I

RACINE’S CLASSICAL PIANO

(1928, WITH ADDITIONAL MATERIAL FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1931)
This study of Racine’s style continues to be recognised as the best treatment of the subject yet written. It argues that ‘attenuation’ or ‘modulation’, the toning-down of direct emotion by the particular devices of the ‘majestic’ style, is the hallmark of Racinian language and constitutes the distant beauty of his poetry. Although this view is not universally shared, Spitzer’s demonstration of the rhetoric of attenuation remains a milestone both in Racine criticism and in the study of style. A more recent approach is Peter France, Racine’s Rhetoric (Oxford University Press, 1965), which contains a useful bibliography and also takes issue with a number of points made by Spitzer.

Spitzer says that he wrote the first draft of this study without consulting any secondary sources other than Vossler’s book and without using the only Racine lexicon then available, Charles Marty-Laveaux’s Lexique de la langue de Jean Racine (1873). He added examples and further material from Marty-Laveaux to his own in the second draft, but was dissatisfied with the Lexique for a variety of reasons. Since we now possess much better tools, most notably J.-G. Cahen, Le Vocabulaire de Racine (1946) and Bryant C. Freeman and Alan Bateson’s computer-assisted Concordance du Théâtre et des Poésies de Jean Racine (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), I have omitted Spitzer’s references to and many of his criticisms of Marty-Laveaux’s Lexique. Also omitted are all references to the secondary sources from which Spitzer obtained many of his Latin examples; and some of the copious quotations from Racine have been reduced to line-references to shorten slightly this very long article. The division into sections and the section-headings are also my own.

All quotations from Racine are given from the current Nouveaux Classiques Larousse editions.

DB
Il rase la prose, mais avec des ailes.*

Racine’s style is not easy for the modern reader, especially if he is not French. Direct access to the heart of Racine’s work, deeply embedded in its language, is inhibited and made difficult by the sober attenuation, the cold rationality, the almost formulaic quality of his style which—often quite suddenly and without warning—bursts into moments of song and living form, snuffed out just as quickly by a cold rationality which puts down any lyrical excitement the reader may have timidly permitted himself. Racine—the essentially Racinian—is neither simply formulaic nor simply lyrical song, but precisely the sequence and intertwining of both elements. As Karl Vossler rightly said:

The ideal of [Racine’s] style is to follow established usage and to appear unmarked, which is a negative and indeed a prosaic aim. Racine’s poetic language has no ‘strong’ features. It is a secularised style modelled on polite conversation, reaching its moments of high solemnity essentially through the renunciation of sensual, direct or colourful language. The renunciation of sensual happiness is the guiding star of Racine’s work, and of his language. An unequalled closedness and modesty that is both secular and transcendent, an inwardness and restraint that appear boring and poor to the vulgar, but noble to the educated taste . . . After the strained flights [of Corneille’s images] Racine’s language brought a calm serenity, a gliding and gentle descent towards earth . . . In Racine, word-order, rhyme and rhythm are all made to help create a flowing harmony in the concrete, modest conversational language of the characters. From the point of view of a history of style, Racine took these devices from Corneille, and to a degree from Rotrou . . . It would be attractive, perhaps, to pursue in detail these discrete attenuations and to illustrate them with comparisons. (Vossler, *Racine*, pp. 149–50, 154, 157)

In this essay I should like to pursue the attenuations in Racine’s style, but not simply in his word-order, rhymes and rhythms, and not with reference to the poet’s predecessors as Vossler urges, since that would

* This unattributed epigraph seems to be a rephrasing of Sainte-Beuve’s comment in *Port-Royal*, p. 608: ‘Racine . . . rase volontiers la prose, sauf l’élégance toujours observée du contour.’
make Racine appear too much like a satellite of other planets. As is my custom in style studies, I shall take Racine as a star in himself, as an entire, internally stable cosmos. I leave to other scholars the task of presenting these attenuations, taken here as it were absolutely, in terms of their relationships to pre-existing models, that is to say historically. I have joined the all-purpose term ‘classical’ to the ‘piano’ of my title because the attenuation of Racine’s style creates precisely that effect of distinguished restraint, of self-enclosure, which is described – in German literature as well, as in the case of Goethe’s Iphigenie auf Tauris – as classical. The word ‘piano’ is meant to suggest the soft pedal on the pianoforte, not the one that lengthens and strengthens the note (the forte, the one meant in the well-known saying that the French language is ‘un piano sans pédale’): Racine’s language is a language with a piano pedal.

1. The Indefinite Article

The first of the piano effects or attenuations in Racine’s style is what I shall call de-individualisation by the indefinite article (in the plural by des). For example, in Andromaque 1.iv, Andromaque wishes to reject the amorous advances of the king, Pyrrhus:

\[
\text{Captive, toujours triste, importune à moi-même,} \\
\text{Pouvez-vous souhaier qu’Andromaque vous aime?} \\
\text{Quels charmes ont pour vous des yeux infortunés} \\
\text{Qu’à des pleurs éternels vous avez condamnés?} \\
\text{Non, non, d’un ennemi respecter la misère,} \\
\text{Sauver des malheureux, rendre un fils à sa mère,} \\
\text{De cent peuples pour lui combattre la rigueur,} \\
\text{Sans me faire payer son salut de mon cœur,} \\
\text{Malgré moi, s’il le faut, lui donner un asile:} \\
\text{Seigneur, voilà des soins dignes du fils d’Achille.}
\]

In this passage, Andromaque tries to obliterate her own self as much as possible. After a fleeting appearance of the ‘lyrical I’ of the widow of Hector in the triple apposition of 1.301 (captive . . . triste . . . importune), an atmosphere of distance is established in 1.302 when Andromaque names herself (→ 17). From this point on, everything is said as if there were no particular case but only general principles involved: it is no longer about Andromaque, but about an enemy (un ennemi, 1.305) whose misfortune Pyrrhus should respect, about unfortunate people (des malheureux, 1.306), not about the particular Astyanax but about a son (un fils, 1.306) to be returned to his mother – or so it might seem, as if it were not a matter of an actual case. However, the hearer knows that it has to do with Andromaque and with her son’s fate not only because of the context but also because the speaker returns to the first person.
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with malgré moi in l.309. Andromaque speaks here both personally and generally at the same time. Her emotion is deeply buried within her, we can feel it in her turmoil and rage, but through her lips comes only the general, one could almost say only the legalistic, aspect of her case: here is an enemy (in the masculine) whose misery commands respect, here is a son with a right to his mother. This is an attenuated, unlyrical manner of expression. [Note also the use of autre in the masculine or, more properly, neuter gender to refer to a woman in Andromaque iv.vi, l.1377–8: ‘Ton cœur, impatient de revoir ta Troyenne / Ne souffre qu’à regret qu’un autre t’entretienne.’] On the other hand, the suppressed emotion invades the linguistic expression and gives new strength to the dynamic of those general and soulless articles un and des: under their modesty and restraint can be heard a tone of declamation and rhetoric, an appeal and an insistence on one’s rights. Unsaid emotion takes its revenge by energising its verbal expression, by exercising a counterpressure on the words that repress it. So we have a piano strung with tension—and a demonstration that Racine’s language is not ‘dead’, but animated by subterranean, bottled-up life. To show that this feature is characteristic of Racine, I need only give some further illustrations from Andromaque and the later plays. For example, in Andromaque iii.1 Oreste retreats behind the general features of his own situation:

J’abuse, cher ami, de ton trop d’amitié;
Mais pardonne à des maux dont toi seul as pitié;
Excuse un malheureux qui perd tout ce qu’il aime,
Que tout le monde hait, et qui se hait lui-même. 795–8

With this use of the indefinite article there arises a degree of strangeness and distanciation between the speaker and his addressee. [My colleague P. Friedländer has pointed out a comparison with Seneca’s Medea, l.503, where Medea says to Jason Tibi innocens sit quisquis est pro te nocens, ‘You should consider innocent anyone who has done wrong on your behalf’. The quisquis has the literal meaning ‘anyone who, whatsoever’ but refers to a particular ‘who’, namely Medea. It suggests some kind of game of linguistic deceit; Friedländer calls it a ‘dialectical movement’ between general and particular meanings.] The device is all the more remarkable when the distance is constantly being closed and opened up again within the same speech, as is mostly the case for Racine’s regal characters who move in a special atmosphere, now coming down close to their interlocutors, now estranging themselves from them.

A de moindres faveurs des malheureux prétendent,
Seigneur; c’est un exil que mes pleurs vous demandent.

Andromaque i.iv. 337–8
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First Andromaque insists with pride on the rights of the unfortunate in general; but with the vocative Seigneur, 1.338, she addresses Pyrrhus as the master of her fate in personal terms, marking the transition to a more intimate manner in which her personal wishes can be voiced (... mes pleurs vous demandent, 1.338). The alternation of pride and humility in Andromaque’s character is mirrored by the alternation of individual and de-individualised modes of expression. [E. Winkler, *Grundlegung der Stilistik*, p. 113, argues rather differently that the indefinite article in 1.103 of Molière’s *Les Femmes savantes* has the effect of making the word *mérite* more concrete:

> Et l’on peut pour époux refuser un mérite
> Que pour adorateur on veut bien à sa suite.

The indefinite article, he says, withdraws so much ‘intellectual energy’ from the word *mérite* that ‘the abstract core of meaning can leave the word and allow the external appearance of a meritorious thing or person to take its place’. On the other hand, *mérite* is more abstract than what it replaces, i.e. ‘la personne qui mérite notre amour’; the notion that ‘love can only favour true merit’ is left unstressed as something perfectly obvious (an example of how a high culture reveals itself in what it takes for granted). Winkler emphasises the outward show of the article; I stress the indefiniteness of the indefinite article.]

On of the finest examples of the attitude both modest and determined communicated by the use of *un* is to be found in Monime’s speech to Mithridate:

> Et le tombeau, Seigneur, est moins triste pour moi
> Que le lit d’un époux qui m’a fait cet outrage,
> Qui s’est acquis sur moi ce cruel avantage,
> Et qui me préparant un éternel ennui,
> M’a fait rougir d’un feu qui n’était pas pour lui.  
> *Mithridate* iv.iv, 1350–4

*D’un feu means de mon amour*—but the appended relative clause makes it possible to accommodate a definite refusal (of Mithridate’s offer) almost incidentally and as if it went without saying, to conceal a dagger beneath the elegantly gathered skirt of a long sentence. A more perfidious grace, a more graceful perfidy would be hard to imagine.

The de-individualising indefinite article with its *piano* of emotion—if one may put it thus—occurs especially, of course, where the speaking ‘I’ seeks both to obscure itself and yet to claim its rights:

> Le croirai-je, seigneur, qu’un reste de tendresse
> Vous fasse ici chercher une triste princesse?
>  
> Hermione, in *Andromaque* ii.ii, 477–8

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Also, to foreground the absolute as against the contingent nature of the speaker’s relationship to a husband, or any other kith and kin:

Voilà de mon amour l’innocent stratagème:
Voilà ce qu’un époux m’a commandé lui-même.

Andromaque iv.i, 1097–8

Hector is meant here, but is referred to only as ‘a spouse’: he had commanded in virtue of his marital status. Even where the relative is the object of discussion, he is referred to by the kinship role which dignifies him, as in Andromaque ii.i:

Cléone: Mais vous ne dites point que vous m’avez un père.
Hermione: Mon père avec les Grecs m’ordonne de partir. 405, 408

Or in Bajazet ii.i:

Ne désespérez point une amante en furie,
S’il m’échappait un mot, c’est fait de votre vie. 541–2

This is a very concise way of saying ‘do not make me despair, for I am a lover gone mad’. One suspects that behind the furioso of the expression there lies a general experience, some sort of maxim along the lines ‘A lover made mad must not be made to despair’. Racine individualises or ‘degeneralises’ maxims in that he characteristically forges them into human form; whereas Corneille, as is well known, delights in autonomous sententiae intended to be quoted as maxims. However, maxims do sometimes occur explicitly in Racine:

Est-ce qu’en holocauste aujourd’hui présenté
Je dois, comme autrefois la fille de Jephté,
Du Seigneur par ma mort apaiser la colère?
Hélas! un fils n’a rien qui ne soit à son père. Athalie iv.i, 1259–62

This could have become directly Est-ce qu’en holocauste . . . un fils doit apaiser . . . [Gabriel Des Hons, pp. 206, 174 has pointed out the Racinian allusion in a passage from Anatole France’s La Révolte des Anges (1914): ‘Maurice . . . lança tout d’une haleine des paroles qu’une mère n’aurait jamais dû entendre’ (p. 250); cf. Phèdre iii.i, 742: J’ai dit ce que jamais on ne devait entendre. The alteration France makes to the line from Racine remains Racinian: ‘une mère’. Incidentally, the passage which this critic calls ‘véritable André Chénier’ should more properly also be compared to Racine: ‘Elle couve, elle est mère: une mère est créative’, A. France; Elle flotte, elle hésite; en un mot elle est femme, Athalie iii.iii, 876.]

It is worth noting here the importance of kinship terms in Racine’s plays dealing with kings and the high-born, for they make these potentates closer to us, and more human. Nothing is more unjust than
to reproach French classical tragedy with ‘title-mania’. As Marmontel said in 1763 (repeated by Lessing, p. 58):

C'est faire injure au cœur humain et méconnaître la Nature, que de croire qu'elle ait besoin de titres pour nous émouvoir et nous attendrir. Les noms sacrés d'ami, de père, d'amant, d'époux, de fils, de mère, d'homme enfin: voilà les qualités pathétiques: leurs droits ne périront jamais. (Marmontel, II.147)

Racine perceived the note of pathos in the names of universal human relationships.

Note how in the following passage from *Mithridate* III.v the referring expressions come in three stages of definiteness:

> Pourvu que vous voulez qu’une main qui m’est chère,
> *Un fils*, le digne objet de l’amour de son père,
> *Xipharès*, en un mot, devenant votre époux,
> Me venge de Pharnace, et m’aquitte envers vous.

The speaker, Mithridate, creeps up like a cunning animal, from the distant *une main*, then *un fils* a little nearer, to the definite article *le digne* . . . and finally the proper name *Xipharès*. (Cf. Rudler, p. 149, where this point is not brought out adequately.) Another instance where the proper name marks the climax of a clarification is to be found in Cénone’s speech in *Phèdre* I.iii:

> . . . au fils de l’étrangère,
> *A ce fier ennemi* de vous, de votre sang,
> *Ce fils qu’une Amazone a porté dans son flanc,*
> Cet Hippolyte . . .

[Note that our evidence on the indefinite article and the use of kinship terms supports the reading given by Menard and older editions for *Mithridate* I.iii, 306: ‘Ce roi . . . / N’accuse point le ciel qui le laisse outrager / Et des indignes fils qui n’osent le venger?’ where Louis Racine, Boileau and Brossette require *deux. Des indignes fils* is entirely appropriate to the reticence of Racinian characters.]

Another case of explicit maxim occurs in *Bajazet* III.v:

> Votre mort (pardonnez aux fureurs des amants)
> Ne me paraissait pas le plus grand des tourments.

Here the extraordinary nature of what is said (that the jealous lover could acquiesce even in the death of the loved one) has to be softened by the parenthetical appeal to the general experience of lovers. This is how one should understand the use of the plural in place of the singular, to allow the individual to dissolve in a multiplicity of experiences:

> Pardonnez, Acomat, je plains avec sujet
> Des cœurs dont les bontés, trop mal récompensées,
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M’avaient pris pour objet de toutes leurs pensées.  

Bajazet ii.iii, 616–18

In reality only one quite particular heart is meant here by des cœurs. The plural-indefinite expression simulates a general stance which obviates the need for an individual prise de position. An especially elegant version of this type of expression is des + (plural) noun + relative clause, because the ‘principled’ point of view can be put especially discreetly in the final relative. An example has already been quoted: des maux dont toi seul as pitié, connected with a polite recognition of the addressee, un malheureux qui perd tout ce qu’il aime (Andromaque iii.i). A similar example from Phèdre ii.ii:

HIPPOLYTE: Je révoque des lois dont j’ai plaint la rigueur .  .  . 
ARICIE: Modérez des bontés dont l’excès m’embarasse. 475, 481

Hippolyte is referring here to laws handed down by Thésée; Aricie means ‘vos bontés’. The de-individualising effect is particularly strong when un is put before parts of the body; they become tools, so to speak, that could be replaced by other ones, and they come into consideration only in respect of whatever activity they can perform. For example:

N’êtes-vous pas ici sur la montagne sainte 
Où le père des Juifs sur son fils innocent 
Leva sans murmurer un bras obéissant .  .  .  

Athalie iv.v, 1438–40

Abraham’s arm was an obedient arm, it might have been disobedient—there is, as it were, nothing noteworthy about the arm other than its obedience. It is not Abraham’s arm, not his (individual) arm, but any arm x such that x has the function obedience. [Cf. Lerch (1919), pp. 246–7, on La Fontaine’s ‘impressionistic’ ouvre un large bec (Fables t/2, ‘Le Corbeau et le Renard’, l.12). See also Athalie v.ii, 1593–6, une main téméraire.]

Since Latin and Greek do not have articles as such, Racine’s use of un and des is not based on any classical model. However, it might be thought that it was precisely the absence of the article in Latin that Racine sought to imitate through the indefinite. Consider the parallel between Terence’s sentence in The Girl from Andros and Racine’s version of it: Pro peccato magno paulum supplicii saitis est patri, Andria v.iii (‘Though the offence be great / A father may the punishment abate’, trans. F. Perry; or, more literally, ‘For (a) great crime (a) little punishment suffices for (a) father’); Un père, en punissant, Madame, est toujours père: / Un supplice léger suffit à sa colère, Phèdre iii.iii, 901–2. [Vossler sees indefinite article + proper name, e.g. un Ovide, des Mécènes as ‘the heightening of the individual to universal significance, so characteristic of the renaissance’ (Frankreichs Kultur, p. 279). It could simply be the continuation of Latin Maecenas, ‘a Maecenas’,
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Maecenates, ‘givers of favour’. Elsewhere Vossler makes much the same comment on un + noun, as in un prince dans un livre apprend mal son devoir. He is quite right to connect un prince with un Ovide, i.e. with the use of the proper name as the name of a type, for proper names originally conferred upon their holders the obligations of the values they referred to. Un Ovide means ‘one who is worthy to be named Ovid’. Un prince and un Ovide are expressions of pride in intellectual nobility."

Under the heading of de-individualisation we must also put impersonal expressions such as:

Hé quoi! votre courroux n’a-t-il pas eu son cours?
Peut-on hair sans cesse? et punit-on toujours?

Andromaque i.iv, 311–12

Here the speaker invokes a general mode of behaviour which he wishes his addressee to adopt (‘one cannot hate for ever, thus you too should not always hate’). But often on replaces a reference to a definite person:

Quel est l’étrange accueil qu’on fait à votre père,
Mon fils?

Phèdre iii.v, 921–2

‘The reception prepared for your father’ (by Phèdre in fact): Thésée sees the general principle that a poor reception has been arranged on his return home, but by whom it has been arranged is for the moment of no importance. Similarly, when Ænone returns all too soon from her errand to Hippolyte, Phèdre cries out:

Mais déjà tu reviens sur tes pas,
Ænone? On me déteste, on ne t’écoute pas.

Phèdre iii.ii, 823–4

A certain kind of modesty, and a superstitious fear of conjuring fate by naming it, an awareness of falling prey to an unavoidable fate (the fate, precisely, of not being heard), all these things stop Phèdre from speaking aloud the brutal sentence she really means: Hippolyte me déteste, Hippolyte ne m’écoute pas. Another case occurs in Andromaque iii.vii when Pyrrhus addresses Andromaque:

Madame, demeurez.
On ne veut rende encore ce fils que vous pleurez.
Oui, je sens à regret . . .

947–9

Here the reader senses how, in order to stop the worried mother from leaving, Pyrrhus first puts in her view the return of her son without stressing his own action (on peut vous rendre), and only then reveals his own self as suitor, which is what the return depends upon. Here the Racinian art of attenuation converges with the necessary attenuation of the character of the unsuccessful suitor.

[Cf. Elmire’s ambiguous use of on in Le Tartuffe iv.v. Also the point made by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, La Nouvelle Héloïse, p. 253: ‘Le je est