he feebleness of its emotional responses – all these factors conspire to ubtract a great deal of dramatic and moral appeal from its noble-sounding nd apparently inspired ethical considerations. Thus the solutions it offers n a variety of levels – the 'true' nature of power or the preference for retired, ataraxic life, its faith in the gods' presence and providence, the ertainty of retribution – are all fatefully undermined.

It is interesting to note that Senecan plays never give the chorus the last vord,[58] thus depriving it of any opportunity to deliver a final evaluation of the events. The chorus's feelings and thoughts are only voiced between events, whether or not these have been directly witnessed or even correctly inderstood. Not even in structural terms does the chorus enjoy a privileged latform. It is small wonder, then, that its recipes for a better life appear in he end to be more of an exercise in abstract morality than a compelling ndication of viable options.

[58] The only exceptions are represented by the certainly un-Senecan *Octavia*, and the dubious *Hercules Oetaeus*; Leo (1897) 512. See p. 68.

CHAPTER 5

Fata se vertunt retro

fata se vertunt retro
(Seneca, *Agamemnon* 758)

I

The time has almost come to bring the reading of *Thyestes*, if not yet to a conclusion, at least to a point where we can take a comprehensive view of the main issues that I have analysed in previous chapters. Before doing so, I would first like to explore a set of related topics which play an important role not just in *Thyestes* but in several other Senecan tragedies. Accordingly, in this chapter I will largely move away from *Thyestes* and offer a thematic reading focusing mostly on other plays: *Hercules furens*, *Troades*, *Agamemnon*, *Medea* and *Oedipus*. In the next chapter I will extend the argument developed here, in order to situate my final analysis of *Thyestes* within a broader context.

I propose to look first at certain peculiarities of Seneca's treatment of dramatic time. There seems to exist a broad consensus, implicit or explicit, that many of the plays' temporal structures display markedly idiosyncratic features. Unfortunately, this is often taken as further evidence for the theory that, by abandoning the conventions of Attic drama, Seneca has irretrievably adulterated the pure forms of tragedy, so that his treatment of time, like many other aspects of his dramatic technique, testifies to a decadence in the evolution of tragedy. It is well established that Seneca breaks away from many fifth-century conventions:[1] the unity of time and space, the rigid delimitation of the time allotted to the tragic action, the coherent succession of scenes in an undisturbed temporal continuum – these are all rules to which Seneca finds surprising (and, I think, highly effective) alternatives. The notion that many of his plays offer detached tableaux

[1] The classic treatment of this topic is Tarrant (1978).

rather than an organic plot is predicated precisely on the sometimes loose, unconventional, often puzzling temporal connections established between acts. It is incumbent upon us to read these disjunctions and discrepancies as markers of meaning. I will take my cue from some peculiar treatments of dramatic time to investigate their semiotic and thematic significance: what does it mean for Seneca to subvert linear chronology, and what role does time play in the configuration of Seneca's tragic thought and tragic writing?

II

At the end of her harsh exhortation to Tantalus in the prologue, the Fury orders him to remain on earth and to watch the doomed banquet which will eventually conclude the tragedy: 'go, fill up your fasting; let blood mixed with wine be drunk before your eyes; I have found foods which even you would want to flee – stop, where are you rushing headlong?' (65–7: *ieiunia exple, mixtus in Bacchum cruor | spectante te potetur; inveni dapes | quas ipse fugeres – siste, quo praeceps ruis?*).[2] Shortly thereafter, however, she dismisses the ghost and sends him back to the underworld: 'go to the caves of the underworld and your familiar river' (105–6: *gradere ad infernos specus | amnemque notum*). Between these two seemingly contradictory orders[3] stands Tantalus' short-lived and ultimately ineffectual rebellion (68–83a, 86b-101), as he is overcome by the Fury's excruciating tortures (96–101). It has been suggested[4] that at 105–6 the Fury is relenting precisely because of Tantalus' emphatic reaction: first he must wreak havoc in the house of the Pelopidai (83: *ante perturba domum*); only afterwards will he be allowed to leave.[5] Difficult as it is to imagine the Fury suddenly surrendering to Tantalus' complaints, this is not the only problem raised by such a conciliatory explanation. In the lines that follow Tantalus' unwilling agreement, and conclude the prologue, the Fury vividly describes the consequences of his pollution. Verbal repetitions convey her excitement[6] (101–4):

[2] See pp. 45ff.

[3] The inconsistency was first noticed by Lesky ((1922–23) 533), who explained it as being a result of Seneca's imperfect adaptation of his Euripidean model. Hine ((1981) 268) believes that the Fury's order at 105–6 is ironic, and is uttered by the Fury alone on stage, after Tantalus has in fact already entered the house and polluted it. See Picone (1984) 28, n. 48.

[4] Steidle (1943–44) 257 and Picone (1984) 28. Lesky ((1922–23) 533–7) puts the discrepancy down to Seneca's departure from his Euripidean model: in Euripides' *Thyestes*, in fact, the ghost would have remained inside the house for the duration of the whole play. See Anliker (1960) 27–8.

[5] On this point see Shelton (1975) 258–9.

[6] See Tarrant (1985) 103 for a discussion of Calder's suggestion (1984) that the repetition marks the strokes of whip which the Fury inflicts upon Tantalus. The suggestion would probably have come from Virgil's Dido (*Aen.* 4.660), who stabs herself with the words *sic, sic iuvat ire sub umbras*.

> hunc, hunc furorem divide in totam domum.
> sic, sic ferantur et suum infensi invicem
> sitiant cruorem. sentit introitus tuos
> domus et nefando tota contactu horruit.

This, this rage distribute throughout the house! Thus, thus let them be dragged, and in turn, as enemies, let them thirst after each other's blood. Your house feels your entering, and has recoiled in horror from your unutterable contagion.

It is at this point that the Fury is finally satisfied (105–7):

> actum est abunde. gradere ad infernos specus
> amnemque notum; iam tuum maestae pedem
> terrae gravantur;

Enough! More than enough! Go to the caves of the underworld and your familiar river; already your step falls heavy on the saddened earth.

While *actum est abunde* reinforces the Fury's affiliation to her Virgilian model,[7] it also establishes a meaningful point of reference within the play. In act 2, after selecting the best form of revenge against his brother, Atreus expresses his contentment in much the same words (279–80):

> bene est, abunde est: hic placet poenae modus
> tantisper.[8]

This is good, more than enough. I like this way of punishing him – for the moment.

The parallelism between these two scenes goes beyond the repetition of *abunde*. Both the Fury and Atreus start by striving to find a revenge of unprecedented cruelty, and the Fury's wish that the Thracian *nefas* be repeated on a larger scale (56–7: *Thracium fiat nefas | maiore numero*, 'let the Thracian crime be done, but multiplied') is mirrored at the same relative point in Atreus' own speech: *non satis magno meum | ardet furore pectus, impleri iuvat | maiore monstro* ('the frenzy burning in my breast is not great enough; some greater horror must fill me', 252–4). Moreover, lines 103–4 are a careful, explicit reworking of two lines in Ovid's Philomela

[7] At *Aen.* 7.552 *terrorum et fraudis abunde est* is uttered by Juno in direct response to Allecto, just before the latter's dismissal (559: *cede locis*).

[8] See Braden (1985) 45 for the suggestion that *bene habet, peractum est* at *Oed.* 998 (cf. *Her. F.* 1035; *Ag.* 901 with Tarrant (1976) 343 and references to comedy; *Med.* 1019; *Her. O.* 1457, 1472) might be connected with the language of gladiatorial games. It would indeed be tempting to see the Fury and Atreus as game-directors *extraordinaires*, a point which could well be supported by Calder's suggestion noted above (n. 6). It is worth noting that *abunde est* appears in the *Aeneid* only at 7.552. Seneca, who has Atreus use the expression a third and final time at line 889 (*bene est, abunde est, iam sat est etiam mihi*), multiplies its model, thus effectively depriving it of much of its value. On the Virgilian construction see Fordyce (1977) 160.

episode:[9] *ut sensit tetigisse domum Philomela nefandam, | horruit infelix totoque expalluit ore,*[10] and in the corresponding position in Atreus' speech, before he in turn exclaims *bene est, abunde est*, we find a direct reference to the same story: *animum Daulis inspira parens | sororque* ('inspire my soul, o Daulian mother, and sister, too', 275–6). These verbal and structural parallels, therefore, highlight the fact that Atreus is closely following in his own speech the same sequence of thoughts and actions as was displayed by the Fury in the prologue.

As the Fury's description of the extraordinary outcome of Tantalus' intervention acquires a cosmic dimension, and as nature forgets her habits, she crowns her crescendo by pointing out that even the sun is uncertain whether it should force the day to continue in its appointed course: 'Look! Titan himself is in doubt whether to order the day to follow, and with his reins to force it towards its destruction' (120–1: *en ipse Titan dubitat an iubeat sequi | cogatque habenis ire periturum diem*).[11] This image clearly prefigures the withdrawal of the sun from its regular course[12] and becomes, later in the tragedy, the icon of the *nefas* which has been accomplished.[13] It is possible to argue that this elaborate parallelism denotes the Fury's ability to predict in great detail the events she has herself caused. Indeed, this appears to be the most economical solution, since it implies no particular idiosyncrasy on Seneca's part. An alternative solution to the correlations and discrepancies mentioned above would be to interpret the Fury's overarching awareness of the events which will later unfold on the stage as a manifestation of prophetic foreknowledge.[14] This is certainly the case in the prologue to *Agamemnon*, where it is Thyestes' turn to anticipate the unfolding of the events. A comparison between the two prologues shows the prophetic nature of Thyestes' words, who welcomes the realization of an 'uncertain prophecy' (*Ag.* 38: *sortis incertae fides*) as the king returns home

[9] *Met.* 6.601–2.

[10] Tarrant ((1985) 103) provides a detailed analysis of the analogies and differences between Seneca's and Ovid's lines.

[11] The use of the participle in *se periturum* indicates the 'inevitability of the action' (Tarrant (1976) 178; see Tarrant (1985) 106).

[12] The premature, unnatural setting of the sun as a mark of horror at Atreus' deeds is mentioned by the messenger (776), the chorus (789), Atreus (892) and Thyestes (990). We must assume that the sun sets while Atreus carries out the infanticide, and the whole of act 4 must be taking place in at least partial darkness (the messenger's words at 623–5 would thus have a somewhat paradoxical flavour). When the chorus opens the following ode in a tone of surprised anguish (789–91), they are not witnessing the disappearance of the sun afresh, but rather commenting on it. The sun, supplanted in its role by a star-like Atreus (885–6), is still hidden when he meets Thyestes, as both brothers remark (891–2 and 990–1). See Hine (1981) for the opinion that similar repetitions are standard narrative devices.

[13] I return to this point at the end of the chapter.

[14] Picone (1984) 32, n. 57.

to be murdered: 'now he is near at hand – to give his throat into his wife's power. Now, now shall this house swim in blood other than mine' (43–4: *adest – daturus coniugi iugulum suae. | iam iam natabit sanguine alterno domus*). Both the careful arrangement of verbal tenses, and the final notation that Thyestes' sojourn on earth is delaying dawn (53–6: *sed cur repente noctis aestivae vices | hiberna longa spatia producunt mora, | aut quid cadentes detinet stellas polo? | Phoebum moramur: redde iam mundo diem*, 'but why suddenly is the summer night prolonged to winter's span? or what holds the setting stars still in the sky? We are delaying Phoebus: give back the day now to the universe') exclude the possibility that the prologue is temporally coextensive with the rest of the play. Thyestes' *video* (46) should therefore be considered a variation on Atreus' boasting that he can picture in his mind the whole *imago caedis*.

At the opposite end of the spectrum of possibilities, Shelton has suggested that the Fury actually observes in a compressed period of time all the events which the tragedy will gradually present to the audience.[15] The whole action of the tragedy – Atreus' plotting his revenge, the double murder, the banquet – would be encompassed in the prologue. This, I hasten to add, would be perfectly in keeping with Juno's metadramatic aspects: as befits the 'author' of the story, she watches all the phases of the plot as they rapidly unfold in front of her eyes before they are shared with the audience. Atreus will acknowledge that he can anticipate the whole sequence of his revenge in his mind: *tota iam ante oculos meos | imago caedis errat* ('already before my eyes flits the whole picture of the slaughter', *Thy.* 281–2).

Both solutions involve substantial difficulties. The 'prophecy' theory falters on the discrepancy between the two orders given to Tantalus by the Fury, first that he stay to watch the banquet, then that he return to his usual abodes. On the other hand, the fact that the prologue is taking place just before dawn, while several references in the rest of the play make it clear that we are in the middle of the day, make it difficult to assume that the clock actually turns back at the beginning of act 2. One can see the appeal of the claim that Seneca, as usual, just messed up his note cards while attempting to juggle one too many models at a time.[16]

The fact remains that repetition and parallelism play a key role in the structure of the play. Moreover the Fury's orders – notwithstanding the play's later attempts to establish an almost regular internal chronology – do jar the audience's perception of temporal flow. The solution to this puzzle probably lies in accepting that the Fury's orders are intrinsically

[15] Shelton (1975), (1978) 17–20.

[16] Lesky (1922–23).

contradictory. Act 2 does in fact repeat the structure of the prologue, as the play ostensibly observes the regular conventions of the passing of time. There is enough evidence in other Senecan plays, as we will see shortly, to argue that Seneca is deliberately questioning a strictly mimetic notion of linear dramatic time. The inconsistency between the Fury's two orders is a telling indication of the fact that we should expect an idiosyncratic treatment of time. In other words, if our (human) perception of events cannot dispense with the usual notions of succession and regularity, there is a level at which gods (and the playwright) devise the unfolding of actions with a synoptic, all-encompassing knowledge which we can only dimly fathom from our limited perspective. Actions, in a sense, are always already determined by a divine masterplot, a consideration which does not eliminate human responsibility (far from it),[17] but inscribes it in a much larger and uncontrolled context of divine foreknowledge and planning. By disturbing the audience's perception of time, Seneca marks repetition as an essential component of tragic actions and of our theatrical understanding of them. The confidence that actions unfold over an unwavering temporal continuum (and, therefore, according to a well-defined causal chain) is shattered even by this limited disruption to the expectation of a regular, forward-looking temporal flow. At the beginning of the second act of *Thyestes* the audience is presented with events which seem to follow on directly from the action of the prologue, but which in a very significant (if not strictly literal) way should be traced back to a point in time in parallel with the prologue itself. The movement from full daylight to the uncertain shades of dawn marks, for the humans, a clear step forward in a temporal continuum. Enough clues emerge, however, to alert the careful spectator to the fact that in an important sense we are moving backwards, returning to a point in time that we have already witnessed once: the framing structure analysed in chapter two[18] acquires a new, pregnant dimension: the second layer of the plot is not only structurally embedded in the first, represented by the prologue, but is to a certain degree temporally coextensive with it.

One of the most significant outcomes of this dramatic technique consists in a further blurring between the responsibilities of the characters on the stage and the audience, and a deeper elision of the possibility of neatly defining innocence and guilt. The audience is involved from the very beginning in the Fury's scheming, and subsequently treated, either willingly

[17] It is difficult to confine the significance of this treatment of dramatic time to the text's desire to emphasize human responsibility, a point well made by Shelton (1975) 263–7.
[18] See above, pp. 45ff.

or *malgré soi*, to a detailed account of events already foreseen and foretold. The audience could (should) leave. By continuing to watch, it can no longer claim innocence. It is, in effect, an accomplice to the *nefas* on the stage.

Such a disruption of the conventions of tragic time is unparalleled in ancient drama[19] and represents a form of self-conscious expression which finds appropriate parallels in only a limited number of modern texts. Before twentieth-century 'epic' theatre started to exploit discrepancies in the treatment of dramatic time in order to draw an audience's attention to the fictional nature of their experience,[20] only a few authors had explored the possibilities of a non-linear arrangement of time.[21]

The case of *Thyestes*, however, is not isolated in the Senecan corpus. The prologue to *Hercules furens* is dominated by Juno, the only goddess (or god, for that matter) ever to enter the realm of Seneca's tragedy, and a character rich with metadramatic resonances. These are particularly clear as Juno, after lamenting the fact that no ordeal, no matter how extraordinary, can worry Hercules or stop him (30–6), explicitly addresses the force of her inspiration in order to discover, finally, an apt instrument of revenge (75–7):

> perge, ira, perge et magna meditantem opprime,
> congredere, manibus ipsa dilacera tuis:
> quid tanta mandas odia?

Onward, my anger, onward! Crush this overreacher! Grapple with him, tear him apart with your own hands. Why delegate such hatred?

There follows a long invocation to the Eumenides (86–8) which leads a few lines later to a direct description of their inceptive function (100–6):

> incipite, famulae Ditis, ardentem citae
> concutite pinum et agmen horrendum anguibus
> Megaera ducat atque luctifica manu
> vastam rogo flagrante corripiat trabem.
> hoc agite, poenas petite violatae Stygis;
> concutite pectus, acrior mentem excoquat
> quam qui caminis ignis Aetnaeis furit.[22]

[19] See Taplin (1977) 290–4, 377–9 for important remarks on fifth-century tragedy. Little is known about later developments, but see Taplin (1977) 49 with n. 2.
[20] I will return to this particular aspect in the next chapter.
[21] On the issue in general see Pfister's perceptive remarks (1977) 246ff., esp. 276ff.
[22] The symmetrical quality of the language is an important indicator of the plotting strategy that Juno has in mind, because Hercules will have to inflict on himself the revenge desired by the goddess. Juno's *furor* will derange Hercules, and his own *furor* will destroy him. The revengeful inspiration that the goddess seeks for herself she will pass on to her unaware victim.

Begin, handmaids of Dis, brandish the blazing pine torch violently. Let Megaera lead your troop, fearsome with snakes, and snatch a huge beam from a blazing pyre in her baleful hand. To your work: avenge the desecration of the underworld! Rouse your hearts; scorch your minds with fiercer fire than that raging in Etna's furnaces.

Juno's role in this prologue is in many respects similar to the Fury's and Atreus' exhortation in the first two scenes of *Thyestes.* But another structural element forcefully connects the two plays and more directly interests us here. The prologue to *Hercules furens* describes various actions in the present and past tenses, which the rest of the play will represent anew. Juno 'sees', while she speaks, all the events that the play will slowly unfold before the audience. A very provocative instance of this occurs early in Juno's speech. At lines 66ff. the goddess is worried that Hercules will bring his attack against the sky, driven by a desire to dominate the entire universe: *nec in astra lenta veniet ut Bacchus via: | iter ruina quaeret et vacuo volet | regnare mundo* (66–8: 'and he will not reach the stars by a gradual approach, like Bacchus: he will forge a path by destruction, and he will want to rule in an empty sky'). In the course of a few lines, as Juno indulges in the description of previous Herculean deeds, the future challenge has already taken place: at line 74 the future *quaeret* turns unexpectedly into the present *quaerit*: *quaerit ad superos viam.*[23] Moreover, at line 64 Juno states that Hercules deserves to be punished because she is afraid that he will attack Olympus. Yet Hercules does so only as a consequence of the madness the goddess has inflicted on him. Juno seems able to conflate, in her divine epistemological omnipotence, cause and effect, crime and punishment.[24]

The most provocative instance of the phenomenon concerns the return of Hercules from the underworld. At 47–52 Juno testifies to some of Hercules' achievements:

> effregit ecce limen inferni Iovis
> et opima victi regis ad superos refert.
> parum est reverti, foedus umbrarum perit:

[23] The rapid succession of the two moments in which Juno foreshadows Hercules' attack (67: *iter ruina quaeret*) and actually sees it happen (74: *quaerit ad superos viam*) provides a pertinent instance of what has been dubbed 'temporal compression' (Zwierlein (1966) 29). This and similar passages (see *Tro.* 351–2) are offered by Zwierlein as evidence that the tragedies were not performed, since the author broke away from the conventions of a realistic treatment of time. In Greek tragedy, he notices, the arrival of characters on the scene is always carefully arranged in such a way that a reasonable amount of time elapses between the decision to summon them and their appearance, while a text written for recitation rather than performance, he argues, would be less interested in preserving a strictly realistic arrangement of time, and such 'compressions' could be easily glossed over in the audience's imagination. I agree with Calder (1970) that recitation increases, rather than reduces, the need for clarification in such passages, while pauses on the stage could easily be filled by different means.

[24] See Braden (1985) 48.

> vidi ipsa, vidi nocte discussa inferum
> et Dite domito spolia iactantem patri
> fraterna.

See, he has broken through the gates of nether Jove, and brings spoils of triumph over that conquered king back to the upper world. It is not enough to return: the terms governing the shades have been breached. With my own eyes I watched him, after he had shattered the gloom of the underworld and subdued Dis, as he showed off to his father spoils won from that father's brother.

The hero has already left Erebus dragging Cerberus with him, and has flaunted to Jupiter the victory he obtained against the god's own brother (51–2). Hercules, however, is still described as inhabiting the underworld at the opening of act 2, and he will not proceed upwards until line 520, when Amphytrion exclaims (520–3):

> cur subito labant
> agitata motu templa? cur mugit solum?
> infernus imo sonuit e fundo fragor.
> audimur! est est sonitus Herculei gradus.[25]

Why is the shrine rocking and shaking with sudden movement? Why is the earth rumbling? A thunderous noise comes from the depths, from the underworld. We are heard! It *is* the sound of Hercules' step.

The choral ode that begins immediately after this remark seems to occupy the time needed by Hercules to complete his ascent: at the beginning of act 3 his initial words are consistent with the notion that he has just re-emerged from the underworld. In this instance it is difficult to assume that at 47–51 Juno is simply foreshadowing future events, since she takes care to insist, by the emphatic repetition of *vidi*, that she has already seen Hercules' return.[26] Here, again, there is a strong suggestion that the prologue covers all the events up to Hercules' bout of madness (which in the play will begin at 926), and that at the beginning of act 2 we turn back to a moment in time when he is still in the underworld.

The unfolding of Hercules' return is further complicated by Theseus' remarks at 813–21, where he harks back to the span of time covered by the second choral ode[27] and informs Amphitryon that Hercules had

[25] Shelton ((1978) 20–1) suggests that the same treatment of dramatic time applies to yet another instance. In her opening speech Juno provides a detailed analysis of the psychological processes which will lead Hercules to his final, self-defeating ordeal. This is a case, however, where it is quite appropriate to suspect that Juno is simply foreshadowing future events thanks to a more comprehensive form of knowledge.

[26] The anaphora of *vidi* is usually referred to events (often of a cruel nature) actually witnessed by the speaker. In Seneca's tragedies see *Her. F.* 254–7; *Tro.* 170 (*vidi ipse, vidi*); *Ag.* 656 with Tarrant (1976) 294; *Her. O.* 207. See Hansen (1934) 40. An influential model must have been Virg. *Aen.* 2.499–501.

[27] Wagenvoort (1933) 177.

returned with a reluctant Cerberus to the mouth of the river Tenarus, not to Thebes. The latter detail, though consistent with the internal chronology of events once we accept the proleptic nature of Juno's prologue, seems to contrast with Amphitryon's words at 520–3, provided that we assign them a specific topographical function.[28] In any event, Theseus' narrative also disrupts the expected overlap between the level of the story and the level of the plot, albeit one which is made acceptable by its insertion in a rhesis.

Regardless of whether Juno is a vatic character, or whether the prologue really covers a temporal expanse which successive phases of the tragedy will repeat, as the curtain rises on the first act the audience will inevitably experience the anxious feeling of *déjà vu*. Juno's words do not simply anticipate the course of events described in the tragedy, but offer a number of specific details which will make those events, as they actually 'happen' for the spectators, repeat a masterplot they already know, hence disrupting the linear arrangement of events which is a cardinal feature of dramatic texts.

Juno's words do not describe reality as much as they in fact create it: she envisages Hercules' challenge, and – behold – the challenge really takes place shortly thereafter. In this respect she embodies the creative power of the author, and the plot that she conceives is the tragedy which happens. This is one more metadramatic feature of the prologue, which functions as a preliminary, superordinate phase of the play, encompassing the rest of the drama from a superior, proleptic viewpoint which replicates the author's perspective.

The limited examples I have presented show a treatment of dramatic time which emphatically breaks away from the linear structure that is consistently observed as the norm in ancient drama. By creating a framework in which certain sections of the play appear to revolve back to a point in time that has already been treated, and by substituting iteration for linearity, these tragedies make repetition an essential modality of tragic representation. By emphasizing repetition and serialization, the tragedy produces a strong alienating effect.[29]

This alienation is largely determined by the conspicuous short-circuiting of a literary canon whose rules had so far been scrupulously observed

[28] I agree with Caviglia ((1979) 238), who rightly argues against the suggestion that line 523 or even the whole section 520–3 should be deleted because they contradict 813–17; see Leo (1878–79) 375 and Lindskog (1897) II. 41. Fitch (1987) 252 argues that '[a]s elsewhere, Sen[eca] is ignoring consistency in favor of immediate dramatic impact'.

[29] I will discuss in the next chapter how these alienating structures impact on the audience.

(at least, I should add, this is how it appears).[30] The treatment of internal time is one of the most radical ways in which tragedy and epic can be differentiated, because creative manipulation of the temporal links between events is widespread in epic. The importing of typically epic narrative techniques into a dramatic text inevitably produces a jarring effect. Epic, with its complex, multiple plot-lines, had explored early in its development the possibility of narrating simultaneous events in a linear scheme. Homer, here as elsewhere, proposed a solution and imposed a rule. Simultaneous events would have to be separated and juxtaposed, arranged serially one after the other.[31] Virgil, too, exploits the potential of linear arrangement, creating in his poem a complex web of temporal intersections which are essential to an understanding of the narrative.[32] One should resist the temptation to read the development of this aspect of epic technique as the progressive complication of a supposedly 'simple' archetype (Homer), and to detect in Virgil the first symptoms of narrative 'disorders' magnified by his 'Silver' successors; in this particular instance, however, it is in Ovid that we find the first extended, systematic deviation from the recognized decorum of temporal linearity.[33] Ovid extensively explores the signifying value of a fragmented and often confusing representation of time. His use of *analēpsis* and *prolēpsis* transcends the limited function that they have in the *Aeneid*, where they are rather rigidly controlled by the internal narrator(s), and become a pervasive feature of the text, poised to exploit the interplay of different narrative times to the full. If the *Heroides* stand as a particularly effective example of this technique,[34] the *Metamorphoses* complicate and

[30] We do not know enough, in this respect as in others, about post-classical drama, and it is reasonable to assume that significant variations in the treatment of time did occur. It is unlikely, however, that Seneca could have found a direct model for his treatment of dramatic time.

[31] See Stanley (1993) 6: 'Like the Homeric sentence, Homeric narrative presents an ongoing series in which each successive action seems at first glance to receive equal status – just as time, in direct narrative, generally moves forward in an uninterrupted flow in which even simultaneous events seem to be treated as a linear sequence.' The phenomenon was first described by Zielinski (1901), hence the definition 'Zielinski's law' (on which see the reservations of Rengakos (1995)). The most recent and exhaustive treatment is offered by Stanley (1993), especially 6–9, 153–5 and, for further bibliography, 306, nn. 18–19. See also Whitman and Scodel (1981) and Janko (1992) 150–1.

[32] On the use of *interea* in the *Aeneid* see Reinmuth (1933). As Heinze ((1928) 306, n. 31) remarks, this is a case of 'loose' use of *interea*, which approximately equals 'now'. But the ambiguities, as Heinze points out, remain. Three books of the *Aeneid* (5, 10 and 11) have *interea* in the first line, but only in 5.1 does the meaning 'meanwhile' appear to be fully active. See Harrison (1991) 58 and Kinsey (1979) 263–4.

[33] On Ovid's treatment of time see now Feeney (1999) and Zissos and Gildenhard (1999). Virgil can also be seen to experiment with chronology: see Heinze (1928) 305 for a discussion of 'how difficult [Virgil] found it to deal with [. . .] simultaneous actions'. It need hardly be remarked that the 'simplicity' attributed to Homer is little more than convenient shorthand.

[34] See the fine discussion in A. Barchiesi (1992) 16–19.

muddle the temporal linearity established at the beginning[35] to such an extent that they end up offering what we might call a 'cubist' representation of time.[36] It is tempting to assume that Ovid's sustained engagement with temporal (dis)continuity is a metaliterary register of his posteriority. 'Going back' in literary time – as Ovid does in his intertextual dialogues – becomes one of the ways in which the text performs its ideological negotiation of the past. (In the next chapter I will attempt to situate intertextuality within the painful, oppressive ideology of the past that Senecan tragedies seem to privilege.[37])

In epic, the narrator's boundless power facilitates the organization of complex temporal structures into a clear, intelligible arrangement. Theatre, on the other hand, was bound to the rule of the *hic et nunc*, to Aristotle's dictum that it should be made up of actions, not of stories,[38] and that narrative interventions should be limited to specific, self-contained *loci* such as the messengers' speeches. The temporal discontinuities that we have observed are evident enough to elicit an active interpretative gesture from the audience, yet subtle enough to dawn on us only gradually. For instance, the Fury's speech in the prologue to *Thyestes* contains internal discrepancies that should alert the audience to the fact that there are – at the very least – different modes of perceiving time, and that to rely exclusively on the notion of linear, unidirectional movement is perhaps inappropriate. But it is only as Atreus' own speech unfolds in the following act that the audience is made to recognize a number of striking parallels between the two characters, and to note the causal relationship between their utterances and actions. At an even later stage – when, for instance, Atreus voices for a third time the refrain *bene est, abunde est* – we perceive both the internal correlations between causes and events and the imperfectly linear structure of time that subtends them. If this deconstruction of linear narrative structures can never compare to its much more intense modern counterparts, a comparison with the latter retains nonetheless a considerable heuristic value, as I will show in the next chapter. What we can certainly say about the structure of *Thyestes* is that, once we perceive the repetition of a key phrase in a specific moment of the dramatic action, we are inevitably gripped by a sensation of *déjà vu*, coupled with the realization that – again – we have been moving backwards. The Fury herself, it should be noted again,

[35] See Ludwig (1965) 56.
[36] *Fasti*, too, are obviously engaged in the treatment of time, juxtaposing discordant scenes which twist and turn below the surface of temporal linearity. The most stimulating recent readings of the poem are A. Barchiesi (1994) and Newlands (1995).
[37] See below, pp. 221ff. [38] *Poetics* 1449b26.

reversed through a well-trodden literary background that is prominently inhabited by Euripides and Virgil.

In *Thyestes*, the upsetting effect of such a sensation stems primarily from the denial of meaningful closure encoded in the structure of the prologue and in its relationship with the rest of the play. Not only does the prologue tear open wounds which its most prominent model, the *Aeneid*, had struggled hard to heal (or, at least, to give the consoling illusion of doing so), but it fashions, in its compact brevity, the illusion that the new ordeal can be concluded swiftly, if not altogether painlessly; in other words, the illusion that the audience could be treated this time only to the superhuman level of deliberations without having to face in excruciating detail the actual unfolding of events: imagine the second half of the *Aeneid* with only divine meetings, and no battles. But the closural sign which brings the Fury's speech to an end is also rapidly exposed as illusional. The tragedy starts all over again in Atreus' chambers, and this time we are going to see it all, in its horrific, unabridged version.

To deny closure means that everything will happen again and again, that regression will know no end. The denial of closure encoded in the contrast between the apparently final ending of the inner level of the plot and the emphatically open finale of the play as a whole turns out to be anticipated at its beginning, too.[39] In *Thyestes*, the non-linear organization of dramatic time and the complex framing structure of the play as a whole allegorize the force of regressive repetition which can be seen as the tragedy's driving dynamic. Indeed, regression, at different levels and in different guises, is arguably the single most relevant operating principle of *Thyestes* – and of Senecan tragedy. If the prologue encompasses in its short frame a much larger portion of the tragic action, then we are bound to perceive the successive stages of the play, in which the actions unfold one by one, as a repetitive, regressive exploration of an already accomplished misdeed. There is no progression in the play: from the end of the prologue onwards, the tragedy is trapped in the repetitive exploration of the consequences of Tantalus' pollution. The plot of *Thyestes*, we realize, is bent backwards, not forwards: it does not aspire to the consoling sense of progress crowned by final resolution, to reach a meaningful point of closure. The lack of closure inscribed in the end of *Thyestes*, with its call to further revenge, and therefore to further engagement with the past, mirrors the illusory closure of the prologue and highlights the overall regressive movement of the plot.

[39] See above, pp. 61ff.

Atreus, the protagonist of the play, embodies the enduring pleasures and pains of memory. His overarching goal throughout the tragedy is to avenge past wounds, and his conduct allegorizes the virtues of memory, even obsessive memory. His superiority *vis-à-vis* Thyestes is based on the fact that, unlike his brother, he firmly believes that the past cannot and will not be erased. Thyestes is tricked into thinking that Atreus has finally forgotten the slights he has endured and is ready to turn a new page in their relationship. His dogged determination proves that the past cannot be undone, and its memory lives on to determine future actions. But Atreus knows no forgetting. While his revenge in the play could be construed as a means to actively reshape the past (this time, after all, Atreus will win), he is the first to recognize, both during the play and, most emphatically, at its end, that the spiral of revenge and counter-revenge cannot find a final resting place, and that even his current victory must be seen in the light of a cyclical arrangement of history.

Prevented from moving forward, *Thyestes* is condemned to oscillate between returning to and returning from. The future, if we can now call it that, promises only the repetition of a well-known pattern: as Thyestes consummates his revenge, he will merely repeat once more the fixed script which holds his whole family hostage.

III

Repetition and regression sustain the dramatic tension in *Troades*. Pained reflections on the hopes and despairs of repetition loom large throughout the tragedy and especially in two crucially important scenes, the altercation between Agamemnon and Pyrrhus in act 2 and the dramatic confrontation between Andromache and Ulixes in act 4.[40] But the tragedy also engages its audience in a complex evaluation of the effect and nature of repetition from the point of view of dramatic structure. *Troades* has long been considered to mark Seneca's resignation to a loose structure with very limited attempts at a unified plot. The result, not unpredictably, has been explained mainly on the basis of the unsuccessful mixture of disparate Greek sources, compounded by the bold, but confusing, decision to unite in one play the fates of Polyxena and Astyanax.[41] I propose to set aside for the moment a

[40] In my reading of *Troades* I have found Fantham's (1982) and Boyle's (1994) commentaries very valuable, and the articles by Schetter (1965) and Owen (1970) particularly useful.

[41] On sources see Fantham (1982) 50–75 and Calder (1970). Although I do not agree with Calder's strictures on the play as a whole, his analysis of the Greek models is excellent. On the lack of unity cf. Zwierlein (1966) 91.

discussion of the play's structure, and to concentrate instead on the role that repetition plays in its thematic texture.

Even before Pyrrhus appears on the stage, the Greek messenger Talthybius has introduced into the play, with a sinister *Ringkomposition*, the tragic spectre of a previous *mora*, one infamously brought to an end by the sacrifice of Iphigenia. The Greeks, stranded at Troy by bad weather, are poised to repeat a well-known pattern of delay (164–5):

> o longa Danais semper in portu mora,
> seu petere bellum, petere seu patriam volunt.

O that there is always this long delay in harbour for the Greeks, whether they will set out for war, or set out for their homeland.

Pyrrhus urges the leader of the Greek army to honour his dead father, Achilles, by sacrificing Polyxena, who had already been promised to him. The sacrifice would represent a decisive victory of the past over the present in more ways than one. It is, literally, a request coming from the underworld.[42] Pyrrhus does not seem to be aware of that, but Achilles' ghost had appeared to Talthybius, as we hear in the first scene of act 2, and had demanded that the Greeks respect their promise: otherwise he will prevent their departure, and their return home (Achilles could count on his mother's help). Moreover, it is a request made in the name of past practices whose value Pyrrhus readily accepts despite Agamemnon's tormented doubts: it is, in many senses, a re-enactement of the dispute that dominates the *Iliad* from its very beginning. The last words of Pyrrhus' impassioned speech foreground the traditional nature of his request, and the tragic precedent that Agamemnon should keep in mind (248–9):

> at tuam gnatam parens
> Helenae immolasti: solita iam et facta expeto.

But as father you slaughtered your own daughter for Helen: I ask for things now customary and with precedent.

Agamemnon's rebuttal shows that he has undergone a significant transformation during the war, and especially at its end. To him, a simple repetition of past patterns of behaviour does not seem to make any sense. His position is based on a series of compassionate, rationalistic assumptions which question the appeal to tradition that is powerfully voiced by Pyrrhus. We find Agamemnon, here, impersonating the voice of resistance to the evils

[42] The underworld as home of the dead who successfully impose their rule on the upper world is a symbol for the past. See the crucial evocation at the heart of *Oedipus*, above, pp. 8ff.

of tragedy – to its *nefas* – precisely like Tantalus' shadow or the *satelles* in *Thyestes*. In fact Agamemnon goes as far as stating that he would have liked to prevent the destruction of Troy (279), and, in any event, that enough, more than enough punishment has already been dealt out: (*exactum satis | poenarum et ultra est*, 286–7). Unlike most of his counterparts in *Thyestes* or other plays (the *satelles*, Phaedra's nurse...), however, Agamemnon is a prominent character with a well-defined past from which he now tries to free himself. Unlike Tantalus' ghost, who is loath to engage in new crimes (*Thy.* 86–7), but whose psychology is only defined in terms of rather simple oppositions, Agamemnon articulates in detail his psychological evolution.[43] Irresistibly, though, Agamemnon is ensnared in the discourse of the past that is advocated by his opponent. The insults that Pyrrhus and Agamemnon start exchanging at line 336 are focused on their past: both look to it for compelling explanations of what they are doing – or what they should be doing.

Agamemnon, of course, must yield, and he does so abruptly by promising to heed Calchas' orders (351–2: *potius interpres deum | Calchas vocetur: fata si poscent, dabo*, 'rather let Calchas, the spokesman of the gods, be called: if the Fates demand it I will grant the sacrifice'). The seer establishes at the very beginning of his response the connection between the present predicament of the Greeks and their bloody past (360–70):

> dant fata Danais quo solent pretio viam:
> mactanda virgo est Thessali busto ducis;
> sed quo iugari Thessalae cultu solent
> Ionidesve vel Mycenaeae nurus,
> Pyrrhus parenti coniugem tradat suo:
> sic rite dabitur. non tamen nostras tenet
> haec una puppes causa: nobilior tuo,
> Polyxene, cruore debetur cruor.
> quem fata quaerunt, turre de summa cadat
> Priami nepos Hectoreus et letum oppetat.
> tum mille velis impleat classis freta.

The fates grant a way to the Greeks at their customary price: the virgin must be sacrificed on the tomb of the Thessalian leader; but in the costume that is worn for marriage by brides of Thessaly or Ionia or Mycenae. Let Pyrrhus present her as wife to his father: thus she will be properly given in marriage. But this is not the only cause that detains our ships: a blood more noble than your blood is owed, Polyxena. Let him whom the fates demand, the child of Hector, grandson of Priam,

[43] On the character of Agamemnon see Anliker (1960) 65 and Schetter (1965) 401, with further bibliography (and diagnoses ranging from 'weakness' to 'noble humanity').

fall from the highest tower and so meet his death. Then let the fleet cover the sea with a thousand sails.

These lines exploit verbal repetition as the iconic correlate of the repetition that Calchas advocates: *solent* occurs twice (360, 362),[44] and so does *fata* (360, 368). The polyptoton *cruore ... cruor* (367) further reinforces the effect. Repetition, moreover, stresses the ritual nature of Calchas' order. In fact, his order that the sacrifice of Iphigenia be re-enacted specifies also that it proceed with all due respect for religious ritual: Polyxena's death, masked as a wedding, will thus be a perfect repetition of Iphigenia's murder and will testify further to the disturbing connection between ritual and murder which can be identified in other parts of the Senecan corpus.[45]

It is also worth stressing the dramatic effectiveness of Calchas' concise intervention, which is similar to the dialogue between Creon and Tiresias in Sophocles' *Antigone*,[46] but which by its very brevity elides any space for discussion: it is, in all senses, a final and irrevocable decree.[47]

Atreus' obsession with a *maius nefas* draws attention, as I remarked earlier,[48] to the fact that any repetition of *nefas* is necessarily worse than its precedent. This obsession finds a novel incarnation in Calchas' unexpected order that the Greeks sacrifice not just Polyxena, but Astyanax, too. This particular combination of horrors is especially striking because nothing in the plot so far has led the audience to expect Calchas' request: indeed, there seems to be no precedent in the tragic tradition for combining in this manner the fates of the two Trojan youths. It is a development, however, which stands out as a direct, emphatic rebuttal to Agamemnon's statement that 'more than enough punishment has been exacted already' (286–7): Calchas shows that more can be asked for, and more can be obtained.[49]

It is important to notice that Calchas is acting here as the structural counterpart of the Fury in *Thyestes*: his appeal to *fata* (360, 368) perversely parallels her reliance on *furor*. Both forces are responsible for the continuation of *nefas* in the face of moderation and restraint, and their connection disrupts any rigid opposition we might have counted on so far. The voice of *fata* appears to be steeped in the cruel repetition of the past and is as

[44] Although in a different perspective (that of tracing elements of rhetorical colour), Leo (1878–79) 149–55 has very interesting remarks on Seneca's use of *soleo*. See Tarrant (1976) 208, and above, p. 27. On iconic repetition in general, Wills (1996) 6–7 and *passim*.
[45] On Atreus' *ordo sacri* see above, pp. 85ff.
[46] Calder (1970) 76.
[47] As Braden ((1985) 37) aptly remarks: 'Senecan dialogue is not an exchange of news or feeling, but a test of [the contestants'] self-possession.'
[48] See above, p. 95.
[49] Schetter ((1965) 408) rightly emphasizes the central importance of Calchas' words in the structure of the play.

complicit with the forces of the underworld as the *furor* it would supposedly counteract: the voice of *fata*, we should remember, coincides with the dark menaces uttered by Achilles' ghost from Acheron.

The contrast between Calchas' brief speech (his only presence on the stage) and the following choral ode, which contains a remarkable number of Epicurean reflections on the nature of death, highlights the deceiving rationality of *fata*. The chorus's rationalistic doubts about afterlife seem to present both an apt continuation of Agamemnon's speech, with which they share a sense of scepticism and uncertainty, and a tentative reassessment of the relationship between life and fate. Thus the chorus picks up both on Talthybius' appearance, which stressed the need for Polyxena's sacrifice, and on Agamemnon's own doubts about this solution. The chorus's Epicurean overtones stand in complete contrast to earlier choral lyrics, a structural problem which would deserve separate, detailed consideration. Here it will suffice to say that the contrast between Calchas and the chorus inevitably portrays the seer's words as belonging to the *vatum terriloqua dicta* criticized by Lucretius immediately after his depiction of Iphigenia's death:[50] both in *De rerum natura* and in *Troades* the sacrifice of Iphigenia is invested with enormous paradigmatic importance.

The moral balance of the story is at this point painfully clear: Agamemnon's resistance to the invariable pattern of repetition is brutally cut short by Calchas and, quite literally, silenced forever at the end of act 2. Repetition will dominate in its most literal, obsessive form, as the apparently endless replica of past *nefas*. Agamemnon's suggestion that a radical modification of the past could represent a valid alternative to this pattern – and to the plot of the tragedy – is rejected outright. In revolving around Achilles' wrath over Polyxena, *Troades* as a whole represents a re-enactment of the archetypal *menis*-epic, the *Iliad*. In this, as in other Senecan plays, revenge – retribution for deeds and obligations long past – becomes the most reliable guarantee of tragedy, since it imposes a cycle of actions which can never stray from its archetypal model and can never alter significantly the psychological profile of the characters or the actual course of events they inevitably choose. Thus revenge encodes both the supreme power of the past over present and future, and the very essence of this form of literary production, in that it provides the masterplot which the author must follow while also clearing space for his creative innovation.

Andromache's actions, no less than those of her Greek foes, are motivated by the spell of the past. As she enters the play in act 3, she retells the

[50] *De rerum natura* 1.102–3.

appearance of Hector's shadow in exact parallel to Talthybius' report about Achilles's ghost in act 2. Although Hector's message is helpful,[51] it shows nonetheless the cognitive subordination of the living to the dead: Achilles and Hector know more, and they can enforce other people's behaviour. In this respect, the appearance of Hector stands as an immediate denial of the chorus's latest reflections on the non-existence of the afterlife. But Hector's appearance is intrinsically fraught with ambiguity: while it is ostensibly geared to prevent a repetition, in the case of Astyanax, of his own tragic fate, it visibly embodies repetition as it alludes to Hector's archetypal appearance in the second book of the *Aeneid* (270–97). Thus the stage is set for the inevitable, and pointed, contrast between the results brought about by the two apparitions: while Virgil's Hector will succeed in saving Aeneas and will thus ensure the Trojans a future that is significantly different from their past, he will be denied any such success in the *Troades*, where, it seems, the only permitted form of repetition is *ad litteram*.

Andromache repeatedly voices her hope of a 'Virgilian' future for her son. As a new Hector, *futurus Hector* in Ulixes' words (551), he will be able to build a new Troy and take revenge against the Greeks (469–74):

> o nate sero Phrygibus, o matri cito,
> eritne tempus illud ac felix dies
> quo Troici defensor et vindex soli
> recidiva ponas Pergama et sparsos fuga
> cives reducas, nomen et patriae suum
> Phrygibusque reddas?[52]

Dear son, born too late for the Trojans, too soon for your mother, will that time come and that blessed day when you, as defender and avenger of the Trojan land, will found a Troy renewed, and bring back your people scattered in exile, giving back its name to your country and your Phrygians?

Recidiva Pergama directly alludes to an idea which, with different overtones, is central to the Trojans' negotiation of their past destruction and future hopes in the *Aeneid*.[53] For Ulixes, of course, the possibility that Astyanax will in fact avenge his country represents a compelling reason to kill him now: thus repetition inevitably displays, once more, its dark, negative potential.

The solution that Andromache devises in order to save her son grimly foreshadows the eventual outcome of her efforts: she hides Astyanax in

[51] A contrast especially emphasized by Schetter (1965) 409.
[52] The theme is further elaborated in 659–61, 771–85.
[53] The *iunctura* occurs at *Aen.* 4.344, 7.322, 10.58.

Hector's tomb, and her envoy expresses the distressing ambiguity of the solution (519–21):[54]

> dehisce tellus, tuque, coniunx, ultimo
> specu revulsam scinde tellurem et Stygis
> sinu profundo conde depositum meum.

Earth, open up, and you, dear husband, rend the earth away from its farthest cavern and bury my dear treasure in the deep gulf of Styx.

Hope of future salvation is sought in the ultimate embodiment of the past – a grave – which literally swallows Andromache's hope for the future:[55] in a similarly poignant scene at the end of the tragedy, Polyxena's blood is sucked up by the thirsty soil covering Achilles' grave; hence Achilles establishes with an undisputed sense of finality his right over the slain maiden (1162–4):

> non stetit fusus cruor
> humove summa fluxit: obduxit statim
> saevusque totum sanguinem tumulus bibit.

The spilled blood did not stay or float on the surface of the ground: but the mound instantly swallowed and savagely drained dry all the blood.

Thyestes, too, realizes at the end of his ordeal that he has become a monstrous coffin for his children: *genitor en natos premo | premorque natis* ('I, the father, overwhelm my sons, and by my sons am overwhelmed', *Thy.* 1050–1).[56] Andromache's final words find a disturbing, almost verbatim parallel in two other Senecan passages. Oedipus employs the very same words when he is finally made aware of the fact that he is the sinner (*Oed.* 864–8):

> OE. si ferus videor tibi
> et impotens, parata vindicta in manu est:
> dic vera: quisnam? quove generatus patre?
> qua matre genitus? PH. coniuge est genitus tua.
> OE. *dehisce, tellus*...

OE. If I seem harsh to you, and out of control, revenge is in your hands; speak the truth: who is he? of what father begotten? of what mother born?
PH. Born of your wife.
OE. Open up, earth!

[54] The image realizes what in *Thyestes* is a perverse metaphor: Thyestes is the 'tomb' of his children, and they can be buried, paradoxically, only if he is cremated and buried himself (1090–2).
[55] Almost certainly a Senecan innovation; see Schetter (1965) 418, n. 8. On the association of tombs with *kleos*, and the literary implications of this connection, see Goldhill (1991) 120–2.
[56] Lines 1050–1 fulfil Atreus' vow at 890–1: *pergam et implebo patrem | funere suorum.* Accius had been even more explicit: *natis sepulchro ipse est parens* (226 Ribbeck^2 = 57 Dangel).

The revelation of incest is met by the desire to hide in the depths of the earth, to *return* to it. As we will see presently, Andromache's decision to have Astyanax hide in Hector's tomb is fraught with upsetting resonances connected with incest and adultery: the Oedipal connection certainly intensifies them.[57] And Phaedra, too, at the end of her tragedy, wants to disappear into the depths of the earth (*Phaed.* 1238–9):

> *dehisce tellus,* recipe me dirum chaos,
> recipe...

Open up, earth, receive me, dread Chaos, take me back...

Even more striking, however, is the hallucinated internal debate about the fate of Hector's tomb which torments Andromache at *Troades* 642–62. As she probes her feelings, Ulixes informs her that since Astyanax is reportedly dead,[58] the only way in which the Greeks can perform the requested ritual purification that is essential for their departure is by tearing down Hector's tomb. In a harrowing aside Andromache weighs the alternative – whether she ought to preserve her husband's tomb or save her son's life. The alternative, of course, simply does not exist: if the Greeks tore down the tomb, both Hector's remains and Astyanax would be destroyed. Yet Andromache desperately clings to the distinction, as she tries to preserve the contrast between past and future which has been an essential component of her thinking all along. As she inclines towards saving the tomb, she desperately wants to spare Hector a repetition of his fate: better to see Astyanax thrown from a tower than Hector killed once again (653–5):

> potero, perpetiar, feram,
> dum non meus post fata victoris manu
> iactetur Hector.

I will be able, I will endure and bear it, so long as my dear Hector is not abused after his death by the victor's violence.

Later she realizes that saving her son means saving a chance of a different future: *serva e duobus, anime, quem Danai timent* ('my heart, of those two, save the one the Greeks fear', 662). But there is no real possibility of choice, and Andromache finally must admit to the harsh truth which

[57] On the connection between womb and tomb in Seneca see Robin (1993) 110–11 and, in general, duBois (1988) 54. Racine's *Andromaque* explores more fully the intricate set of erotic and sexual implications that are tentatively suggested in Seneca: the plot itself, of course, hinges on romance. A particularly poignant confession is registered at line 279, where Andromaque declares, referring to Astyanax, that 'il m'aurait tenu lieu d'un père et d'un époux' – alluding to *Il.* 6.429–30.
[58] So Andromache had claimed at 594–7.

for the audience has ironically been clear all along. Ulixes' trick has in fact obliterated any distinction between past and future for her: *utrimque est Hector* (659), there is no choice between preserving the memory of the past and rescuing the seed of future revenge. Andromache's ineffectual debate poignantly underlines a truth that the play has already upheld not once, but several times, namely that the only movement allowed by *fata* is a repetition bound to keep as close as possible to its model. If anything, Andromache's inconsequential emotional struggle shows that she herself is ultimately more inclined to preserve the past than to give the future a chance. After all, by asking Astyanax to come out of his shelter, and by leaving him at the mercy of Ulixes (Andromache and the *senex* had deliberated at length on the danger of the situation, and Hector's ghost had been extremely clear in this respect) she chooses the only option that could guarantee the preservation of her husband's tomb.

A reading of these conflicting allegiances can naturally enough be expanded into an analysis of the emotional intricacies of Andromache's character, especially in the light of what might appropriately be dubbed a significative *lapsus* at line 501. Before committing a reluctant Astyanax to his frightful refuge, Andromache invokes Hector's protection: 'Hector, keep safe the stolen treasure of your loving wife, and with trusty ashes welcome him so that he may live' (*Hector, tuere: coniugis furtum piae | serva et fideli cinere victurum excipe*, 501–2). *Coniugis furtum* is a surprising definition which the oxymoronic addition of *piae* (and *fidelis* in the following line) does nothing to tame: it still refers, in no uncertain terms, to adultery.[59] Thus, even if we set aside the tense Oedipal implications to which Andromache effectively draws our attention with these unguarded words, it is plausible to infer that she is thinking here that her ploy to save Astyanax – *victurus* – constitutes a betrayal of sorts of her dead husband. By committing her son to her husband's grave, Andromache vicariously and perversely fulfils a wish which is well known to lovers, classical and otherwise: that they might be joined together in death.[60] The spell of the past, it seems, holds hostage even the one character in the play who seems to be generally sincere, if not without a degree of ambiguity, in her desire to guarantee her son and her country a different, better future. The tomb, the *sēma* of epic honour and the symbol of epic grandeur (here charged with a gesture towards elegiac wish fulfilment), violently encodes in the drama of Andromache the demands – both tragic and appealing – of the past. Determined to save Hector's tomb, Andromache echoes her Virgilian counterpart. In

[59] Cf. Fantham (1982) 288. [60] Ov. *Met.* 4.157, with Bömer ad loc.

the third book of the *Aeneid* she is recognized by Aeneas while she offers a libation to Hector's empty grave, an 'empty tomb' (*tumulus inanis*, 3.304) which seals her unwavering determination to live in the past, in a miniature Troy built around a 'false' Simoenta (3.302: *falsi Simoentis ad undam*).[61] Against Andromache stands the unwavering request of immutability and repetition, voiced in different guises by Pyrrhus, Calchas and Ulixes, even as the latter proclaims that killing Astyanax is necessary in order to avoid a new Trojan war:[62] as the protagonists who catalyze the string of events which constitute the tragedy, they also embody the narrative progress of the play and guarantee its successful arrival at an end, of a sort. But they advocate an apparent progression which ultimately results in the denial of meaningful change, and strives in fact to assure that no substantial change will ever occur.

Even Astyanax's physical appearance is moulded by the spell of the past: he greatly resembles his father; indeed, too much to give him any hope of a happy future, or to keep at bay the incestuous undertones of Andromache's feelings (Sen. *Tro.* 646–8).[63] This similarity, which Euripides had briefly remarked upon (Eur. *Tro.* 1178–81), is especially magnified in *Troades* (461–8):

> o nate, magni certa progenies patris,
> spes una Phrygibus, unica afflictae domus,
> veterisque suboles sanguinis nimium inclita
> nimiumque patri similis. hos vultus meus
> habebat Hector, talis incessu fuit
> habituque talis, sic tulit fortes manus,
> sic celsus umeris, fronte sic torva minax
> cervice fusam dissipans iacta comam.

Dear child, true offspring of a mighty father, sole hope of Troy and of your shattered family, scion of an old race, too glorious and too like your father; these were my dear Hector's features; he was like this in his walk and in his bearing; he held his gallant hands just so; just so he carried his shoulders high and seemed to threaten with frowning brow, shaking his streaming hair with the toss of his neck.

Only later do we discover why Astyanax is *nimium . . . similis* to his father. Seneca departs from the tradition according to which the boy is buried on

[61] See also Andromache's reaction to the appearance of Aeneas, which seems to be echoed in 3.310–12: '*verane te facies, verus mihi nuntius adfers, | nate dea? vivisne? aut, si lux alma recessit, | Hector ubi est?*'
[62] Owen ((1970) 130) argues that 'to the present victor belong the future and the power', which is certainly true at the immediate level of action witnessed in the play. But it is important to remark that the future that Ulixes has in sight is essentially a repetition of the past.
[63] Compare Phaedra's comments about Hippolytus' close resemblance to his father as a youth at *Phaed.* 646–8.

Hector's shield,[64] and he has the messenger describe in graphic detail the complete destruction of his body after the fall from the tower (1111–17):[65]

> ossa disiecta et gravi
> elisa casu; signa clari corporis,
> et ora et illas nobiles patris notas,
> confundit imam pondus ad terram datum;
> soluta cervix silicis impulsu, caput
> ruptum cerebro penitus expresso – iacet
> deforme corpus.

His bones are fragmented and crushed by the violent fall, his weight cast down to the earth below blurs the features of his noble body, his face and those lineaments of his glorious father; his neck is broken by the impact of the flint, his head split open and the brain squeezed out from inside – the body lies there a shapeless horror.

It is at this point that Andromache interrupts the messenger and sees that her hopes are to be cruelly realized: Astyanax will follow in his father's footsteps only in the most gruesome of senses – 'in this, too, he is like his father' (*sic quoque est similis patri*, 1117).[66]

One more scene embodies the power of repetition in a perversely effective way. In the fourth act of the play Helen reflects alone on her involvement with marriages that are destined to be 'unhappy' and 'sorrowful' (861: *funestus, inlaetabilis*). She is referring, of course, not only to the devastating long-term consequences of her wedding, but more specifically to the *nefas* which opens the Trojan expedition, the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Her aside (861–71a) declares her completely self-conscious nature as a character who is aware both of the moral implications of her actions and of the literary background to which she is inevitably connected.

Dismemberment is, of course, a disturbingly common feature of Senecan death, as, for that matter, of other first-century authors.[67] As the basic model of natural order, the body, dissected and scattered, is warped into the supreme emblem of disruption, and symbolizes a breaking down of spatial order which is germane to the dissolution of temporal linearity that I have been discussing so far. Sometimes a disjointed body, as in the case of

[64] Eur. *Tro.* 1133ff.; see Enn. *scen.* 73 Ribbeck² = 106–7 Jocelyn.

[65] Homer does not describe Hector's dismemberment, but places enough emphasis on the damage that the corpse suffers because of Achilles' cruelty: see *Il.* 22.396–404, and especially 401–3, which climax, as Seneca does, at the head. See also Virg. *Aen.* 1.483: *ter circum Iliacos raptaverat Hectora muros.*

[66] A poignant reversal of Catullus' wish in 61.214: *sit suo similis patri* (cf. Procne's words as she sees Itys, Ov. *Met.* 6.621–2: *a! quam | es similis patri*); Leigh (1995) 471.

[67] See especially Most (1992).

Hippolytus, who is disfigured beyond recognition, aptly portrays the cracks in a reading of reality as a coherent, organic whole. The conflict between points of view and competing narratives, together with the weak causal links between acts and scenes, testifies to a pervasive epistemic quandary. How can we comprehend and represent a reality which has long ago lost firm internal points of view? How can we reconstruct a narrative which overcomes the puzzles and limitations of human understanding? In Theseus' anguished question at the sight of his dismembered son – *Hippolytus hic est?* (Sen. *Phaed.* 1249) – we can infer a much larger question on the nature of representation and the understanding behind it. Reality, diffracted in a range of conflicting perspectives, escapes a unified approach, as if the very abundance of details (of 'moments') denies the possibility of a complete, immediate vision.

Thus the threat that circularity and repression pose to the norms of continuity and linear progress is also played out in the spatial dimension of the tragedy. In the metonymic, often less than organic, segues that regulate the development of the play's actions lies the intimation that the fundamental categories of perception must face a new reality, where the 'natural' order has been ripped up and replaced by an obsessive regression and return, where the present is menaced by the spell of the past (as represented by a literary heritage). So much so, in fact, that only individual moments survive, arranging themselves in erratic, shifting structures. Spatially, the fundamental inversion of 'above' and 'below' fatally connects upper world and underworld, and inverts their traditional hierarchy. This is not, however, the only instance of spatial disruption. *Troades*, for instance, by alternating scenes in the Trojan and Greek camps in direct succession, and using two different choruses (one of Trojan women, the other of Greek sailors),[68] represents a reality torn between two competing, opposed points of view, and resists a uniform approach. *Troades*, it seems, can understand and express emotions and events only by partial, metonymic approximation. Gone is the illusion that a linear Aristotelian plot can ensure a united, coherent vision of events, and can signify a logical chain of causal connections. Events succeed each other in a less than orderly fashion, forcing the sometimes puzzled audience to reconstruct the relationship that glues them together. Considerable effort is required simply to understand the underlying structure of the plot.

[68] In Hellenistic tragedy (Sifakis (1967) 113–26) and Senecan tragedy the chorus is no longer present uninterruptedly from beginning to end and might well have followed the Hellenistic practice of leaving the stage after each ode, thus making it possible for the scene to change and for time to elapse (Calder (1975), (1976–77) 6; Tarrant (1978) 221–8; Davis (1993) 11–38). On secondary choruses in classical Greek tragedy see Wilamowitz (1909) 116, n. 13; Lemmers (1931) esp. 131–42; and Carrière (1977); on Eur. *Hipp.* 58–71, see Barrett (1964) 167–8 and Taplin (1977) 230–8).

Astyanax's death is thus highly symbolic, as are the deaths of so many other children in Senecan tragedy. In *Hercules furens*, *Troades*, *Medea*, *Phaedra* and *Thyestes*, children are sacrificed to a regressive logic of revenge, punishment and *furor*. Their deaths testify to the overwhelming power of the past over the future. In this appalling elimination of potentiality, Senecan tragedy also overturns one of the main principles of epic narrative. Epic strives to construct a bridge between the past and a future that should normally be different from the past. In the *Aeneid*, for instance, it is Anchises who dies, leaving Aeneas (and Ascanius with him) free to construct his own new identity and that of his fellow citizens, once Trojans, soon to be Romans. It is remarkable that while Senecan tragedy adopts, as we have seen, distinct traces of epic discourse, it deprives it of any forward-looking implication and constantly imposes its conflictual, gnomic, static perspective.[69]

IV

Endowed with prophetic powers, Cassandra foresees a distortion of the linear continuity of time at the conclusion of her prophecy in *Agamemnon*; the king will die, Troy will be avenged (752–8):

haec hodie ratis
Phlegethontis atri regias animas vehet,
victamque victricemque. vos, umbrae, precor,
iurata superis unda, te pariter precor:
reserate paulum terga nigrantis poli,
levis ut Mycenas turba prospiciat Phrygum.
spectate, miseri: fata se vertunt retro.

Today this boat of dark Phlegethon will carry the royal souls, vanquished and vanquisher. I pray you, o shades, and equally I pray you, waters upon which the gods take their oath: for a little open up the cover of the dark world, that the insubstantial crowd of Phrygians may look at Mycenae. Look, poor souls: the fates turn backward on themselves.

Here, the opening of the gates of Acheron portends Cassandra's desire that her fellow Trojans (although it is difficult to overlook the larger impact of *spectate*) see the breaking down of historical progression which had determined their demise: the decrees of fate seem to be turning backwards, and now it is time for the Greeks to suffer. Paradoxically, the prophetess is able

[69] It is useful to compare this opposition with the different connotations of the main characters of Lucan's *Bellum Civile*. While Caesar embodies epic discourse (winning, progressive, geared towards the future), Pompey (as Cato) gives voice to a tragic instance which hopelessly reverts to an irretrievable, vanquished past.

to conjure up an image of the future course of events precisely because her eyes are turned backwards,[70] in more senses than one (712–15):

stetere vittae, mollis horrescit coma,
anhela corda murmure incluso fremunt,
incerta nutant lumina et versi retro
torquentur oculi, rursus immoti rigent.

Her fillets hang still, her soft hair rises in horror, her gasping heart rumbles with pent-up murmuring, her glance roams uncertainly, and her eyes, turned backwards, circle, then again stare unmoving.

Cassandra looks back to the past history of Troy, but by denying her eyes their normal forward-looking perspective, she also privileges a point of view which is the antithesis of the norm. She looks back,[71] and she looks down, just as she hopes that dead Trojans will be allowed to look up from the underworld, another form of vision which is exceptional and unnatural.

By looking back and down, Cassandra signals the arrival on stage of a reversal of fortune which transforms winners into losers, even if it does not manage to accomplish the opposite feat. Inspired by her underworldly *furor*, Cassandra sees more and better than anybody else, but the price to pay for her epistemological prowess is inscribed in her power's dark, chthonic origin. The movement backwards, accordingly, has none of the empowering overtones that connote the archetypal reversal of the Trojans' defeat elaborated in the *Aeneid*. Cassandra's own death, pointedly linked to Agamemnon's in the *iunctura victamque victricemque* (754), denies the possibility of escaping from the web of the past. Dying together, as the inhabitants of the underworld express their impotent, purely negative joy at Agamemnon's demise, signals the regressive nature of their desire to repeat the past, albeit as winners. As Cassandra herself had desperately acknowledged, Troy is forever destroyed, and her prophetic abilities seem utterly pointless, since they have not been heeded when they should have been: 'Now Troy has fallen – what have I, false prophetess, to do?' (725: *iam Troia cecidit – falsa quid vates agor?*).

At the very beginning of *Agamemnon* another character had testified to the regressive quality of backwards movements. As he dominates the prologue, Thyestes reflects that his incest has subverted the law of nature (34–6):

versa natura est retro:
avo parentem, pro nefas, patri virum,
gnatis nepotes miscui – nocti diem.

[70] See Tarrant (1976) 304 for parallel descriptions of frenzied ecstasy.
[71] On *torqueo* as a sign of frenzied anger see Hershkowitz (1998) 92–3.

Nature has been turned backwards: I mixed father with grandfather – monstrous! – husband with father, grandsons with sons – and day with night.

Incest forces a repulsive mixing of different generations and perturbs their natural motion forward. As unnatural as streams rushing back towards their sources,[72] incestuous offspring move in the wrong direction: they look at the past, not at the future.

A similarly upsetting image of incest is established in the tragedy of Oedipus. Creon scathingly attacks the king who has 'returned to his mother's womb' (*Oed.* 236–8):

> nec tibi longa manent sceleratae gaudia caedis:
> tecum bella geres, natis quoque bella relinques,
> turpis maternos iterum revolutus in ortus.

You will not enjoy the pleasure of your slaughter for long: you will wage war against yourself, and will bequeath war to your children too, you who have foully returned to your mother's womb.

Later in the play, Oedipus will mark his belated awareness of his *nefas* by invoking a similar image of reversal (868–70):

> dehisce, tellus, tuque tenebrarum potens,
> in Tartara ima, rector umbrarum, rape
> retro reversas generis ac stirpis vices.

Open up, earth! And you, lord of darkness, and king of the shades, drag to the deepest Tartarus this succession of ancestry and progeny which has turned back on itself.

But the most extensive engagement with images of unnatural and ominous reversal comes in one of the most powerful scenes of the play, the sacrifice performed by Manto at 303–402. Unable to see, Tiresias asks his daughter to describe to him the *manifesta... signa* (302) marked in the entrails of a slaughtered cow. The findings are portentous (366–71):

> mutatus ordo est, sede nil propria iacet,
> sed acta retro cuncta: non animae capax
> in parte dextra pulmo sanguineus iacet,
> non laeva cordi regio, non molli ambitu
> omenta pingues visceri obtendunt sinus:
> natura versa est; nulla lex utero manet.

[72] For *retro* in such contexts see *Thy.* 115 (*iam Lerna retro cessit*) and, somewhat differently, *Thy.* 459 (the unnaturalness of 'pushing back' the sea by building in it). Similarly, of blood flowing backwards, in the sacrifice at *Oed.* 349.

The position has changed; nothing lies anymore in its place, but all has been reversed: on the right side lies the lung, filled with blood and unable to breathe; the heart is not on the left; no caul with soft covering stretches with rich folds over the entrails. Nature is subverted: no rule is left for the womb.

The retroflection of the internal organs of the cow is the iconic correlate of the incest which Oedipus has committed,[73] an equally devastating upheaval of natural laws.[74] No less stomach-churning is the presence of a foetus in the womb of an 'unmarried cow' (373–5):

> quod hoc nefas? conceptus innuptae[75] bovis,
> nec more solito positus alieno in loco,
> implet parentem

What monstrosity is this? A foetus conceived by a virgin heifer, unusually placed in a strange location, fills its mother.

The oxymoron fits Oedipus' own situation, since the real monstrosity of his marriage to Jocasta is, in effect, a return to the *status quo ante* of his prenatal existence.[76] In his nefarious regression, Oedipus cancels the passing of time, denies the normal flow of events which should preclude his renewed union to Jocasta, and questions the necessary correspondence between causes and results: as an unmarried cow can conceive (a *hysteron proteron* of sorts), so can he overstep societal and natural boundaries and return to Jocasta's womb. The tragic suffering never seems to deter Oedipus' obsession with returning. Even as he fully acknowledges his monstrosity, the punishment he initially proposes for himself privileges a repetitive modality which would actually entail the endless rehearsal of his crimes, an endless, explicit return to Jocasta's womb (942–7):

> illa quae leges ratas
> Natura in uno vertit Oedipoda, novos
> commenta partus, supplicis eadem meis
> novetur. iterum vivere atque iterum mori
> liceat, renasci semper ut totiens nova
> supplicia pendas...

[73] Bettini (1984) offers a persuasive analysis of this scene and its anthropological implications.

[74] In the prologue to *Thyestes* the Fury points out that as soon as Tantalus' ghost has polluted the house, water starts to flow backwards, another appropriate indication of retroflection as sign of perversion: *cernis ut fontis liquor | introrsus actus linquat... ?* (107–8).

[75] The unnatural association of *conceptus* and *innuptae* has perturbed the manuscript tradition as well, part of which (A), prefers the *facilior infaustae*. See Bettini (1984) 149–50 for a more extensive discussion of this point.

[76] Bettini (1984) 151–2, who also compares Soph. *OT* 1213–15: Time condemns the ἄγαμος γάμος (1214) because, Bettini argues, 'l'unione incestuosa si configura simultaneamente come "generante" e come "generata"'.

Let Nature, who in Oedipus alone reverses her fixed laws, devising strange births, be changed anew for my punishment. Let me live again and again die, be born again forever to pay new penalties as many times . . .

Later, the first scene of Seneca's *Phoenissae* finds him, old and blind, moving slowly with Antigone in the aftermath of the disaster that has wrecked his life. He resists his daughter's help, and voices his desire to turn back, to seek once again the slopes of Mount Cithaeron, the place where he was found, a thinly veiled disguise for an unavowable desire to return.

Oedipus embodies in Seneca's tragedies the temptation and danger of returning to an impossible past, a retrogression which, taken to its extremes, threatens nature and history alike. No less than Thyestes' and Oedipus' incests, Cassandra's desire to even the score with her Greek foes is a *nefas*, predicated on a violent reversal of history which is geared to annihilate the past even more than simply to reverse fortune. Cassandra is ready to die, provided that she can see the death of Agamemnon, and that the dead Trojans can ascend briefly from the underworld in order to see what could have happened, but did not, and can no longer happen.

The intertextual thread connecting Cassandra to Dido encourages comparison of the negotiation of Trojan past and future which is at the core of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Resolved to die, the queen of Carthage – *furens* (4.465) – is assailed in her sleep by tormenting images (4.465–73):

> agit ipse furentem
> in somnis ferus Aeneas, semperque relinqui
> sola sibi, semper longam incomitata videtur
> ire viam et Tyrios deserta quaerere terra,
> Eumenidum veluti demens videt agmina Pentheus
> et solem geminum et duplices se ostendere Thebas,
> aut Agamemnonius scaenis agitatus Orestes,
> armatam facibus matrem et serpentibus atris
> cum fugit ultricesque sedent in limine Dirae.

As she slept Aeneas himself would drive her relentlessly in her madness, and she was always alone and desolate, always going on a long road without companions, looking for her Tyrians in an empty land. She would be like Pentheus in his frenzy when he was seeing columns of Furies and a double sun and two cities of Thebes; or like Orestes, son of Agamemnon, driven in flight across the stage by his own mother armed with her torches and black snakes, while the avenging Furies sat at the door.

It is worth noting the elaborate allusive game that *Agamemnon* plays with its model, as the striking detail of the *geminus sol* (*Ag.* 728), inserted in a text

in which Cassandra describes Agamemnon (if not Orestes) *agitatus scaenis*, thus fulfils the theatrical reference suggested by the *Aeneid* (*Ag.* 728–31):

> sed ecce gemino sole praefulget dies
> geminumque duplices Argos attollit domus.
> Idaea cerno nemora: fatalis sedet
> inter potentes arbiter pastor deas.

Look, the day shines with a double sun, and double Argos lifts up twin palaces. I can see the groves of Ida: the fateful shepherd sits in judgement of the powerful goddesses.

At the very core of the *Aeneid* stands the complex, often obsessive elaboration of the relationship between past and present, and the *Aeneid*, too, highlights the temptations and dangers inherent in the desire simply to return to an unattainable *status quo ante*. But there are conspicuous differences between the way in which the poem negotiates these opposite trends and Seneca's own approach to the same critical theme. The battle between past and future which dominates the first part of the *Aeneid* finds a resolution, albeit a painful and uncertain one, in the ultimate predominance of a teleological solution of the plot which breaks with the repetitive, ineffectual compulsions displayed by the Trojans in the earlier phases of their wanderings.[77]

In *Agamemnon*, but also in *Oedipus* and *Thyestes*, any such teleological drive is conspicuously absent. Regression and return impose seriality as the dominant organizing principle of the plays, and there seems to be no counterbalancing force which might eventually displace them. There is, in effect, no *clinamen* which may lead to a future that is significantly different from the masterplot of the past. Looking back, and obsessively insisting on the repetition of a past *nefas*, prevents the successful repression of *nefas* which many characters in these tragedies advocate, often with less than compelling force. While there is no guarantee that looking forward, to the future, will bring no new crimes, it is certain that further engagement with age-old ones will only perpetuate the spiral of revenge and counter-revenge.

Rather than looking at epic as a possible (if far from entirely successful) solution, Senecan tragedy makes it an integral part of the problem. Epic models of representation import into the tragedy a disruption which is ethical as much as it is narrative. The radically different status of epic *vis-à-vis* dramatic representation – once freed from its prescribed boundaries, such as the messenger's speech – contaminates the texture of tragedy

77 Quint (1993) 50–96.

and precipitates the incumbent threat of *nefas*. Metastatizing as an alien entity in the play, epic narrative and temporal structures thematize the breaking down of narrative conventions and the ethical boundaries they imply. The opposite process is well documented in the *Aeneid*, where tragedy powerfully deconstructs the forward-looking, self-assertive conventions of epic narration.

Seneca shows that the epic's linearity is illusory, perhaps true only, if at all, in strictly relative terms; in a different context, he shows that epic, too, is the embodiment of *nefas*. In the prologue to *Thyestes* it was precisely an epic intertext which vigorously introduced *nefas*; we see now that the association extends to other important aspects of the play. But this complementary demonstration is hardly neutral. To show that epic can be to tragedy what tragedy was to epic proves that relative hierarchies and privileges are hardly tenable, that there is no haven safe from the menace of *nefas*, and that the illusory strength of the epic masterplot is precisely that – illusory. In retrospect, *Thyestes* and other Senecan tragedies question the discursive assumptions on which the *Aeneid* was built, and shatter any optimistic ideals that it may have nurtured.

V

An impossible dream of return also torments Medea, the arch-heroine of Senecan drama. While it is undoubtedly difficult, and perhaps dangerous, to privilege specific thematic links in the compact poetic texture of *Medea*, it is more difficult, still, to forgo such a partial investigation in the name of a hypothetical organic approach (which, incidentally, might be faulted even more in the case of Seneca's tragedies than in others). Thus it is legitimate, I believe, to privilege in a reading of *Medea* a particular obsession, a recurrent thread which lends the protagonist's actions and emotions their common denominator: her desire to push her life backwards, to deny the future any real possibility of unfolding and deviating from the past. Medea, although we might want to see her portrayed as an unruly, furious and uncontrollable maenad, in fact consistently evaluates her predicament and displays a dogged determination to achieve her goals. She is far from irrational: 'irrationality' is a weapon she wields with poise and sophistication, clear intent and strategy. Far more 'irrational', to her, is the supposedly rational explanation of events which Jason half-heartedly tries to uphold. Like Atreus, Medea could easily be dismissed as a dreadful embodiment of boundless revenge: yet, even more than Atreus, she forcefully communicates her clear-headed reasonings to the audience.

Medea strives to arrest the implacable sequence of events set in motion by the announcement of Jason's wedding. When the tragedy opens she already knows what is going to happen, and the *epithalamion* sung by the chorus after the prologue only confirms the truth in a suitably contrasting shallow tone. Deeply wounded in her pride, Medea longs for a return to a past in which she was Jason's partner, a role from which she has now rather hastily been displaced by Creusa. Images of return, accordingly, play a central role in the tragedy.[78] Creon, in act 2, orders her to return home, but the return she has in mind is less literal and less circumscribed. She insists that Jason should be given back to her, that their story (*history*) turn back to the point before the tragedy started, before it all happened. She might be guilty, but if she is, she still deserves what was once hers (*Med.* 245–6):

si placet, damna ream;
sed redde crimen.

If you so decide, condemn the accused woman; but give me back my crime.

Towards the end of the confrontation her pleas become insistent (272–3):

profugere cogis? *redde* fugienti ratem
vel *redde* comitem – fugere cur solam iubes?
non sola veni.

You force me to flee? As I flee, give me back my ship, or rather give me back my companion – why order me to flee alone? I did not arrive alone.

A similar iteration returns in her dialogue with Jason: *redde supplici felix vicem* ('give me, a suppliant, my reward', 482), and again *redde fugienti sua* ('give your wife's property back as she flees', 489), are the high points of her appeal.[79] It is important to stress the fact that this particular aspect of Medea's psychology is wholly Senecan. Euripides' heroine makes no attempt to win back the object of her passion. She is resigned to her fate, determined only to take on Jason as agonizing a revenge as possible.

In her triumph, Seneca's Medea finally achieves the nefarious return she has so much longed for. Her actions describe a stripping away of features that she considers external, to reveal only the inner core, the true Medea (or 'Medea'). She sheds first her status as a wife, returning to be only a mother: *materque tota coniuge expulsa redit* ('the wife in me is driven out, the mother is completely reinstated', 928). But even that is too much, and

[78] A comparably impossible dream is voiced (perhaps deceivingly) by Clytemnestra in *Ag.* 241: *sed nunc casta repetatur fides.*

[79] Compare a similar exchange between Electra and Clytemnestra in *Ag.* 967–8: CL. *redde nunc gnatum mihi.* | EL. *Et tu parentem redde.*

the path backwards can proceed further: *rediere regna, rapta virginitas redit* ('my kingdom has been restored, my raped virginity is restored', 984). She is willing to eradicate any trace of motherhood from her very womb: *in matre si quod pignus etiamnunc latet, | scrutabor ense viscera et ferro extraham* ('if any pledge even now lurks unseen within its mother, I shall probe my womb with the sword and tear it out with the steel', 1012–13). *Mater*, which a few lines earlier meant 'mother' (928), is now (1012) a strictly physiological marker, pure anatomy, simply a 'womb'. At the conclusion of her revenge, before flying away, driven in a blaze of serpents, she has succeeded in bringing back a past which is – paradoxically – both before crime, and yet full of it. Her virginity is back, but at the price of multiple murder, and infanticide. She has held true to the vow she expressed in her magic rite: indeed, she has 'bent the courses of the seasons' (759–64):

> temporum flexi vices:
> aestiva tellus horruit cantu meo,
> coacta messem vidit hibernam Ceres;
> violenta Phasis vertit in fontem vada
> et Hister, in tot ora divisus, truces
> compressit undas omnibus ripis piger;

I have bent the courses of the seasons: the summer earth has shivered at my chant, Ceres has been compelled to watch a winter harvest. The Phasis has turned its violent waters back to its source, and the Hister, which branches out into so many mouths, has held back its sullen waters, reluctant to move in any of its channels.

Again, it is worth while to contrast this turn of events with its Euripidean model. The Greek Medea displays a realistic preoccupation with her future, and ensures for herself a safe refuge at Aegeus' palace in an episode which is completely omitted by Seneca. In sharp contrast to Euripides' Medea, who plans her departure towards 'Erechtheus' land' (1384), at the end of this play Medea does not have a new city to move to, and simply disappears into the sky, returning to the ancestral abodes of her family.

In her triumph over the laws of time and nature – Oedipus' own triumph – Medea denies the constrictions that reality imposes on emotional drives. She erases the notion of temporality with the same determination with which the unconscious refuses to acknowledge time's existence[80] and

[80] On Freud's central tenet that the unconscious ignores temporality see especially *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud (1900) = *SE* IV.328 and V.577–8; the latter passage, in which Freud discusses the relationship between lack of temporal awareness and anger, is especially interesting in connection with Medea); *On Beginning the Treatment* (*Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis* vol. 1) (Freud (1913) = *SE* XII.130); *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (Freud (1932) = *SE* XXII.74). In general, see De Ritis (1991) 233.

the unidirectionality of causal connections[81] – another crucial aspect of its symmetrical, generalizing logic which emerges in contrast to the prevailing 'adult' logic that is based on Aristotelian principles.[82] *Medea* is, at a certain level of abstraction, a wish fulfilled, a compulsion satisfied against the requirements of logic and reality. We are reminded of Atreus' similar victory over the basic principle that what is done cannot be undone; by punishing Thyestes with abandonment, he is able to restore what has been lost, to assure himself that his children are really his own and that his wife has never been seduced by a wanton brother: *liberos nasci mihi | nunc credo, castis nunc fidem reddi toris* ('now I am convinced that my children are my own; now I believe that I can trust again the purity of my marriage-bed', *Thy.* 1098–9). This is, quite literally, a dream come true, or, in psychoanalytic terms, an instance of *Ungeschehenmachen*, the 'retroactive annulment of an event',[83] which is perfectly possible, of course, in the unconstrained realm of symmetrical logic and 'negative magic'.

Medea, like Calchas or Ulixes in *Troades*, embodies the power of the past over the present and the future. She does not accept Jason's change of mind, and she alters the regular succession of times, both natural and historical, in order to achieve her goals. The moral balance, as is usual with Senecan characters, is less easy to determine than one might be tempted to think. Jason is a lame, ineffectual character, excused without much enthusiasm by the chorus, on the basis of his intrinsic weakness. His desire for change – for a new bride – is essentially rooted in selfishness, his desire to save himself and, perhaps, his children. Functionally, his role is similar to Andromache's, but nothing remains of her emotional appeal, of her complex, engaging inner turmoil. Medea's reasons – compared with Ulixes' – are also basically private in nature. She cannot claim that the future of a whole nation is at stake, that Astyanax's survival will provoke endless agony for the mothers of Greece. Yet, paradoxically, her actions acquire a grandiosity that completely overshadows Ulixes' *Realpolitik*. Her greatness lies precisely in her adamant conviction, deeply personal and undebatable nonetheless, that she will halt the course of events. The tone is set from the beginning, when she defiantly asks the sun, her ancestor, whether it can still bear to proceed in its

[81] On the parallelism between the elision of chronology and the unconscious' undermining or abolition of causal links see *Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria ('Dora')* (Freud (1905) = *SE* VII.17), with *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud (1900) = *SE* IV.247). It is interesting to read in conjunction with Freud's remark the important arguments put forth by Goldschmidt ((1969) 47–9, 168–86) on the prevalence of the present in the Stoics' ideology of time.

[82] Bodei (2000) 3–19.

[83] *Notes on a Case of Obsessional Neurosis (the 'Rat Man')* (Freud (1909) = *SE* X.235–6); 'negative magic', *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (Freud (1926) = *SE* XX.119–20 at 119).

path – should it not turn back right now (Sen. *Med.* 28–31)? Creon had dimly foreseen the truth: giving Medea time, even a little time, means giving her the very weapon she needs (292).[84] She wants to control time in order to bend it backwards. The certainty of her *furor* is rooted in the certainty of natural events (401–7):

> dum terra caelum media libratum feret
> nitidusque certas mundus evolvet vices
> numerusque harenis derit et solem dies,
> noctem sequentur atra, dum siccas polus
> versabit Arctos, flumina in pontum cadent,
> numquam meus cessabit in poenas furor
> crescetque semper . . .

while the earth stays at the centre and keeps the heavens balanced, while the bright universe maintains its constant revolutions, while the grains of sand are innumerable, while day attends the sun and stars the night, while the pole keeps the Bears dry as they revolve, while rivers flow down into the sea, never shall my madness falter in its search for vengeance, and it will increase constantly.

But she also carries out her proposal to subvert and destroy everything: *sternam et evertam omnia* ('I shall ruin and destroy everything', 414). At the end of the play her *furor* and her *dolor* do acquiesce: she has altered the regularity of time with her rites, and she has found a limit to her revenge (1018–20). The apparent *adynaton* is fulfilled precisely as she kills her second son:

> misereri iubes –
> bene est, peractum est. plura non habui, dolor,
> quae tibi litarem.

You're telling me to have pity. [*She kills the second son*] Good, it is finished. I had nothing else, anguish, to sacrifice to you.

Her cry of joy, which turns on its head the chorus's moralizing *sententia* at the beginning of the play (175: *tempori aptari decet*, 'it is right to adapt to circumstances'), is revealing: *meus dies est. tempore accepto utimur* ('The day is mine; I am enjoying the time I have been granted', 1017).

By taking control of time, Medea ensures that there will be, in a sense, no future: Jason has lost Creusa and his children, and Medea disappears into the sky, back to her ancestors' home. All Jason can do, as Medea poignantly

[84] In Euripides, Creon remarks explicitly on the fact that the time he finally grants Medea is not enough for her to commit any of the deeds he fears: see 355–6 (these lines are deleted by Nauck and Diggle, but retained by Murray and Page).

remarks, is 'to take back' his children, the emblem of their past life together that he had rejected: *recipe iam gnatos, parens* (1024).[85]

It should be observed that Medea pointedly refrains from any idealization of the past, even as she longs for its return. Her intent is largely negative: things should not change, Jason should not marry again. Her fixation on a surpassed state of events finds a significant echo in the second chorus of the tragedy, where the women of Corinth elaborate on the *nefas* of seafaring. It is easy to file this ode in the bloated category of *laudationes temporis acti*, and to dissect it in search of *topoi:* the dangers and intrinsic impiety of navigation, the longing for a long-gone golden age with no ambitions and no sorrows, the deprecation of the geographic and moral disorder which marks a degenerate present. Yet the chorus itself resists such a simplification. The contrast that it institutes between past and present is less facile and less reassuring. In the midst of expected judgements, it is remarkable, for instance, that the idealized life of the farmer 'who has reached old age in his ancestral fields' (*patrioque senex factus in arvo*, 332) should be characterized as 'lazy' (*piger*, 331), as if it lacked, together with the nefarious practice of navigation, a vital *élan* which is not intrinsically immoral, and which we would in fact expect to be praised in the context of Roman ideology.[86]

Medea draws attention more than once to the weight and implications of her name. In her dialogue with the nurse, she is fully aware of the potential embedded in it: *Medea superest* ('"Medea" is left', 166), 'Medea' as a recognizable entity, as a *persona* somehow distinguishable from the person who carries it. Again: *Medea – fiam* ('I'll become "Medea"', 171). At the end of the play, as her revenge is being carried out, she feels that she has lived up to the expectations: *Medea nunc sum* ('now I am "Medea"', 910). It is time for the others, particularly for Jason, to acknowledge this fact: *coniugem agnoscis tuam?* ('do you recognize your wife?', 1021). Recognition is a belated act of cognition which reveals something previously hidden, or unfocused, which, in this sense, stands as the ultimate victory of the past. To be able to 'recognize' Medea as 'Medea', or Atreus as 'Atreus', is predicated on the immutability of fundamental characteristics which define them as what they are. These characters can deceive and disguise, but their inner nature sooner or later shines through and is revealed in a flash of horror. Both Medea and Atreus embody the superiority of the past over the present – and the future. They both guarantee that past patterns will prevail;

[85] The order does not imply any action on either Medea's or Jason's part: there is no need to suppose that Medea actually throws the children's corpses from the roof, and to construe this event as evidence of the fact that the play could not have been staged.

[86] See Biondi (1984) 87–141 and Nussbaum (1994) 464ff. for a fine analysis of this ode.

they rise from the certainty of a model which their antagonists need time to learn. Once they do, once they 'recognize', they admit the fallibility of their desire, or hope, for change. Thyestes, for instance, had indeed suspected that Atreus could not possibly have changed, and that Tantalus' exhortation was therefore dangerous. He was right: his only mistake was not acting on such a good hunch. Even at a later stage he tries to dispel his depressing forebodings, to discard his past worries: the 'old Thyestes' should make room for a new, impossibly happy one (*Thy.* 937: *veterem ex animo mitte Thyesten*, 'dismiss the old Thyestes from your thoughts'). Similarly, Jason entreats Medea to change, to accept something new and different in lieu of what she can no longer have. On a more positive note, Andromache, too, 'recognizes' her son's character, which is strikingly similar to her dead husband's: 'I know your nature: you are ashamed to show fear' (*agnosco indolem: | pudet timere*, *Tro.* 504–5).

VI

As I remarked in the opening section of this chapter, regressive repetition is complicit with the action of repressed forces and impulses of destruction and upheaval. At the most basic level, regression denies the movement forward inscribed in the natural passing of time. This turning back implies, sometimes literally, a return to darkness, the darkness of unspeakable crimes, of *nefas* and *furor*. As her eyes turn back, Cassandra sides with a compelling form of knowledge which is chthonic and subversive, and she reveals nothing less than the violent overturning of the fate's decrees.

In their struggle upstream against the linear determinism of time, Senecan characters stage a rebellion against the notions of law and order represented by time's unerring flow. If time is *inreparabile*, it is a sort of counterfactual, ultimately impossible reparation that they stubbornly try to achieve. The desire to turn back the clock on history, personal and otherwise, finds its most poignant expression in the emphasis placed on the past, which slowly bulges out of proportion as it invades the present and conditions the future. We should ask ourselves, at this juncture, what may be the overall implications of this obsessive regression that seems to characterize many of the tragedies on the various levels I have discussed.

We might perhaps take our cue from an incisive passage in Seneca's *Letters to Lucilius* 122 that raises an intriguing set of associations. In his attack against those who 'live backwards' – *retro vivunt* (122.18) – Seneca expounds the immoral connotation of fighting time's natural forward movement. Inverting the order of day and night is the most powerful icon, and to a

certain extent the cause, of a denial of nature which immediately affects morality. It is a sign of dubious distinction to alter the normal arrangements of time, the *temporum dispositio* (122.18), even if the sinners who choose to live in this manner reveal their obsession in a number of seemingly innocuous activities: they crave spring flowers in the middle of winter and will do anything in order to obtain them (122.8), just as they strive to prevent, even to erase, natural ageing (122.7). In the latter case Seneca makes explicit the connection between the artificiality of tampering with time and the connotations of sexual immorality which configure the whole process as *nefas*: 'do they not live against nature, those who strive to retain the glow of adolescence at the wrong age? Can there be something more cruel or miserable? He'll never be a man so that he can continue to lie under a man. His gender should have spared him this iniquity, but now not even age will'[87] (*non vivunt contra naturam qui spectant ut pueritia splendeat tempore alieno? quid fieri crudelius vel miserius potest? Numquam vir erit, ut diu virum pati possit? et cum illum contumeliae sexus eripuisse debuerat, non ne aetas quidem eripiet?*, 122.8).

The connection that is raised in the letter between sexual deviation and the subversion of nature's laws of ordered time finds a remarkable counterpart in a tragic passage which I have already had an opportunity to discuss. In his speech at the beginning of *Agamemnon*, the shade of Thyestes complains that he has mixed together things which the norms of nature keep separate: children with their fathers, grandparents and their descendants, day and night (*Ag.* 34–6).[88] Merging day and night is revealed as the emblem of a much more upsetting tampering with natural laws. (We will see in a moment how this image can be connected with the repeated instances of the sun turning its course that dot several tragedies.)

Less upsetting, but equally revealing, is the connection between morally inappropriate behaviour and interference with the natural flow of time that is inscribed in a well-known mythical episode, which is repeatedly mentioned in the tragedies and voiced with particular emphasis by an enraged Juno in the prologue to *Hercules furens*. From the very moment of his conception – when Jupiter, eager to prolong the night he was spending with Alcmena, prevented the dawning of a new day – the hero symbolizes the disruption of natural order which will be especially evident in his trampling of the thresholds of the underworld (24–6):[89]

[87] Author's translation. [88] See above, p. 203.
[89] Appropriately, the structure and names of the constellations are now a permanent cosmic reminder of Jupiter's unfaithful behaviour. See especially line 5: *tellus colenda est: paelices caelum tenent*, and 6–18.

in cuius ortus mundus impendit diem
tardusque Eoo Phoebus effulsit mari
retinere mersum iussus Oceano iubar.

[This son] for whose begetting the whole world lost a day, when Phoebus, with orders to keep the sunlight immersed in Ocean, shone forth late from the Eastern seas.

This very detail of the mythical narrative, which elsewhere in the tragedies is explicitly referred to as a breaking down of natural laws,[90] is mentioned by Seneca at *De brevitate vitae* 16.5 in the context of his attack against the *poetarum furor*: Jupiter's crime is magnified and perpetuated in the poetic descriptions of his lascivious deeds.

The immorality, even perversion, of holding back personal or public history must arguably be read in conjunction with the notion of time that structures Stoic thinking about the physical universe. Although repetition is prominently inscribed in the Stoic concept of *palingenesis*, I have observed a number of instances in which repetition acquires distinctly negative overtones and is portrayed as a dangerous obsession. The contradiction is only apparent. The kind of repetition that, for instance, Medea advocates, unduly forestalls the natural and expected evolution of the cosmic cycle which will eventually culminate in a purifying *ekpyrōsis*.[91] This form of repetition slows down the movement of the cycle and constantly threatens its potential for renewal. It is a sinful form of *restitutio in integrum*, which we should contrast with the righteous attitude described by Seneca at *De providentia* 5.8: our fate has been determined since the moment of our birth, and wisdom resides in a complete acceptance of its decrees; to go with the flow of the universe is indeed a relief: 'it is a great consolation that it is together with the universe we are swept along' (*grande solacium est cum universo rapi*). Acceptance of nature, a basic tenet of Stoic thought, necessarily implies acceptance of time, and of the movement forward which will lead to destruction and purification.

A rebellion against Stoic orthodoxy alone, however, can hardly account for the far-reaching prominence of this theme in the tragedies, and it might

[90] *Ag.* 814–15: *cui lege mundi Iuppiter rupta | roscidae noctis geminavit horas.*

[91] It has been argued that Seneca presents a distinctively pessimistic view of *ekpyrōsis* as final catastrophe, which is at odds with the traditional Stoic notion of a natural, purifying event (Rosenmeyer (1989) 151–9). It is rather clear that Senecan heroes try hard to precipitate what they would like to see not just as a phase in the unstoppable process of creation and destruction, but as a final catastrophe, which might come in the form of a flood (*Q Nat* 3.29–30). Also, contrary to the surviving (Greek) Stoic authorities, Seneca posits a direct correlation between their wickedness and the catastrophe, which, again, is portrayed in terms of punishment. On this issue, see Barnes (1978); Lapidge (1978); Mansfeld (1979); Long (1985).

be worth while to expand our points of reference to include other first-century authors. I will start, though, from Virgil. The teleological ambition of an epic such as the *Aeneid* is inextricably linked with a treatment of narrative time that privileges linearity and control. The story has to proceed forward, to approach its ultimate goal. Regressions and digressions, tempting as they are, must be restrained lest they obstruct the chosen path forward. Virgil gives this principle emphatic expression not in the *Aeneid* but in his *Georgics*, at a point when the insisted description of the *furor equarum*[92] threatens the ordered unfolding of his didactic project (*G.* 3.284–7):

sed fugit interea, fugit inreparabile tempus,
singula dum capti circumvectamur amore.
hoc satis armentis: superat pars altera curae,
lanigeros agitare greges hirtasque capellas.

But in the meanwhile time flies, flies irretrievably, while, seized by love, we linger around each topic. Enough now about herds; the second part of our labour remains, to lead the woolly flocks and shaggy goats.

There is something to be gained by insisting on the contrast between the *furor*-led temptation to digress and the rationality of the move that Virgil opposes to it. The flow of time is undeniably determined by Fate.[93] There is, literally, no going around that fact. Or is there? The narrator's fiddling with the linearity of time is an act complicit with *furor*, with the subversive forces down below. Arguably, there is no act of poetic creation which could be deemed completely innocent in this respect. By retelling events, poetry is bound to repeat, and thus to disclaim the uniqueness and linearity of time. Moreover, any act of poetic evocation inevitably disrupts the temporal framework of the events that it narrates, whether they are historical or not: there can be no perfect coincidence of *histoire* and *récit*. Yet, as I remarked earlier, certain works display much more obviously than others their willingness to challenge the ordered unfolding of time.

In the *Bellum Civile*, too, the 'comforting logic of chronology'[94] is abandoned in favour of fractured, competing narratives which stubbornly refuse any call to order, not to mention unity. Lucan's poem, as Ralph Johnson elegantly puts it, 'has no unity unless it is the absence of unity, and, having no unity, it needs no heroes to enact unity'.[95] Time becomes one of

[92] *G.* 3.266, with Schiesaro (1993a) 140. It is worth remembering in this connection the importance of Juno's *furor* as a principle of delay (explicitly acknowledged by the goddess herself at 7.315) which structures in a very basic sense the *Aeneid* as a whole.

[93] Cf. Sen. *Ben.* 4.7.2; *Helv.* 8.3.

[94] Johnson (1987) 110.

[95] Johnson (1987) 110.

the most charged signifiers in the poem, endowed with competing ideological values: delay is pro-Pompeian as much as proceeding forward is pro-Caesarian. As he engages in the re-enactement of a *nefas*, and thus inevitably displays his Caesarian allegiances, Lucan multiplies *morae* which can at least postpone Caesar's inevitable victory.[96] The 'momentary' nature of Lucan's heroes (many are able to hold the stage convincingly for a while, but none can give the poem in its entirety a sense of unity) can provide useful insights into Senecan tragedy as well, especially if we consider it alongside the 'cubist' diffraction of time in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* which I recalled earlier.[97]

Taken together, the experiments with time undertaken by Ovid, Lucan and Seneca testify to a shared sense of uneasiness and anxiety. Never before (*pace* Lycophron, an exception that confirms the rule) had classical texts built up such a comprehensive onslaught against the linearity of time. By the beginning of the twentieth century similar challenges, however, had indelibly marked the experience of Western culture. In this more recent scenario it is possible to connect experimental attitudes towards time with a flurry of scientific discoveries and philosophical reflections which substantially modified our perception of time and imposed uniformity and order on that which was previously defined only by ignorance and superstition.[98] But Roman culture, too, had experienced its own 'Copernican' revolution. Bringing order to the confusion that had reigned for several centuries, Caesar introduced, just one year before his death, a new, reliable calendar. It was, by all accounts, no mean feat, as Lucan's Caesar remembers in his meeting with the Egyptian priest Acoreus (10.184–7):

> fama quidem generi Pharias me duxit ad urbes,
> sed tamen et vestri; media inter proelia semper
> stellarum caelique plagis superisque vacavi,
> nec meus Eudoxi vincetur fastibus annus.

For sure, I was brought to Pharos' cities by report about my son-in-law, but still report about you too; always in the midst of battles I found time for higher things, for regions of the stars and sky, nor will my own year be worsted by Eudoxus' calendar.

It is undoubtedly striking that Caesar seems here almost to equate his pursuit of Pompey to his insatiable drive to know. In his desire to reveal the inner secrets of nature, Caesar momentarily turns into a cultural hero of sorts, redolent in many respects of Lucretius' portrayal of Epicurus,

96 One of Masters' most important acquisitions, see Masters (1992) *passim*.
97 See above, p. 188. 98 Kern (1983).

who pushed himself to the edge of the world in order to comprehend the regulatory mechanisms of all things, and even more of Alexander the Great, the ruler who embodied a profound link between the thirst for knowledge and the thirst to conquer. As the 'inventor' of the new calendar, Caesar marks the ordered passing of time as a personal accomplishment intertwined with the vicissitudes of Roman history. There will be, as we know, a well-ordered 'time for Augustus',[99] but it was his predecessor who had explicitly paved the way. Caesar's ordered *annus* proceeds smoothly and without uncertainties, not unlike his plan to catch Pompey and progress to a new form of political organization.

It is not simply a matter of observing that political power is intrinsically involved in the regulation of the calendar and especially of its festive days, as Ovid's *Fasti* amply attest. Rather, we should try to recapture at least part of the fundamental sense of (new) order and predictability that lay at the core of the Julian reform, and to imagine that such a powerful revolution could come to be seen as the perfect target of equally forceful counter-reactions. It is precisely because there can now be, literally, such a thing as 'time for Augustus', that the active and unpredictable manipulation of time in poetry can acquire a significant disruptive force. Reacting to the myth of progress and renewal that is so central to Augustan rhetoric, the disruption of time portrayed by Ovid, Lucan and Seneca problematizes in different ways the most basic category of human understanding, implicitly questioning its very foundations. Causality and chronology waver under the repeated attacks of analogy, association, regression, repetition and delay.[100] The unstoppable vector of history that was promoted by Augustus can now be shown to be simply one of many possible movements of history and hence deprived of any teleological impact. History can bend back on itself and explore darkness and regression, can eliminate the future and proclaim the triumph of the past. Not even time is safe from *nefas*: it can actually be one of the ways in which *nefas* achieves its victory. Neither is poetry safe: poetry, too, bends backwards, thanks to the multiple opportunities afforded by a novel, creative poetics.

99 Wallace-Hadrill (1987).
100 I do not believe, however, that the foregrounding of 'irrational' elements and the development of avant-garde poetics especially in first-century AD literature should be read only as a reaction to Augustanism and its undoubted impact on cultural protocols. The drive towards rationalization is an important feature of Roman culture at least from the second century BC onwards (Moatti (1997)), and any reaction to it should be read not simply as antagonistic to the political powers who may at certain times appear to be fostering it (too reductionist a move), but primarily in the context of an ongoing cultural debate (see Schiesaro (1997); and Schiesaro (1993b) 263).

In the reversal of 'upper' and 'lower' worlds, as in the constant return of the past, Senecan drama gives voice to the dead who emerge from Acheron to impose their dreadful rule on the living. Time turns back not so much to redress the misfortunes of the past as to guarantee that no change and no variation can occur. It is difficult not to read in this reversal a pained scepticism about the regularity imposed by Augustus on time and space – a regularity and faith in the future that Augustan poets had tried to make their own. In, for instance, Virgil's promise of *imperium sine fine*[101] (a promise that the *Aeneid* powerfully questions at several critical junctures), or in Horace's *Epode* 16, we can read the hope that the new Augustan beginning has interrupted the law of cosmic cycles and, thanks to the king's vital force, has inspired a progression which will not have to be tempered by catastrophe.[102] Two or three generations after these hopes had been tentatively expressed, they have lost even their qualified problematic appeal and are ripe for deconstruction.

Seneca, as I mentioned, presents us with a dramatic visual icon for the fundamental disruption of natural laws which recurs with remarkable frequency in tragedy. His tragedies often display the sun's uncertainty in following its course or even its extraordinary retrocession.[103] Shocked at the sight of the *nefas* perpetrated by Atreus, the sun withdraws, throwing mankind into utter darkness as the text repeatedly emphasizes. It is indeed tempting to recall that Caesar's calendar, for the first time based entirely and reliably on the sun's regular movements, seems to have been one of the immediate motivations behind a surge in the popularity of solar cults.[104] The sun, elevated on the one hand to the position of supreme guarantor of the regularity of time, displaying in its perturbed and unpredictable movements the irrational criminality of human actions, can now become, in Seneca's obsessed and distraught universe, the ultimate symbol of disorder.

[101] *Aen.* 1.257–96. [102] Eliade (1954) 133–40, esp. 136.
[103] Rosenmeyer (1989) 160 and Schmitz (1993) 90.
[104] Bickerman (1980) 51, with Nilsson (1932) 166 and Weinstock (1948) 37.

CHAPTER 6

The poetics of passions

INTERTEXTUALITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

I

The thematic insistence on the role of the past in the tragedies is displayed to great effect in the extensive and for some even hypertrophic allusive dimension of Seneca's writing.[1] I now want to explore this dimension of intertextuality further. By problematizing the relationship between intertextuality, poetry and the past, I also want to look again at the connection between poetry and passions, and at what implications such connections might suggest for the interpretation of *Thyestes* and other plays. In the second section of this chapter I will therefore focus again on the Stoics' theoretical discussion of the role of the audience confronted by theatrical outbursts of passion, and in the third section I will investigate how spectatorship is dealt with in the tragedies themselves. The last portion of this chapter will be devoted to an issue which is crucial both within the tragedies and in the possible modalities of their reception, that is, the relationship between this form of drama and epic. I will also look further at possible analogies between Seneca's plays and modern 'epic drama', which may be characterized by the particular mode of reception it demands and purports to foster. Can Seneca's theatre be considered 'epic' in any Brechtian sense? Was his notional audience predicated on a similar set of presuppositions?

Intertextuality is indeed one way of looking back, of allowing a past constituted by texts, words and narratives to shape the present and possibly the future. All texts are by definition intertextual, even if and when they happen

[1] In his important discussion of Seneca's intertextuality Segal ((1986) 202–14) focuses especially on the implications of the sword at *Phaed.* 896 (*hic dicet ensis*, 'this sword will tell you'). The sword, which replaces the writing tablet with which Theseus accuses Hippolytus in Eur. *Hipp.* 877, is, according to Segal, 'the visible mark of Seneca's own "anxiety of influence"', 'the trace of the earlier writer's absence' (208).

THE PASSIONS IN PLAY

Thyestes and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama

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