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The Place of Breath in Alan Hollinghurst's *Berenice*

Denis Flannery

Abstract

This chapter closely reads moments in Alan Hollinghurst's 2012 translation of *Bérénice* (in many ways Racine's most benign tragedy) where characters complain of their incapacity to breathe, rejoice in their capacity to breathe again, or contemplate the air around them as a potentially hostile medium. Reflecting on the archaeology of lines in the translation such as 'I cannot breathe in this uncertainty', 'I breathe, you give me life again' or 'what air is this you breathe?', the chapter considers what such moments contribute to Hollinghurst's rendition of Racine's play, how they differ from their French originals. This chapter also considers how such moments enable *Bérénice* to be read in dialogue with a range of recent and contemporary writing that reflects on the dynamics and ethics of breath and breathing in relation not only to the work of canonical writers but also to Black Lives Matter and Covid-19.

To subdue destruction is one of the most important affirmations of which we are capable in this world. It is the affirmation of this life, bound up with yours, and with the realm of the living, an affirmation caught up with a potential for destruction and its countervailing force.

Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*

Je ne respire pas dans cette incertitude.

Jean Racine, *Bérénice*

I cannot breathe in this uncertainty.

Racine, *Berenice*, translated by Alan Hollinghurst

To write about the place of breath in Alan Hollinghurst's translation of Jean Racine's

Bérénice (1670) is to write about something that is, on one level, rather 'minor'. References

to breath and breathing do not exactly pepper either Racine's original or the version that, nine years ago now, Hollinghurst published and saw performed.

Directed by Josie Rourke, with Anne-Marie Duff in the leading role, this *Berenice* opened at London's Donmar Warehouse on 27 September 2012. Hollinghurst's text was published by Faber two weeks later in a volume where it was paired with his 1990 translation of *Bajazet* (1672). Hollinghurst's career as a translator entailed a move from his 1990 translation of what has been called 'Racine's most violent and most frightening play' to his 2012 translation of *Bérénice* – a play criticized by some as 'insufficiently violent to qualify as tragedy'.¹ Racine's career as playwright went in the opposite direction, from *Bérénice* to *Bajazet* – from the 'insufficiently violent' to 'the most frightening and most violent.' In the Faber publication the plays are printed in the order in which they were first written and performed, not in the order in which Hollinghurst translated them. The order in which the plays were written amounts to a journey from a relatively gentle level of tragedy, from the subduing of destruction to something of a massacre. Over *Bajazet*'s final act all three of the characters who form its charged erotic triangle meet violent ends, whether through offstage assassination (Roxane), offstage execution by the garotte (Bajazet), or onstage suicide (Atalide).

'Songez-vous' the sultanness Roxane reminds the later play's hero, 'Que j'ai sur votre vie un empire suprême?/Que vous ne respirez qu'autant que je vous aime? (II. 2. 508-10).

Roxane later uses the verb 'respirer' when, denying her senses of hurt and betrayal, she says of Bajazet: 'Ah! Je respire enfin. Et ma joie est extrême/Que le Traître une fois se soit trahi

¹ *Berenice* and *Bajzaet*, trans. Alan Hollinghurst (London: Faber, 2012), p. 77, pp. v-vi.

Further references to Hollinghurst's translation are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

lui-même' (IV. 5. 1273-75). 'Malheureuse', Atalide later asks the servant Zetime, again about Bajazet, 'dis-moi seulement s'il respire' (V. 8. 1654). In a play where death by the garotte is an ambient threat, breath is associated with both menace and disavowal. There is also an emphasis on the breath (or non-breathing) of individual characters, not on breathing as a collective experience. Emphasizing that breath is a precious facility which can be cut off by those in power, *Bajazet* makes far less space for breathing than *Bérénice*.

When, in Hollnighurst's translation of *Bajazet*, characters use the English verb 'to breathe' or the noun 'breath' they tend to do so in figurative senses, absent from the French original: 'I'll breathe no word against your happiness,' Atalide says to Bajazet, translating 'Je ne murmure point contre votre bonheur' (p. 119; III. 4. 957). At the play's end, just before her own suicide and addressing the dead Bajazet, Atalide refers to 'the hateful noose that stopped your breath' (p. 152). In the original this noose is referred to as 'le lien malheureux,/Dont tu viens d'éprouver les détestables nœuds' (V. Scène Dernière, 1739-40).

Bérénice's bloodless, more gentle outcome might match the more ample room it makes for breath, breathing, and considering the air. Comparing both plays, it is easy to see *Bérénice* (the earlier play and the later translation) as an exercise in the subduing of destruction, to echo the Judith Butler of my first epigraph, and therefore as an instance of 'one of the most important affirmations of which we are capable in this world'.² But it is also the case that this affirmative propulsion never renounces the potential for destruction and its countervailing force to which Butler draws our attention. In this chapter I will be exploring the extent to which *Berenice*'s emphasis on breath might be part of what creates its relatively affirmative impact. I will also explore how the play's greater emphasis on breath is what

² Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2020), p. 65.

makes reading, seeing (or translating) it experiences where we occupy an uncertain space between affirmation, on the one hand and, on the other, the countervailing force of destruction.

Michael Billington claimed of Rourke's 2012 production that it 'certainly *breathes* what Racine called "that majestic sadness which is the whole pleasure of tragedy"' before going on to point out that 'the great danger is that the play becomes a study in *suffocating nobility*'.³ Claiming that this translation's onstage life *breathed* a certain quality (Racine's 'majestic sadness'), Billington also suggested that *Berenice*'s 's 'noble' ending, however much it might allow the play's central characters to go on breathing after the curtain falls, brings with it a certain suffocating risk for performers, audiences, and readers.

Billington was not the first to respond to this play in terms of breathing, obstructions to breath, and rival airs. In *Sur Racine* (1963), Roland Barthes wrote of Titus, the play's most powerful protagonist, as himself a breathable, life-sustaining element. For Barthes, the new Emperor:

révèle dans l'image érotique son essence corporelle, l'éclat de la douceur: il est un principe total, un *air*, à la fois lumière et enveloppement. Ne plus respirer cet air, c'est mourir. C'est pourquoi Bérénice va jusqu'à proposer à Titus un simple concubinage (que Titus repousse); c'est pourquoi aussi, privée de son aliment, cette image ne pourra que dépérir dans un air raréfié, distinct de l'air de Titus, et qui est le vide progressif de l'Orient.⁴

Bérénice, in its original manifestation and in Hollinghurst's translation, has then been considered as something that breathes and something at risk of becoming a study in suffocation. Barthes describes the erotic allure of the new emperor Titus as amounting to an air (both a light

³ *Berenice* -- Review, *The Guardian*, 3 October 2012. Emphasis mine.

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/03/berenice-review>

⁴ *Sur Racine* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1963), p. 94.

and a shrouding, swaddling, enveloping force). For Barthes, Titus is an image that can only waste away in what the play casts as the almost anti-air of the Palestine to which, instead of dying (or as a form of dying?), its heroine, having subdued destruction, returns at the end alone. Barthes also considered Titus's relationship to Roman law and custom in terms of suffocation: 'Comment,' he goes on to ask rhetorically, 'rompre une loi, soulever un étouffement?'⁵

The emphasis I have outlined here on breathing, suffocation, and airs that are both enriching and deadly is one that has been present in the humanities for some time now, certainly since 2012 when Hollinghurst's translation was first performed and published. Writers such as Jane Bennett, Judith Butler, Christina Sharpe, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Derek McCormack working in fields such as anglophone cultural studies, black studies, queer theory, the study of affect, and geography have been contemplating what Bennett calls the 'atmospheric realm' in different ways.⁶ In the pages that follow I hope to put Hollinghurst's *Berenice* in conversation with this kind of work and with, inevitably, the breath-oriented crises of the Covid-19 pandemic that erupted 350 years after the first performance of *Bérénice*. But first I want to provide a short account of how Hollinghurst's translation works.

1 Hollinghurst translates *Bérénice*

⁵ Barthes, p. 95

⁶ Jane Bennett *Influx and Efflux: Writing Up with Walt Whitman* (London and Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2020), p. 61. I discuss Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and Christina Sharpe on breath in the pages that follow. See also Derek McCormack, *Atmospheric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment* (London and Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2018).

In his Translator's Foreword, Hollinghurst makes an eloquent case for translating Racine into blank verse, that 'staple form of English verse tragedy from the Elizabethan period on' (p. vii). However faithful or inventive this translation might be, its most radical aspect is to step away from Racine's alexandrine, what Hollinghurst calls 'a strict form, inescapable as time itself' (p. vi). In making this claim, Hollinghurst's point of reference and contrast is Shakespeare (p. vii). Certainly, Hollinghurst's Racine translations tread a line between strict fidelity to the original and a looser sonic sense that foregrounds the restrained theatricality of the original.⁷

How does this work in practice? Let's look at two lines from a speech made by Antiochus in Act I, Scene IV, when, declaring to Bérénice his long-muted love for her, he recalls staying on in Palestine after she herself had been taken to Rome by Titus:

Je vous redemandais à vos tristes États,
Je cherchais en pleurant les traces de vos pas.
I. 4. 237-8

In Hollinghurst's translation this reads:

Again I sought you in your sad domains,
I searched in tears the places where you'd trod.
(p. 20)

Clearly, Hollinghurst foregoes the rhyme of the original turning, in a gorgeous lyrical choice, those 'tristes États' into 'sad domains'. The single French verb 'redemander' expands to three words, 'Again I sought'. The English verb 'to search' sonically echoes (without idiomatically translating) the French verb 'chercher'; the French present participle 'en pleurant' becomes a colloquial, noun-focused phrase 'in tears'.

⁷ Much of this paragraph is taken from my essay 'Using Racine in 1990; or, Translating Theatre in Time' in *Alan Hollinghurst: Writing Under the Influence*, edited by Michèle Mendelssohn and Denis Flannery (Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 157-173, p. 160.

If that translation choice involves a shift from a verb to a noun, from ‘pleurer’ to ‘tears’, the one that follows it goes in the other direction: ‘les traces de vos pas’ (literally ‘the traces of your steps’) becomes the much more grounded ‘places where you’d trod’. This haunted invocation of Berenice’s rather goddess-like step becomes more specific, while also echoing, in part, the sound of the original French: ‘Les traces’ becomes ‘the places’. This choice is far from a literal translation but it maintains, through that ‘ace’ syllable, an acoustic ‘trace’, we could say, of the original. Moving from ‘les traces de vos pas’ (‘your steps’) to ‘the places where you’d trod’, gives this line a rather corporeal, weighty and emphatically ‘Anglo-Saxon’ feeling, one that enriches through resistance and restraint the lyricism, the song-like quality, of this moment.

The shifting between verbs and nouns (from ‘en pleurant’ to ‘in tears’, from ‘traces’ to ‘trod’) takes place in part to keep the translation functioning as idiomatic, fluent (and lyrical) verse, one whose blank-verse metre and rhythm avoid, as Hollinghurst claims in his Preface, the risks of monotony and comedy that can come with rhyme in English (p. vi). In this small example we can also see an instance of Hollinghurst translating the play ‘couplet for couplet’ so, as he puts it, to ‘preserve the formal containment of Racine’s thought and the irresistible architecture of his great speeches’ (p. vii). Whatever this translation might downplay or shift as it moves from French to English, Hollinghurst nonetheless maintains a wise respect for Racine’s sense of the couplet as a vital conceptual and aesthetic unit. So there is a dual respect operative here. First, respect for English verse tradition and the limitations of the English language. Second, respect for a verse unit – the couplet – that is so vital to the push and rhythm of Racine’s writing.

As anyone who has read any of Hollinghurst’s prose can tell you, his style is sonically and poetically sensitive. Bernard O’Donoghue has written of how Hollinghurst’s career has featured ‘occasional poetic sorties’ and of how it was poetry, rather than fiction, that was

Hollinghurst's 'first love'.⁸ So it's not surprising that, in his translation of these two lines, Hollinghurst allows sonic traces from French to happily inhabit his English version. His 'I searched' echoes the original's 'Je cherchais'. His 'places where you trod' mirrors (and reverses) the sonic sequence of 'les traces de vos pas': the 'p' consonant leads onto the 'tr' consonant in English; the French goes in the other direction. Hollinghurst's line reverses the order of both sounds in the French even as it keeps them and their relationship alive. Again, the phrase 'dual respect' feels useful here. Hollinghurst respects the unit of the couplet in Racine, even as he recognises the risks and limitations of rhyme in an English verse translation. He employs the form of Shakespearean blank verse, though without flaunting any 'super-Shakespearean' stylistic features. Yet all the while he allows his listeners and his reader to hear Shakespearean echoes. He maintains the presence, and – even reversed – the sequence, of French syllables from the original without sacrificing either the clarity or lyricism of his English writing and without flaunting his translation as an exercise in 'Frenchness'.

Neither of the two lines from Act IV on which I've chosen to concentrate here employs a vocabulary of breathing. But it is worth taking a moment to consider how, in terms of form and of content, breath and breathing underpin them. The metres and the couplet forms of both the English and the French work almost naturally with human breath.

These lines also point forward to Bérénice's concluding instruction to Antiochus in the play's final couplet:

Bérénice. Tout est prêt. On m'attend. Ne suivez point mes pas.
 Pour la dernière fois, Adieu, Seigneur.
Antiochus. Hélas!
 V. Scene Dernière. 1517-18

Famously, this couplet's final word – 'Hélas!'— is spoken by Antiochus. There could be no greater emphasis of the fact that that Antiochus, Bérénice – and the audience – all breathe the

⁸ 'Abjuring Innocence: Hollinghurst's Poetry' in *Writing Under the Influence*, p. 20, p. 12.

same air than Racine's having Antiochus utter the word that could have been spoken by Bérénice, thus making the play's final couplet a physical instance of their interconnectedness through breath.

The act of asking (again) in the verb 'redemander' assumes an ongoing use of breath in the events of Antiochus's little narrative. The tears evoked in the French and specified in the English presuppose, perhaps, a certain sobbing sound – and what is a sob if not a form of breath? Paul Hammond has pointed out that, in the following scene, Bérénice herself utters 'a poignant speech which begins by choking on the word "jamais"'.⁹ Speaking, sobbing, choking: the play steadily emphasizes breath as the sometimes threatened raw material of speech.

The steps that Bérénice has taken and which Antiochus claims that he has followed assume a capacity on his part and on hers to move – and therefore to breathe. In this narrative, Antiochus evokes that other air on which Barthes touches – the air of Palestine – which differs so from the climate, both political and literal, of Rome. We will see a little later on that Titus understands his relationship to Roman law and custom as the inhabiting of an atmosphere.

The English noun 'breath' occurs several times in Hollinghurst's translation. What relationship do those occurrences have to Racine's original? When Titus says to Antiochus that Berenice is 'All that I'll love until my final breath', his 1670 French-language manifestation claims that she is 'Tout ce que j'aimerai jusqu'au dernier soupir' (p. 40; III. 1. 770). The French noun 'soupir' ('sigh') becomes 'breath', something more neutral, final and death-oriented than the French original which is more affect-laden, 'theatrical' and easily linked to the dramatic, rivalrous, affect-laden dramatics of threat that we find in *Bajazet*. 'Arsace', Antiochus says in the next scene, 'let me find my breath a moment' after (it

⁹ 'Stones Wrapped in String: The Paths not Taken in Racine's *Bérénice*', in this volume, p. 000.

appears) Titus has given Arsace his heart's desire by asking him to take Berenice back to the middle east (p. 41). The original reads 'Arsace, laisse-moi le temps de respirer' (III. 2.774). Here we can see Hollinghurst rendering a verb as a noun-phrase. If breath is to be found (if we can be separated from our breath) then it can be understood as an object of desire.

In Act II, Scene 4, where Titus makes his first attempt to break with Bérénice, they knock single words back and forth between each other in this moment ('Mais ...', 'Achevez ...', 'Hélas', 'Parlez ...', 'Rome L'Empire'). Speech keeps lapsing back into the breath which enables it as the actors stir the air they both inhabit and transform (II. 4. 623-28). As Hammond puts it, Titus 'cannot bring himself to speak: he cannot produce a grammatical structure based upon an appropriate verb and tense which would define his future and hers'.¹⁰ A reader of the text sees elegant Racinian columns of print break into a format that looks, on the page, like twentieth-century experimental poetry:

Berenice.

Finish.

Titus.

Alas!

Berenice.

Speak,

Titus.

Rome ... the Empire ... (p. 34)

¹⁰ 'Stones Wrapped in String', p. 000.

The spaces between the words seem to be doing all of the work, dramatically illustrating the claim once made by Adrienne Rich that ‘poems consist of words and the breathing between them’.¹¹ In the theatre (and I remember this being the case when Stephen Campbell Moore played Titus in the 2012 production of Hollinghurst’s translation), speech keeps lapsing back into (and then reemerging from) the breath without which it cannot exist. Barthes famously described *Bérénice* as ‘une tragédie de l’aphasie’.¹² While Barthes’s ascription is both startling and convincing, the experience of both reading *Bérénice* and of seeing it performed involves something more fundamental than the common understanding of aphasia as a medical condition that hampers speech, writing or the understanding of either. Reading *Bérénice* (or seeing it performed) involves persistent reminders that without breath there is no speech and that speech can always melt back into the basic breath which is its enabling factor.

After Titus’s abortive attempt to tell Berenice that they must separate, she utters the line that constitutes my second epigraph: ‘I cannot breathe in this uncertainty’ (p. 35). The original reads: ‘Je ne respire pas dans cette incertitude’ (II. 5. 644). In part motivated, it’s safe to assume, by metrical considerations, Hollinghurst’s choice makes Berenice’s assertion more tentative, less enclosing and final than in the original. Whatever metaphorical intention might lie behind the phrase ‘Je ne respire pas’, the phrase’s *literal* impossibility (the only way you can in fact say ‘Je ne respire pas’ is if the opposite is patently true) is inescapable. Hollinghurst’s version puts a certain distance between his Berenice and a tradition that

¹¹ ‘Defying the Space that Separates’ in *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company), pp. 106-114, p. 113.

¹² Barthes, p. 96.

would stretch from (at one end of the historical spectrum) the death-oriented declarations of Sophocles's *Antigone* to the words uttered by Edgar Allan Poe's M. Valdemar, 'I am dead'. To say 'I cannot breathe' is, however alarming, to indicate that there is still breath available (at least enough to enable you make this utterance) and, again, it makes breath, breathing, air objects of desire and struggle. In the process, saying 'I cannot breathe' also holds out, however despairingly, a future where you may be able to breathe again. Here Hollinghurst's choice is very much in harmony with his sense of the tone of *Bérénice* (as opposed to *Bajazet*, what he calls 'the pained acceptance of the irreconcilable in human affairs' – and his sense of the new possibilities that pained acceptance might bring (p. vi).

2 Breathing 2020-2021

To write about the place of breath in *Bérénice* (or indeed in any text) is to address something that is as psychically and ontologically fundamental as it is resonant with events that overtook the world early in 2020. In an interview with the *Financial Times* in April of that year, Emmanuel Macron spelt this out very baldly as he linked the ongoing pandemic with perceptions of the chronic climate crisis: 'What are we afraid of when it comes to catching Covid-19? We are afraid of suffocating ... The fear of suffocating is the fear of not being able to breathe. Once we are out of this crisis, people will no longer tolerate breathing polluted air'.¹³ For Macron, the threat to one's individual capacity to breathe posed by Covid-19 acts as a brutal reminder of the threats that air-pollution and consequent climate change pose to our collective capacity to breathe. This reminder prompts Macron to take on a prophetic tone. For

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPGfKhCICC0&fbclid=IwAR1ycaY-Q8GTsvPLyMoDYAZMlaTPYDGI dnw5iAIgul6kcXK3tnIIU7IuhwE>. Accessed August 31, 2020.

him, the immediate, even if only anticipated, threat to *individual* capacities to breathe posed by the virus entails a limit of tolerance – and a future with a transformed, and global, sense of *intolerance* – when it comes to living with polluted air.

‘This breath is mine, but also not my own’, Judith Butler claimed in an interview with Francis Wade in *The Nation* on 13 May 2020, a few weeks after Macron’s comments and a few months after the publication of her book *The Force of Nonviolence*. In that interview, Butler emphasized that this same breath is:

always drawing from the air, which is filled with the exhalations of absent and unknown others. The virus makes this truth clear in a potentially frightening way, but it is important to remember that it is an interrelationship that connects our bounded selves and proves them to be less bounded than those of us formed within individualism might believe.¹⁴

At the time of writing (March 2021, towards what appears to be the end of England’s third Covid-19-prompted national lockdown) most theatres in London, elsewhere in the UK (and in Europe) remain closed. This should remind us that whatever else may or may not constitute ‘Theatre’, it is first and foremost a space or system in which, together, audiences and performers share a common air. It is therefore a space or system in which interconnections between our bounded selves can be re-experienced and rethought. The re-experiencing of interconnectedness – between Antiochus and Bérénice, between identities and environments, between writers, translators and readers, between audiences and

¹⁴ Wade, Francis, ‘Judith Butler on the Violence of Neglect Amid a Health

Crisis’: [https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/judith-butler-force-of-nonviolence-](https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/judith-butler-force-of-nonviolence-interview/)

interview/ Accessed May 26 2020

performers – is at play in those two lines from Act IV whose translation we have just been considering. That re-experiencing is the note on which the play ends and it is a note touched on throughout.

As 2020 went on, events which overtook the world took on aspects, mostly associated with racism, and in particular racist violence directed at African-Americans in the United States, that had grimly pre-existed the onset of Covid-19. Certainly questions of breath and State violence re-entered public discourse on 25 May 2020, the date of the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. The words that Floyd repeated in the minutes before he died -- ‘I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe ...’ – were repeated again and again through the media and were also taken up as slogans and printed on placards in ensuing Black Lives Matter protests that opposed police violence directed against African-Americans.

Floyd’s utterance of those words constituted a repetition of the same words repeated – as both Butler and Christina Sharpe recount – eleven times by Eric Garner on 17 July 2014 in Staten Island as he, like Floyd, was put into a chokehold by police and as he, like Floyd, subsequently died.¹⁵ These specific instances of the relationship between the power of a state instrument and the depriving of breath are also part of a scenario and history of racialised oppression which operates not only by using a specific act of violence (the chokehold) to arrest the breathing of its objects but which makes breathing problematic, for those whom it so objectifies, on at least two other grounds.

The first is literal. Sharpe has recently written of chattel slavery’s creation of disease through both labour and living conditions that inhibit breath and damage breathing

¹⁵ Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, p. 117; Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2018), pp. 110-11.

processes.¹⁶ The second ground menacingly hovers somewhere between the literal and the metaphorical, in the creation of what Sharpe terms ‘antiblackness as total climate’.¹⁷ Sharpe’s work constantly returns to the ways in which forms of racist violence do more than cut off or otherwise suppress the literal breathing of their targets. ‘In what I am calling the weather,’ she writes, ‘antiblackness is as pervasive as climate’.¹⁸

Rereading Hollinghurst’s translation in the spring of 2020, with a view to speaking about it at the British Academy symposium that was due to be held in September of that year (an event that, like every other academic conference at this time, had to be held online), it was very difficult to encounter a line such as that quoted in my second and third epigraphs – ‘I cannot breathe in this uncertainty’/‘Je ne respire pas dans cette incertitude’ without hearing their resonance for the breath-oriented senses of dread, (re)emergent injustice and responses thereto with which the atmosphere was, in every sense, filled.

‘Rome hait tous les Rois, et Bérénice est Reine’, Phénice says to Bérénice at the end of Act One, a line Hollinghurst translates as ‘Rome hates all kings. You, madam, are a queen.’ (I. 5. 296; p. 22). ‘She has great virtues. But, sir, she’s a queen’ (‘Elle a mille vertus. Mais, Seigneur, elle est Reine’) (p. 26; II. 2. 376) Paulinus says to Titus a few scenes later. These two moments indicate a key aspect of the plot of *Bérénice* – a Roman aversion to kings and royalty. But there are of course other aspects, that also have to do with the dynamics of

¹⁶ Sharpe, p. 112.

¹⁷ Sharpe, p. 105.

¹⁸ Sharpe, p. 106. Using the word ‘wake’ as a more-than-metaphor for what she terms ‘the legacies of slavery’s denial of Black humanity,’ Sharpe claims that ‘in the weather of the wake, one cannot trust, support, or condone the state’s application of something they call justice, but one can only hold one’s breath for so long’ (p. 111).

racial hatred and othering. Just before her telling declaration that ‘Bérénice est reine’, Phenice intimates that her mistress’s foreign provenance is as much an issue as her royal blood. ‘Romans must marry only Romans here,’ she says (p. 22). And Paulinus’s remark is followed by the invocation of the historical exemplum of Cleopatra – and the involvement of both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony with her. In the course of that speech Paulinus almost provides Titus with a set of instructions for the play’s outcome. ‘Julius’, he points out, ‘burned for Cleopatra, but said nothing,/And let her languish in the East alone’ (p. 26). The original reads ‘Jules ... Brûla pour Cléopatre, et sans se déclarer/ Seule dans l’Orient la laisse soupirer’ (II. 2, 387-90). At these two crucial points where the troubling aspect of Berenice’s royal status is invoked, neither Bérénice nor Titus are allowed to forget that questions of Roman self-definition against an ‘other’ – in this case the Orient, whether it is figured in anti-Semitic terms, as Palestine, or as Egypt – are intensely operative.

The story of Bérénice and its aftermath(s) has been told, of course, many times and in many different contexts, one of which is Mozart’s *La Clemenza di Tito* (1791). Speaking about a production of the opera that he was directing in 2016 for Poland’s Teatr Wielki Opera Nardowa, Ivo van Hove said of her:

She is the love of Titus’s life, his big passion. But she is Palestinian and she is not accepted by the Roman people. They cannot accept that a foreigner will be the new empress of Rome. Titus wants to do the best for the Roman empire and he thinks that this is the only way to do it, whatever it costs. So it’s a huge sacrifice as the leader of a country that you do by giving up the love of your life.

Berenice as a character does not appear in Mozart’s opera, though she is, as van Hove points out, ‘spoken about a lot’.¹⁹ Whatever difference might exist between Mozart’s narrative and Racine’s, van Hove’s comment emphasizes how Berenice’s story is one of racial conquest, violence, migration, the oppression of peoples – factors which, in their more recent and

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSgRupNBOOs>. Accessed March 10, 2021.

ongoing forms, have much to do with quite literal threats to one's capacity to breathe and with the creation of airs in which breathing is either difficult or impossible.

3 *Bérénice* and Breathing

When, a few years ago, I wrote about *Bajazet* as translated in 1990 by Hollinghurst I did so with an eye on how, also in 1990, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick drew on the Racine of *Esther* (1689) as she developed her far-reaching 1990 theory of the 'epistemology of the closet'. At first glance, *Bérénice* with its love-triangle of two men (Antiochus and Titus) and one woman (Bérénice) also seems to resonate with Sedgwick's earlier work on such triangles (and their formatively homoerotic energies) in her 1985 book *Between Men*.²⁰ *Bajazet* – with one of its triangles constituted by the vizier Acomat, Atalide and the play's eponymous hero – could be read in a way that was also friendly to Sedgwick's 1985 model. But Racine's 1670 play resonates more intriguingly with Sedgwick's posthumously-published 'The Weather in Proust' which appeared a few months before Hollinghurst's *Berenice*.

²⁰ Sedgwick outlines her theory of the 'potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual (desire) – a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society is radically disrupted' in her introduction to *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York and Guilford, Surrey: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 1-2. See also Paul Scott's essay in this volume discussing the homosocial and homoerotic subtexts of the play.

Through Sedgwick's dense and beautiful late essay, Anglo-American critical theory was prompted to engage with the work of 'the Hungarian-born psychoanalyst Michael Balint (1896-1970), who studied with Sandor Ferenczi and was, following Ferenczi, a pioneer in what is now called object relations psychology.' This is how, in the same paragraph, Sedgwick outlines Balint's divergence from a certain Freudian tradition:

In his final book *The Basic Fault* (1968), Balint distinguishes between two forms of transferential relation, one malignant (in his terminology) and the other benign. The one he calls malignant is essentially the transference described by Freud: Oedipally structured, seductive, essentially rivalrous, 'aimed at gratification by external action' of the transferential object, and based, like neurosis, on the conflicts surrounding an already salient genital desire.²¹

You can see how a (Freudian) framework might be 'applicable' to *Bérénice* with its two triangles – the first being that constituted by Antiochus, Bérénice, and Titus, the second constituted by Bérénice, Rome, Titus. In both instances there is an object – Bérénice in the first triangle, Titus in the second – who is the object of a struggle, however muted, between two forces and desires (Antiochus v. Titus over Berenice, Rome v. Bérénice over Titus). The workings of such triangles might have intrigued and excited the Sedgwick of 1985 and *Between Men* but, in her late work, her focus is much more resigned, depressive, ambiently-focused, less 'Gothic' but also more joyous. This move is similar to the move Hollinghurst made as he went from translating a super-violent, desire-oriented Racine to one whose lower levels of violence questioned his relationship to 'the tragic'.

Sedgwick never wrote about *Bérénice* but reading her on Balint we can see how, as her life came to an end, she might have been drawn to this play's stepping away from 'malignant' and 'rivalrous' 'conflicts surrounding an already salient genital desire' towards something

²¹ 'The Weather in Proust' in *The Weather in Proust*, edited by Jonathan Goldberg (Durham N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 10.

much more resigned, transcendent, and very similar to the ‘new beginnings’ and ‘new discoveries’ that, for Balint, were enabled by the ‘benign forms of transference’ that came with attending to the psychic centrality of breath and breathing.

If Sedgwick emphasizes that Freudian transference is ‘seductive’, then, over the summer of 2020, I also found myself seduced by Balint’s work, and by Sedgwick’s clearly seduced response thereto. Listening, at such a stymied, lonely, terrifying time to the conversation between these two writers was both calming and winning. Reflecting recently on Sedgwick’s investment in Balint, Judith Butler has written that:

Sedgwick emphasizes another modality of desire that seeks instead what is adequate and that forms itself around the very material and ecological conditions of support, sustenance and persistence. This brings her to a reconsideration of basic drives but also to breathing and the circumambient world in which that is possible.²²

Butler is very much following Sedgwick’s lead as, a few lines later, she emphasizes the extent to which Balint’s work enables a move away from wishes for omnipotence and exclusivity’ that are ‘perpetually vanquished by jealousy and defeat.’²³ Let’s take a moment to read a short passage from Balint’s book:

We use the air, in fact we cannot live without it; we inhale it in order to take parts out of it and use them as we want; then, after putting substances into it that we want to get rid of, we exhale it – without paying the slightest attention to it. In fact, the air must be there for us, and as long as it is there in sufficient supply and quality we, we do not take any notice of it. This kind of environment must simply be there, and as long as it is there – for instance, if we get enough air – we take its existence for granted, we do not consider it as an object, that is, separate from us; we just use it. The situation changes abruptly if the environment is altered – if, for instance, in the adult’s case the supply of

²² ‘Proust at the End’ in *Reading Sedgwick*, edited by Lauren Berlant (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 64.

²³ Butler, p. 64.

air is interfered with – then the seemingly uncathected environment assumes immense importance, that is, its latent true cathexis becomes apparent.²⁴

In its first two sentences, Balint's emphasizes air's (and breathing's) non-dramatic status: we use the air 'without paying the slightest attention to it' and it intermingles with us. Air's most distinguishing feature is that we don't notice it. Let's re-read Balint's last sentence: 'The situation changes abruptly if the environment is altered – if, for instance, in the adult's case the supply of air is interfered with – then *the seemingly uncathected environment assumes immense importance, that is, its latent true cathexis becomes apparent*' (emphasis mine). When something happens that amounts to an alteration in our (air) environment, then that non-dramatic process become utterly dramatic, a kind of *dénouement*: our 'latent true cathexis' with air and breathing is, all too theatrically, revealed. Reading this sentence in the light of Sharpe's work on breathing and racial injustice, we can say that this drama is ever-present and always ready to repeat and re-emerge.

Despite the tonal and sense-making relief that the move from Freud to Balint comes to represent and provoke for Sedgwick and for Butler, phrases that we have seen Racine employ and Hollinghurst translate – phrases such as 'my [final] breath' or 'I cannot breathe in this uncertainty' -- cannot be understood apart from scenarios of rivalry, fantasies of omnipotence, prospects of defeat. There's something nourishing about the move from Freud to Balint, from *Bajazet* to *Bérénice*. I certainly experienced it reading Balint's spare and moving writing. But at the same time that nourishing liberation utterly depends on the antagonistic scenarios that drove Freud (and, it must be said, Jean Racine). All that appears to be required for our 'latent

²⁴ *The Basic Fault: Therapeutic Aspects of Regression*, with a Foreword by Paul Ornstein (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1992), pp. 66-7.

true cathexis' with breath to become apparent is the mere utterance of the word 'breath' – or the words 'I cannot breathe'.

4 Breathing's Sad Domains

On my last rereading, I counted about six further references to breath and breathing in Hollinghurst's *Berenice*. We have already encountered the proclamation 'I cannot breathe in this uncertainty' which Berenice makes after Titus's first abortive, stuttering attempt to tell her that they must separate (p. 35). After Arsace has managed to paint a rather optimistic and rosy picture of a potential return to Palestine *à deux* by Berenice and Antiochus the latter says, 'I breathe, Arsace, you give me life again' (p. 43). The original reads: 'Ah, je respire, Arsace, et tu me rends la vie' (III. 2. 828). In Act IV, Scene 4, increasingly desperate, foregoing any claim she might have to marry Titus, Berenice asks 'Why must you envy me the air you breathe?' (p. 55). The original reads 'Pourquoi m'enviez-vous l'air que vous respirez?' (p. 55; IV. 4. 1129). In Act V, Scene 4, Antiochus claims that:

My every moment's but an endless flight
From fear to hope, and then from hope to rage.
And I'm still breathing?
(p. 63)

Antiochus's final question in the passage I have just quoted is a very direct translation of the original 'Et je respire encor?' (V. 5. 1301). 'Alas! What word can I say?' Titus asks himself at the end of Act IV. He goes on: 'I hardly know if I myself still live.' I count these two lines among the instances of breathing in Hollinghurst's *Berenice* because Racine's original reads 'Hélas! Quel mot puis-je lui dire/Moi-même en ce moment, sais-je si je respire?' (p. 60; IV, 7, 1236-7). Hollinghurst's translation turns Titus's rhetorical question into a statement about uncertainty, thereby taking this short speech onto more psychically and ontologically fundamental ground.

The close consideration of all of these examples would take us far – and would also take up more space than I have available here. But they illustrate, I hope, the sheer frequency of references to breath and breathing in this play, especially when it is compared with *Bajazet*. They also illustrate the characters' readiness to reflect on their breath and to equate it with living itself ('I breathe, Arsace, you give me life again'). Furthermore, they show the extent to which air is evidently, and especially for the Bérénice who imagines her separation from Titus as a separation from the air he breathes, intimately bound up with desire. In most of the instances I've just provided, breath is also a question – either a direct question, as with Bérénice's question to Titus or, more frequently a rhetorical question, directed to oneself.

I would like to move towards a conclusion by returning to some aspects of Titus's long soliloquy where he envisages a popular response to his ongoing relationship with Bérénice that will not be opposed by the Roman people and where he understands his relationship to Roman law and custom as the inhabiting of an atmosphere:

Who knows if, seeing the queen's virtues, Rome
Might not feel moved to call her Roman too?
Rome by its own choice can vindicate my own.
No, no, once more let's not be over-quick.
Let Rome still weigh in balance with its laws
Such love, such tears, and such perseverance –
Rome will be for us. Titus – look, and see.
What air is this you breathe? Are you not here
Where hate for kings is suckled at the breast
And cannot be expunged by love or fear?
When Rome condemned its kings it judged your queen.

(pp. 51-52)

In these lines Titus expresses his hope that Rome will 'weigh in balance with its laws/Such love such tears, such perseverance,' going on to confidently predict that 'Rome will be for us' (p. 51). Then there is a shift. Titus rejects what he has just outlined as a fantasy, urges himself to 'look and see' ('Titus, ouvre les yeux') and asks himself 'What air is this you

breathe?’ (‘Quel air respire-tu?’)] recognising that in Rome ‘hate for kings is suckled at the breast’ (‘la haine des Rois avec le lait sucée’) (IV. 4. 1013-16; p. 51).

I will end by considering two aspects of this moment. Hollinghurst’s translation of the phrase ‘avec le lait sucée’ as ‘suckled at the breast’, moves our attention from mother’s *milk*, something that is, for the infant, a life-sustaining substance (like the air) to the breast which is the source of that substance. This particular translation rather weakens the elemental force of Racine’s original. If, finally, the play’s first reference to breath (Bérénice’s assertion that she does not or cannot breathe in her new uncertainty) exists in response to a sudden, though not-yet-comprehended change, then a sudden change in Titus’s perception of his environment – a move from blindness to insight – is registered by a more-than-metaphorical reference to air and to breathing: ‘Quel air respire-tu?’. This questioning manifestation of a change also reminds us that the moves from *Bajazet* to *Bérénice* and from Freud to Balint (especially as celebrated by Sedgwick and Butler), from the rivalrous interpersonal scenario to an awareness of the circumambient world, often retain potentials for destruction and its countervailing force.

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