]

The young Hellenist constructed his analysis from the interweaving of these references and texts, to use one of Barthes's favourite metaphors. However, it was especially the book of André Schaeffner, *The Origin of Musical Instruments* (1936), that provided him with elements of crucial importance. After two ethnographic missions in 1932 and 1935 in Central and West Africa with Marcel Griaule and Michel Leiris, Schaeffner worked with the German ethnomusicologist Curt Sachs in the 1930s and became one of the founding fathers of French ethnomusicology

at this time.[33] Challenging the classical opposition between noise, sound, and music, Schaeffner decentred European music and offered a general explanation of the origin of music based on the addition of instruments to the body. Barthes often refers to *The Origin of Musical Instruments* and, like Schaeffner, he makes many comparisons with non-Greek cultures, for example with Egyptian culture or Assyrian music.[34] Following Schaeffner and Claudel (the former frequently cites the latter's *Knowledge of the East* and *The Black Bird in the Rising Sun*) and writing thirty years before the pages on the Bunraku in his 1970 piece *Empire of Signs*, Barthes compares ritual practices in Aeschylus and Nô theatre.[35] We can also note in the dissertation, again following Schaeffner, a mention of Balinese theatre, in which the musicians remain visible next to the site of the dramatic representation.[36] In recalling the existence of such practices, Schaeffner intended to oppose the mystical orchestral pit of Bayreuth to radically different forms of theatre, where music becomes visible.[37]

Finally, the 'question of the mask', which would become so important in Barthes's writings on theatre and in several mythologies in the 1950s, is analysed in a few decisive pages, in which he relies once again on the interpretations of Schaeffner. The function of the mask was to distort the voice, to give it a 'chthonian' character and to contribute to the action exerted by sound on the dead:

> The voice of the supplicants – amplified, deformed, containing a thousand strange resonances from the tragic mask – became something superhuman, a free sound, with an autonomous force, that the spectator's consciousness could barely connect to the human body through which it passed. Through the mask, the supplicating voice objectified the supplication directed towards the god or the dead as something solemn. It is not ordinary prayer – a common reaction to pain or desire – it is a magical sound – never seen before – like that music of destruction described by Barrès, whose virtue – or better, whose *life* – raises up cities, overthrows walls, murders or revives, and bends gods or the dead to the will of man. In the incantation, the mask is the final consecration of sound and word, as a power superior to man.[38]

Barthes would long remember this interpretation of the tragic mask, just as he would often take up the metaphor of the word 'crack-of-the-whip', found in Aeschylus's *Suppliant Women* (v. 466). Musical

ethnology unquestionably provided him with a method and information that allowed him to interpret the auditory element of tragedy while taking into account the magical power of sounds. But the quotation above still shows a certain ambiguity between sound and music, as well as a typically Barthesian association between an ethnological analysis (Schaeffner, Murray, Rohde) and a literary vision (Barrès, Claudel). We can already see the outlines of a research project that would consist in performing multiple exchanges between the social sciences and literature.

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Philology would become the object of a radical critique in the 1960s and 1970s, when Barthes promoted semiology and the Text in opposition to 'monosemic' literary history. Nevertheless, one cannot fail to perceive, as Barthes himself would recognise in 1974, certain resonances between this early university work and his later writings. The relationship between vision and listening, the performativity of language, the need for a lexical and rhetorical analysis of texts, the insistent presence of violence, death, and singing, and rhythm as a structuring element are all themes and fields of study whose first seeds seem to develop over these pages. As a letter to Philippe Rebeyrol in 1945 reminds us, Barthes himself was aware of the interest of his dissertation and the vast perspectives that had opened up to him through the study of 'verbal substance' and magic in scenes of evocation and incantation:

> Since my graduate degree, I have been pursuing some vague but powerful ideas about the mythological value of the word; it seems to me that one could consider literature from this point of view; there is an imperceptible; and uniform passage from magic to art, to poetry, to rhetoric; that is what my thesis demonstrated; that marvellous thread could set us free from the idea, the content, to grasp literature in its creative – that is to say, organic – phase where it is most pure, as nascent oxygen is the strongest. Basically, everything holds together and I anticipate exciting connections: a history of literary art on the surface – that is, at greatest depths – captured in samples, cuts taken from the purest episodes in the permanent drama of the word: the Greek lyric, sophistry, scholasticism, euphuism, classical rhetoric, Romantic illusion (where the desire was to fuse magic and truth, to criminally suppress the sacred distance between the word and

> the idea, to socialize, Christianize, authenticate the magic, which immediately resulted in depreciating the truths treated thus: the problem of Michelet's great hollow words), and finally symbolism and what follows, the purest examples of this attempt: Valéry or Michaux and the contemporaries in general when they are not stupidly mysticizing or confusing prayer and poetry.[39]

Barthes, however, always refused to publish his dissertation, implying that his 'first text' was either the article on Gide's *Journal* in 1942, or the pastiche of Plato's *Crito* from 1933. However, despite its technical dimension and its precise – and often old-fashioned – analyses, this dissertation illuminates many subsequent texts, beginning with 'Powers of Ancient Tragedy' (1953) and 'The Greek Theatre' (1965). Furthermore, an evaluation of the many performances that Barthes attended in the 1950s, the theoretical and practical knowledge that he acquired during his years of study, would also be of great help. Here was a model of theatre then located not in the impoverished plays of bourgeois theatre, but in the performances of the Berliner Ensemble as well as the dramatic and musical performances of the Greeks.

Notes

[1] Sylvie Patron, 'Le Groupe de Théâtre Antique de la Sorbonne', *Cahiers de la Comédie Française*, 23 (spring 1997), 48-53; *Amphitryon de Maurice Emmanuel*, ed. by Sylvie Douche (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris-Sorbonne, 2012), pp. 13-16.

[2] Albert Camus, 'Métaphysique chrétienne et néoplatonisme', in *Œuvres Complètes*, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard Bibl. de la Pléiade, 2006), vol. I, pp. 999-1081. See the introductory text by Maurice Weyembergh, pp. 1424-27. Cf. Roger Grenier, 'Albert Camus, un cœur grec', in *Camus* (Paris: L'Herne, 2013), pp. 126-27.

[3] Roland Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations dans la tragédie grecque', October 1941, p. 2 (Archives Roland Barthes, BNF, NAF 28630). Barthes's expression 'man-actor' (homme-acteur), unclear as it is, would seem to be a reference to the fact that the person on stage performing theatre (actor) must be considered simultaneously as a member of the community (man) and who therefore performs rituals; and it is the sublimation of ritual into theatre that defines Aeschylan tragedy.

[4] Roland Barthes, 'Lettre au Groupe de Théâtre Antique', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Eric Marty, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002), vol. II, p. 25. Henceforth referenced as *OC* followed by volume and page number. The names of the actors were not mentioned on the programmes distributed at the Group's performances.

[5] Notebook entitled 'Assemblées Générales 1936-1939', Paris, BNF, Arts du spectacle, Archives du Groupe de Théâtre Antique de la Sorbonne, 4 COL 33 (13).

[6] Helmut Flashar, *Inszenierung der Antike* (Munich: Beck, 1991), pp. 70-76; Susanne Boethius, *Die Wiedergeburt der griechischen Tragödie auf der Bühne des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005).

[7] Roland Barthes, 'Critique et autocritique', *OC* III, p. 636.

[8] Alfred Merlin, 'Notice sur la vie et les travaux de M. Paul Mazon', *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 99.4 (1955), p. 475. Laloy was the author of an important thesis on Aristoxenus of Tarentum in 1904, a close friend of Debussy, and had written the libretto of Albert Roussel's opera ballet Padmâvatî, which was performed at the Paris Opera in 1923.

[9] 'The director will come closest to the Greek model if he transposes the ancient spectacle into a modern spectacle, and places all the resources of modern techniques in the service of a renewed tragedy, just as the poets of Athens put into practice all the resources of the techniques of the time. The principle that he should remember above all is that, in a Greek spectacle, everything is life and movement, and that the chorus, more than any individual character, is designated by the history of the genre to create this life and movement.' Paul Mazon, 'Le Spectacle grec' [1929], in *Le Théâtre Antique de la Sorbonne* (Paris: L'Arche, 1962), p. 3.

[10] See Tiphaine Samoyault, *Roland Barthes: A Biography*, trans. by Andrew Brown

(Cambridge: Polity, 2016), p. 102; and Sylvie Douche, *Amphitryon de Maurice Emmanuel*, pp. 207-08.
[11] Cf. Platon Mavromoustakos, 'Théâtre en plein air et Groupe de Théâtre Antique de la Sorbonne: *Les Perses* à Epidaure', in *Le Double Voyage: Paris-Athènes 1919-1939*, ed. by Lucile Arnoux-Farnoux and Polina Kosmadaki (Athens: Ecole Française d'Athènes, 2018), pp. 293-300.
[12] '*Les Perses* 1937', Archives du Groupe de Théâtre Antique, Paris, BNF, Département des Arts du Spectacle, 4-COL-33 (136).
[13] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b31-1450b21.
[14] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'The Trojan Women', in *Sartre on Theater*, ed. by Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, trans. by Frank Jellinek (New York: Pantheon, 1976), p. 310.
[15] Christophe Corbier, 'Des mètres latins aux mesures modernes: le rythme dans Amphitryon de Maurice Emmanuel', *Revue Silène*, Centre de recherches en littérature et poétique comparées de Paris-Ouest-Nanterre (http://www.revue-silene.com/images/30/extrait_163.pdf).
[16] Paul Masqueray, *Formes lyriques de la Tragédie grecque* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1895).
[17] Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', p. 58, p. 120.
[18] Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', pp. 117-18.
[19] Roland Barthes, *Le Lexique de l'auteur: Séminaire à l'École pratique des hautes études 1973-1974, suivi de fragments inédits du Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, ed. by Anne Herschberg Pierrot (Paris: Seuil, 2011), p. 289.
[20] Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', p. 1.
[21] Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', p. 27.
[22] Nicole Loraux, *The Mourning Voice: An Essay on Greek Tragedy*, trans. by Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 26-41. Cf. W. B. Stanford, *Greek Tragedy and the Emotions* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 51-59.
[23] Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', pp. 26-34.
[24] Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', pp. 24-25.
[25] Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', p. 11.
[26] Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', pp. 46-56.
[27] Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', p. 43.
[28] Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', p. 43.
[29] Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', pp. 56-58.
[30] Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', pp. 15-16.
[31] Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', pp. 88-89.
[32] William S. F. Pickering and Michel Bozon, 'Gaston Richard: collaborateur et adversaire', *Revue française de Sociologie*, 20 (1979), 163-82.
[33] Cf. Olivier Roueff, 'L'ethnologie musicale selon André Schaeffner, entre musée et performance', *Revue d'histoire des sciences humaines*, 14.1 (2006), 71-100; Anne Boissière, 'André Schaeffner et les origines corporelles de l'instrument de musique', *Methodos* [online], 11 (2011).

[34] Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', p. 29.
[35] Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', p. 49.
[36] Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', p. 43.
[37] André Schaeffner, *Origine des instruments de musique* (La Haye: Mouton, 1968), pp. 92-93. First published in 1936.
[38] Barthes, 'Évocations et incantations', pp. 59-60.
[39] Letter to Philippe Rebeyrol, 12 July 1945, in Roland Barthes, *Album: Unpublished Correspondence and Texts,* trans. by Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 23.

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