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Review of Richard E. Goodkin, *The Symbolist Home and the Tragic Home: Mallarmé and Oedipus*

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The Symbolist Home and the Tragic Home: Mallarmé and Oedipus. By RICHARD E. GOODKIN. Purdue Univ. Monographs in Romance Languages, 13. Amsterdam-Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984. Pp. xiii + 203. In this comparative study, it is Richard E. Goodkin's subtly argued project to discuss dramatic tragedy and poetic symbolism as two responses to the problem of establishing what is most human in language, what Goodkin calls *home*. To be sure, Heidegger lies behind part of the author's development of this image. Yet, the principal force of the metaphor comes from a close reading of the texts under study, where the concept of home is tied to human attempts to exceed human limits, leading to self-recognition. Thus, he brings together tragedy and symbolism and shows their common vocabulary and concerns.

Goodkin's approach is to read tragedy as symbolism and symbolist poetry as tragedy. This conflation of genres is not gratuitous. In the former case, Goodkin reminds us of the original meaning of *symbolon*: one half of a mutually revered object, broken and then carried by two friends who in turn pass the halves to their descendants, guaranteeing recognition and perpetuating friendship between their houses whenever the two halves

are brought together. Goodkin traces the pattern of meaning achieved through union throughout Sophocles's play on the thematic, structural, and linguistic levels. Oedipus's tragedy brings together the human and the divine. In Goodkin's analysis, the house, which aspires to a kind of stability and yet constantly must be regenerated, is in conflict with itself in that it seeks to be more than itself. It is both the house of life (the living) and the house of death (the ancestors), the earthly (changing) home and the celestial (static) home. The notion of home exists on as many levels as does symbol and becomes a metaphor for all opposition seeking impossible union. Concerning even the play's language, insofar as the normative political discourse of Creon seeks to unite, in Oedipus, with the enigmas posed by Teiresias, "Oedipus' story is the story of language" (99).

Six of Mallarmé's sonnets are discussed. Three ("Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe," "Sur les bois oubliés," the swan sonnet) are placed within the vain attempt to join the houses of life and death, in that they treat the attempt to name and call back the dead. The other three poems ("Quand l'ombre menaçait," "La chevelure vol d'une flamme," "Ses purs ongles") reflect the opposition between the earthly and celestial houses in their effort to join the contingent to the absolute. Goodkin proposes to read them as "failed tragedies," by keeping in mind the notion of the search for home as the goal of symbolic thought. Mallarmé's quest was for a "non-conventional symbolism" where each term is "equal to itself" (seen absolutely) and fully equal to what it tries to represent. However, since symbolic thought must be expressed in figurative language, this is an impossible dream in that metaphor and metonymy are inherently unstable or unequal in the relationship between signifier and signified. In its failed attempt to raise the encounter with chance (meaning) to the noncontingent level, Goodkin sees this poetry as tragic in its implications.

The readings of the poems are uniformly subtle, and a number of new insights are presented (e.g., the relationship between Mallarmé's translation of "The Raven" and the commemorative sonnet to Poe). With great sensitivity to detail, they trace the development of the respective oppositions, on the level of theme and image as well as on that of language. Goodkin is perfectly at home in French and is also an accomplished Hellenist and Latinist. The result is that he is especially attentive to the play at different levels between words, and his analysis relies heavily on wordplay. More often than not, the results are felicitous, whether in punning (*les mots de la tribu-les maux de l'attribut*, 60), fruitful etymological punning (as with *vert* of *vertèbres*, 122), or creative interpretation of etymological pairs (the word *ongle* dedicating the word *onyx*, 160). The readings perforce are very personal ones. Yet, Goodkin stays within the linguistic possibilities available to Mallarmé (mainly through the *Litttré*), if not necessarily known to him. This book should be read by serious students of Mallarmé, particularly those working on the sonnets treated here.

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