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## The Endless Tragedy: Euripides and Camus

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The Endless Tragedy: Euripides and Camus

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
Ian McMahon

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## PROLOGUE

Most Greek tragedies end right at the moment when the characters' alienation is at its peak. Only a few stride further. In this seldom-charted space, everything is darker; the stage is no longer lit. You must imagine a hero—or perhaps a man who was once a hero—groping around in the dark with his arms extended, helpless, trying to maneuver through the ruins of his world that lies in shambles at his feet. He stumbles and falls repeatedly. He starts to ask himself “why,” but the darkness is silent and the world refuses to provide him with an answer. This project shines a light into these dark spaces. I take self-alienation and the consequences it arouses after tragedy as my foundation for examining the works of two infrequently paired writers: Euripides and Albert Camus.

At the center of my intellectual life is a deeply rooted fascination with the works of Camus. The utter warmth of his deserts and the lingering presence of a sea close by have always been somewhat of a home for me. But the questions that initiated this project had nothing to do with him at first. Rather these questions were directed at one tragedy of Euripides' in particular: *Heracles*.

How is any reader to make sense of this drama's disorienting structure and contradictory reversals? I became devoted to finding an answer, and the reason that this tragedy struck me so much at first, I believe, was simply because it reminded me of more familiar *récits*. I let what for me was a natural connection take its course. As a result, the project arose out of an effort to read this confounding and frequently overlooked-tragedy through Camus' eyes. Soon enough, as I strayed into the brilliant and decadent web of Euripides' tradition, I found that these two writers were attempting to understand a similar darkness. More specifically, the darkness that exists at the end of *Heracles*, the

one pervading *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and the one at the heart of *The Fall* all seemed to harmonize with one another. It is a darkness defined by the experience of man becoming conscious of himself after tragedy. Whether or not a modern lens can lead to an authentic reading of an ancient tragedy, or that a distant past can truly be used to make sense of a recent present is not something I seek to answer—though I will not say that such a thing is starkly impossible. Rather, my goal in this project is to show how two distinct cultures and literary works communicate with each other in order to make light of a more broadly human experience that reoccurs throughout time.

Performed in 416 B.C., towards the end of the Peloponnesian War, *Heracles* is a tragedy unlike others in its genre. To a naïve, modern reader of Greek tragedies—as my experience once informed me—the dramas have an ancient and mystical aura to them. They feel calculated and accomplished in the same way that the Parthenon is dimensionally perfect or that the ancient bronze sculptures show the human body not as it is but in the ideal state of what it should be. Aeschylus' *The Orestia* puts an end to generations of violence and revenge-atrocities with a grand symphonic-style ending marked with the bang of Athena's gavel in a divinely orchestrated court of civil justice. Likewise, the heroine of Sophocles' *Antigone* courageously offers her young life and entire future of happiness in order to ensure the preservation of honor in the war-torn city of Thebes. As a modern reader, the sentiment that ran throughout these tragedies was one of nostalgia: that this is what man once was.

None of this nostalgia, however, can be found in *Heracles*. This drama renders virtue, justice, and the semi-divine Heracles himself entirely unrecognizable by the end. Everything from the characters to the plot and the values instilled within get caught up in



a disorienting sea of contradictions. The sense of unity and heroic spirit had been evacuated. Reading it didn't feel like an excavation of an ancient past, a stretch across a large, incomprehensible expanse of time. It was recognizable, as if I were merely looking out the window into a much more recent past. For so long, many classical scholars would write that Euripides' *Heracles* seemed inconsistent and incomparable to the standards of the genre—be it the fault of the tragedy, tragedian, or something indefinable. But to me there appeared a different reason: the heartbeat of *Heracles* is modern. This belief is paired with the fact that scholars of the modern period, beginning in the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, started to ask themselves whether this tragedy is as inferior as they once thought—as if they only recently acquired the perspective necessary to understand this anomaly of a drama.<sup>1</sup> Something in the way that thinkers have come to see the world in the past two centuries had been hibernating in the *mythos* of this drama.

The modern era had reequipped man's perspective. What was needed was a very particular understanding of self-alienation, an understanding that is perhaps no better articulated than from the self-proclaimed “poet of modern life,” Charles Baudelaire. A 19<sup>th</sup> century French poet succeeding Euripides by some two thousand years, he captures the very essence of what Heracles experiences in his poem from *Les Fleurs du mal*, “L'Héautontimorouménos.” The title is derived from the Greek words *ἑαυτὸν τιμωρούμενος*, meaning “the self tormentor” or “the man who tortures himself.” As the title foreshadows, Baudelaire's speaker confronts the self as if it were an “other.” He enters into a reflexive encounter wherein each threat is a threat doubled back onto

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<sup>1</sup> I am not alone in this view, as Daniel Mendelsohn argues the very same. Daniel Mendelsohn, “Herakles: Punished Again!,” *The New York Review of Books* (New York, NY), May 23, 2013. He writes, “An earlier generation of classicists, more often than not, saw in *Herakles* a hopeless mess. But we moderns (and postmoderns) are perhaps better equipped to see the point in the apparent pointlessness of the action, in the fragmentation, in the hollowing out of convention.”

himself:

I shall strike you without anger  
And without hate, like a butcher,  
As Moses struck the rock!  
And from your eyelids I shall make

Je te frapperai sans colère  
Et sans haine, comme un boucher,  
Comme Moïse le rocher  
Et je ferai de ta paupière,

The waters of suffering gush forth  
To inundate my Sahara.<sup>2</sup>

Pour abreuver mon Sahara  
Jaillir les eaux de la souffrance.<sup>3</sup>

The poem begins with establishing distinct oppositions between subject and object. They begin as separate entities acting on one another, the “I” striking “you,” and the “waters” inundating the “Sahara.” But more than that, they are diametrically opposed to one another to such an extent that they exhibit a positive and negative relationship. But as the speaker continues and comes to the pivotal central stanza, he reveals that this relationship is not at all what it seems:

Am I not a discord  
In the heavenly symphony,  
Thanks to voracious Irony  
Who shakes me and who bites me?

Ne suis-je pas un faux accord  
Dans la divine symphonie,  
Grâce à la vorace Ironie  
Qui me secoue et qui me mord

Here, we discover that the subject and the object at play in this poem are not separate at all but instead are merely “discord” within the same single, ironic entity. The “harmony” is a false one. The speaker thus causes us to reframe the stark distinctions between the subject and object in the beginning as clear enumerations of the same divided-self. What first appeared as an external struggle proves to be an internal one. Turning the gaze meant for the “other” inward, the speaker enters into a destructive self-conscious examination.

Irony begins to pervade this internal struggle, and as it does, the speaker himself falls under threat. He also uncovers that within the divided-self there exists an inherent

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Baudelaire, William Aggeler, “the Man Who Tortures Himself” in *The Flowers of Evil* (Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954)

<sup>3</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “L'Héautontimorouménos” In *Les fleurs du mal: the complete text of The flowers of evil* (Boston: D.R. Godine, 1983), 256.

evil, a capacity for both virtue and for ruining vice. The imagery created in these final stanzas shows not just a self doubled, but how its two halves gravely imperil one another:

I am the wound and the dagger!	Je suis la plaie et le couteau!
I am the blow and the cheek!	Je suis le soufflet et la joue!
I am the members and the wheel,	Je suis les membres et la roue,
Victim and executioner!	Et la victime et le bourreau!
I'm the vampire of my own heart	Je suis de mon coeur le vampire
— One of those utter derelicts	— Un de ces grands abandonnés
Condemned to eternal laughter,	Au rire éternel condamnés
But who can no longer smile!	Et qui ne peuvent plus sourire!

The divide between subject and object that characterized the beginning is no more. Instead, the speaker unifies the two under one “I” that recognizes itself as two things. As a result, the opposition that exists throughout the beginning has transformed into a highly exaggerated form of self-alienation. Being both “victim and executioner” is the ultimate fate of the “self-tormentor,” for he is someone whose self-consciousness approaches the limit of self-annihilation. Once the impossible marriage is made between the one striking and the one stricken, the self becomes the “vampire,” that alienated being that reflexively engulfs its “own heart.”

Once Heracles’ tragedy unravels, he becomes a “self-tormentor” in his own right. But these conclusions—that man is self-consciously alienated, are only the starting point of this project. Heracles too discovers that the self is contradicting, that the harmony of the world is distant and incomprehensible, but he takes this inquiry one step further. Realizing this, is there not a case for suicide? While I cannot claim that no such case like this one exists elsewhere in the ancient world, philosophies of the modern world deal with this problem openly and head on. In fact, I look towards these modern philosophies in order to understand *Heracles*. Just as Heracles will ask himself this, Albert Camus will do the same in *the Myth of Sisyphus*. This essay on the philosophy of the absurd, written

in the 1940's, assumes the same set of conclusions reached by the "self-tormentor" and begins, "there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide."<sup>4</sup>

Camus' philosophy is enriching to this tragedy not just because it contemplates the same question but also because the questions that both a philosophy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a drama from the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. ask are born from similar historical ruins and intellectual environments. Both Euripides and Camus are writers of tragic times. Writing during or after the time of world-shattering wars, the work of both these individuals captures the essence of their morally declined and gravely hypocritical societies. However, I must establish now, this project is not a historical reading of either of these texts. Through a comparative reading, I am explicating the historical environments of tragedy—or at least this specific strain of tragedy. And by placing these similar landscapes next to one another, I do not mean to imply that such landscapes are unique to these points in history. In fact, I intend to suggest the opposite. That these environments can be recognizable over two thousand years apart, geographically separated by thousands of miles, shows only that they are timeless landscapes—tragedy eternally reappearing. The "self-tormentor" can find his home anywhere.

The first step to answering my initial question was to address the bigger question as to how to approach a comparative project with such large proportions. While I am indebted in many cases to the traditional scholars who have written on these various texts—and one will find that their influence is surely present—this untraditional project required an untraditional approach.

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<sup>4</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 6.

The first part of this project looks at how Euripides' *Heracles* manifests these problems in a way unlike most other Greek tragedies. In order to read and understand how this unique space of confrontation functions, a different critical framework is necessary than what scholars traditionally rely on. Knowing that the guidelines espoused in Aristotle's *Poetics* would be ineffective in this regard, I use Camus' *the Myth of Sisyphus* as a lens to interpret the drama's latter segments. Using this framework, I explore how the disjointed construction of *Heracles* is mirrored in the psychological crisis of the self that the protagonist comes to experience, helping us to understand the highly criticized, final segment of the drama which confronts the question of suicide.

The second part looks to the future and how Camus' later work, *The Fall*, complicates this problem. My analysis will progress through his dizzying *récit* in order to arrive at Clamence's illusive and damning conception of falling. Awaiting our arrival is a man grown accustomed to this darkness. His narrative is one of undoing. If *Heracles* embarks from the land out into the sea, then *The Fall* becomes lost in this sea, seeming to erase the possibility that there exists anything but the sea.

The heroes of these stories are not who they may seem to be. A god, a lawyer, a gentleman on the street—these are only who they were. Stumbling in the impenetrable black of tragedy, they truly discover themselves. What happens to heroes in this darkness? They fall, of course. Like sailors enticed by the song of the Sirens, they will heed the charming voices that seem to promise them redemption. Searching endlessly for the harmony that they desire, our heroes will abandon home and make a life in the sea. But the song is beautiful all the same. Isn't it?

## I

*HERACLES: A Life Of Hopeless Labor*

Euripides' *Heracles*, first performed in 416 B.C, has earned a reputation among the Greek tragedies for being the troubling black sheep of the tragic cannon. Most often, scholars have a great deal of trouble working through the plot's confusing and somewhat contradictory structure. It slips through their fingers, eluding a solid grasp. The drama begins in Thebes with Heracles' wife Megara, his three sons, and his mortal father Amphitryon under threat from Lycus, a tyrant invader wanting to kill the hero's family and take the city. Heracles himself is away completing the last of his twelve labors, but as word spreads that he has descended into the underworld, everyone else, including his family, believes him to be dead. His desperate family buys time from their deaths, hoping that he might make a timely return. Indeed he does at the very last minute and defeats Lycus just in time. Then, without explanation, Iris, messenger of the gods, and Madness<sup>5</sup> arrive over the city and cast a spell of mania onto Heracles at the orders of Hera. In this state, Heracles goes on to murder his wife and his children, sparing Amphitryon. Upon regaining sanity, Heracles learns of his madness from his father, and in his suffering, concludes that he must commit suicide to preserve any of his remaining honor. Then, once more as if by chance, Theseus, whom Heracles saved from the underworld, arrives in the city upon hearing of Lycus' tyranny. He convinces Heracles not to end his life but to leave his suffering and come with him to live in Athens. And thus it ends, the life of Heracles preserved.

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<sup>5</sup> Sometimes translated as "Lyssa"

Because of the drama's multiple reversals, it is no wonder that so much of the scholarship surrounding it concerns itself with establishing a sense of unity. For a long period of time, *Heracles* simply received little attention at all. Those scholars that did address it frequently came to the unfortunate conclusion that it is simply "broken backed,"<sup>6</sup> or worse, that it is merely a "grotesque abortion."<sup>7</sup> An early scholar of Ancient Greek literature, K.O. Müller, wrote of *Heracles*, "it is altogether wanting in the real satisfaction which nothing but a unity of ideas pervading the drama could produce," because the drama places "in one piece two actions so totally different."<sup>8</sup> Early scholars like Müller generally argued that *Heracles* sternly breaks with the classical traditions of Greek tragedy that one might find in Aristotle's *Poetics*. In what is largely considered the first piece of tragic criticism, Aristotle claims that the actions of plots must be singular, that they be not "episodic," and that the events must follow each other in a sequence that is rational and reflects cause and effect.<sup>9</sup> Using this as groundwork, scholars have trouble reconciling the action of Heracles saving his family with the subsequent action of him killing them in his madness. In addition to this, the unexplainable entrances of both the godly messengers and Theseus seem to defy the laws of cause and effect. With these 'errors,' classical thinkers have had a difficult time mining out the thematic message (the 'take-away') that lies beneath *Heracles*' frenzied surface.

We may pause if only for a minute to consider the man behind the tragedy, an author whose critical reception is not very unlike the reception of the drama in question.

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<sup>6</sup> G. Murray, *Euripides and his Age* (London 1914) ch. Iv; *Greek Studies* (Oxford, 1946), 112.

<sup>7</sup> A. W. Verrall, "Wilamowitz-Moellendorff's 'Heracles' of Euripides." *The Classical Review* 10, no. 1 (1896), 43.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Otfried Müller, *History of the Literature of Ancient Greece* (London, 1840), 372.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), 70.

Euripides is the last of the three ancient tragedians whose works have survived from the 5th century B.C. Seeing as very few ancient writings from contemporary critics of tragedy have survived, perspectives of the author are typically drawn from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Classicists widely believed that Euripides broke from the traditions and conventions of the Greek tragic method most frequently and most irreconcilably, making him, according to many critics, the inferior tragedian. Friedrich Schlegel articulated at the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century what came to be the common problem scholars had with Euripides. In his works they found “the failure of the parts to mesh with the whole.”<sup>10</sup> Adding to this, he found that Euripides’ works sacrificed moral steadfastness for theatrical embellishments simply in order to shock the audiences. But by the turn of the century, scholars like A. W. Verrall revived his reputation reframing his untraditional methods as complex rather than sloppy: “if anywhere we suspect [Euripides] of dullness, we should quietly mark that place for something which probably we do not understand.”<sup>11</sup> This is the general tone in which Euripidean scholarship has continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Although today Euripides is much more positively received, certain works of his remain difficult to swallow for some classicists. And the need still arises every so often for a bold scholar to step forth and defend some under-appreciated work of his. In the words of Euripidean scholar and translator William Arrowsmith, when Euripides breaks with tradition “it becomes sacrilege, a crime against

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<sup>10</sup> Ann N. Michelini, *Euripides and the Tragic Tradition* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 12.

<sup>11</sup> A. W. Verrall, *Euripides the Rationalist: A Study in the History of Art and Religion* (Cambridge University, 1895), 119.



the classics. We respond, if at all, with outraged traditionalism, automatically invoking that double standard which we seem to reserve for the classics [...]"<sup>12</sup>

While *Heracles* only receives a small fraction of the attention that Euripides' more popular works like *the Medea* or *the Bacchae* receive, modern criticism has been friendlier to it than previous centuries. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century classicist U. von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff wrote at length on the singular subject of *Heracles*, and his work showed an appreciation for its contradictions, identifying them as the very thing that empowers the work.<sup>13</sup> Writing on Wilamowitz's criticism, A.W. Verrall states that "the grounds for superiority of this criticism to any which has preceded it lies in recognizing as intentional, indispensable and all important to the meaning of the dramatist, the contrast and discord of opposing elements [in the drama]".<sup>14</sup> Thus, it is in these moments of absurdity that *Heracles* actually comes to life the most. This line of thinking would seem to be the only correct way to approach such an anomaly as *Heracles*. An analysis that forcibly tries to explain the irrationalities so that they align with the canonical standards of tragedy is thoroughly damaging to the merits that the tragedy has to offer.

One of the most striking features of *Heracles* is that it is divided into two seemingly disjointed halves. The act of madness divides the plot, at which point the identities and ideologies of the first part reverse and transform into their opposite form by the second. My reading will initially focus on the first half up to the madness in order to show how the reversal contradicts the ideals established in the beginning. From there, I

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<sup>12</sup> William. Arrowsmith, "A Greek Theater of Ideas." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 2, no. 3 (1963), 36.

<sup>13</sup> Michelini, *Euripides and the Tragic*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> A. W. Verrall, 43. I must rely on Verrall's review of "das Herakles" because Wilamowitz' work has not been translated from the original German.

will focus more thoroughly on the events that follow the madness. My greater interest in the second half is owed to the fact that Euripides shows something there that is largely absent in other tragedies. Instead of ending right when the character's lives have been reversed and their alienation is at its peak, *Heracles* gives space to answering the question: what comes after tragedy?

A seminal tragedy like *Oedipus Rex* comes to a close within moments of Oedipus learning that he is not the hero he thought he was—his sense of self destroyed. Something like *the Orestia* does in fact give space to this question, but instead of showing how the tragic hero Orestes endures after the world has been given over to disorder, *the Eumenides* dedicates itself to rebuilding order and dispelling any remnants of irrationality through law and order. Within this space so rarely staged, Heracles confronts the existential consequences of tragedy. Order and meaning given over to chaos, he must make the choice of what to do next. The question he faces is the quintessential question of the absurd. Incapable of finding meaning, yet unwilling to give up searching for it, he must come to reject suicide in all of its forms.

The approach that I wish to take for reading *Heracles* is a particularly modern one. Considering my claim that the drama deals with both the tragic and the post-tragic world, I argue that it has the necessary components to be an absurdist tragedy. I call it absurd because it shows characters not just experiencing tragedy but, more importantly, confronting the reality that their world is chaotic and meaningless. Therefore, I intend to elucidate the events of *Heracles* through the lens of the philosophy of the absurd in order to make sense of the drama's long, post-tragic scene. Seeing as the philosophy of the absurd only comes about in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I will draw exclusively from Albert Camus

and his philosophical text, *the Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus does not take an interest in proving the absurdity of life; rather, his goal is to examine the consequences of man's conscious confrontation with the absurd. Thus, I will follow a similar path in that I will show moments, particularly in the beginning and at the major reversal, where the plot erects notable irrationalities and how their presence contributes to constructing the essence of the absurd that is confronted in the latter half.

It is my goal to show that the structural peculiarity of *Heracles* is not a case for abandoning ship. The absurdist lens, though not traditional, offers a powerful reading of this tragedy—one perhaps that it has desperately needed. If others have struggled in battling the winds of this drama, it is because they sail the likes of a stormy sea that will not allow itself to be maneuvered by traditional means. I set off into this very storm, at the mercy of its direction and with a willingness to wind up shipwrecked in an absurd and tumultuous sea.

### *Changing the Myth*

A characteristic of this tragedy that should inevitably serve as the starting point to all analyses of *Heracles* is Euripides' detour from the standard events of the canonical myth of Heracles. This includes both reordering the traditional sequence of events and adding new material to the myth. Perhaps the most evident and significant disparity between Euripides' myth and the standard myth is that in the standard myth Heracles is meant to kill his family and complete his twelve labors as a form of penance. In Euripides' version, the labors come before the crime itself, bringing forth many thematic problems that I will return my attention to later. But one important thing to note about

this tragedy is that Euripides is not simply abandoning the traditional myth to tell a new story; rather, the poetic inventions that Euripides' makes are constantly at odds with the standard events of the myth. These two versions, however, cannot coexist. The tragedian's changes make the standard myth itself irrational, but at the same time, those inclusions of the standard myth contradict the story that he appears to be telling. Yet the tragedy forces them to coexist. So from beginning to end, these two conceptions of the Heracles story sustain a dramatic tension that frequently forces the plot's rationale to break down in certain pivotal moments. Thus, as one scholar eloquently states, "*Heracles* makes use of yet abuses the "other world" of myth and in order to do so employs one of the strangest dramatic structures in the whole of Greek drama."<sup>15</sup>

Just as the reordering of the labors is the tragedian's invention, so too are Lycus and his invasion of Thebes. As the scene opens, Amphitryon and Megara reveal themselves to be helpless innocents at the mercy of Lycus. They are, as Amphitryon himself recognizes, suppliants "upon this altar of Zeus."<sup>16</sup> This sets the stage for what is a common archetype of tragic plots: the suppliant drama. Often in tragedies one will find helpless characters fleeing some imminent threat by retreating to the city's religious temple. Once there, religious law protects them. For a villain to disregard this law and continue pursuing his prey or for some bystander not to come to the suppliants' rescue is morally reproachable.

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<sup>15</sup> D. J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama: Myth, Theme and Structure* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 82.

<sup>16</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," trans. William Arrowsmith, in *Euripides III*, by Euripides., trans. William Arrowsmith, et al., 3rd ed. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 47-48. All references made to Euripides will refer to Arrowsmith's translation unless otherwise noted. Additionally, all corresponding citation numbers will refer to line numbers not page numbers.

The suppliant drama of *Heracles* is one of a more abject variety. The innocent duo make it clear from the start that not only will Lycus refuse to show any mercy, but also no one, not even the mighty Heracles, is going to save them. The tragedy seems to begin at the end. Yet, despite death quite literally being at the doorstep, it is inexplicable that Amphitryon maintains such a strong hope for survival. Late in age now, he was an honorable hero in his own time, but his statements, “We are weak and, being weak, should play for time./ ... I love [life] even now. I love its hopes./ ... A cure may come in wearing out the time”<sup>17</sup> run counter to the standard codes of Greek nobility whereby he should preserve his honor by using his autonomy to take his own life. We see such nobility in Sophocles’ *Ajax*, for example: Ajax turns to suicide in order to preserve his honor after having slaughtered a herd of animals in a state of blind madness. Suicide is one final act of courage that rids his life of its shame—a dictum in the hero’s handbook.

Being a definitively violent act, suicide rightly goes hand in hand with the heroic. Interestingly, however, Euripides has given the role of honorable nobility to the female, as Megara proclaims, “The man who struggles hard against his fate/ shows spirit, but the spirit of a fool.”<sup>18</sup> The dialogue between these two desperate characters in this opening scene foreshadows the question that will come to dominate the second half of the drama: that is, whether or not Heracles should commit suicide after disgracing his honor. Megara may imply that her husband, when in the face of similar ruin, would make the choice that she voices here, but by the time the reversal arrives, the link between honor and suicide is

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<sup>17</sup> Euripides, “Heracles,” 89, 91, 93.

<sup>18</sup> Euripides, “Heracles,” 308-309. Although Megara makes the case that she is merely imitating the nobility of her husband (292-294), for this advice not only to come from a woman but also for it to have to convince a former male hero is unusual in the context of Greek tragedy. Indeed, the *Poetics* has it that, “there is a type of manly valor; but valor in a woman... is inappropriate,” 81. But Megara’s claim is progressive beyond the point of “manly valor,” she is correcting the man and bringing shame to him.

questioned—honor not having the same meaning in the end as it does here in the beginning.

In general, the characterization and inclusion of Lycus has raised a few flags among critics.<sup>19</sup> He is often criticized for being flat because he ultimately lacks any relieving qualities that would make him less one-dimensionally evil.<sup>20</sup> He is simply bad. But I believe that his simplistic evil is not to be mistaken for insignificance. He functions as the most unredeemable symbol of traditional vice. The plot most clearly establishes this by the fact that Lycus is so blindly intent on overthrowing and killing that he is willing to commit an act that is considered beyond reproach as an attack against the religious order. Growing impatient with the suppliants, Lycus threatens to burn down the temple and altar of Zeus in order to finally end their standoff, “Burn them alive/ until they have learned the dead man rules no more;/ I, and I alone, am the power here.”<sup>21</sup> Although the dead man he refers to is indeed Heracles, it is tempting to look at Lycus’ threat as one issued directly to the divine order. This in fact is more than plausible considering its connection to the defilement of the religious space, not to mention that Heracles himself, being the son of Zeus, is just as much representative of divine power as he is of humanity. It is true, however, that Lycus only sends troops off to find firewood and that the time never comes to put his words into action, but the gesture to do so is unprecedented even for a barbarian—a Greek might consider it.

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<sup>19</sup> McDermott, Emily A. "Double Meaning and Mythic Novelty in Euripides' Plays." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1991): 123-32. 125. Once more, scholars widely recognize that he did not exist outside of Euripides’ tragedy. McDermott notes how Wilamowitz classified Lycus’ long introduction as being a clear admission that Euripides is introducing this character for the very first time. She then goes on to make the very astute observation that Lycus’ mythic novelty “blurs the conventional separation of the character’s world and the audience’s,” but provides little insight as to how this should influence any reading of Lycus’ character.

<sup>20</sup> Michelini, *Euripides and the Tragic*, 240. One-dimensional because, as she points out, Lycus has not “a single trait to relieve his characterization.”

<sup>21</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 244-246.

Considering that Lycus is more talk than anything else, the first part of the tragedy is often criticized for being flat and precarious in its development.<sup>22</sup> Kitto argues that this scene provides very little dramatic action because “Lycus represents nothing but imminent danger,” and so he argues that Euripides dramatizes only a “negative” in this first half.<sup>23</sup> Lycus undeniably contributes to this “negative,” but not in the way that Kitto argues. The “imminent danger” that Lycus issues in this half has a very wide spread. He not only threatens the family of the hero, but he also threatens the honorable reputation of Heracles, the reputation of the divine, and most of all, the sanctity moral structure. His very presence invokes a pressing display of justice. In other words, the purpose of Lycus in this part of the plot is simply to establish the true form of wrong that Heracles will contrast himself to, but which, by the end, he will ironically come to mirror.

When Heracles arrives, he swiftly defeats the villain and restores order to a city that had sprung into chaos. Justice prevails. His entrance makes for a brilliant and heroic image of a man returning against all odds from the underworld, coming to the defense of desperate suppliants, and living up to his semi-divine status. Though, this image is fleeting. Slowly coming into focus over the long first half of the drama, this Heracles lasts only for an instant. Fading too quickly for us to admire it, a few lines later it will be thrown out of focus once again.

Immediately after Heracles’ success, the messenger gods arrive and bring with them a life’s worth of ruin. Appearing at what could rationally be the end of the plot, Iris and Madness arrive just at the time when the audience could expect the *deus ex machina*

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<sup>22</sup>H.D.F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study* (Routledge: Taylor and Francis Inc., 2002), 239. Kitto writes, “is there in the whole of Greek drama a set of scenes that can rival these in debility?” He goes on subtly to attribute the flatness to this first half to too much of Euripides’ creative influence on the mythological narrative.

<sup>23</sup> Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*, 242.

to give the thematic lesson. Typically, when the gods arrive at the end of a tragedy, they are tasked with surmising the events and relating the morals to the audience in a way that is within the range of human knowledge. The reason for this interpretative element is that, as Aristotle states, “to the gods we ascribe the power of seeing all things.”<sup>24</sup> The chorus in *Heracles* prepares the audience for their arrival and plays upon the expectations that Aristotle lays forth, singing in their celebratory song, “the gods of heaven do prevail:/ they raise the good and scourge the bad.”<sup>25</sup> What happens instead is not a *deus ex machina*, but more a parody of one. Once these messenger gods arrive they serve only to complicate the drama and plunge the characters into a far darker chaos. Not only they reject our expectation of divine behavior, but also the tragedy itself seems to be aware of the irony. The chorus’ song appearing next to such a graceless image of gods shines a bright light upon the marked dissonance between our perception of the gods and the reality of how they are.

Appearing more like a villain’s incompetent henchmen than *gods*, they argue and stumble over one another on the stage. The overly apparent irony in this scene is that Madness is serving as the voice of caution and reason. She says, “And I advise both you and Hera now,/ lest I see you stumble, to hear me out [...] renounce these wicked plans,”<sup>26</sup> yet no one is heeding her warning. Madness is forced against her will and put at the service of the blind revenge, for Iris retorts, “Hera has not sent you down to show your sanity.”<sup>27</sup> The fact that a bickering argument takes place about justice in the first

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<sup>24</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 82. It is important for me to underscore that for Aristotle, this is the only acceptable use of the *deus ex machina*. Any other use, as seen in the end of *Medea*, which relies on an unrelated and external action to bring an end to the events of the play, he strongly criticizes.

<sup>25</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 772-773.

<sup>26</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 848-854.

<sup>27</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 857.



place attests to the non-universal and non-definitive nature of justice, unlike the brand of justice shown just moments before to Lycus. While arguments about the “just” course are frequent on Mt. Olympus, Euripides has invented this interaction, making a point to stage such a silly and absurd debate before a human audience. The conclusions they reach, however, are grave and destructive for the hero. Virtue and reason, the case made by Madness, is silenced and overridden by power and violence. D.J. Conacher points out in that this argument “serves to emphasize the gratuitous nature of the gods’ ill-treatment of the kindly Heracles,”<sup>28</sup> noting further how this display of chaotic divinity humanizes Heracles and separates him from the divine order. His grace is seemingly far above theirs. The only image that this tragedy provides of true gods is one in which they actively renounce sanity and order. We can normally expect the gods and humans to have opposing images, but in this case, the poles have flipped and the human comes out of this comparison on top. Ultimately, Euripides shows here just how precarious the pillars of justice truly are, as the messiness of the gods’ arrival mirrors the mess that they make of the plot.

Looking ahead, knowing that in his madness Heracles will turn upon his family and finish the task that Lycus started adds a confounding layer to this suppliant drama. Here lies one of the tragedy’s most senseless irrationalities. It is a thorough contradiction that all of these endangered subjects—his family, his reputation, and the moral structure—are laboriously saved, and then, in the very next motion, destroyed by the same hand. The traditional myth requires only that Heracles murder his family in a state of mania, but it is only *Heracles* that necessitates the family to first be saved. This forces

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<sup>28</sup> Conacher, *Euripidean Drama*, 82.

us to reconsider the “meaninglessness” that Kitto claims plagues this first half. It is not meaningless in that nothing of merit happens; it is meaningless—one could argue—because it is rendered meaningless by the events of the drama itself. In this way, Euripides has given us a tragedy that contains two separate actions that are opposite, or, in other words, one single contradiction.

### *The Reversal*

Once Heracles goes mad, the long awaited and devastating *reversal* occurs. Of all the remaining Greek tragedies, the reversal in *Heracles* is perhaps the most poignant and most literal of them all. According to the *Poetics*, the *reversal* is simply the “change in which the action veers round to its opposite, subject to our rule of probability and necessity.”<sup>29</sup> Virtually nothing in this tragedy is exempt from this reversal. The events turn from good to bad; the hero becomes the villain; and most importantly, order is given over to chaos, justice over to violence. The first part of the tragedy (until the moment that the messenger gods arrive) depicts a structured world. There are swift forces that balance the scales of justice. Quite simply, Lycus acts the villain—he unjustly invades Thebes, prepares to murder Heracles’ innocent family, and abuses religious law. In response, he is stopped. In this case, Heracles serves as the arbiter of good, and so the chorus celebrates the just system in their song, which I will quote once more, “The gods of heaven do prevail:/ they raise the good and scourge the bad.”<sup>30</sup> This illustrates that mankind’s world operates in a conscious and meaningful system, one in which an ethical code, enforced by some higher or objective force, establishes order among the chaos of humanity. The first

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<sup>29</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 72.

<sup>30</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 772-773. “The gods of heaven do prevail:/ they raise the good and scourge the bad.”

half of the tragedy is dedicated to creating the appearance of such a system, the very same system of ordering forces that exists in a majority of other tragedies. But in the case of *Heracles*, we receive this moral declaration midway through the drama, and so the reversal dedicates itself to tearing this very system down, leaving nothing save for senseless chaos in its place.

How this reversal affects Heracles identity is a more complex matter and will be the focus of my argument into the tragedy's second half. In order to establish the fundamental groundwork of this transformation I will point out some broader observations about who he is in the beginning. The tragedian's reordering of the labors becomes very important in considering this question. The standard, mythical Heracles is noble and glorified because he is the son of a god, and not just any god, but Zeus himself. However, Euripides takes this baseline nobility and multiples it by putting the labors beforehand. Rather than his labors being issued for atonement of a crime, the Heracles of this drama conducts the labors as a service. They are a self-less attempt to restore Amphytrion to his native land, from where he has been exile, establishing Heracles as the good son and the "civilizer" of humanity from the very start of the tragedy.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, the standard, mythical character acquires much fame and greatness as a result of his many labors. The general arc of the mythical concept of "Heracles" is that, although he is born noble, he commits a great crime early in life and then becomes a glorified hero through his labors. Once more, since these great labors come beforehand,

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<sup>31</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 16-20. "He hoped to win me back my native land/ and so alleviate my grief [...] he promised to Eurystheus a vast price/ for our return: to civilize the world."

his arc is reversed in that he is already great, commits his crime, and then descends.<sup>32</sup> The potential to rise again no longer exists as it has already passed.

Before moving on the second part of the tragedy, I want to look back and address some lingering points about the interaction between myth and poetic invention that were raised earlier on. By reordering Heracles' timeline, Euripides has effectively produced an entirely new character that differs from the mythical standard of "Heracles." At the same time, Euripides' Heracles is forced into the same narrative structure that the mythical character faces, and in doing so, the story breaks down and becomes a contradiction. The myth and the tragedy offer up two different conceptions of Heracles, so that the actual hero of the tragedy essentially has an identity that is doubled. Once the madness is carried through, the last part of the tragedy deals with the discordant union of two opposing identities that are forced to converge in the singular hero. Thus, Euripides successfully manipulates the myth of "Heracles" to make his Heracles undergo a dramatic crisis of self.

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<sup>32</sup> A long choral song in the beginning dedicates itself to establishing the greatness he has acquired from his labors, beginning, "of him I sing a dirge of praise" (355). It is a dirge (a lament for the dead) because he has not returned yet and all the characters suspect him dead. Nonetheless, the song recounts virtually all of his labors—though not in traditional order and even includes some events that were not in fact a part of the twelve labors—and adds the glory that each one brings him. He slays the lion (360-63); defeats the Centaurs who had been ruling over Thessaly (364-74); slays the spotted deer, that "robber-beast" and "ravager" (375-89); he mastered "Diomedes' mares, that knew no bridle" (380-89); he killed Cycnus, the "stranger-slaying" monster (389-94); he plucked apples from the garden of Hesperides and slew the untouchable orchard dragon (395-402); he stole the belt from the "famous barbarian" Amazonian queen (408-19); he killed the Hydra, whose many heads grow back (420-24); and the last of his labors where he descends to Hades to capture Cerberus (425-29). Despite the fact that they believe him dead, he had "won in all the victor's crowns" (425).

*Consciousness and the “Why?”*

Once Heracles awakens from his madness he must confront his crime and the senseless reversal that just destroyed his entire conception of the world. The remainder of the tragedy is what I am referring to as the “post-tragedy” phase, that is, the period in which the characters must confront the consequences of the reversal and recognition. Typically, after the tragic moment passes, the characters realize why it occurred and the drama ends; thus, Aristotle refers to this as the recognition scene. He defines it as “the change from ignorance to knowledge” wherein “the best recognition is coincident with the reversal of the situation.”<sup>33</sup> Euripides dramatically complicates the recognition scene, however, more so than most other tragedies. After waking up from his madness, Heracles recognizes how the tragedy occurred, but because of the senselessness of it, he is merely left in darkness. Euripides withholds true understanding from recognition so that, without it, Heracles must make a choice about his tragic life without comprehension of the world’s order. For the last half, knowing the world will not offer up any clarity to him, he must decide whether or not to commit suicide. It is here that we see the hero helplessly stumbling in darkness.

At this very question is where the philosophy of the absurd makes its beginning. In *the Myth of Sisyphus*, the essence of the absurd boils down to the moment where man begins to think and to reflect upon himself. Before the moment of reflection, man lived a life of false unity, a life where habit and rhythm built the façade of logic and truth. “One day,” according to Camus, “the why arises,” and “awakens consciousness.”<sup>34</sup> It is through this awakening that thought discovers a “contradiction.” When man reflects, seeking to

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<sup>33</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 72.

<sup>34</sup> Camus, *The Myth*, 13.

unify and understand the world around him, but each time he comes to face the unacceptable reality that human reasoning is limited and will necessarily fail to discover a greater unity.<sup>35</sup> Now estranged in this paradoxical thinking, he becomes nostalgic for the false world of unity that he has embarked from. Seeking to return there, he tries only harder to order and unify his world, and with each of those attempts, he re-enters this “vicious cycle” that “stifles all hopes.”<sup>36</sup> An impenetrable wall is reached.

Rather than seeing the second half of this tragedy as a disjointed partner to the first, the events of the latter half address how the hero reacts to the contradiction that his life has become after the tragedy’s reversal. So as Heracles opens his eyes and faces a crumbled façade of unity and order, his revival from madness operates as a metaphorical awakening into consciousness, the moment where the “why” first arises. The dialogue that ensues between Heracles and his father, and later with Theseus, illustrates a characteristic that is unusual to the typical characterization of Heracles, one that is in fact unique to Euripides’ creation. It is the essential and foremost quality of the absurd man: he is able to engage intellectually with matters of philosophical inquiry.

Normally, the mythical figure “Heracles” is characterized as a physically strong and violent hero—all at the expense of reasoning and intellect. Euripides scholar and translator William Arrowsmith writes in his introduction to his translation that Heracles was “a symbol of unconquerably robust masculine vitality and courage.”<sup>37</sup> Writing on the role of sacrifice in *Heracles*, Helene Foley points out that Heracles “occupies an unstable position between beast and god” and that he “frequently undermines the very culture that

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<sup>35</sup> Camus, *The Myth*, 16-17.

<sup>36</sup> Camus, *The Myth*, 18.

<sup>37</sup> William Arrowsmith, “Heracles: Introduction,” in *Euripides III*, by Euripides., trans. William Arrowsmith, et al., 3rd ed. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 13.

was his function...to protect.”<sup>38</sup> In fact, there is no shortage of scholarship that targets Heracles’ great proclivity for violence. All of it is right to do so, as the mythic character Heracles is indeed a force to be reckoned with.<sup>39</sup>

While Foley and other scholars do well to emphasize the general standard of what Heracles has come to represent in Greek myth, they do not give enough credit to the novelty of the “Heracles” that Euripides erects in the second part of the tragedy. His mythological reputation is even maintained by the first part of the tragedy, as we see him over and over again conquer external crises with heroic strength: all of his labors and his return to Thebes to overthrow Lycus. But after the central reversal, the type of crisis that Heracles encounters is reversed as well. Suddenly he is faced with an internal one that engages with problems of self-consciousness and the philosophical merits of suicide. Critical analysis in general gives little recognition to the way in which Euripides’ Heracles turns away from his physical and violent identity by the end of his tragedy. Kitto’s work gestures at moments to the path of my analysis, quoting the work of the Euripidean translator Léon Parmentier,

Euripides’ idea was to purify the crude popular pictures of Heracles, to give a Heracles who ‘n’est pas seulement le bienfaiteur qui met sa force au service de l’humanité; il est... capable de supporter noblement une souffrance morale plus cruelle que toute douleur physique.’<sup>40</sup>

This change in Heracles’ characterization is perhaps where Euripides’ brilliance shines forth most vividly. The tragedian has created a tragic environment simply by ironically

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<sup>38</sup> Helene P. Foley, *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides* (Cornell University Press, 1985) 191.

<sup>39</sup> For other scholarship on Heracles’ violent behavior, see Shirley A. Barlow, "Structure and Dramatic Realism in Euripides' 'Heracles'" *Greece & Rome* 29, no. 2 (1982): 115-25.; Michelini, *Euripides and the Tragic*, 264.; Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*, 243.; Foley, *Ritual Irony*, 190.

<sup>40</sup> Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*, 238.

forcing the very symbol of physical strength into the polar opposite world of psychological turmoil and unbearable self-consciousness. The threat is no longer a villain or “other” capable of being defeated, but the hero’s own consciousness, whose defeat would invariably leads to the hero’s own demise. We might say that Sophocles’ Ajax is placed in the same situation, but his suicide is a result of failing to engage with the problems of consciousness and sticking to what he knows: heroic violence. He meets internal problems with physical force. Consciousness has a tendency to destroy the hero.

The window into this psychological conflict only becomes open to the reader at the moment when Heracles awakens from his madness-induced sleep. Opening his eyes to a world that is unfamiliar to him, his previous conceptions of justice, virtue, and identity prove to be inconsistent with his present reality. He exclaims, “For I do not recognize clearly anything I am used to.”<sup>41</sup> Among these, the transformation of Heracles’ self-understanding after the reversal and the feeling of alienation that results has been of minimal focus for scholars, yet it is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the drama’s final movement. In many ways, we might summarize the conflict that arises after his awakening as one in which Heracles must work through “un-knowing” himself, for his identity becomes problematized and impossible for him to define. This reflexive investigation is one of the first stages that follow the “why?” of consciousness. Camus frames it as such:

For if I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and to summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers. I can sketch one by one all the aspects it is able to assume [...] this nobility or this vileness. But

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<sup>41</sup> Euripides, *Heracles*, ed. Godfrey W. Bond, repr ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 1108.



aspects cannot be added up. This very heart which is mine will forever remain indefinable to me [...] I shall forever be a stranger to myself.<sup>42</sup>

Once the curtain of Heracles' mythical heroism, his life of virtuous pioneering in the name of divine morality, is pulled away, the tragedy exposes a darkness within that does not align with his understanding of self. Kamerbeek frames the problem of Heracles' dual identity well when he argues that, "the very contrast between Heracles the triumphant savior of part I and Heracles in his madness is the measure of this tragedy."<sup>43</sup> This contrast, and thus this irony that Heracles embodies two opposing identities at once is the heart of the drama's final movement.

Heracles awakens, and the first thing he engages with is not the brutality of the scene but rather the dissonance he feels within himself. The identity of Heracles had so long been predicated on his steadfast label as a "hero," but now he has discovered not only that he is not who he thought he was, but that he is simultaneously the complete opposite, "the anti-hero." His language in his waking speech captures the estrangement between body and self, finding himself in a state of being that is discordant to how he feels he should be: "How strangely my muddled senses swim,/ as on a choppy sea... my breath comes warm,/ torn up unsteadily from heaving lungs.../ and look: I sit here, like a ship lashed tight with cables binding my chest and arms."<sup>44</sup> As he regains his consciousness his body still possesses the signs of his crime and madness. He appears to himself as an "other." His breath ought to be coming to him calmly, but it comes rapidly; his limbs should be free, yet they are restrained. Heracles believes himself to be the hero,

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<sup>42</sup> Camus, *The Myth*, 19.

<sup>43</sup> J.C. Kamerbeek, "Unity and Meaning of Euripides' 'Heracles,'" *Mnemosyne* 19, no. 1 (1966): 11.

<sup>44</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 1091-1095.

but what he's feeling is the bodily feeling of the "anti-hero." That Heracles could be out of breath because he just slaughtered his family or that he could even be the murderer of his family at all is a thought entirely alien to the extent that it does not even occur to him as a possibility. He merely acknowledges seeing himself with a sense of otherness.

The end of this speech culminates in a greater truth: he has now become a stranger to himself. After voicing the dissonance plaguing his being, he concludes by saying: "I am bewildered. Where can I be? I'm helpless [...] For all I took for granted now seems strange..."<sup>45</sup> Bond captures the existential confusion of this last line more succinctly, "For I do not recognize clearly anything I am used to."<sup>46</sup> The known has become the unknown, and Heracles' disorientation comes to a head. Therefore, I suggest reading Heracles' words, "where can I be," with a deeper layer of meaning, putting an analytical emphasis on the "I." By the end of this scene, it is Heracles' unified understanding of himself that has become lost. The clearly defined limits of the "I" have been blurred by the otherness he feels in his body and in his breathing. This way, to read the singular "I" as the thing that is lost, Heracles is foreshadowing the discovery that he is a duality.

This alienation within the self—seeing a part of the self as a separate object—is irresolvable for Heracles because it results only in more contradiction. To acknowledge that he has done these crimes to his family, to recognize his inhumanity would require him to accept the reality of the divided-self. When it comes time for Heracles to issue threats and take revenge on the murderer of his family he ends up raising the stakes of this self-alienation to dangerous heights. He becomes "the self-torturer." Heracles says,

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<sup>45</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 1105, 1108.

<sup>46</sup> Bond, *Heracles*, 1108.

“let me avenge my children’s murderer/ let me hurl myself down...”<sup>47</sup> Arrowsmith’s translation shows a reflexivity in Heracles’ imagery that acknowledges a distinct subject and a distinct direct object, implying that the “me” avenging is separate from “my children’s murderer” when they are in fact the same. As a result, the image created is of Heracles being both the punisher and the punished. Even in the second phrase, the reflexivity in “me” and “myself,” although they are the same, creates the illusion of one punishing (“me”) and one being punished (“myself”). This self-reflexivity is equally as present in the original Greek, though agreeably more subtle. The Greek features “δικαστής,”<sup>48</sup> typically meaning, “judge” or “juror”; however, some scholars conclude that given the context of the scene, Euripides uses the word precisely to mean “avenger.”<sup>49</sup> In either case, this is the ultimate contradiction. The “judge” cannot be capable of judging while simultaneously being worthy of judgment, just like the “avenger” should not be both the victim and the executioner. With the impossibility of reconciling these estranged selves—both the heroic Heracles and the anti-heroic Heracles—the absurd hero is thus born in their forced union: “a stranger to myself and to the world, armed solely with a thought that negates itself as soon as it asserts itself...”<sup>50</sup>

As Heracles becomes aware of the irony that pervades his identity, the divided-self creates a striking discord in his inner harmony. This alienation comes to a head in a long, pitiful speech that he gives to Theseus soon after the Athenian’s arrival. Having to explain his suffering, not only does Heracles tell his friend what has recently happened

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<sup>47</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 1146-1153.

<sup>48</sup> Euripides, *Heracles*, ed. Godfrey W. Bond, repr ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 1150.

<sup>49</sup> LSJ SV δικαστής II.

Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, Roderick McKenzie, P. G. W. Glare, and A. A. Thompson. A Greek-English lexicon. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. 429.

<sup>50</sup> Camus, *The Myth*, 20.

but he also begins to redefine his entire life history. Aware of his contradicting, dual identity, Heracles stumbles upon the realization that there has always been a capacity for duplicity within him. His memories and his past become consumed by his newly realized discordance: “Let me show you my life:/ a life not worth living now, or ever.”<sup>51</sup> In the fashion of the “self-torturer,” this reflexive process is destructive in every capacity. His mind has begun to break its “silence,” and, as Camus claims, what was once “the appearance of unity begins to falter with the first pulsations of a conscious mind.”<sup>52</sup> Heracles must unravel his heroic past.

In this review of his life, Heracles reflects upon many of his more foundational characteristics, and each time he does, he looks to establish a sense of his present suffering in what he thought were his past triumphs. Looking first to his troubled parentage, Heracles figures that his life has been reared towards this single ruin:

Take my father first, a man who killed  
My mother’s father and, having such a curse,  
Married Alcmene who gave birth to me.  
When a house is built on poor foundations,  
Then its descendents are the heirs of grief.<sup>53</sup>

Even from before he was born, Heracles begins to unearth traces of his inherent evil, observing a duality in Amphytrion’s life that is similar to his own. His father is both the husband of Alcmene and the murderer of her father—the “vampire of his own heart.” We may understand this “curse” that he refers to as the forced union of contradicting opposites, that is, the curse of irony. He even makes reference to the misgivings of Zeus

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<sup>51</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 1256-1257.

<sup>52</sup> Camus, *The Myth*, 18.

<sup>53</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 1258-62.

just a few lines later. Bringing them both into the spotlight, we cannot help but take note of the fact that Heracles' divided-self is mirrored by the fact that he comes from two fathers. The structural metaphor that he employs a few lines after emphasizes how, through his "poor foundations," he has merely inherited both his capacity for evil and his contradicting natures. The more important thing at stake with this observation is that it shows how Heracles has begun to erode the singular moment in which he becomes guilty. Rather than conceiving of his crime as the source of his guilt, Heracles implies through reframing his history that the moment of his downfall has in many ways happened before the drama began. The conception of himself that he gradually comes to accept, especially as this dirge of a speech continues, is that he has in fact always been this way.

Continuing his destructive reflections, he pulls all the threads out from the tapestry of his life one by one until he has made it into an image that mimics the baroness of his present state. He expounds the insignificance of his labors, asking himself "why recite all those labors I endured?"<sup>54</sup> He realizes that these labors, which earlier in the plot served as the heroic foundation of his identity, no longer culminate in a praiseworthy figure.<sup>55</sup> In the same motion, he evokes an image not of glorious labor but of hopeless labor. He recalls his struggle with the Hydra, saying, "I killed the Hydra, the brute whose heads/ grew back as soon as lopped."<sup>56</sup> Just as Sisyphus rolls his rock up the hill in hopelessly, Heracles provides his audience with a similar image of him laboring at a nearly equal futile task, which is perhaps only heightened by the irony that even after having defeated the Hydra and all the rest of his labors, he now stands without glory.

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<sup>54</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 1270.

<sup>55</sup> See note 32.

<sup>56</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 1274-1275.

What Camus writes of Sisyphus, his own absurd hero, could just as well apply to Heracles in this very moment: “the whole of [his] being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing.”<sup>57</sup>

Eventually his reflection moves from the past and begins looking toward the dreadful future that awaits him. Connections to eternal suffering and permanent banishment have multiple appearances in this reflection. For Heracles, these labors were his path to virtue, but at the end of it, “my last and worst labor has been done:/ I slew my children and crowned my house with grief.”<sup>58</sup> His devotion to virtue has led him to crime, for which he faces the harsh sentence of lifelong exile. He must leave Thebes, and he anticipates that his banishment will be one of endless wandering: “rivers and seas cry out against my crossing over, and I’ll be like Ixion, bound forever to a wheel.”<sup>59</sup> The literal exile from home that he faces merely functions as a physical manifestation of his psychological alienation. Therefore, his allusion to Ixion could not be more poignant. A man condemned to roll eternally on a fiery wheel in Hades, he is the epitome of movement without trajectory, of wandering without end. Likewise, the discordance of Heracles’ divided-self will never recapture the harmony it once had, and so this hopeless sentiment is the capstone of his self-estrangement, concluding his speech “Why should I live? What profit have I, having a life both useless and accursed.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Camus, *The Myth*, 120.

<sup>58</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 1279-1280.

<sup>59</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 1296-1298.

<sup>60</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 1301-1302.

*Suicide or Recovery*

Thus far we have looked at how a consciousness awakened injects doubt into Heracles' understanding of the world, particularly of himself. After turning his thought inward, he establishes that his life, present and past, has been a combination of contradictions and hopeless efforts. He has completely uprooted his foundation, and, the stage for the internal crisis having been set, the question of living becomes the only question that remains for Heracles. At the height of this dilemma comes the essential decision according to Camus: "at the end of awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery."<sup>61</sup> I'll explain what exactly this consequence entails in one moment, but before doing so I want to point out some characteristics about how Heracles is forced to approach this problem. As I mentioned earlier, his conceptions of justice and virtue have been completely proven wrong by the reversal of the tragedy. Since the events of the drama have shown him that justice will quickly betray those fighting on its side and that virtue will unexpectedly lead to crime, he must now face the decision of suicide in complete darkness in regards to any guiding principles. This is exactly the confrontation of the absurd: "At this point of his effort man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."<sup>62</sup> Without a path to guide him any more, Heracles has never experienced such freedom.

The question of "suicide or recovery" is not as straightforward as it might initially appear. What exactly Camus means by "suicide" requires some explanation because it has a meaning for him beyond the common, physical interpretation. Camus looks at his

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<sup>61</sup> Camus, *The Myth*, 13.

<sup>62</sup> Camus, *The Myth*, 28.

philosophy of the absurd as an equation that must be preserved, and to “recover” effectively means to preserve this equation.<sup>63</sup> The first term of this equation is man’s nostalgia, which is the part of us that perpetually yearns for understanding. The second term is the utter irrationality of the world, that is, “the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle.”<sup>64</sup> The ways in which man could destroy the equation and violate its terms are through suicide, of which there are two forms. Physical suicide is the form that eliminates the first term of the equation. By killing oneself, man symbolically states that he no longer yearns for life and understanding. The second form of suicide is philosophical suicide. This form is responsible for eliminating the second term of the equation: irrationality. The act of philosophical suicide refers to man assigning a unity or meaning to the world’s irrationality that is beyond human comprehension. In most cases, this takes the form of religion: man ascribes what he does not understand to being the domain of a god—“instead of saying ‘This is absurd’ man says ‘This is God!’”<sup>65</sup> Such an assignation makes the world’s irrationality rational.

My interest is not whether Heracles comes out of this tragedy as the proto-absurd hero. Rather, I am more interested in the fact that Heracles even comes to face the question of suicide as a result of confronting the absurd. I suggest reading Heracles’ heated debate with Theseus<sup>66</sup> as a map in order to determine how Heracles deals,

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<sup>63</sup> Camus, *The Myth*, 30. “To destroy the terms means to destroy the whole.”

<sup>64</sup> Camus, *The Myth*, 51.

<sup>65</sup> Camus, *The Myth*, 34.

<sup>66</sup> Critics often draw question to the seemingly disconnectedness of Theseus’ arrival, as it brings the plot’s progression to a complete halt. He is a longtime friend of Heracles and is in debt to him, for Heracles saved his life while he was in the underworld. As he enters the scene, Heracles refuses to be seen by him or to interact with him because he fears that his blood will bring pollution to his friend. Theseus refuses to abandon Heracles, and Heracles, touched by the display of friendship, confronts him and includes Theseus in the conversation of his potential suicide. For a discussion on the unity of Theseus’ arrival in relation to the plot, see Michelini, *Euripides and the Tragic*, 258.



successfully or unsuccessfully, with the problem of philosophical suicide. As many scholars have pointed out, interpretation of these following passages is starkly divided among critics. Although the central concern of this debate is whether or not Heracles will commit suicide, the question of divinity and divine justice plays a large role in how Heracles will make his choice. Theseus is first to make the case for Heracles' life. He claims that even the gods of mythology commit moral blunders, yet they continue living; therefore, Heracles should not hold himself to a moral standard beyond what the divine hold themselves to:

Do not the gods commit adultery?  
 Have they not cast their fathers into chains,  
 In pursuit of power? Yet all the same,  
 Despite their crimes, they live on Olympus.  
 How dare you then, mortal that you are,  
 To protest your fate, when the gods do not?<sup>67</sup>

Arguments such as these that make light of the gods' imperfections as an apology for their behavior are common in Euripidean tragedies.<sup>68</sup> While this is a rejection of suicide by most standards, his argument is problematic, for it contains traces of philosophical suicide. According to Camus, "understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal."<sup>69</sup> Theseus has applied human rationale to an entity that functions outside of the human experience. He is familiarizing irrationality in order to satiate the human need for clarity. In addition to that, he effectively argues for Heracles to mold himself in the image of the very thing that has irrationally destroyed him.

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<sup>67</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 1316-1321.

<sup>68</sup> Scholars have pointed out how the Nurse in the *Hippolytus* makes nearly the same argument in order to persuade Phaidra to not commit suicide. For discussion on this: H. Friis Johnsen, *General Reflection in Tragic Rhesis: A Study of Form* (Copenhagen 1959) 50-53.

<sup>69</sup> Camus, *The Myth*, 17.

The more contentious part of this debate, however, is Heracles' response to Theseus' argument. In truth, Heracles' remarks are somewhat confounding and quick to cause drama within critical arguments. He argues,

Ah, all this has no bearing on my grief;  
 But I do not believe that the gods commit  
 Adultery, or bind each other in chains.  
 I never did believe it; I never shall;  
 If god is truly god, he is perfect,  
 Lacking nothing. Those are poet's wretched lies.<sup>70</sup>

Very little if any analysis of *Heracles* fails to give some attention to these lines because they create a contradiction. To believe that "if god is truly god, he is perfect" elevates an unrealistic and, as far as this tragedy is concerned, an unqualified image of the gods and rejects the reality of what they have proven to be. Murray accredits Verrall for making the argument that, because Heracles rejects the idea that the gods could act with flawed and irresponsible behavior, he essentially rejects his own suffering since it is clear that it is a result of Hera's jealousies.<sup>71</sup> The major problem that arises from these lines is the fact that, if he is rejecting this reality of the gods' natures, then this proclamation nullifies everything that we've witnessed over the course of the drama.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 1340-1346. There is some confusion in the text as to what part of Theseus' response Heracles refers to, but all criticism seems to agree that, because Heracles matches Theseus argument point for point, he is most certainly responding to the section which I make reference to. I take this as an assumption in my analysis. For an explanation of this conclusion see Bond (n. 1341-46)

<sup>71</sup> On the broader scale, this rejection of the gods' behavior effectively rejects the entire mythical story of the divine throughout Greek mythology. From the very origins of the Greek mythological canon gods are over throwing their fathers, titans and gods alike enchain one another, and adultery serves as an aspect of everyday life. Ironically, the being of Heracles himself falls into this rejection, as he is the result of an adulterous encounter. This pronouncement, although he seems to be defending the position of the gods, he is actually refuting the truth of the Greek mythological narrative.

<sup>72</sup> For an alternative analysis that holds that the gods in this play do in fact align with Heracles' "if god is truly god, he is perfect," see Burnett, *Catastrophe Survived: Euripides' Plays of Mixed Reversal* (Oxford 1971) 174.

It is my opinion that no reading of these lines should contradict any aspect of the drama's plot or the suffering of Heracles. Rather, I propose reading these in such a way that empowers Heracles' recent experience with contradiction and self-alienation. It would be irrational to take the conflict created by these lines and use it to nullify the plot and its truth—that the gods have a role in Heracles' suffering. It is far more logical to use this conflict to reinforce the one thing that we know to be true: that the gods are an irrational contradiction. By insisting that the gods are “perfect” and incapable of crime while their crime remains visible on the stage, Heracles ironically merges two conceptions of divinity that directly contradict one another. It's clear that Heracles is not actually ridding the gods of their guilt because he goes on to blame Hera only a few lines later: “For all of us have died, all struck down by one blow of Hera's hate.”<sup>73</sup> It would seem here that either Euripides or Heracles—I would argue the latter—is being ironic.<sup>74</sup> We might read this scene as Heracles taking his revenge. By defending the reputation of the gods in the moment he should be condemning them, Heracles actually does a more powerful thing than what Theseus' argument does, which merely humanizes the divine. Heracles doubles the image of gods and simultaneously creates a dissonance within *their* own being.

These argumentative possibilities aside, I want to look specifically at how Heracles' response progresses along the path's division of suicide or recovery. Although it may first appear that Heracles is defending the divine pantheon, he is actually rejecting Theseus' argument point for point. Kamerbeek argues that Heracles' response ultimately

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<sup>73</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 1392-1393.

<sup>74</sup> A set of scholars have argued that these lines have no inherent meaning on the tragedy at all and that they are merely a glimpse of Euripides' own opinion: H. Chalk, “APETH and BIA in Euripides' Herakles,” *JHS* 82 (1962) 15 n.39; G. Grube, *The Drama of Euripides*, (London 1941) 58-59; Bond, *Heracles*, 400.

“implies a repudiation of the very existence of the traditional anthropomorphic gods as *gods*, but not the evil powers responsible for Heracles’ unhappy fate.”<sup>75</sup> Unlike Theseus, Heracles rejects any attempt that rationalizes the ordering power and thereby any human effort that tries to impose the “human seal” on it—like the “poet’s wretched lies.” What’s important to note, as Kamerbeek does, is that, Heracles does not actually impose any understanding on the divine order. Rather, his response simply functions as a rejection of one who does try to impose an understanding on it. Even in doing so, Heracles maintains, “all this has no bearing on my grief.” There are certain powers responsible for his fate, but what is tantamount to maintaining the absurd is that he does not try to rationalize them. According to Kamerbeek, by the end of Heracles speech, he still implies that the divine and the forces responsible for his suffering are nothing more than “a playground of arbitrary evil.”<sup>76</sup> The irrationality of the world indeed remains irrational and nothing more.

As far as philosophical suicide is concerned, Heracles may acknowledge some higher order or force, but he maintains his divorce from it. That is, he refrains entirely from trying to understand it. The conclusions he reaches resonate with a greater movement in Greek tragedy where scholars realize that divine powers outside of the human existence gradually become more and more incomprehensible. Billings has written that, “Greek tragedy reveals that divine substance (or essence) cannot be individualized as *pathos* or knowledge.”<sup>77</sup> Such theories confirm the grounding for the philosophy of the absurd in these works. Although scholars like Billings may argue that

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<sup>75</sup> Kamerbeek, “Unity and Meaning,” 9.

<sup>76</sup> Kamerbeek, “Unity and Meaning,” 9.

<sup>77</sup> Joshua Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic: Greek Tragedy and German Philosophy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 184.

this “demonstration of the inadequacy of Greek knowledge” results in the “end of tragedy,”<sup>78</sup> I can only add that while it may prove an end for one tragic tradition, this inadequacy of knowledge immediately erects a new tradition that is equally as tragic.

### *The Absurd Man*

Rebelling against the divine order by refusing to live in its image, Heracles moves on to his reasons for living in the second part of his reply to Theseus. It is here that we can test whether or not Heracles can live like Camus’ absurd man, who, “without negating it, does nothing for the eternal. Not that nostalgia is foreign to him. But he prefers his courage and his reasoning.”<sup>79</sup> Once more, with his conceptions of justice and virtue completely nullified, Heracles must come up with new reasons for living that do nothing to reject the world’s irrationality. All the while, he must maintain everything that his consciousness has brought to light over the course of his suffering. If he is going to live, he must also continue to accept his duality. Otherwise, to rationalize his experience necessarily means to reject his consciousness, meaning that he only eludes the tragedy rather than confronts it.

Any decision to live that Heracles proposes no longer come from some predetermined path or some generally accepted notion of virtue. Rather, as Halleran points out “the rhetoric and context of Herakles’ statement put a clear emphasis on Herakles’ decision to live, a decision based on his own consideration for the cowardice of suicide.”<sup>80</sup> Rather than restructure his life on the same precarious foundations it was built,

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<sup>78</sup> Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic*, 184.

<sup>79</sup> Camus, *The Myth*, 66.

<sup>80</sup> Michael R Halleran, "Rhetoric, Irony, and the Ending of Euripides' "Herakles"" *Classical Antiquity* 5, no. 2, 171-81 (1986) 176.

Heracles instead decides to live from his own view of the world, particularly on the notion of *deilia* (cowardice):

Even in my misery I asked myself,  
would it not be cowardice to die?  
The man who cannot bear up under fate  
could never face the weapons of a man.  
I shall prevail against death. I shall go  
to your city. [...]  
I see, I must serve necessity.<sup>81</sup>

Halleran's analysis empowers Heracles' conscious abilities, showing him accept life based on his own individual experience. We could effectively read, "would it not be cowardice to die?" to also mean, "would it not be courageous to live?" It's worth underscoring how unique Heracles' newfound courage truly is in this moment. As far as cowardice is concerned, his view of suicide here runs counter to the societal views that would have been held by the audience: that suicide is an acceptable alternative to dishonor.<sup>82</sup> In fact, earlier in the plot we see the manifestation of this belief. Megara, wanting to courageously preserve the honor of her husband's family through suicide, identifies cowardice in Amphitryon's holding on to life, "Wait for worse? You love life so much?"<sup>83</sup> In the first part of the tragedy, the idea of the hero was still very much intact, and so heroic ideals still held a great deal of weight. But with the symbolic contradiction of heroism, those ideals also must be casted out. Therefore, once the tragedy has rejected

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<sup>81</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 1351-57.

<sup>82</sup> Bond, *Heracles*, (n. 1248). "There was a general admiration of suicide as an alternative to dishonor."

<sup>83</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 90.

heroic ideals through the central reversal, cowardice and courage must undergo a complete reversal as well.<sup>84</sup>

With heroism reversed, the hero starts to become a mortal *man*. The importance that this passage puts on preserving life and resisting death is all the more important because it shows how Heracles embraces his humanness. Suddenly there is an inherent value placed on living and a focus moved away from the eternal. The devotion to life is a sentiment that has no place in the hearts of immortals. It is a mortal's game because it acknowledges an end, a need to even pose the question "to live" or "to commit suicide." Throughout the drama Heracles is caught between his immortal and mortal identities, but by the end, we see what is ultimately a celebration of his humanity, and with it, its limitations. This idea appears even before Heracles makes his choice to continue living, for, in an earlier speech to Theseus, he chooses his mortal father: "Take no offense old man [Amphitryon] for I count you my father now, not Zeus."<sup>85</sup> If the first half of the tragedy shows us a Heracles that is clearly a divine hero, the second half shows us a Heracles that, in his disaster, is merely a man. By the end, Heracles' distance from the divine could not be any larger. And from this abyss that separates them lies the evident truth that, as Conacher eloquently writes, "the gods of myth appear as impossible while

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<sup>84</sup> For more on Heracles' courage in his rejection of suicide, particularly how it compares to Ajax decision to commit suicide and Andromache's decision to reject it, see J. de Romilly, *the Rejection of Suicide in Heracles*, (Oxford 2003) 290. She sees this reversal as being central to the play's unity and to the works of Euripides as a whole, "in the course of these debates the duty to live has in the end proved to be worth more than the epic ideal in which glory and death shone brilliantly." 292. She extends her analysis by looking at how Euripides was the frontrunner in changing philosophical opinion about disbanding life and cowardice. Following his lead, this same idea begins to reappear later in the works of Plato, Flavius and Plutarch, among others.

<sup>85</sup> Bond, *Heracles*, 274. Bond acknowledges this as well and argues that, "in accepting Theseus' support Heracles acknowledges his distance from the gods and his need for mortal help."

the moving and edifying human elements in the action succeed in transcending the mythological nonsense.”<sup>86</sup>

Having chosen to continue living in the irrational world, he begins to reflect an essence of the absurd man. He has faced the absurd and death alike, and he has responded with courage and an acceptance of finite humanity. Before the end is reached, however, we must return to the notion of the divided-self once more. In making the decision to embrace his humanity fully, he is simultaneously forced to accept his dual self. Euripides puts this dilemma into a tableau, as one of Heracles’ final decisions is whether or not he will keep his bow. On the one hand, his bow represents the crime he committed against his family, “Knocking against my ribs and always saying,/ ‘With us you murdered wife and sons. Wearing us,/ you wear your children’s killers.’”<sup>87</sup> On the other hand, his bow is a symbol for all of his past glory and physical achievement, “[...] these weapons,/ with which I did my greatest deeds in Hellas.”<sup>88</sup> His bow is the very symbol of his internal opposing natures, representing both his heroism and his inhumanity. Eventually he decides, “No, they must be kept with me; but in pain I keep them.”<sup>89</sup> This choice is of tremendous psychological significance for Heracles. It is imperative that Heracles make the decision that he does because by accepting his duality it means that his consciousness is completely preserved. It’s worth noting that the acceptance of it does not relieve him of the burden of it. Rather, it pains him to keep them because it means that, despite the fact he has rejected suicide, he will still face an entire life of self-alienation, mirrored in his actual exile. Unlike the standard myth, Heracles cannot go complete twelve heroic labors

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<sup>86</sup> Conacher, *Euripidean Drama*, 81.

<sup>87</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 1379-1381.

<sup>88</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 1382-1383.

<sup>89</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 1385.



to atone for his crime. Euripides has prevented that possibility by putting the labors beforehand. There is nothing to follow except to live on. And in choosing to live, the *inner* tragedy of a broken man lives on.

### *Conclusion*

As the last words are uttered, the hero is dead; the man, barely able to stand, embarks upon his exile in Athens. The physical exile he faces, however, is only secondary to the self-alienation he will have to endure. Like Thebes, now lost to him forever, his clear conception of self is consigned to his past, and he will always remain in that ambiguous state of the divided-self: between victim and executioner. But he has survived his encounter with the absurd. A world seemingly ordered by justice reveals its true emptiness by leading the virtuous hero to utter ruin. What more is *Heracles* but a slow and painful sunset over man's understanding of the world? And how is one to live in such darkness?

In most instances, tragedy is concerned with staging the sheer presence of such a devastating reversal. Euripides, however, is able to make *Heracles* his into an absurd tragedy by staging the world's meaninglessness over two contradicting halves and then by giving room to the less often staged scene of confronting the consequences of that meaninglessness. To a certain extent even, absurdism itself is tragedy prolonged.

*Heracles* enjoins us to imagine the philosophy of the absurd more generally as being the space in which the ramifications of tragedy become manifest and are addressed. It is an opaque space in which tragedies of the ancient world seldom wandered but one that the philosophy of modernity dove into headfirst.

Whether or not Heracles fits perfectly into the Sisyphean image of the absurd hero is indefinable—doubtful even. For Sisyphus reaffirms his rebellion against the absurd both eternally and heroically. Heracles stumbles as if feeling his way through the dark. He is not a titan but simply a human. As he grieves in agony at the end, he shows how uncomfortable the absurd appears to him. Even though Heracles has favored recovery over suicide, no reading of this tragedy could possibly conceive of him as being happy. This is in reference of course to the final and perplexing line of *Myth of Sisyphus*, “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”<sup>90</sup> All the same, his consciousness having bloomed, Heracles willingly returns to the boulder that awaits him at the bottom of his hill. Shining the spotlight of doubt up toward the impenetrably dark skies, he draws his conclusions, resigned to his own ephemeral, discordant light.

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<sup>90</sup> Camus, *The Myth*, 123.

## *INTERMEZZO*

By the end of the fifth century B.C., Athens had been at the center of a long and brutal civil war that showed from what great heights the image of man could fall. The Peloponnesian War, lasting from c.431 to 404 B.C., saw the Delian League led by Athens pitted against the Peloponnesian League led by Sparta. Unlike the previous wars fought against barbarian civilizations, this war saw a unified self become divided. The brutality did not take place in some far away land but in the heart of Greek civilization—large-scale atrocities committed by Greek citizens terrorizing other Greek citizens. Culminating in the collapse of social and political unity, scholars often state that the war resulted in “the breakdown of the old community, the overwhelming destruction of that mythic and coherent order.”<sup>91</sup> Both the *polis* and the intellectual landscape had devolved into a frenzy of radical thought and moral discord. Though the effects were felt throughout the region, Athens, being the losing party, saw some of the war’s worst aftermath. The Athenian citizen, once sheltered by the walls erected from tradition and mythology, has been exposed to the harshness of the world and to a primitive violence long forgotten. Both his spirit and his image were in tatters, and so it is here at the sight of the hero’s ruins that we find the desolate and hopeless frame in which Euripides created his tragedies.

Evidence of this frenzied and destructive era is passed down to us by the ancient historian Thucydides.<sup>92</sup> In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides captures a microcosm of the war’s harrowing murders and the total degradation of traditional moral values. That event is the Melian Dialogue, an account between the Athenians and the

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<sup>91</sup> Arrowsmith, “A Greek Theater,” 33.

<sup>92</sup> As is the concern with any recorded history, the weight of his account is of course dependent on whether or not we are to consider Thucydides a trustworthy historian.

Melians. The Melians, a small population on an equally small island, wanted to remain neutral to both sides and avoid participating in either campaign of murder.<sup>93</sup> In hoping to avoid becoming executioners, however, they merely become the victims.

The Athenians did not accept their neutrality and sent representatives to their island, warning them that if they did not join the Delian League, they would kill the island's inhabitants. Diplomacy proving itself unsuccessful, the Athenians go on to execute all the men on the island and to enslave the women and children. The dialogue itself, however, unearths how the war brought out the complete failure of communication and persuasion, and how, as a result, traditional principles had completely broken-down.

The defeat of the Melians lies in the fact that their argument appeals to justice, divinity and virtue, whereas the Athenians rescind these ideas, wanting only to flex their colonial power. The Athenian argument demoralizes justice. Separating it from virtue and making it serve their violent means, they make it nothing more than a hallowed out contradiction. This kind of justice sees persuasion based in morality as inferior to physical strength and power. The Athenians espouse their irrational position claiming that "the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept,"<sup>94</sup> and that, "our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can."<sup>95</sup> To impose contemporary terminology, their argument stands entirely on the shoulders of nihilism. They reject the existence of universal order and even bring divinity to kneel

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<sup>93</sup> Thucydides., *Thucydides: History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1954), 5.84.

<sup>94</sup> Thucydides., *Thucydides: History*, 5.89.

<sup>95</sup> Thucydides., *Thucydides: History*, 5.105.

before meaninglessness. The Melians meet them only with traditional appeals to justice and morality, “there should be such thing as fair play or just dealing,”<sup>96</sup> and “nevertheless we trust that the gods will give us fortune [...] because we are standing for what is right.”<sup>97</sup> Being the far weaker party, the Melians can only rely on the uncertainty of the gods and the Spartan army to save them. In one of their final remarks they “put their trust in the fortune that the gods will send,”<sup>98</sup> but the Athenians coldly take the last word, “you seem to us quite unique in your ability to consider the future as something more certain than what is before your eyes, and to see uncertainties as realities [...]”<sup>99</sup> By its conclusion, the two parties maintain their initial opinions. Communication has failed, and they remain divided. The Athenians fulfill their word—proving that the transformation of justice has become permanent—and they execute all military aged men of Melos. No god came to save them.

The convulsions of the war echoed and had a destructive effect on the Hellenic *polis*, where civil war continued on a micro scale. Thucydides once more captures how rivaling political parties were springing up in a variety of new forms, some of Athenian influence and others of Spartan influence. Both forms were so desperate for power that they were all too willing to exact violent revenge on the other with brand-new atrocities. The leader too found his grave next to the hero’s. Suddenly what was once “a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member.”<sup>100</sup> The most affected victims of these political conflicts were the citizens

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<sup>96</sup> Thucydides., *Thucydides: History*, 5.90.

<sup>97</sup> Thucydides., *Thucydides: History*, 5.104.

<sup>98</sup> Thucydides., *Thucydides: History*, 5.116.

<sup>99</sup> Thucydides., *Thucydides: History*, 5.116.

<sup>100</sup> Thucydides., *Thucydides: History*, 3.82.

themselves. Their voice found no resonance in these violent power-lovers who sought only to project their own and to silence those not in harmony with them. Self-interest was reigning and justice had been usurped. Citizens left hopeless to this turmoil were left with the impossible choice of picking between the lesser of two disgraces. The Melian peril thus reappears in the *polis*, as Thucydides creates the familiar image: “the moderate part of the citizenry perished between the two [political parties], either for not joining the quarrel or because envy would not suffer them to escape.”<sup>101</sup>

Philosophy of this time also harbored in it a similar state of discordance. Scholars recognize that Greece experienced a significant intellectual crisis during this 5<sup>th</sup> century wartime era. In the city of Athens, a trend of rationalist thinking, led by the Sophists, responded to the evident flaws that the war enumerated in the traditional ways. This movement of questioning “spared neither the official religion nor institutions, laws or conceptions of justice,”<sup>102</sup> creating an overall upheaval of the intellectual foundation.

Thinkers who participated in this “revolt against religion”<sup>103</sup> sought to move thought away from the divine moral structures and to recognize the divide that exists between the gods and man. Protagoras, for example, acknowledged a sense of ambiguity and doubt growing in the space once occupied by faith. He writes, “Concerning the gods I am not in a position to know either that they are or are not [...] for there are many things that are preventing knowledge, the obscurity of the matter and the brevity of human life.”<sup>104</sup> Man’s limits are recognized. The relationship between man and the gods

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<sup>101</sup> Thucydides., *Thucydides: History*, 3.82.

<sup>102</sup> Friedrich Solmsen, “Introduction” of *In Intellectual Experiments of the Greek Enlightenment* (pp. 3-9). (Princeton University Press. 1975) 3.

<sup>103</sup> George Briscoe Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, repr. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 164.

<sup>104</sup> Kerferd, *The Sophistic*, 165.

devolves from a sort of understanding to a silence as if a wall separating them had suddenly becomes palpably visible. And as the presence of the gods gradually begins to form into an absence, the influence of traditional religion is drawn into question. Other philosophers would look to the power of reason as their tool to return order back to their world. Tracking the effects of this revolution on Greek Tragedy, Karl Reinhardt observes that the Sophist thinker Anaxagoras was a foundational figure in elevating the concept of “Mind” and logic over more theological forms of thinking. Anaxagoras viewed Mind as “infinite and self ruling.”<sup>105</sup> Instead of universal order being determined by some incomprehensible force, he believed that “[Mind] arranged all things.”<sup>106</sup> Within man exists the power to rebuild the culture’s broken traditions, and so ideas like these gave rise to a flourishing of humanism, all the while remembering that with man’s capacity to rebuild lies a darker, more proven capacity to destroy.

The effects of this intellectual crisis frequently found themselves at the heart of contemporary Greek art, particularly in the theatre of Euripides.<sup>107</sup> Scholars believe that his work, so often criticized for its many irrationalities, captured the essence of the intellectual environment of the time.<sup>108</sup> For William Arrowsmith, “the immediate, salient fact of Euripides' theater is the assumption of a universe devoid of rational order, or of an order incomprehensible to men.”<sup>109</sup> Because the traditional moral structure generally featured in the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles had come into question, Euripides’

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<sup>105</sup> Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the pre-Socratic philosophers: a complete translation of the fragments in Diels*, "Fragmente der Vorsokratiker" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 84.

<sup>106</sup> Freeman, *Ancilla*, 85.

<sup>107</sup> Solmsen, “Introduction,” 4. He writes, “Their thoughts may convey the "environment" in which the moral doctrines flourished; conversely, the writings of such authors, and for obvious reasons especially of the historian Thucydides and the tragedian Euripides, may reflect the powerful impact of the new theories.” This is also the primary focus of Reinhardt’s work on the intellectual crisis.

<sup>108</sup> Euripides completed *the Heracles* in 416 B.C, directly in the heart of this intellectual crisis.

<sup>109</sup> Arrowsmith, “A Greek Theater,” 36.

tragic model differs greatly from the other tragedians. This decay of the old moral tradition is coupled with a destructive transformation in how virtue is represented on the stage. That is, with Euripidean plays, virtue frequently “tends to change to crime.”<sup>110</sup> Is this not exactly the fate of Heracles? He who is perhaps the epitome of divine heroism and tried virtue (all the more in Euripides’ rendering) follows the formula that tradition has given him and finds himself utterly ruined. Euripides’ characters are no less virtuous per say, not in the case of *Heracles* at least, but the choices and actions that once led to glory—what allowed for Orestes to receive fair and just judgment in the case of Aeschylus, for example—now leads heroes to their falls. Tragedy perhaps no longer lies in the fault of man, but in the intellectual system that guides them. In this way, Euripidean tragedies like *Heracles* do not represent the decadence of the art form, but rather, the decadence of the old tradition.

Not only does Euripides capture the rise of radical rationalism in his theatre but also, as Reinhardt also points out, he makes an effort to crystallize the nostalgia that protested the fall of traditional moral values. Reinhardt sees this most evidently in Euripides’ use of choruses, which are conveniently always embodied by old men. He sees that the chorus seems to be dissonant with the general aim of the tragedy. That is, while the tragedy engages in the destruction and decay of the moral tradition, the chorus merely wishes to escape the matter. Reinhardt writes, “Euripidean lyric no longer concentrates on the tragic event, it intensifies, it no longer interprets, it breaks out [...] wishes the world were otherwise, becomes escapist [...]”<sup>111</sup> If once the chorus’ purpose was to comment and aid in the interpretation of the tragedy’s events, Euripides has reinvented its

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<sup>110</sup> Karl Reinhardt, "The Intellectual Crisis in Euripides" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 27.

<sup>111</sup> Reinhardt, *The Intellectual*, 30.



use to now relay a dissonance with the destructive experience and the ambivalence to engage with it. So too in *Heracles*, the chorus too often breaks from the plot to dwell on the implication of old age, yearning to be young again. They make seemingly tangential claims like, “youth I long for always,”<sup>112</sup> and “ourselves mere words, ghost that walk.”<sup>113</sup> These old men are anywhere but at the table where the old ways are in question. And in a tragedy like *Heracles*, where the last half observes the consequences of the decay so head on and unforgivingly, the chorus becomes virtually absent from the tragedy. That Euripides captures both sides of the intellectual crisis vastly multiplies the tension of the moral trials coming to life in his works. Reinhardt summarizes this tension which he finds present throughout Euripidean theatre very well: “In antiquity there is not even a remotely comparable analogy to the decline of meaning, the loss of centre, etc., in which so many of our artists and analysts of art wallow—apart, perhaps, for one brief exception [...] confined to Athens and to the period between 450 and 400 B.C.”<sup>114</sup>

There is a spirit, as Reinhardt implies, writing from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, of the ancient crisis in the struggle of the modern world. Though the problems that come to light in the 20<sup>th</sup> century needless to say are of a much greater complexity than in Athens, if only because the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw destruction on a truly international scale—and because these events have hardly left our critic field of vision. Two great wars and the unfathomable atrocity of the Holocaust had dragged man to new levels of despair. As a result, man saw the same need to confront himself and his gods once more.

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<sup>112</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 638.

<sup>113</sup> Euripides, "Heracles," 111.

<sup>114</sup> Reinhardt, *The Intellectual*, 17.

The scale of this crisis being so enormous and historic records far more plentiful than in 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens, the time and place that I wish to give exclusive attention to in this matter is France during the 1940's, immediately following the conclusion of the war. After the battlefields fell silent and Paris had regained its freedom from Nazi occupation, it became clear that the traditional image of man had utterly crumbled. During this time, Camus wrote for and was editor of *Combat*, a clandestine newspaper of the French resistance, which, after the liberation of Paris, became a public and widely read paper. In it, he writes on the doubled nature of man and the violent darkness within, "We learned of comrades who had their guts ripped out, their limbs torn off, and their faces kicked in. And the men who did these things were men polite enough to give up their seats on the subway" (August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1944).<sup>115</sup> The everyday individual had revealed within himself an unsettling other. And so the suspected nature of man shared in the general darkness that had overtaken the city.

The atmosphere that Camus goes on to capture is that Paris, eager to restore an essence of light, became open to significant change—and perhaps prematurely. The old had to be discarded, and so "in no other country did German occupation lead [...] to a change in political, cultural and social life that was as abrupt, as dramatic, and as contrary to the prewar situation as in France."<sup>116</sup> Once the rebuilding began, the ideological current moved swiftly to condemn the remnants of the old ways. But soon enough it became clear that this ideological recourse had just as many of its wrongs. Paris became, much like Athens, suspended in a web of contending ideological forces. For Camus in the

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<sup>115</sup> Albert Camus, *Camus at Combat: Writing 1944-1947*, ed. Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), #.

<sup>116</sup> Henry D. Rousso, "Vichy and Resistance," in *The Columbia History of Twentieth-century French Thought*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2006), 122.

post-war, these ideologies took the form generally of communism and capitalism, tied so closely to the divisions of Europe itself: the East and the West, respectively. And this divide of the continent was no less present among the minds of everyday Parisians. French scholars insist that when considering the intellectual environment of France during this time, “one should be aware of the highly polarized atmosphere which dominated intellectual life in France during the post-war years.”<sup>117</sup>

After Paris was liberated from German occupation, the time had come to hold those guilty and collaborating parties accountable, and this time from 1944 to 1949 became known as *Épuration légale*. Hundreds of people working with the Nazis were executed or purged from French society. Camus was initially among those who saw the purge as necessary in order to rebuild. He writes in an article written at the beginning of the *Épuration légale* “the voices of the tortured and humiliated join with ours in calling for justice of the most pitiless and decisive kind” (November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1944).<sup>118</sup> But quickly it became evident that the violence and murder resulting from the purge was just as inscrutable as the violence the purge was reacting against. In less than a year, Camus acknowledged the injustices of the purge and would go on to call the purge a “failure” (August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1945).<sup>119</sup> Similarly, French resistance groups had become starkly divided, disagreeing about the broken country’s future.<sup>120</sup> With individuals trying to elevate new ideologies from the ruins of the old, society became dazed by radicalism and uncovered new horrors and darker “others.”

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<sup>117</sup>Ieme Van Der Poel, "Camus: A Life Lived in Critical Times," in *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, ed. Edward J. Hughes, (Cambridge [u.a.]: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 20.

<sup>118</sup> Camus, *Camus at Combat*, xiv.

<sup>119</sup> Camus, *Camus at Combat*, xv.

<sup>120</sup> Van Der Poel, "Camus: A Life," 20.

The executions of the purge did not stop despite appeals from intellectual circles. Camus witnessed that society's concern for delivering its raging and miscalculated justice had created a particularly fearful environment where murder was becoming legitimized by the purge, making the process of rebuilding futile. He writes in a series of articles entitled "Neither Victims nor Executioners," published in *Combat* in 1946, "the twentieth century is the century of fear."<sup>121</sup> Citizens had become so intent on their ideas of justice that man had lost the ability to voice his discontents. It became evident that "the world seems to us to be led by forces blind and deaf to warnings, advice, and supplications."<sup>122</sup> Dialogue and persuasion ceased. A silence of continuous talking with nobody listening overtook society, and without the ability to communicate, man was left to "quake in fear" within the "vast conspiracy of silence."<sup>123</sup> The unity of humanity had been destroyed on all levels: the globe, the state, and even the individual.

Neither able to return to how he once was nor add to the world's violence, man had to find new ground to stand on that rejects the hypocrisy of the world and a justice that is irrational. In this regard, there was no escape for the moderate citizen. Radical ideologies forced more murder, destroying the image of man while at the same time proclaiming to save it. Man cries out, "Je suis la plaie et le couteau!" Once more, Camus captures the unbearable contradiction that comes to befall man:

We are therefore living in utopia and contradiction, to be sure, since the world we live in is one in which murder is legitimized [...] but it seems that it can't be changed without running the risk of committing murder. Murder thus leads to murder, and we will continue to live in terror either because we resign ourselves

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<sup>121</sup> Camus, *Camus at Combat*, 257.

<sup>122</sup> Camus, *Camus at Combat*, 258.

<sup>123</sup> Camus, *Camus at Combat*, 258.

to it or because we seek to eliminate it by means that replace one form of terror with another. (*Saving Bodies*, 1946)<sup>124</sup>

Justice was being achieved through murder, and so the path to virtue was leading to more and more crime. Man had not even the opportunity to truly be virtuous because his ideological environment led him to ruin either way.

The hero was dead. To Camus, it was clear that man could not legitimize murder and take up the role of the executioner, but he also feared becoming the victim of murder and, by his silence in reaction to the murders, admitting that human life has no value. The fact that this is the question man is forced to ask himself—whether he will fail this way or that way—shows that he is completely at the mercy of the broken ideological system that guides him, for he has no other option but to fail tragically. Instead of waging in this suicidal game, Camus' response was to rebel and to refuse all murder. "What is a rebel? A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation."<sup>125</sup> These are the very first lines of his second major, late philosophical work *the Rebel*, published in 1951, nine years after *the Myth of Sisyphus*.

This is Paris in the eyes of Camus. And as time will go on, he will find himself resorting to the same philosophical answer as new, more intimate conflicts arise. That is, when large amounts of native Algerians break into a violent civil war for independence against the French-Algerian population in the late 1950's, he will find a similar unease between the inevitable self-destruction proposed by either side. Algeria being his homeland, Camus was unable to definitively take a side, and would describe this conflict between the French and the Arabs "as if two insane people, crazed with wrath, had

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<sup>124</sup> Camus, *Camus at Combat*, 261.

<sup>125</sup> Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Herbert Read (New York: Vintage, 2012), 13.

decided to turn into a fatal embrace the forced marriage from which they cannot free themselves.”<sup>126</sup> The French intellectual public would come to heavily criticize him for his general silence over the course of this war. With his heart divided between the two countries, to raise his voice would be to become both the victim and the executioner.

In a lecture given in Athens in 1955, Camus will begin, “Our age is extremely interesting, that is to say, it is tragic.”<sup>127</sup> What he means by this, what it means to be in a period of tragedy, is to live when society has undertaken the arduous process of rebuilding, when contradiction reigns, and when “the future is uncertain and the present is dramatic.”<sup>128</sup> Paris saw this period just as Athens did. Both places experienced the tension of ideologies weighing on the morality of the individual and contradicting his actions at every turn. In Athens, the literature responds, and so tragedy takes a new form. Euripides preserves this intellectual strain, illustrating the failure of the old ways and the uncertainty of what will follow. The literature of France responds as well, and for Camus, he finds the roots of this transformation in a shared past, “It is in France that the first signs of such a [tragic] renaissance is visible... the model for us remains the genius of Greece...”<sup>129</sup> Although Camus wrote plenty of his own theatre, these themes exist at the heart of his fiction. He preserves the fall of man and concerns himself with the consequences. The connections elicited from this bond founded in contradiction allow for two literary traditions, rich completely in their own regards, to share a common breath

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<sup>126</sup> Albert Camus, "Letter to an Algerian Militant," trans. Justin O'Brien, in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 128-129.

<sup>127</sup> Albert Camus, "On the Future of Greek Tragedy," trans. Philip Thody, in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Philip Malcolm Waller Thody (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 295.

<sup>128</sup> Camus, "On the Future," 296.

<sup>129</sup> Camus, "On the Future," 309.

across an enormous sea of time. "French writers feel for Greece, their common fatherland..."<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Camus, "On the Future," 310.

## II

*CLAMENCE: The Siren Of The Zuider Zee*

“What sort of song was the Siren’s song? ...it was a song from the abyss and once heard it opened an abyss in every utterance and powerfully enticed whoever heard it to despair in that abyss.”

Maurice Blanchot, *The Song of the Sirens*

Camus published *The Fall* in 1956, and it is the last major work of literature he completed before his death. This work of fiction possesses a narrative structure that is more experimental than those of *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, and many French literary scholars see *The Fall* as being one of the foundational texts for more contemporary experimental French narratives.<sup>131</sup> The text is a dramatic dialogue between Jean-Baptiste Clamence and an unnamed stranger whose voice is absent from the text. Unlike his other works, which are so often set under the oppressive Mediterranean sun, *The Fall* takes place among the dreary, foggy canals of Amsterdam. There, at the very center of the red light district, in the shady *Mexico City* bar, Clamence waits, gin in hand, for a willing ear to give the story of his fall from grace. At its core, *The Fall* unveils the inhumanity that lies dormant in the self and the guilt that is present in all innocence. Like Heracles, Clamence is confronted with the realization that he is the opposite of what he thought he was: a *deus ex machina*. He goes from thinking he is innocent and invisible to the world of judgment, to discovering that “there was something in me to judge [...] and [in others]

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<sup>131</sup> David Carroll, "Albert Camus," in *The Columbia History of Twentieth-century French Thought*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2006), 467. “Along with the novels of Samuel Beckett, [*the Fall*] could be considered to anticipate and serve as a model for some of the narrative experiments associated with French *nouveau roman*.”



an irresistible vocation to judge.”<sup>132</sup> Walking along the canals of Amsterdam, he tells of his life in Paris as a successful and respected lawyer, of the event that occurs one night on the Pont Royal and jeopardizes his innocence, and of how he has arrived at his present state: a self-described “judge-penitent” who finds company among the sailors and those of even lower ranks of society, deep within the bleak hell of Amsterdam.

The events of the narrative do not unfold in any sensible or easily understood fashion. Everything about the character of Clamence, from his proclivity for long-winded tangents, complex literary allusions to his wholly contradictory language, contributes to the disorienting nature of the narrative. The story takes place over several days and in a variety of desolate settings. Walking through the canals of Amsterdam, on an excursion into the empty Zuider Zee, and ending in the darkness of Clamence’s own home, he subtly blends the themes of his confession with the physical world in which it is given. *The Fall* progresses like the journey of Dante through the circles of hell. Leading the way, Clamence guides this stranger to whom he tells the story through a prolonged, non-chronological reflection of his life that traverses into deeper and darker layers of memory and observation. Immediately, the setting begins to mirror the narrative as Clamence romanticizes the canals of Amsterdam, which, “resemble the circles of hell. When one comes from the outside, as one gradually goes through the circles, life—and hence its crimes—becomes denser, darker.”<sup>133</sup> But even the imposed map of an inferno is perhaps too generous for a text like this one.

In order to understand the narrative complexities at stake in this text, we must first have a general understanding of Clamence himself and his fall from grace. Although

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<sup>132</sup> Albert Camus, *The Fall*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 78.

<sup>133</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 14.

Clamence begins his story addressing the question, “What is a judge-penitent?” he will take the entire course of the narrative to arrive at his answer. He begins by reconstructing his esteemed life in Paris. Clamence claims to have once risen to tremendous heights in Parisian society, successfully hiding his self-interest behind an edifice of virtue. He was once a lawyer, a noble voice of victims, always on the right side of justice. He would offer his seat on the subway, tip his hat even to the blind people he would guide across the street, and seize each and every opportunity to kiss the hand of a poor woman and give her whatever money he could. Virtue took him to that “supreme summit,” satisfying his need to “feel above” the rest of humanity and far above their judgment.<sup>134</sup> Indeed, to be removed from the judgment issued by the eyes of man was his sole aim in life. Having achieved it, he was entirely free. “Bathed in a light as of Eden,” he was privy to a certain unity and happiness in life that others were merely in pursuit of.<sup>135</sup> Clamence saw himself “somewhere in the flies like those gods that are brought down by machinery from time to time to transfigure the action and give it its meaning.”<sup>136</sup>

Once high above the stage, he then plummets from his position of grace and descends to the level of the tragic characters. One night on the Pont Royal he witnesses a woman jump into the water, and Clamence is faced with the decision to jump in or to do nothing.<sup>137</sup> He does nothing. Suddenly the power of his perceived godliness weighs upon him because he knows that in order to uphold his innocence, he has the responsibility to save her. Clamence becomes a witness to a traumatic event, and as a result, the inaction that freezes him has a direct impact on her fate. His unwillingness to prevent death

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<sup>134</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 123.

<sup>135</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 27.

<sup>136</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 25.

<sup>137</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 70.

affirms for him that life does not have the value that he once instilled in it. No matter what excuse he came up with, that it was “too cold,” “too far” or, most importantly, “too late,” he had permitted death. He was forced to retract his innocence and step into the sight of judging eyes.<sup>138</sup>

This scene on the Pont Royal is arrived at only after much delay. Throughout the beginning in fact, he is keen to make a spectacle of its arrival, showing glimpses of its approach and suddenly pulling away: “I still long in my heart of hearts. I soared until the evening when... But no, that’s another matter and it must be forgotten.”<sup>139</sup> In issuing these delays, Clamence insinuates that the event of the fall is coming but that we are not there yet. This, however, is merely a trick that he is playing on his silent listener, a listener who represents the position of the reader. The moment of the fall is not a singular moment; rather, it has always been happening. Clamence himself makes this point much later on when he says, “then I realized...that that cry which had sounded over the Seine behind me years before had never ceased, carried by the waters of the Channel, to travel throughout the world, across the limitless expanse of the ocean, and that it had waited for me until I encountered it.”<sup>140</sup> In this case, the event of the fall is nothing more than a realization of an already occurring truth. As to how this informs the delaying structure of

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<sup>138</sup> Sanyal Debarati, *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (Fordham University Press, 2015.) 84. Some scholars read this scene a historical criticism. The woman on the bridge is representative of the atrocities from WWII, most notably of course the events of the Holocaust. In her reading of *The Fall* as an allegory of the “Shoah,” Debarati calls this scene a “crisis of witnessing.” Clamence becomes a symbol of those who witnessed the unspeakable atrocities of the war and yet turned away. She continues, “for the failure to witness the drowning allegorizes the Holocaust as a trauma that defies representation.” One of the primary points that Debarati goes on to make is that the ambiguity of the fall scene lends itself to a large variety of interpretation. This paired with the fact that because *The Fall* features so many different scenes of falling, as both historical accounts and the personal accounts of the main character “The allegory of the fall becomes a master trope that recycles multiple histories into a primordial fall, one that ultimately lies outside of history...” 95.

<sup>139</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 29.

<sup>140</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 108.

the narrative, it seems as first that there will be this major event we will arrive at, but as we continue and it never comes, it becomes apparent that he is merely tricking us.

The success of his trick is entirely dependent on the confusing nature of his narrative structure. The chronology of time and the chronology of his narrative are not equivalent. Instead of telling his story in a sequential manner, he goes back and forth between events in his memory (one episode occurs one year, the next takes place three years later, the following occurs only a short while after the first episode, and so on). Considering that he appears to be approaching one single event in which everything changed, it is disorienting then when he veers into episodes a few years after that event. It is in these detour episodes that Clamence shows how he became conscious of his fallen state; they are the scenes where he is actually falling. By placing these episodes beforehand, his narrative possesses a realistic structure in that, once he gets to the night of the fall, he has already fallen. The fall has always already happened. All of this is merely to say that the detour episodes that appear before the night on the Pont Royal in narrative but many years later in time are the episodes in which one can analyze and understand the meaning of falling for Clamence.

He recalls a time when he entered into an altercation on the road, but the scene does not go according to plan for Clamence. Instead of coming out on top, he is physically beaten and embarrassed in front of a mass of onlookers. It is here that Clamence starts to become aware of his vulnerability. He writes, “the car horns had put the finishing touch on my embarrassment [...] I could see myself getting back into the car without a reaction, under the ironic gaze of a crowd especially delighted because, as I

recall, I was wearing a very elegant blue suit.”<sup>141</sup> This scene bears all of the fall’s essential characteristics. We see a man who enters a scenario with a set of expectations and is utterly confounded when the world reacts oppositely. There is a discordance growing between himself and the world. The shock of his failure is overshadowed by the moment when he realizes that there is a gaze upon him. He is beginning to see holes forming in the veil of virtue he thought was protecting him from the world. And so his understanding of himself begins to break down.

The elegance and grace that once characterized him are now confined merely to the suit on his back—no longer from within. The transformation is permanent, as he adds a little later, “it was no longer possible for me to cherish that fine picture of myself.”<sup>142</sup> He has crossed a line and now sees his always-right self as completely lost and never able to return to it. This realization loosens his restraint of civility, and he wants only to give himself over to violence. He wanted to “be the stronger, and in the most elementary way...ruling over society by force alone.”<sup>143</sup> Like those colonizing Athenians in Melos who subvert justice by substituting it for power, so too does Clamence forfeit the virtue and justice-based structure that once held his world together. For him to return to that life he once had—to rise back up on his *machina*—is impossible, and he knows that if he is to enter the courtroom again, it can only be to join the side of the guilty.

In another scene that comes before the fall in the narration but after the fact in time, the recurring sound of laughter enhances the complexity of Clamence’s transformation. Walking home one night on the Pont des Arts, “a laugh burst out behind

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<sup>141</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 53.

<sup>142</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 55.

<sup>143</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 55.

me. Taken by surprise, I suddenly wheeled around; there was no one there.”<sup>144</sup> Though nothing in this scene actually reveals the ways in which Clamence is guilty, the perceived sounds of laughter show how there is something of him that is worthy of judgment. The effects of this laughter, however, are incredibly far-reaching. As he regards the laughter just a few days later, he says, “I thought a little about that laugh, for a few days, then forgot about it. Once in a great while, I seemed to hear it within me.”<sup>145</sup> The experience of laughter shifts from being an outward event to an inner event occurring explicitly at the psychological level. It prompts him to begin a reflexive examination, and through this, he becomes more and more self-conscious. Avi Sagi points out that laughter is the experience through which Clamence comes to discover his self-consciousness.<sup>146</sup>

Laughter then has the effect of “disturbing and subverting quotidian comforts. Laughter directs Clamence to himself, to the voyage supposed to discover the hidden, primary truth about human existence, namely that the human being is a dual creature.”<sup>147</sup> So as he returns home from that night on the Pont des Arts, Clamence looks into the mirror and observes that, “my reflection was smiling in the mirror, but it seemed to me that my smile was double.”<sup>148</sup> His sense of self has literally become doubled and his self-consciousness has completely taken root. Suddenly the coherence of his character is disturbed, and he observes an “other” within himself.

The discovery of the dual self becomes even clearer to Clamence as his “voyage” of introspection progresses. Laughter begins to appear throughout his daily life,

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<sup>144</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 39.

<sup>145</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 40.

<sup>146</sup> Avi Sagi, "The Fall: Consciousness, Freedom, and Responsibility," in *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd* (Amsterdam [u.a.]: Rodopi, 2002), 135.

<sup>147</sup> Sagi, "The Fall," 136.

<sup>148</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 40.

disrupting the actions that had become so fluid and habitual to him. Now when he is with a woman or giving some speech in front of the court, an internal laughter breaks in and reveals to him that he is not one coherent being; there is the division between the internal self and the self that is presented.<sup>149</sup> In other words, he realizes the irony in the fact that he can give a speech about justice while knowing that he himself is on the side of the guilty. But at the same time that this “voyage” interrupts daily life, it has the capacity to retroactively take its effect upon memories. Clamence himself quite clearly confirms this when he says,

To begin with that perpetual laugh and laughers had to teach me to see clearly within me and to discover at last that I was not simple [...] after prolonged research on myself, I brought out the fundamental duplicity of the human being. Then I realized, as a result of delving in my memory, that modesty helped me to shine, humility to conquer, and virtue to oppress.<sup>150</sup>

The repudiation of the “simple” perception of self is revelatory for Clamence. The “simple” self is a self that does not see itself as doubled or divided but as fixed and singular. This discovery prompted by laughter forces him to observe that not only is he not “simple,” but also that any perception of simplicity has only been an illusion. The dual self was merely hidden behind the “simple,” behind a mirage of acting.

Clamence learns that he can wear the mask: the mask of modesty, the mask of humility, or the mask of virtue. The gesture of tipping his hat to the blind people on the street is revealed not to be a kindness at all—a performance instead. It is clearly not at all intended for whom he gives it, for they cannot even see it. Rather, he tips his hat for the audience of onlookers. Once he learns that he can be ironic, that he can say one thing and

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<sup>149</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 65.

<sup>150</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 84.

mean another, the self becomes completely fluid in that there is no limit to what form it can take.<sup>151</sup> And so by the end, Clamence reveals himself as the actor: “Don’t take my emotional outburst or my ravings too seriously. They are controlled.”<sup>152</sup> Can he not also wear the mask of the confessor? The identity of the authentic Clamence behind the mask is as indeterminable as the identity of his silent interlocutor. The uncomfortable reality that the reader must face from this point on in the narrative is that Clamence can become whoever serves him best, a concern that becomes darker and graver as the text progresses.

At this point, I want to pause in order to truly examine the nature of “falling” in this text. It’s clear that Clamence’s fall is not one strictly of innocence and guilt, but more generally a transformation between states of self-consciousness. While the fall of Clamence has many similarities to the Christian conception of the fall, many characteristics of his experience are unexplained by a purely religious reading. At its core, the Christian idea is a transition from one state of being to a lesser state of being, and this transition is centered on the concept of original sin and the loss of innocence. In its most basic premise, original sin provides that there is a singular and central event that

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<sup>151</sup> It is interesting to consider Clamence’s closing remarks when describing this scene because they reveal the end product of his transformation. Reaching the end of this climactic scene, which in reality receives significantly less detail than the scene on the Pont des Arts or on the street with the motorist, Clamence casually deflates the importance of the event, “What? That woman? Oh, I don’t know. Really. I don’t know. The next day and the days following, I didn’t read the papers.” (71) These lines seem to echo those of the altogether indifferent protagonist of *The Stranger*, “Maman died today. Or maybe it was yesterday. I don’t know” (Camus, Albert, *The Stranger* Translated by Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage International, 1989. 3). Both Clamence and Meursault illustrate their unwillingness to play the game. Both of them are fronting impassibility with their indifference; however, they couldn’t be more different. On the one hand, Meursault is a figure entirely impermeable to the world, and the foundation of his character prevents him from being anything else. His indifference stems from the fact that he sees himself as blameless and thus refuses to make any judgment on the world. On the other hand, Clamence has transformed into this state. His indifference stems from the knowledge that humanity has already been proven guilty, that the blame is unavoidable. Meursault is avoiding casting judgment, whereas Clamence is avoiding the gaze judgment; he is failing to interpret the world and is deflecting our attempts to read him.

<sup>152</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 146.



warrants the exile from paradise and the need for salvation. What's central to this idea is that there is a movement from one place to another, from paradise to exile. Even once Adam and Eve are forced to leave paradise, the remainder of their lives is centered on achieving salvation so that they may eventually return to their original, perfect state. Clamence may structure his narrative in order to make it seem as if there was a central event from which he transformed to his fallen state, but this is not the case. When he undergoes his fall, he merely comes to the realization that he has always been fallen. It is not a movement from one place to another. Rather, it is a realization that he is not where he thought he was. Clamence's experience of the fall maintains that paradise never existed and therefore cannot be returned to. The possibility for salvation is thus ruined—for Eden has been forgotten. This is a truth that Clamence provides in his chilling last words: “‘O young woman, throw yourself into the water again so that I may a second time have the chance of saving us both!’ ... But let's not worry! It's too late now. It will always be too late. Fortunately!”<sup>153</sup>

What the Christian approach cannot illuminate about the text, Martin Heidegger's view of the fall possibly can. Heidegger's idea extends beyond the basic opposition of innocence and guilt. The idea of falling that he focuses on in *Being and Time* is far more existential. He explains falling as “a most exaggerated ‘self-dissection.’”<sup>154</sup> Avi Sagi, who also observes Heideggerian characteristics in Clamence's fall, defines Heidegger's fall as a “shift from an authentic to inauthentic existence” where “an authentic existence is one in which human consciousness is transparent...and a state of fall is one of self

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<sup>153</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 147.

<sup>154</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie, ed. Edward Robinson, 35th ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2013), 223.

alienation.”<sup>155</sup> Clamence’s conception of falling does in fact lead him to a sense of self-alienation, but at the same time, he shows that the “inauthentic self” is the only true self and that the “authentic self” is nothing more than an illusion of the mind. When Clamence proclaims that in falling he discovered the “fundamental duplicity of the human being,” he insinuates that the true nature of man is to be fallen. The actual event of falling is not one of becoming or transforming but simply of realizing: he is not so much becoming alienated as much as he is merely realizing his alienation. Nonetheless, the alienation resulting from the fall is a product of identity’s fragmentation. Heidegger’s idea then that the fall results in a state of consciousness that “is characterized by turbulence”<sup>156</sup> is no less true for Clamence. He suggests this condition in himself throughout the text. His sense of self becomes tangled in duplicity, and everything about his reality, both conscious and physical, appears ambiguous and incomprehensible.

Once Clamence has learned that he has always been falling, he is forced to confront the complimentary truth that there is no end to his fallen state. This idea originates from Maurice Blanchot’s reading of *The Fall*, for whom Clamence’s fall is an “eternal” one, arguing that, “We console ourselves for falling by determining in our imagination the point at which we would have begun to fall... A suffering without reason, an exile without a kingdom, a flight without vanishing point cannot be tolerated.”<sup>157</sup> The notion of falling that his reading proposes is that, because there is neither a beginning nor an end to the fall, any sense of progression or trajectory associated with the movement of falling is entirely an illusion of a hopeful mind. In this

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<sup>155</sup> Sagi, "The Fall," 136.

<sup>156</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 223.

<sup>157</sup> Maurice Blanchot, “The Fall, the Flight,” *Friendship*. Translated by Lydia Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 207-08.

case, the metaphorical landscape of falling is one in which all indications of distance or space are completely blurred. Blanchot's conception of falling is visible in the setting in which Clamence gives his story. Specifically, the waters of the Zuider Zee (along which Amsterdam lies) not only capture the spatial ambiguity of the fall, but they also come to represent the anti-Eden, that is, where the fallen individuals find their home. Riding along in a boat through the foggy sea, nothing is defined, everything is just an ambiguous mass:

But the Zuider Zee is a dead sea, or almost. With its flat shores, lost in the fog, there's no saying where it begins or ends. So we are streaming along without any landmark [...] We are making progress yet nothing is changing. It's not navigation but dreaming.<sup>158</sup>

The distortion of space in this scene creates the illusion that Clamence is suspended in a void. The fog obstructs everything, making it entirely impossible to determine a position or limits. Not knowing "where it begins or ends," the sea itself represents the existential abyss from which there is no exit. That Clamence recognizes this same concept of movement yet without any progress mirrors his exact experience of falling: that there is no trajectory, no start, middle, or end. Clamence is merely left to wander in it as if in some eternal purgatory. And so this "dead sea" becomes the land of his exile. Unlike paradise, the Zuider Zee is merely an absence, a "negative landscape... universal obliteration, everlasting nothingness made visible."<sup>159</sup> The light that Clamence once saw himself bathed in whilst in his Eden has been replaced by an impenetrable, dull haze.

Once Clamence has fallen into the tangled web of self-consciousness, there is no returning to the coherent order of self he once possessed. As he comes to discover his

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<sup>158</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 97.

<sup>159</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 72.

identity as an actor, he thus learns that he has no fixed identity at all. The self becomes an infinite sea: it embodies everything, and therefore, nothing. Ironically, the Zuider Zee truly “is a dead sea.” Although the text makes no acknowledgment of this idea, the sea is a perfect metaphor for the divided-self. It mirrors Clamence in that it was once a real sea in reality, but the construction of a major highway closed it off and divided it into two, and neither section kept the original name.<sup>160</sup> What was once the mouth of the Zuider Zee became the Wadden Sea and the remainder became known as the IJsselmeer, and so as they became no longer unified they lost the name that signified their unification: Zuider Zee.<sup>161</sup> Clamence is also one who, after he realized himself doubled, abandoned his original name, which he reveals very early on.<sup>162</sup> Although he does not specify what his name once was, the fact that it is not even presented to the reader is a further sign of how lost and irretrievable that singular and original identity is. This reoccurring motif then of lost original identity is another way of compounding the experience self-alienation. Likewise, the fact the Clamence, like the sea, is capable of adopting a new name reaffirms his identity as the actor, for whom identity is completely fluid.

Taking a step back from the narrative, the perpetual feeling of approaching something that one cannot make out that characterizes the voyage through the Zuider Zee shares many characteristics with the greater narrative structure of *The Fall*. As Clamence tells his tale and leads up to the moment of the fall he is merely “making progress yet nothing is changing,” revealing by the end that the fall is not an event that can be arrived at because it is not an event at all. Considering that Camus himself referred to *The Fall* as

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<sup>160</sup> Sagi, 140.

<sup>161</sup> However, an important distinction to make is that the sea was divided many years before *The Fall* was written, so Camus has consciously chosen to use the dated concept of the sea: the Zuider Zee.

<sup>162</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 17.

a *récit* instead of a novel, I find the Blanchotian idea of the *récit* to be particularly illuminating about this endless-approach narrative structure. Unlike the novel, “the *récit*, in general, is the narrative of an exceptional event that escapes the forms of daily time and the world of ordinary truth, perhaps of all truth.”<sup>163</sup> He compares this to the song that Sirens give to sailors on the sea, a song that entices sailors to cross a distance that can never be crossed—to embark upon a journey without an end. So too for the moment of the fall, Clamence may create the illusion of approaching it, but he can never actually arrive at it because it is a non-temporal event. His narrative is a *trompe l’oeil*: the fall is happening before our eyes and has always been happening, but we do not realize it because we are constantly expecting it. Therefore, the *récit* is the only narrative structure in which Clamence’s conception of fallenness can be retold. The narrative he gives then takes the form not of a narration, but of a wandering without destination, as the *récit* “is not the narration of an event, but the approach of this event, the place where it is called on to unfold, an event still to come.”<sup>164</sup>

But the greater problem that is consistently at stake with this *récit* is that just when it seems like we are finally reading Clamence, the suspicion arises that he is merely trapping us in his complex narrative—acting the confession rather than giving it. As a narrator, Clamence is painfully skilled in the art of *détournement*. By reversing the temporality of events with prolonged excursions into his memories and thereby insisting upon the non-temporality of the fall, Clamence prevents the reader from grasping a clear understanding of his narrative. Thus, what Clamence is actually hijacking is the reader’s ability to analyze his story succinctly and to issue judgments of his or her own, evading

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<sup>163</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. *The Book to Come*, Translated by Lydia Davis (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 6.

<sup>164</sup> Blanchot, *The Book*, 6.

our gaze merely by distorting our view. But to avoid our gaze is not enough; in fact, he is merely redirecting our own gaze to face ourselves.

Each of these narrative hijackings is successful in distorting our perception of the fall, but the greatest *détournement* of the entire narrative is that of the fall itself. The central question posed to Clamence is not about his fall, but rather, “What is a judge-penitent? ...But first I must set forth a certain number of facts that will help you understand my story.”<sup>165</sup> Yet it is these tangential “facts” which become the material for which Clamence will implicate the reader into his guilt. We might pause if only for a second to consider the role of the silent interlocutor. Not only is he never heard from, but also we learn nothing about him besides that he bears some similarities to Clamence himself. Therefore, he is no one, and at the same time, he is everyone. A total absence, he functions merely as a vacant placeholder so that the reader may easily insert him or herself into the seat of Clamence’s audience. In this case, whatever effect Clamence produces upon his companion, he produces on the reader simultaneously. The actual implication occurs in the telling of his fall. As Clamence is unfolding his intricate and confusing narrative, he is performing a sleight-of-hand and tailoring his own story, “adapting my words to my listener,” so that the portrait of his confession is of “all and of no one.”<sup>166</sup> By the time the reader learns the truth of his profession and the intent of his monologue, it is too late to retreat:

Covered with ashes, tearing my hair, my face scored by clawing, but with piercing eyes, I stand before all humanity recapitulating my shames without losing sight of the effect I am producing, and saying: “I was the lowest of the low.” Then imperceptibly I pass from the “I” to the “we”... the more I accuse myself, the

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<sup>165</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 17.

<sup>166</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 139.

more I have the right to judge you. Even better, I provoke you into judging yourself, and this relieves me of that much of the burden... I shall listen, you may be sure, to your own confession with a great feeling of fraternity.<sup>167</sup>

He subtly transforms the portrait that was ostensibly of himself into a mirror in which we become the subject of judgment. We may then, at his will, embark upon our own confession at the conclusion of his. He creates a trap into which his audience easily falls.

Part of his success in trapping his reader is owed to the heightened sense of intimacy that he gradually creates throughout the narrative. For example, in addressing the interlocutor, he slowly drops the formalities so that the “*Monsieur*” on the first page transforms into “*cher monsieur*,”<sup>168</sup> to “*cher ami*,”<sup>169</sup> and toward the end, “*mon cher*.”<sup>170</sup> Even spatially, the narrative begins in a shady public bar, and as he seems to reveal more about himself, the setting too becomes more intimate so that the last chapter takes place in his home by his bedside. In doing so, Clamence cultivates the perfect environment for his audience to let down their guards—to look into their own mirror and see their smile doubled.

The confession of the interlocutor is the true prize for Clamence because it guarantees the slow acquiescence of his own freedom. Clamence recognizes that to confess is to submit oneself to judgment, but he fosters the illusion that freedom is in fact not freedom at all and that submission is where true freedom lies: “Ah, *mon cher*, for anyone who is alone, without God and without a master, the weight of the days are dreadful. Hence one must choose a master...when we are all guilty, that will be true

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<sup>167</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 140.

<sup>168</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 18.

<sup>169</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 102.

<sup>170</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 118.

democracy.”<sup>171</sup> With each confession he produces he converts his audience into a consciousness that is aware of the duplicitous self, and so he welcomes one more individual with open arms into that familiar self-alienating expulsion. But Clamence has made somewhat of a home in exile, “I have accepted duplicity instead of being upset about it.”<sup>172</sup> Having rushed to his own judgment as the judge-penitent he has adapted himself to this banishment, and so as the world arrives, somewhat paralyzed by the confusion warranted by the divided-self, he’ll have already created his kingdom, and he will ironically become the master in exile, a “prophet in the empty desert.”<sup>173</sup> It is all the more appropriate that his new name should be Jean-Baptiste Clamence, bearing an intentional likeness to John the Baptist. He leads the interlocutor into this kingdom of his by baptizing him in the Zuider Zee, that “holy water-font”<sup>174</sup> that for him is the utter symbol of his guilt and estrangement. And so as he addresses his interlocutor one last time, he does so with the utmost irony: “*cher Maître*,”<sup>175</sup> he says, giving his audience the final illusion of freedom they will ever have, even though in truth, it is too late, and they have already long lost it. Like the Song of the Siren, “awakening the hope and desire for a wonderful beyond, [but] this beyond represented only a desert,”<sup>176</sup> Clamence lulls his listener straight through the gates of eternal exile.

By the finale, the clearest view of Clamence’s kingdom arises, and it is in all ways the anti-Eden. Once he fought on the side of justice, but now, in this fallen world, Clamence has enslaved justice; in fact, it’s in the cupboard. When Clamence reveals that

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<sup>171</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 133, 136.

<sup>172</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 141.

<sup>173</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 117.

<sup>174</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 109.

<sup>175</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 147.

<sup>176</sup> Blanchot, *The Book*, 4.



he is in possession of the missing panel piece entitled “the Just Judges” from the “Adoration of the Lamb” altarpiece by the artists Hubert and Jan van Eyck, he implicates his audience in the crime. In the altarpiece, various groups of religious people are traveling to see the holy Lamb. The central figure of the piece itself, the Lamb is a parallel of Jesus Christ and signifies the state of innocence. The scene represents redemption, the return to the pre-fallen state.<sup>177</sup> In the cupboard, those judges are supposedly on their way to meet the Lamb of innocence and to take part in redemption, but like the wanderer on the *Zuider Zee*, their search will be eternal. According to Clamence, “justice being definitively separated from innocence... I have the way clear to work according to my convictions. With a clear conscious I can practice the difficult profession of judge-penitent.”<sup>178</sup> A sense of internal clarity only returns to Clamence once he has disturbed and contradicted the world around him. He has made justice mirror his discordant state by alienating it from the object that predicates it: innocence.

In his dark home in the center of Amsterdam, he has put the judges in his own little-ease, that Middle Ages torture device that limits all movements, prohibiting the search for the Lamb. From inside the little-ease, “through the unchanging restrictions that stiffen [the] body, the condemned man learned that he was guilty,”<sup>179</sup> and so justice is made into a contradiction. Locked up, the “Just Judges” will be forever on their search for the Lamb of innocence, forever approaching redemption, but never will they arrive. A copy of the panel has taken the place of the stolen original on the altarpiece in St. Bavon

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<sup>177</sup> Baldass, Ludwig. *Jan van Eyck* (Phaidon Publishers, 1952) 34.

<sup>178</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 130.

<sup>179</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 109.

Cathedral. Mankind has doubled it, and the original piece has been expelled to the place where “one is forgotten for life.”<sup>180</sup>

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Revealing to us his secret, showing his proof that the “Just Judges” are lost and that justice is ruined, he baptizes his reader once and for all and welcomes him to a bleak life of exile. Clamence has done everything that he can at this point to prepare his listener to begin his or her own confession. The narrative has come to a complete circle. Just as one confession ends the next one is to begin, and presumably this will continue through eternity. As the *récit* ends, we do not arrive anywhere, but instead we begin again, always beginning—ending on yet another beginning. In these last pages, Clamence makes the joke that a day might come when he will reveal his stolen painting to the wrong person, that they will take him away, and that justice will be restored: “I’d be decapitated, for instances [...] I’d be saved.”<sup>181</sup> But that day will never come, for even he knows that “It’s too late now. It will always be too late. Fortunately!”<sup>182</sup> Even if such an arrest were made, Clamence knows that there would be nothing to return to, no actual paradise that existed before the fall.

But what about those judges locked in the cupboard—are they not familiar? Once responsible for carrying out justice, they’ve been exiled, forced to realize their guilt. There, in the little-else, they find the bones of Heracles. Justice exists in the same place at the end of both *The Fall* and *Heracles*. In the Euripidean universe, Heracles too once carried out the ways of justice and is betrayed by a justice that rejects itself. Banished, the

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<sup>180</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 109.

<sup>181</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 146.

<sup>182</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 147.

judge becomes the penitent. And like Clamence, who also stood on the side of justice until his ruin, Heracles too experiences the alienation of the divided-self. Never will he be able to return from his physical expulsion to Athens, and in his consciousness he will always be both the victim and the executioner.

It is true that both the tragedy and the *récit* end in a more impenetrable darkness than from where they start. But the darkness at the end of *Heracles* is merely made deeper by the revelations of *The Fall*. While it may seem like these protagonists enter into exile, they have always been there. For them, the tragedy is only when they realize it. All that remains is to fall, and to keep falling. With no beginning or end to it, Heracles and Clamence, the “Just Judges” and ourselves—for we are among them—are left to wander in the limitless, fog-filled void of a dark and confusing sea.

## *EPILOGUE*

Today, if you were to walk into the St. Bavo's Cathedral, which is located in the idyllic town of Ghent, Belgium, you could find the "Ghent Altarpiece" on display behind a thick pane of glass in the small but secured Villa Chapel. On the bottom left hand side of the panel you can find the "Just Judges," only feet from the Lamb of innocence. All twelve of the inside panels appear to be in complete, unbroken harmony with each other. But do not be fooled. It is only meant to look as if they are in harmony. The panel of the "Just Judges" on display is a fake, painted by an art forger on the back of an old bookshelf. The whereabouts of the original are completely unknown.

As Clamence accurately narrated, the "Just Judges" was truly stolen on the night of April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1934 from the Ghent Cathedral. Its absence from the altarpiece immediately caused a stir in official and civilian circles throughout the country. But whereas many paintings in that period that were stolen simply disappeared without a trace, the thief began reaching out. In a matter of days after it was stolen, the Bishop of Ghent began receiving ransom notes from an anonymous individual, giving only the initials D.U.A. The thief asks for money, of course (one million Belgian francs from the church to be exact), but what is more unusual is that in his letters he shows as much concern for getting the panel returned as he does for receiving the money. He is aware not only of its monetary significance but also of its symbolic significance, and it is from the latter that he works his leverage. He writes in his first letter to the Bishop, "[the location] is indeed only known by one person. This fact is the only thing that should interest you because it

implies terrifying possibilities.”<sup>183</sup> The ominous threat in his words reveals the greater truth—a truth that the thief is aware of—that the painting itself is hardly the object being ransomed. What’s at stake is graver. He has created a discord in the symbolic harmony of redemption and salvation, and it is the possibility of restoring that harmony that he holds in his singular possession.

As time goes by and letters are passed back and forth, the Bishop and the Belgian authorities gradually retreat into silence. They cannot meet the thief’s demands and, as he sees it, they have become relatively indifferent to the matter. In his later letters, he shows a disappointment not because he will not see the money, for over the course of their negotiations he lowered the ransom price again and again in order to have them commit to the cause. Rather he becomes frustrated that they are unwilling to pursue the “Just Judges” unconditionally. He writes in his second to last letter:

After having tried everything within our power, and despite your continuously repeating and impossible to realize answers, I believe I fully performed my duty as a Leader... and I withdraw the order to my friends in order not to take revenge yet. They are free and just like them and you, I can only wait and see what will happen. I have clean hands and I leave with an easy mind, and I take my terrible secret with me. Please accept, Monsignor, my honorable regards as well as my regret that you did not treat the people in this historical matter, with enough dignity.<sup>184</sup>

The thief becomes the prophet. Pleased to reveal the shortcomings of those who claim themselves to be on the right side of justice, he feels himself accomplished in showing man’s unwillingness to restore the judges to innocence.

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<sup>183</sup> “The theft of the Just Judges: Ransom Letters,” Mystic lamb.net, last modified 2007, Accessed April 27, 2017, <http://judges.mysticlamb.net/letters/letter1.html>. Letter 1.

<sup>184</sup> The theft of the Just Judges: Ransom Letters, Mystic lamb.net. Letter 13.

Was this perhaps not the intention of his theft all along? It was nothing more than an experiment—a confession of sorts. Having made his case to the Bishop, having done his part, he has made himself open; his “hands are clean.” It is a miraculous and familiar trick. He merely made himself guilty first in order to prove everyone else guilty in the end. Civilization has lost its jewel not because it was stolen but because we were indifferent to its absence. The thief has revealed the duality of the people. Claiming to value this precious work and its significance over all else, they refuse to meet the simple needs necessary to restore it. The thief withdraws, “happy to have been of help.”<sup>185</sup>

The letters from the thief cease. The Bishop does not meet the thief’s demands. Those “terrifying possibilities” that he initially made reference to in the beginning regretfully become realized. The suspected thief was a stockbroker with a failing heart named Arsène Goedertier. He dies nearly eight months after the painting was stolen. On his deathbed he purportedly revealed the location of a final letter, which had never been sent, hidden in the drawer of his desk. Approaching the end, his tone becomes evermore damning:

[...] you dare to take the responsibility to write that your proposal is ‘to take it or leave it.’ In such circumstances it is dreadful to dare to write such a thing. We know that one usually says such a thing when it concerns the trading of objects without value or of minor importance. But when it concerns one of the most valuable objects in the world [...] the disappearance of which will be registered in history as an irreparable occurrence, dare to write: ‘Take it or leave it,’ without bearing in mind the material responsibility, that is incomprehensible.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 3.

<sup>186</sup> The theft of the Just Judges: Ransom Letters, Mystic lamb.net. Letter 14 (unsent).

The thief has issued his judgments. We can only imagine that he would have admittedly taken some pleasure in being caught, arrested—to be decapitated and thus, be saved. But as he dies, the secret dies with him. He reveals that, “The judges rest in a place where neither I nor anybody else can take it without catching the attention of the public.”<sup>187</sup> It’s too late.

Nearly a century later, no progress has been made on discovering the location of the “Just Judges.” Although a copy stands in its place, the altarpiece stands symbolically incomplete. In 2010 the artwork began restoration, and it was found that the forged panel, painted in 1945 and therefore the newest panel by hundreds of years, is in the direst shape. Its paint flakes more than the older pieces, and the wood on which it was painted is rotting.<sup>188</sup> Its true, inferior nature shows through from behind its cracks more and more each day. As for finding the “Just Judges” and restoring them back to their rightful place restored with the Lamb, a detective remains assigned to the case to this day.<sup>189</sup> The search, it seems, will never end.

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<sup>187</sup> The theft of the Just Judges: Ransom Letters, Mystic lamb.net. Letter 14 (unsent).

<sup>188</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, "The Flip Side." *the New Yorker*. Last modified November 29, 2010. Accessed April 27, 2010, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/11/29/the-flip-side>.

<sup>189</sup> Noah Charney, "The Ghent Altarpiece: the truth about the most stolen artwork of all time," *the Guardian*, last modified October 20, 2013, accessed April 27, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/dec/20/ghent-altarpiece-most-stolen-artwork-of-all-time>.





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