Tragedy, Realism, Skepticism

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Many current accounts of the relationship between tragedy and modern realism present these generic traditions as not only distinct but even rigidly opposed. Critics who trace the advent of modern realism—most often through the rise of the novel—have maintained that its origins lie in the development of the middle class, the transformation of the medieval romance, the global dissemination of European civilization, or the consolidation of bourgeois ideology and subjectivity (see McKeon 2002, 52–63; Davidson 2004, 73–100; Azim 1993; Viswanathan 1989, 23–44). In these literary histories, the generic formation of the realist novel is the antithesis to the history of "tragic" literary forms. Indeed, the cursory difference between a lengthy (prose) narrative and a concentrated (poetic) drama masks a host of tensions. The novel narrativizes middle-class values, whereas tragedies stage the fall of aristocratic or "great" houses; the realist novel purportedly democratizes literature, while tragedies regularly presuppose some form of antipathy toward the mundane or lower classes (see Aristotle 1999, 35); a "realist" or secular view of history underlies the novel, while tragedy seems to enfold human agency within the forces of divine fate;[1] the novel protracts drama across time, whereas tragedy intensifies it into momentous events;[2] the novel is concerned with subjectivity (see Armstrong 2006), while tragedy explores the dissolution of the individual, the doxastic wisdom of the chorus, or the demands of

1. In *The Historical Novel* (1983), Georg Lukács situates the works of Sir Walter Scott within the production of bourgeois consciousness and a view of history that contrasts sharply with its precursors, the epic and tragedy.

2. Again Lukács (1971, 120–30) expresses these contrasting notions about the "time" of the novel and tragic drama, though they are commonplace among novel theorists. See also Franco Moretti's (2000, 55) argument that the bildungsroman expresses the "triumph of meaning over time."

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absolute authorities; the novel emplots the quotidian, whereas tragedy dramatizes the serious; the novel developed amid tensions between the Christian tradition and the nascent secularization of modernity, while tragedy was born out of the spirit of pagan Greece.[3]

These broad polarities underlie the common literary-historical assumption that the two generic traditions are fundamentally at odds with one another. The prevailing consensus is that the realist novel developed in marked opposition to its tragic forebears. For those who hang their theoretical hats on such distinctions, it would be anachronistic to describe novels or their modes of representation as "tragic." Indeed, to position modern realism and tragedy in any relation other than "rupture" or to argue that they share comparable epistemic suppositions would be fundamentally mistaken. As one notable example, George Steiner (1961, 118) announces, "The history of the decline of serious drama is, in part, that of the rise of the novel." Steiner (2008, 30) more recently has responded to the opponents of his death-of-tragedy thesis by rejecting the notion of a "formulaic, legislative definition of 'tragedy,'" clarifying that his affirmation of tragedy's modern demise instead presupposes a "generative nucleus of supposition, of reasoned intuition, a minimal but indispensable core shared by 'tragedies' in literature." This "core" is a "dynamic negativity," a "metaphysical and, more particularly, a theological dimension" to the literary representation of the human estrangement from life—a state that Steiner also describes as an "ontological fall from grace" (32). Steiner explains that his taxonomy is concerned with "absolute tragedy," a categorization that includes *Seven against Thebes* and *Antigone* but excludes *Macbeth*, *Faust II*, and anything by Samuel Beckett. While his detractors object to Steiner's lofty but cramped "core" at the heart of the tragic, they are no more successful in positing a viable definition that evolves across literary history but that does not depend on arbitrary exclusions of certain texts. As Terry Eagleton (2003, 8) explains, the difficulty with defining tragedy "is that, like 'nature' or 'culture,' the term floats ambiguously between the descriptive and the normative." To posit any single "nucleus" to the tragic as a historical constant is to be faced with both glaring exceptions and one's own normative presuppositions.[4]

3. Michael McKeon (2002, 65–89) examines the relationship between secularization and the novel. Ian Watt (1962, 215–16) also implies this kind of dissonance between the religious imaginaries of tragedy and those of the novel in his reading of *Clarissa* and *Pamela*.

4. This relation between normativity and taxonomy plagues the very concept of "literature," as Alastair Fowler (1982, 15–19) explains.

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The notion of realism is no less problematic. For instance, in an important debate with Menachem Brinker, Nelson Goodman (1983, 271) claims that the difference between Harry Angstrom in John Updike's suburban realist *Rabbit Run* (1960) and the March Hare in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) lies "in terms not of what the pictures and stories denote but in terms of what denotes them, not in terms of how they sort things but in terms of how they are themselves sorted." Based on this dichotomy between the subject matter and modes of representation, Goodman (1983, 271) clarifies that the term *realism* refers to a "real-object-story." Following artistic practices established by Renaissance artists, modern novelists represent characters whom they identify with a "real" category rather than the "fantasy" of myth. Nonetheless, readers and writers alike recognize the subjects of "real-object-stories" as fictional creations—that is to say, as not having a referential personality in the material world. Realism depends "upon the told rather than the telling" (271; see also Brinker 1983).

In contrast to Goodman's account, Roland Barthes situates realism within what Goodman might call the "telling" rather than the "told."[5] For Barthes (1986, 145), the narrative logic or meaning of realism at first blush "depends on conformity not to the [real-world] model but to the cultural rules of representation." Realism may thus be understood as a function of literary convention. The narrative structure of, say, Émile Zola's *La bête humaine* (1890) or William Dean Howells's *Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) depends solely upon the mimetic strategies established by cultural institutions and literary forebears such as Honoré de Balzac. These conventions are expressed in devices like notation.[6] Indeed, notation in particular suggests that realist representation regularly employs speech-acts that the philosopher J. L. Austin (1975, 3) calls "constatives," which are speech-acts taken as "straightforward statements of fact."[7] Much like the structuralist view of the sign, Barthes maintains that these statements of fact—these signifiers of literary convention and narrative structure—appear to be arbitrary in referring

5. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth (1983, 90) makes a similar point to Barthes when she affirms the "power of generalization inherent in the realistic convention," which blurs the "gap between teller and tale."

6. Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan (2014, 81–82) point out that Barthes slightly alters this view in his lectures at the Collège de France in 1978–79 and 1979–80, published as *Preparation of the Novel* (2011), which attempts to correct the earlier reduction of "the horizon of meaning such that all realist details mean the same thing."

7. By linking Austin and Barthes, this essay suggests that constatives have both conventional and performative elements, particularly as they "perform" certain generic moves that give literary identity to a text.

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to the real. This idea of the underlying conventionality of realist representation has established something close to a scholarly consensus: "realism" is merely a set of gestures and conventional devices that the institutions of literary reading and writing count as real.

However, Barthes further complicates the idea that realism is the repetition of established literary norms. After observing certain recursive features of this mode of representation, Barthes (1986, 148) adds that realism connotes only the "category" of the real, as if realism were a "speech-act" signifying the absence of the signified—a magisterial insight that I extend in this essay to elucidate the philosophical affinities between tragedy and realism. Barthes's insight suggests that—more than noting the fundamental conventionality of this "verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity"—realism also depends on the invocation of a distinct philosophical concept (148). That is to say, realist modes of representation often rely on metafictional invocations of an epistemic category: the real itself. Realist narratives invoke the conventions of their generic tradition, but they also summon the concept of the real, as if such a concept were Banquo's ghost rising up to testify to the betrayal behind the appearance of things. The invocation of the "real" in realism is a type of betrayal, Barthes suggests, because the "real" is always an absent referent (148). In other words, by representing a conventionally established category of the real, realist representation takes a negation as its referential object. In Barthes's account, then, realism does not depend on a narrative arc or a particular kind of subject matter but rather a philosophical account of a reality that representation always fails to present.

By adapting Barthes's insight, this essay shows that philosophical skepticism animates the conventionality of certain realist techniques of representation.[8] This epistemological anxiety about the real provides as yet unrecognized grounds for comparison between the seemingly incompatible generic traditions of tragedy and modern realism. Such a comparison is not concerned with whether realist plots may be understood as sufficiently "tragic." Instead, this essay analyzes closely related verbal acts in tragedy and certain narrative gestures in realist representation. At one level, the literary history and philosophical gestures of the two genres find grounds for comparison in a mutually constitutive threat of

8. More than incredulity or reasonable doubt, "philosophical skepticism" refers to what Stanley Cavell (1999, 129) describes as "the failure of a particular claim to knowledge," such that this failure casts "suspicion on the power of knowledge as a whole to reveal the world."

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epistemological skepticism.[9] Ancient tragedy and modern realism thus become newly intelligible within a wider family of elective affinities—what Max Weber calls *Wahlverwandtschaften* (elective attraction) in a turn on the technical term for chemical substances that preferentially attract or combine.[10] Modern realism attracts rather than repels tragedy—a continuity that has implications at a second level. Such continuity shows how texts "perform" their genres in ways that make comparisons possible across the *longue durée* (long term) of literary history. Instead of imposing a sequence of ruptures in literary history or identifying rigid classes of characteristics that define any given genre, this essay identifies elective affinities within ostensibly unrelated texts through what I call "genre performatives."

Genre Performatives and the Problem of Knowledge

This essay's attempt to identify shared ground between tragedy and realism contributes to a body of scholarship that reconsiders the nature of genre. For example, Alastair Fowler (1982, 37) rejects the view of genres as "fixed historical kinds," as if they were a set of determinable and unchanging characteristics (e.g., the idea that the sonnet is *always* fourteen lines).[11] Fowler instead offers a conception of genres as "types" that accumulate characteristics across time but do not require all of those characteristics to "be shared by every other embodiment of the type" (38). Fowler thus establishes a more versatile account of genre, which recent scholarship by Eric Hayot (2012), Blair Hoxby (2015), and others have similarly pursued.

Many who reject rigid systems of classification view genres as dispersing—perhaps even dissipating—across time and national boundaries. By affirming the historical progression of literary types, this more contingent and granular view presents genres as so variable across time that they become incomparably varied. Fowler (1982, 47) presents a version of this idea when he offers the following prescriptive view: "Statements about a genre are statements about the genre at a particular stage—about $Z_{n'}$ not Z. Concerning a genre of unspecified date, or within very wide chronological limits, correspondingly little can be said."

9. On the troublesome implications of hypostasizing "the tragic," see Goldhill 2008.
10. For a record of the debates on translating this term, see Weber 1978, 1112n3.
11. Regarding the evolution and often hybrid generic kinds of the sonnet, see Fowler 1982, 183–85.

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The approach of this essay differs in key respects from such a radically contingent view through its attention to "genre performatives," or verbal acts in literary texts that have the illocutionary force of constituting a generic field of meaning. Performatives, according to Austin's (1979, 243–44) initial framing, are uses of language that actually "perform acts" through their utterance.[12] Austin's concern with ordinary usage in speech also applies to verbal acts in written texts. In particular, the notion of the genre performative refers to how smaller-order gestures, devices, and formal techniques come together to "perform"—that is, present to an audience but also execute or bring about—any given genre. In the cases that concern this essay, such verbal performatives include the concept terms *sparagmos* (ritual rending) and *anagnorisis* (recognition), metafictional self-reflexivity, and what narratologists call metadiegesis. These particular performatives within tragedy and realism are important because they at once help constitute texts as being a certain genre—declaring *this* as tragedy, *this* as realist narration—while these verbal acts also call attention to the text as *performing* its literary status. Much like Fowler (1982, 38) suggests, though, these performatives are not always "shared by every other embodiment of the type."

The genre performatives discussed in this essay have both constitutive and self-reflexive dimensions. Such duality is part and parcel of Austin's view of performative speech-acts. As Shoshana Felman (2003, 43) explains, Austin's theory of illocutionary speech-acts "takes into account the subversive, and self-subversive, potential of the performative." Similarly, genre performatives that constitute tragedy and modern realism often perform their own self-subversions even as they invoke generic fields of meaning. As a result of such self-subversive acts, these particular performatives have skeptical resonances. While effecting one knowledge claim by constituting the text's generic status, they simultaneously invoke the specter of that claim's failure or at least the limitations of its referentiality. Therefore, by making the synchronous form of any given genre only a supporting character, I show why the literary and often philosophical verbal acts that perform genres should take center stage in our theories of literary history.

Finally, this view of genre performatives adapts Austin's notion that even the speech-acts called *constatives* have a performative dimension. Austin (1979,

12. As Shoshana Felman (2003, 43) explains, Austin "abandons the statement/performance opposition in favor of a generalized theory of the performative: the general doctrine of illocutionary acts." "Illocutionary acts" becomes Austin's preferred nomenclature, even though he retains the distinction between uses of language as statements and uses that are performative.

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249–50) takes verbal constructions like description and reporting "off their pedestal," as he puts it, by showing "that they are speech-acts no less than all these other speech-acts that we have been mentioning and talking about as performative." Austin finds that "stating something is performing an act just as much as is giving an order or giving a warning" (251). To extend this view of verbal utterances to dramatic texts and prose narratives, even the most mundane or seemingly functional aspects of literary representation do more than disseminate information about the plot or describe the reality of the fictional world. Instead, the many kinds of verbal constructions in literary texts also perform their genres through verbal conventions. By thus wedding Barthes's and Austin's approaches to speech-acts, we find that the pleasures of genres—including their self-subversions—derive in large part from the conventionality of even their most radically skeptical performatives.

Realism, Representation, and Skepticism

Not unlike the way Fowler's theory of genre makes it conceivable to speak of "tragic types" existing across several kinds of genres, Northrop Frye imagines a continuum of modes of fiction between the mythical and the low mimetic. Such a continuum emerges through what he calls the archetypal and anagogic symbols of literary narrative that Frye identifies across a range of texts. "In myth we see the structural principles of literature isolated," Frye (1957, 136) contends, and "in realism we see the *same* structural principles (not similar ones) fitting into a context of plausibility." Frye uses the musical concept of tonality as an analogy for this shared literary structure: "A piece by Purcell and a piece by Benjamin Britten may not be in the least *like* each other, but if they are both in D major their tonality will be the same" (136). Frye's point is that what he describes as "low mimetic" realism can use an implicit simile that is archetypally the same as a metaphorical identity deployed in tragedy. The "sameness," in other words, occurs when two seemingly disparate literary forms repeat certain structural designs that, according to Frye's taxonomy, are of the same organizational archetype. For instance, Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina interprets the death of a railway porter as an omen of what Frye describes as "ineluctable fate or hidden omnipotent will" (139). In relying on a structural device conventionally associated with the plays of Sophocles, *Anna Karenina* (1877) breaks with its genre's adherence to secular representational norms. For Frye, then, texts are potentially mobile across

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the structural continuum between realism and tragedy insofar as they deploy the same "archetypal organization" (140).

While Frye illuminates the "sameness" between texts that otherwise lack grounds for comparison, his archetypal imagination is less concerned with sketching the interrelations of literary history than with local devices that have related yields in narrative design. In contrast to Frye's modest acknowledgment that realism and tragedy may share common ground, most literary histories maintain that the modern realist mode of literary production developed either independently from tragedy or in avowed denial of it. Erich Auerbach (2012, 23), for example, preserves late antiquity's "separation of styles" on the grounds that tragedy "permitted no such leisurely and externalized description of everyday happenings" as does "classical-antique realism." While such a separation obtained in antiquity, Auerbach explains that this gulf only widens in the ensuing millennia of Western literary modes of representation.[13]

As Auerbach's account suggests, part of the perceived incompatibility of ancient tragedy with its modern generic successors derives from an implicit rupture narrative, wherein a behemoth modernity has in various ways broken with the structures of thought dominant in Greek antiquity. Eagleton, on the contrary, claims that tragedy is not necessarily extrinsic to modernity. Tragedy, Eagleton (2003, 204, 205) shows, "is on hand in the modern age to deflate a vainglorious bourgeois humanism," but the idea of tragedy is also inclined "to a self-vaunting humanism which passes cavalierly over the fact of human frailty." Tragedy is neither friend nor foe of modernity. It can as easily be a generic vehicle for the forms of violent conflict in modernity as it can express a classical worldview that predates the rise of capitalism and liberal humanism. Even as modern bourgeois values ostensibly promote "a genuine respect for human life" (206), Eagleton observes that these values are likewise "sources of that destructiveness" that have "escalated" in the modern era (205). Tragedy therefore seems apropos of the "deadlock, contradiction, self-undoing, which represent the dark underside of [modern] fables of progress" (207).

Although Eagleton identifies a dialectic between modernity and the tragic, he construes the realist novel as a denial of the vexed modern condition. Eagleton observes, for instance, that the "realist novel and the political liberal make natural

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13. For its modern iteration, see the "limitations" on the "elevated style" of French tragedy in the eighteenth century (Auerbach 2012, 370–71).

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bedfellows," such that the practice of realism takes the reader "beyond the external facts into a phenomenology of them, of how their lights and shades fall differently in different centres of consciousness, and so forestall absolute judgments in this way too" (184). Realism tends toward the exception, whereas tragedy tends toward the absolute. The mantra of such realist novelists as George Eliot, then, is "Tout comprendre est tout pardonner" (To understand is to forgive everthing) (quoted in Eagleton 2003, 184). The social impulses of realist fiction seemingly obviate the sense of totalizing agony, self-undoing, and damnation characteristic of the tragic. According to Eagleton, the realist novel instead "preserves a delicate equipoise between conflicting viewpoints, shifting its focus with impeccable equity and good manners so that now one centre of consciousness and now another is lit up" (187). The facility with which realism presents human experience is, in other words, a fundamental denial of the insuperable contradictions—indeed, the antinomian structure—of modern philosophies of the subject (226). While tragedy may be at hand in modernity, Eagleton suggests that the modern realist novel nonetheless denies or tries to overcome that abiding tension through liberal sentiment.

It is hard to disagree that Eliot's sympathy differs from Aeschylus's treatment of Clytemnestra. Still, many realist texts probe the epistemic limitations of narrative precisely in moments when prose's rational capacities come into narrative view. In fact, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth (1983, 34) identifies the historical trajectory through which modern realism, following its beginnings in Renaissance art, trades on problems of referentiality:

> The realist does not imply that the object [of painting] *has* no reality apart from its aspects. . . . The realist says that the object can be grasped in any one instance only in aspect, and that fuller apprehension depends on the reductive comparisons made from a series of instances. What the spectator perceives, then, are not discrete objects "like" objects in experience, but a system of relationships. By showing sight rationalized in painting, or consciousness rationalized in the novel, the realistic work mimes the act of system-making. What is represented is the act of rationalization itself.

Ermarth charts the many permutations of these sensibilities from the birth of Renaissance humanism to the heyday of realism in the nineteenth century, showing that the "consensus" of realism is a set of procedures for representing the "act" of consciousness (181). In addition, as I have suggested by reference to Barthes, Austin, Felman, and others, the performative of what Ermarth calls "rationalization itself" has the further potential to flaunt its conventionality and thus subvert itself as a representational act. As Ermarth argues, the language of realism often

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appears to be "innocently pointing toward an objective world beyond it," but this representational mode is "self-reflexive, gesturing toward its own principles of operation" (xiii). It is during these self-reflexive gestures—when the potential for self-subversion is realized—that the realist novel and tragedy attract one another, both epistemically and formally.

Self-reflexivity and the Category of the Real

Realism, like tragedy, evolves and splinters. However, many of the genre performatives of realism buckle under their performance of epistemic contingency. Metadiegetic narration is a case in point, for it calls attention to itself in a way that often, though not always, points out the artificiality of what Ermarth describes as "the act of rationalization itself."[14] For example, in part 2 of Miguel de Cervantes's (1950, 484) *Don Quixote*, Sancho recounts discovering the Don's story "already in print under the title of *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de la Mancha*." The bachelor Sampson Carrasco explains that readers have praised various episodes in this volume: "Some favour the adventure of the windmills which seemed to your worship Briareuses and giants. Others the adventure of the fulling mills" (487). The value of these episodes later elicits debate among the novel's characters about their truth. As Hayot (2012, 122) says about this "intertextual dialogue's casual violation of the boundary between work and world," readers "see the modern artwork probing the edges of its own ontological status." *Don Quixote* is therefore what Hayot describes as "world affirming" in the sense that it "frames, conceptualizes, and normalizes the cultural experience of a period" (124). The "world affirming" performance of the scene is modern realism itself, but ontological and epistemic doubt is also part and parcel of the world being affirmed. The narrative's comedic irony "creates the substrate against which Don Quijote's imaginary world is measured, found inadequate, and made into the stuff of narrative" (122). This modern novel takes itself as the object of representation, and it consequently affirms its literary status by reference to the doubt and false fictions it both opposes and peddles.

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14. The notion of narrative framing that becomes self-reflexive is of course traditionally associated with postmodernism. Yet some scholars have analyzed metadiegetic narratives across the modern era (see Seager 1991). As Gérard Genette (1980, 228) explains, *metadiegesis* is the "universe" of the "narrative within the narrative." This essay specifically focuses on metadiegetic moments that call attention to a text's status within a genre.

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While *Don Quixote*'s self-references as literary fiction establish a self-reflexive vein in the modern realist tradition, nineteenth-century European realists such as Stendhal and Gustave Flaubert frequently employ forms of self-reflexivity that, to return to Barthes (1986, 148), represent a negated conception of the "real" by construing reality in terms of "a signified of denotation." Regarding Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (2008), Barthes (1986, 145) argues that the "aesthetic goal" of the novel's mode of description is to replace the real with its own referential denotation. Flaubert purportedly elides the real by his aesthetic presumption of the exactitude of his referential mode. Barthes explains:

> By positing the referential as real, by pretending to follow it in a submissive fashion, realistic description avoids being reduced to fantasmatic activity (a precaution which was supposed necessary to the "objectivity" of the account); classical rhetoric had in a sense institutionalized the fantasmatic as a specific figure, *hypotyposis*, whose function was to "put things before the hearer's eyes," not in a neutral, constative manner, but by imparting to representation all the luster of desire . . . ; declaratively renouncing the constraints of the rhetorical code, realism must seek a new reason to describe. (145–46)

Barthes argues that realism breaks with classical verisimilitude by divesting narrative denotation of any utilitarian or classical-rhetorical purpose. The referential details of realist narrative seemingly exist without advancing the plot, as if to "*denote* the real directly" (148). Description of ostensibly useless narrative detail becomes a convention tacitly agreed upon by writers and readers for demarcating the "real" within the narrative.

Barthes argues that this new modern aesthetic of representation, rather than actually denoting the real, only "signifies" the concept of the real. Flaubert's ostensibly useless denotation of details, including a household barometer or the sprawling description of Rouen, says "nothing but this: *we are the real*" (148). Such an affirmation, according to Barthes, suggests that "it is the category of 'the real' (and not its contingent contents) which is then signified; in other words, the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism" (148). Barthes's point is that realist denotation disintegrates the nature of the sign by purporting to represent a more thoroughgoing real. The sign is not enough, and such an epistemic lack is embedded in the aesthetic of modern realism. Barthes concludes, then, that realism discovers a "new reason to describe" in its own referential attempts to circumvent or degrade the sign through an "aesthetic" that is characteristic of "modernity" (148). The plenitude of referential detail *is* the realist referent. This conventionality veiling itself

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as the "real," in Barthes's view, manifests the tension underwriting the modern striving for the "pure encounter of an object and its expression" (148).

One problem with this account is that Barthes presents a homogeneous "modern aesthetic." His theory of modern representation posits an unvarying literary realism. In spite of this homogenizing view of modern realism, though, Barthes's account suggests how we might analyze certain verbal performatives within the realist tradition as often ironizing or casting suspicion upon the style's own narrative modes of representation. When they are attentive to the conventions of representing the "real," some realists question the tradition's avowed aspiration to present reality as it is. This self-suspicion occurs as a folding inward or a rending of the mimetic veil between "work and world" (Hayot 2012, 122). For instance, when the narrator of *Madame Bovary* recounts how Homais "had pondered over what to say, making his phraseology more orotund, more polished, and more harmonious," the reader encounters not the meeting of object and expression but Flaubert's (2008, 222) ironizing of representational style. The narrator continues to describe the speech imagined by Homais, who has been charged with telling Emma Bovary of her father-in-law's death, as "a masterpiece of prudence, judicious transitions, subtle wording, and delicacy" (222). Literary style becomes Flaubert's object of representation, but it also becomes the subject of realist irony. More than mocking Emma's view of life and setting up a realist mode of reading the world in opposition to a feminized sentimentalism or Homais's romantic prose, *Madame Bovary* narrativizes literary form as a satirical object.

Flaubert's novel clearly employs such irony to reject sentimentalism and romanticism, but *Madame Bovary* also directs this irony against literary representation's capacity for accessing the real. Indeed, in a novel ostensibly fixated upon criticizing bourgeois sentimentalism as a means for exhibiting a more thoroughgoing real, the recurring scenes of reading stage the philosophical antinomies of Flaubert's brand of literary realism. For example, Léon and Emma's engrossed and romanticized conversation about novels—"You identify with the characters; you feel as if it's your own heart that's beating beneath their costumes" (75)—calls attention to the fact that these fictional readers are "costumes" themselves. In a moment of dramatic irony, this scene of reading recalls that Léon and Emma are fictions who read bad fictions. While on a cursory level Flaubert's characterization of the couple suggests that "always belong[ing] to a lending library" (75) is no prophylactic for estrangement, the scene of reading also suggests that referentiality has become a poor substitute for the referent. Reading has

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distanced the lovers from reality. This episode thus invokes the concept of the real only to exhibit readers who fail to have access to it.

Significantly, in order for these cases of Flaubert's irony to have any purchase, they first require self-referentiality. By calling attention to themselves as artifice, such self-referential performatives undermine Léon and Emma's seemingly more pernicious fictions.[15] They also construe literary meaning, as Jacques Rancière (2004, 17) puts it, as a "relationship between signs and other signs." According to Rancière's reading, the self-referential relationship of signs in Flaubert's work mirrors a common democratic resistance among nineteenth-century prose writers, who wished to refrain from "imposing one will on another, in the fashion of the orator, the priest or the general" (18). Flaubert's novel, according to Rancière, exemplifies how realist representation creates and then sustains the contradiction of its relationship to the ordinary and the everyday: it reconfigures "the visibility of a common world" after literature's own pattern for itself (18). Rancière argues that the ambiguity of this situation led Flaubert to the conclusion that the "novelist himself has nothing more to do than to copy the books that his characters are supposed to copy" (22). Thus the perceptions and practices that constitute the narrative world of *Madame Bovary* cluster around suspicion and at times even fatalism regarding its capacity for representation. It is a realist novel that takes as one of its implicit subjects the threat or possible failure of realist narrative.

In novels like *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary*, the ironizing attention given to the realist curtain—the self-reflexivity that exposes itself as mimetic representation—conjures the philosophical ghost of a more authentic "real." However, rather than simply expressing a preference for authenticity above the sentimental or the possession of private property above the simulacra associated with the masses, these narrative gestures signal an underlying epistemic doubt, one motivated by an acknowledgment of "the narrow capacity of human understanding," as David Hume (1993, 112) wrote a century before Flaubert's novel. By calling attention to the curtain of realist representation, novels like *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary* embed within their narrative frame the skeptical insistence that nonrepresented things-in-themselves lie beyond human understanding.[16]

15. Such reflexivity is of course not confined to the realist novel. In addition to ancient tragedy, reflexivity is closely related to the mise en abyme of William Shakespeare's plays and is not uncommon in Italian comic theater. For this reason, self-reflexive generic moves are important to expanding our understanding of genre. They defy and cut across conventional generic topographies.

16. Beyond these two novels, this conventional opposition is regularly found in novels by Scott, Balzac, Howells, and Zola (see Duncan 1955).

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Such narrative devices arise out of a philosophical sense of human finitude, but they also playfully suggest that the only things to which readers have access are their own failures to access the real. These scenes signal a narrative self-awareness that depends upon a tacit acknowledgment of the novel as a representation, an expression formulated at a yawning remove from the purported object of referentiality. Both realist ironizing and nods to narrative self-awareness perform what Hume (1993, 111–12) calls "mitigated" or academic skepticism about the human capacity for certain knowledge.

The formal registers of such genre performatives have substantive historical conditions. For instance, if a skeptical epistemology provides the philosophical soil for many influential strains of realist narrative, Michael McKeon and others have shown how formulations of the problem of knowledge provide the historical seedbed for the growth of English realism. Synthesizing a material history of early modern newsprint and letters, McKeon (2002, 53) argues, "It is mainly through the uncompromisingly acerbic meditations of extreme skepticism that the doctrine of realism slowly becomes acceptable, and then authoritative, in modern thought." In McKeon's history, medieval romances are supplanted by naive empiricism, both of which are then deposed by the skeptical epistemology of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This dialectic suggests that narrative presentations of history, fact, and the authentication of truth function as wider social markers of the modern philosophical debates informing the emerging genre of the realist novel. McKeon considers, for instance, the "discovered manuscript topos" of Renaissance romance as an example of "modern" fiction becoming "conscious and skeptical of its own customary conflation of 'history' and 'romance'" (56). Even as the sixteenth-century Renaissance *romanzo* (novel) sustains a lingering epistemological doubt about the authenticity of its narrative content, this literary form contributes to the formation of a recurring structural reflexivity about the conditions for representation in the modern realist tradition.

Tragedy, Rending, and the Costs of Knowledge

The self-reflexive and self-subversive genre performatives of modern realism are part of the connective tissue that binds its literary conventions with the ancient genre of tragedy. It is true that "there is no burden of seriousness" in texts like *Don Quixote*, as Carl Good (1999, 63) says. Cervantes's novel "bears lightly the weight of its burden, never moving into the orientation of a plea or, for that mat-

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ter, the pathos of tragedy" (63). Yet pathos is only one of tragedy's many affective conventions. And given the impossibility of identifying immutable criteria for any one generic tradition, pathos and levity need not be the only grounds for comparing tragedy and other genres. Rather, as this section argues, the skepticism of the realist tradition—most often evinced in its moments of narrative reflexivity—manifests an elective affinity with many of the genre performatives in classical tragedy. Indeed, not only do these affinities complicate the traditional distinction between tragedy and realism, but the recurrence of related expressions of epistemological skepticism across such a breadth of literary history complicates the "rupture" narrative that so often remains implicit in taxonomies of genre.

While Flaubert's narrative reflexivity is less pronounced than that which is so often associated with mid-twentieth-century fiction, it is part of the same overlapping fictional thread that "devours" the "real," as William Gass (1985, 81, 83) puts it, by replacing the "real" with "this unfolding thing of words in front of us; this path the mind will follow in search of a feeling. . . . Nothing is being represented. A thought, instead, is being *constructed*—a memory." Gass's notion of fiction during his moment in literary history avowedly breaks with the modern realism of an earlier era. However, Gass's explanation relies on imagining a straw man version of representation—the denial of which allows for the ascendancy of what Gass terms the construction of words or a kind of aesthetics of surfaces. The previous section challenges the rupture implicit in construing an aesthetic of surfaces as opposed to modern realism. Instead, this straw man account obscures the degree to which novels within the realist tradition often include themselves as the objects of representation. Gass's notion of self-reflexive construction, in other words, amounts to another form of signifying (albeit with an intensified irony) the category of the real rather than the real itself. Flaubert's calling attention to the distance between reality and novel—or the costumes read by other costumes—lies on an epistemic continuum with the later narrative play of surfaces. The point is that the reflexivity of construction—the late twentieth-century notion of narrative *as* literary surface—is drawn from a realist repository. It is indebted to the conventionality of realism, which experimentalist novelists develop rather than jettison.

As a matter of fact, many of the genre performatives of modern realism and tragedy overlay and even consume referentiality with self-referentiality. Friedrich Nietzsche begins to recognize this act of devouring in his account of the modern novel in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1967). Ironically, those interested in constructing

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a cordon sanitaire around tragedy to protect it from the vulgarizing influences of modern realism often look to Nietzsche's book as an unruly but nonetheless collaborative statement on distinguishing the serious drama of antiquity from later literary forms. In tension with such appropriations of *The Birth of Tragedy*, though, Nietzsche includes within his figural repository a demonic possibility for the novelistic forces that stifle tragedy. In Nietzsche's reading, the novel grows out of the Platonic dialogue, and this "new art form" conquers poetry as the means for dialectic philosophy to produce its particular sort of knowledge (90–91). However, the modern forces of the novel, as Nietzsche puts it, "gradually overgrow its Dionysian regions and impel it necessarily to self-destruction" (91). For Nietzsche, the philosophic forces underwriting the novel's impetus toward a modern conception of "truth" compel the literary form toward an unraveling—a tearing apart of the narrative fabric.

While Nietzsche envisions limited possibilities for "self-destruction" within the modern novel, the epistemic gestures of the self-referential text as devouring the real in classical tragedy frequently takes the form of dramatic tropes that associate consumption or sacrificial rending with the costs of seeing, knowing, or failing to know. In classical tragedy, this set of tropes often congregates around the term *sparagmos*. Olga Taxidou (2004) explains that the pity and fear aroused by dismemberment and subsequent devouring in tragedy—consider, for example, Atreus's cannibalistic feast—could not be portrayed on the Greek stage, presumably because of its socially taboo status. The Aristotelian notion of the audience's horror at such consumption, according to Taxidou, "comes from the loss of subjectivity and individuality that immersion, dismemberment and cannibalism imply" (92). Dismemberment and cannibalism express the pity and fear of harm to one's physical person, but more tellingly they point to a philosophical anxiety about the "disintegration" of the self (92).

Euripides's *Bacchae* (1959) offers a telling instance of the philosophical contours of physical dismemberment and the disintegration of the self. The suffering of both Agave and Pentheus is precipitated by the latter's failure to acknowledge Dionysus, a god who, as Eagleton (2003, 268, 269) puts it, "brings with him forgetfulness of self and a compassionate release from toil" while simultaneously inciting a "horrible mixture of cruelty and sensuality." The disintegration of the self is its own form of pleasure, and thus part of the aesthetic gratification of this tragedy centers on Pentheus finally knowing what he has refused to know all along. As Euripides presents it, Pentheus is plagued by *amathia*, an obstinate

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ignorance of himself and brutality toward others. The *amathia* of Pentheus is initially opposed to the high and solemn posture of *sophos*, often translated simply as wisdom, which others exhort the young king to adopt.[17] Cadmus, for instance, urges Pentheus:

> Your mind is distracted now,
> and what you think is sheer delirium.
> Even if this Dionysus is no god,
> as you assert, persuade yourself that he is.
> The fiction is a noble one. (Euripides 1959, 168)

Cadmus construes Pentheus's denial as a "delirium," a form of madness precipitating his failure to see. Later the young king will more literally embody a version of this "delirium" under the spell of the god, but here Pentheus is not merely unwise or arrogant but more fundamentally unknowing: he refuses to see what the chorus and others repeatedly affirm. This man of *amathia* denies more than the god of tragedy, for as the chorus explains:

> What passes for wisdom [*sophon*] is not;
> unwise are those who aspire,
> who outrage the limits of man. (170)[18]

If the chorus expresses the doxastic reasoning of tragedy, what passes here as shared belief is the finitude and contingency of human knowledge.

However, in the epistemic gesture of Euripides's moral terms (*amathia*/*sophos*), the costs for *aspiring* to know what may not be known amounts to more than simple failure or misunderstanding. When Dionysus later reveals his arrest to be an illusion—a ploy to humiliate the young king—the god explains that Pentheus

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17. The meaning of *sophos* and its many cognates remains anything but self-evident, particularly in its appearance in *Bacchae*. Patricia Reynolds-Warnhoff (1997, 82) summarizes two commonly attributed connotations of the feminine form: "The word *sophia*, in the later years of Euripides' lifetime when the Sophistic movement was flourishing, had begun to shift its meaning from the original sense of 'skill' (most often 'poetic skill') towards the more intellectual sense of 'speculative wisdom,' such as we see in Plato and Aristotle." Reynolds-Warnhoff looks to the cult of Dionysus to suggest a third set of connotations (100–103). Anna Lamari (2016) elevates the symbiotic relationship between wisdom and its opposites, ignorance and madness, to a narratological level, suggesting that even madness is "neatly and carefully organized by the tragic narrator." Lamari thus shows another instance in which a thematic or literary device performs a genre's identity at a formalist level.

18. The first line of the passage is *to sophon d' ou sophia*. In its more literal translation, the line undermines its constituent term: "But that which is wise is not wisdom." This is the only appearance of the feminine form *sophia* in *Bacchae*; the neuter form *to sophon* appears five times. For more on the significance of the many permutations of the *soph-* root in *Bacchae*, see Reynolds-Warnhoff 1997.

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> fed on his desires.
> Inside the stable he intended as my jail, instead of me,
> he found a bull and tried to rope its knees and hooves. (182)

Pentheus's failure to see has now become more than a form of madness. It is a hunger, a desire or insatiability that will eventually become all-consuming. As Pentheus feeds on his desire to deny the god of tragedy, he wrestles not with the divine but with an irate and obstinate animal—the bull—which is as much an image of the young king himself as an obstinate and dangerous creature meant to punish the unbeliever. The cost of his refusal is figured as contention with an image of himself. As such, the nature of Pentheus's *amathia* depends in large part upon self-ignorance. His moral error thus performs a philosophical error—that is, his stubborn failure to see the truth about the self, a refusal to confront his own lack of wisdom.[19] Euripides therefore locates Pentheus's failures within a moral landscape that collapses into the epistemic lack at the heart of the young king's knowing voice. What we might at first blush read as defective character in fact stages the problem of recognition and a more general philosophical uncertainty about the nature of knowledge (see Goldhill 1988, 151–52).

Given that Euripides construes human epistemic contingency in terms of the vicissitudes of moral character, it is not surprising that the young king's desire to witness the Bacchic rites—to *see* what he has all along scorned—provides the impetus for his death. Doubt provides form to the *costs* of his denial, which in turn transforms recognition into a punishment. As Pentheus vows to force the Bacchae to return to the city, Dionysus calls with immediate and imperious craft, "*Wait!* / Would you like to *see* their revels on the mountain?" (Euripides 1959, 190). The offer entices Pentheus and draws him under the persuasion of the god whom he has denied. His refusal to acknowledge Dionysus along with his eagerness to observe the god's famed rites are evidence of the insatiability of the young king's hunger to know. Yet the paradox at the heart of his character also presents his criteria for certainty as the source of his own dissolution. As the messenger later recounts regarding Pentheus's violent death, the hunger of the king's *sight* becomes the ploy for being caught by the Bacchae:

> But Pentheus—
> unhappy man—could not quite *see* the companies
> of women. (202)

19. Alex Garvie (2016, 119) pushes this point further: "The use of the same moral terms, but with different connotations, by both defenders and opponents of Dionysiac worship remains a problem [at the end of the play]." Following Garvie, there is no moral resolution to this tragedy, only the uncertainty of confronting a god demanding equanimous submission to his mad rites.

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So the disguised god "worked a miracle" and places the young king in a tall fir, where his vision is unimpeded (202).

This scene of reading is telling. Pentheus's ignorance (i.e., his lack of knowledge about the Bacchae) gives rise to an insatiable hunger to see even more fully. The price for feasting on what may be known, however, is not only the literal rending of his physical person through Agave's blind violence but also the dismemberment of his self. Prior to being placed in the tall fir tree, when Pentheus returns from his palace under Dionysus's spell, he carries a thyrsus. The image of the young king mirrors the appearance of Dionysus at the beginning of the tragedy, for the king now wears a wig with long blond curls (195). He becomes the image of the truth that his moral-philosophical limitations prevented him from seeing. Pentheus then slips into delirium, and as Dionysus says, he "now think[s] as sane men do" (197). The loss of his thinking self's integrity and autonomy becomes a form of sanity, for Pentheus now perceives the truth of a reality (i.e., Dionysus as a god) that transcends his capacity and willingness to know. A maddening recognition of "the limits of man" (170) becomes sanity; delirium is the price of sober knowledge.

Recognition and the Performance of "Tragedy"

Both Pentheus's vision of the Maenads and his recognition of the deity are, much like the sudden recognition (*anagnorisis*) that recurs in Sophocles's plays, the occasion for violence, failure, and horror.[20] Indeed, the classical idea of anagnorisis categorizes the mechanism through which Oedipus meets his downfall in Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, but the term also enacts a problem of knowledge that makes Oedipus's tragedy have a distinctly generic force.[21] Recognition

20. Terence Cave (2002, 33), responding to Aristotle's original formulation in *Poetics*, offers the following description of the Greek term: "'Ana-gnorisis,' like 're-cognition,' in fact implies a recovery of something once known rather than merely a shift from ignorance to knowledge." Based on this etymology, Cave associates the term with *peripeteia* "in that anagnorisis too is said to be a change (*metabolê*) from one thing to or into (*eis*) its opposite, except that what is changed is not the 'things being done' but the degree of knowledge. Anagnorisis appears first as the epistemological counterpart or corollary of peripeteia."

21. In his theory of illocutionary acts, Austin (1979, 251) offers the idea of "force" as a further specification beyond the question of "what a certain utterance *means*": "There is a further question distinct from this as to what was the *force*, as we may call it, of the utterance." Much like Austin's theory of illocution asks us to think about the performances of ordinary language usage, we also should consider the philosophical and generic force of anagnorisis as a literary performative and epistemological gesture.

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performs the tragic, invokes an epistemic convention through which the genre becomes recognizable. While initially the costs of knowing in tragedy appear to be moral and philosophical—as the Aristotelian idea of hamartia is often taken to suggest—the force of knowing's costs also functions as a performative within an "already constituted field" (Butler 2003, 122) of verbal and literary conventions.[22]

In the previous section I showed how *Bacchae* renders Pentheus's tragedy through a conflation of epistemic and moral terms—one that leads to a rending of the self and its epistemic capacities. This conflation is not an abstractly skeptical gesture. Instead, the costs of knowing in *Bacchae* amount to a generic move that constitutes the tragedy *as* tragedy through a representational convention, which wears the garb of a philosophical position. As Terence Cave (2002, 7) says, the gesture of anagnorisis "raises the question of knowledge and more particularly of a dubious or disturbing knowledge." But its appearance in ancient tragedy often stages not only the problem of knowledge but also the problem of a genre's believability.[23] Regarding Sophocles's *Oedipus*, for example, Cave claims, "What the audience is given is not a correct reading of an enigmatic story but a device for rendering plausible a highly implausible sequence of events: the anagnorisis is itself a fiction" (261). Cave refers to the scars on Oedipus's feet, which animate the recognition of his identity as his father's murderer and his mother's lover (see Sophocles 1991, 59). In other words, in addition to unveiling the tragedy, anagnorisis is a narratological act that attempts to overcome the audience's doubts about what may be believed. Recognition is a mechanism for constituting events as "tragic," but it also performs the genre's doubts about what claims its audience may accept or deny.

In its Sophoclean and Euripidean forms, then, recognition of the truth about one's self or situation is often a damning revelation. Indeed, tragic texts' use of anagnorisis frequently evinces what Stanley Cavell describes as the costs of skepticism. Regarding such a thematic, Cavell (1999, 389) explains:

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22. This phrasing comes from Judith Butler in her response to Felman's theory of a referential act. Butler (2003, 122) claims that "an act refers only insofar as it presumes a situation upon which to act. Thus, although the referent institutes reality rather than describing it, the referent always institutes reality within an already constituted field."

23. Yet as a related example in early modern drama, Cave (2002, 276) explains that recognition tends heavily toward "contrivance," such as the Shakespearean pattern in which a play "shows its hand" or nods to its own mastery. Such a gesture has definite affinities with the rending of the mimetic veil that recurs in many realist modes of narration.

> Since the recognition is of a person in whom the protagonist is implicated, . . . the recognition of the other takes the form of an acknowledgment of oneself, one's own identity. This need not be a case, as with Oedipus, in which the hero had before the learning not been cognizant of his identity. It can be a case, as with Antigone, in which everything is known but in which the logic of recognition (viz., that it demands acknowledgment) is itself the drama. Here the tragedy is that the cost of claiming one's identity may claim one's life. In another tragedy, say *Phèdre*, acknowledgment is forbidden from a different source of law: here everything is known to one, and acknowledgment is forbidden to that one.

In Cavell's view, tragedy frequently revolves around the frustration or collapse of recognition, which he associates with "the condition of human separation, with a discovering that I am I" (389). In this family of tragic performatives, the "I" that one discovers is either damning or self-destructive. However, in the case of Euripides's man of *amathia*, the trope of seeing situates Pentheus's self-ignorance within a wider meditation on tragedy as a dramatic staging of human epistemic aspiration.

Euripides's tragedy, much like Cavell's reading of *Antigone*, elevates recognition to a moral-philosophical force that animates the drama. Before being torn apart by his mother and the other Bacchae, Pentheus no longer wrestles with the image of his obstinate ignorance but instead becomes a representation of the god he has denied. The inversion suggests more than that Pentheus has moved from *amathia* to *sophos*. In the tragedy's moral philosophy, the two categories have collapsed into one another as Pentheus's discovery becomes his undoing.[24] The punishment mirrors the error of *not seeing*. His final state of wisdom about the god amounts to ignorance about the threats to his own life, a blindness to the physical world.[25] Pentheus's state of Dionysian "sane" thinking suggests that, when confronted with the presence of the god of tragedy, the costs of sight and ignorance are one and the same thing. As Dionysus ominously says to Pentheus before the latter exits to surprise the Bacchae, "You will find all the ambush you deserve, / creeping up to spy on the Maenads" (Euripides 1959, 197). An overturning of the

24. Similarly, Simon Goldhill (1988, 147) characterizes the *sophos* of Tiresias as a dubious type of seeing: "Euripides depicts a dealer in punning sophistry, attempting to explain the ways of god to man through ludic and even ludicrous rhetorical epideixis."

25. As Sophie Mills (2006, 87–102) explains, there are numerous symbolic explanations for the figure of Dionysius in *Bacchae*, most of which are rooted not in philosophy but in debates about the fifth-century mystery cult or democratic rule. David Kovacs (2016, 107), for example, argues that "the power of the Bacchic religion, and of religion in general, is to be seen in the dreadful fate that overtakes its opponent [Pentheus] and in the bliss it promises to its adherents, a bliss that captivates even the man who is its determined enemy." Mills and Kovacs show how fluidity and multiplicity animate so much of the interpretational work required by *Bacchae*.

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man of *amathia*—a dismembering of the integrity of his person—is, according to Dionysus, the cost for the human aspiration to enter domains of knowledge marked out only for the gods. Pentheus is punished not only for opposing the infinite but also for denying the condition of his finitude. The god of tragedy is the director who stages this revelation.[26]

Even as Pentheus's tragedy performs the consequences of acquiring knowledge, the literary identity of tragedy likewise becomes the subject of moral and philosophical consideration in *Bacchae*.[27] By framing Pentheus's final discovery as a conflict regarding the Dionysian rites, the drama construes the young king's fate as a tragedy about the denial of the god of tragedy—a reflexivity that seems to shore up the genre against disputations of its value. Pentheus's fate attests to the hazards of denying tragedy its full weight or due (see Goldhill 1988, 155–56). This meditation on the legitimacy of the genre begins at the play's opening, when the Theban women have denied that Dionysus's father is Zeus. As Dionysus explains, the Theban women instead maintain that his mother Semele "had slept beside a man in love / and fathered off her shame on Zeus" (Euripides 1959, 156). The cost for their denial, much like Pentheus's later delirium, is "frenzy," a wandering homelessness among the mountains while being "crazed of mind" (156). Although Thebes "lacks initiation in [Dionysus's] mysteries," that ignorance provokes Dionysus to "stand revealed to mortal eyes as the god / [Semele] bore to Zeus" (156). The point is that *amathia* or ignorance about Dionysian "mysteries" infects both Pentheus and the wider polis. This ignorance calls for *sparagmos*, and the denial of tragedy thus demands its performance.

If tragedy is the punishment for denying the god of tragedy in *Bacchae*, I have also argued that this self-reflexive affirmation of the dramatic genre relies on a philosophical performance of human finitude. The literary form affirms its identity and importance through a certain conception of epistemic contingency. For example, both Pentheus's and the Theban women's loss of a lucid sentience—the dissolution of sanity and *sophos*—prefigures the more literal dismemberment of Pentheus's body by Agave and the other enthused Bacchae. Both the madness and the dismemberment are forms of Bacchanalia, manifesting the common convergence of suffering and pleasure that comprises the god's worship.

26. Helene Foley (2003, 344–49) even describes Dionysus as a kind of "stage manager" overseeing costumes and character actions (see also Wyles 2016, 59–61).

27. Many have likewise demonstrated that *Bacchae* operates on "metatragic" or "metatheatrical" terms (see Friesen 2015, 40–46; Foley 2003; Wyles 2016, 59, 64–66).

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Madness and dismemberment also reflexively render the conditions of tragedy. Even as the women of Thebes succumb to madness while worshipping Dionysus, Pentheus's *sparagmos* by the Bacchae marks an act of worshipping the deity. Dionysus becomes "comrade of the chase," as Agave says while carrying her son's head impaled upon her thyrsus, and the god is thus "crowned with victory" (204).

By casting Pentheus's death in terms of both the limitations of human knowledge and the genre of tragedy, *Bacchae* shows how epistemic contingency often becomes part of the verbal performance of the pity and fear that so often mark or constitute the classical genre. Pentheus's *sparagmos* invokes part of the gestural repository of this literary form of thought. The performance of *sparagmos* is often represented on amphora and other relics from antiquity as members of the Bacchic cult tearing apart lions or snakes. These renderings represent a climactic act of communion with the deity.[28] Pentheus's rending by his mother encloses the pleasures and pains of this ritual—the simultaneous denial and worship—within a ringed structure, wherein *Bacchae* opens with the consequences of Agave's denial and closes with her "unhappy" recognition of the madness of denying Dionysus. *Sparagmos* and anagnorisis are thus twinned. Pentheus's remains are also scattered among the hills where the Bacchae revel (204). This fearful symmetry yet again allows Pentheus to become like Dionysus, who in classical mythology is torn apart by the Titans before being put back together by Rhea—a story that perhaps developed out of the more extreme versions of the Dionysian sacrificial rending (see Parker 1997, 494). The price of knowledge requires a ritual of tearing apart, rending the veil between *amathia* and *sophos*. As the chorus puts it, the recognition of Dionysus's true identity brings with it the "prize of grief," which for Agave means holding a child and "streaming with his blood" (Euripides 1959, 205).

Genre Performatives in the *Longue Durée*

The costs of recognition, along with the ritual of *rending* and *consumption*, are epistemic gestures that perform generic kinds of verbal acts—the same kind of act as the self-reflexivity that often tears the mimetic veil in realist narrative. On

28. On the relation between *sparagmos*, tragedy, and Dionysian worship, see Compton 2006, 135–37; Hughes 2007. Frye (1957, 148) also analyzes the typology of *sparagmos*. Courtney J. P. Friesen (2015, 57–69) brilliantly deploys the term to describe the reception history of *Bacchae* in antiquity.

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one level, these affinities occur by what is acknowledged as *not* representable. The rending of Pentheus's body by his mother—itself an antibirth or undoing of creation—takes place off scene. Following classical conventions about what may be presented onstage, the physical rending is represented through a recounting. The philosophical import of this mode of representation is, to return to Cavell, that the cost of claiming recognition is *not* to see the thing fully. If Cadmus and Agave now see, the audience only hears or reads. As a refraction of acknowledging the deity through tearing apart Pentheus, the anagnorisis in the tragedy becomes antipresentation. We fail to see the event, the thing-in-itself. However, in contrast to Pentheus's all-too-human *amathia*, the corollary for not knowing fully is that the audience of tragedy comes to know through a mechanism that affirms and reinstates its finitude. The rending is thus for the audience's benefit but not for its seeing.

As a result of the dramatic device of Pentheus's final tragedy through an indirect representation, the trope of *seeing* as necessitating *rending* becomes further refracted at the remove demanded by the play's affirmation of the contingent nature of knowledge. In other words, Euripides's tragedy makes epistemic doubt and finitude a formal necessity of the drama and thus an act that constitutes its identity within a field of generic meaning. I have argued that the denotative iconography of the realist novel and metadiegetic narrative moments that reflect back on the realist narrative likewise trade on epistemological skepticism. Both sets of gestures arise out of the burden of attaining recognition through established literary norms. Indeed, rather than subverting the sign to attain the referent, conformity to established norms of representation often becomes in the modern realist novel a Sisyphean task whose impossibility is narratively recursive (namely, the compulsivity of denotative repetition and detail).[29] Failing to know, or recursively insisting upon the reality of what is known, or nodding that there is a more thoroughgoing reality than what can *here* be represented all threaten and often even subvert the performance of mimesis.

Analyzing the reiteration of epistemic failure across these seemingly distant historical genres establishes the groundwork for future work on comparative genre performatives. This approach provides a vantage point for clarifying the dialectic between modernity and antiquity, not only realism and tragedy, if only to situate them within a long tradition of the vexed relation between the verbal

29. On the importance of repetition in a related form of realism, see Downing 2000.

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performatives that constitute genre, the conventionality of those performatives, and the threat of epistemological skepticism. Comparative scholarship on these two genres might further consider how drastically different economic and cultural systems deploy performatives with strong elective affinities. Or based on J. Peter Euben's (1990) argument about the importance of tragedy to the establishment of democratic political theory, scholars might consider the performance of "tragedy" as a comparative basis for ancient and modern democracies. Still another possibility for comparative work on these generic traditions is to consider how this account of modern realism calls into question conventional polarities within the periodizing categories of literary history (e.g., Howellsian era realism versus postmodernism). Those moments in realist narrative when mimetic representation becomes a problem to itself allow the fiction to probe what Hayot (2012, 122) calls "the edges of its own ontological status." As I have suggested about Gass's theorization of "construction," unsettling the straw man account of realist representation allows us to place later experimental writing on a continuum with its predecessors in nineteenth-century modern realism, not to mention the classical forms of tragedy.

The affinities between certain performatives in ancient tragedy and modern realism establish grounds for comparison across the *longue durée* of literary history. At formalist and narratological levels, putting the speech-acts of tragedy and realism in relation to one another reveals the narrative mechanisms that support conceptions of genre. The gestures centering on contingency that I have analyzed in this essay are examples of how literary texts employ philosophical claims about epistemological skepticism to justify or shore up their generic forms. Pentheus's *sparagmos* in *Bacchae*, for instance, enacts a form of Dionysian worship that also satisfies the costs incurred by denying the god of tragedy. The contingency of Pentheus becomes the source for the drama's tragedy, most clearly expressed through the thematic of *seeing* and the opposition between *amathia* and *sophos*. Rather than pointing to a field of timeless and abstract thought, such a recursive affirmation of genre shows how subversions of literary claims to knowledge derive from the conventionality of a text's performance of itself.

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