

Mask, Word, Body and Metaphysics in the Performance of Greek Tragedy

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In an article that appeared in *New Theatre Quarterly* in 2001 (Vervain and Wiles, 2001), David Wiles and Chris Vervain reported on their practical research relating masks to the performance of Greek tragedy. In one session, Vervain and Wiles experimented with two different masks, one of which was painted with character features, while the other was of plain white plaster. While wearing the white mask, they reported:

“the actress was seen to be simplifying and focusing her movement and beginning to dance the lines. The painted mask allowed a degree of characterisation that seemed inappropriate with the white mask. The focus of the scene was altered, *since the white mask pulled the attention away from the personality of the Herald towards the scene in Troy that the Herald was describing*” (Vervain and Wiles, 2001, p.266, my emphasis).

When the mask not painted with character features was used, a greater proportion of the ‘scene’, or the ‘action’, was located in the imagination of the spectators rather than in the actual, physical location before their eyes.

In this paper I expand on this point, and attempt to create a framework in which at least some of the fragments of evidence for the masked performance of tragedy in the fifth century B.C. find a coherent home. As Vervain and Wiles (2001, p.256) note, discussion of masking traditions tends to pivot between the neutral and the character mask. Similar distinctions are often made between masks that *conceal* and masks that *reveal* (Mack, 2004, p.16). But it would appear that Greek masks were neither neutral nor character masks, and the distinction between revealing or concealing does not seem adequate to them, for as I shall argue, they seem to both conceal (the physical) and reveal (the metaphysical) at the same time. I argue that what Wiles and Vervain noted about the unpainted mask may have been true of tragic performance in general, and suggest that masks, the mythic status of tragic personae, the actors’ physicality, and the fact of performance in outdoor theatres all combined to make masks the ‘defining feature’ of not just tragic performance, but of tragedy’s *metaphysical* performance. The tragic mask, I suggest, as far as one can say anything about it, was a device for removing the actor, and the spectators, from the daily world they lived in, transporting them to a world in which the relationship between man and god was paramount. The conclusions I make relate to the performance of tragedy today, an issue that is for me, as for Wiles and Vervain, of central importance, but a discussion of these ramifications is beyond the scope of this paper and is reserved for another time.

My paper, like all speculations on Greek tragic performance, is provisional; it is an imaginative attempt to create a coherent framework in a field where no certainty is possible. Cultures, as Clifford Geertz (1973, p.14) asserts, consist of ‘interworked systems of construable signs’ (Geertz 14), symbolic systems and practices that are not comprehensible when we are not familiar with ‘the imaginative universe within which their acts are signs’ (*ibid*, p.13). Analysis, therefore, ‘is sorting out the structures of signification ... and determining their social ground and import’ (*ibid*, p.9). It is not just description, but explication, signification, social import that we strive for, ‘what it is that is being said’ (*ibid*, p.10). This kind of “thick description”, as Geertz calls it, is valid in so far as it allows us to ‘find our feet’ in, to ‘converse’ with, in a broad sense, a complex system. What one needs to do, he suggests, is to place our evidence ‘in some sort of comprehensible, meaningful frame’ (*ibid*, p.30). The value of one interpretation as opposed to another is the degree to which it can ‘bring us into touch with the lives of strangers’ (*ibid*, p.16). In the case of the masked performance of Greek tragedy we meet extra difficulties; we can never directly observe what we are analysing, and the evidence for our object of research is highly fragmentary. But we may be comforted by the injunction that facts in history are never enough anyway. As Alfred North Whitehead (1929 cited Postlewait and McConachie 1989, p.198) asserted, ‘Imagination is not to be divorced from the facts: it is a way of illuminating the facts’. And as Geertz (1973, p.20) reminds us, ‘it is not necessary to know everything in order to understand something’. This paper, then, is an attempt to understand something about Greek tragic performance.

The ‘Relatively Featureless’ Mask

A necessary point of departure for any discussion of masked performance is to determine what kind of mask it being examined. There is no single mask type and different kinds of masks have different ramifications for their use in theatre. Since there is no *certainty* about the classical Greek tragic mask, the discussion could of course end here and now. But in line with Geertz’s injunction to create a meaningful framework, and see if it can ‘bring us into touch with the lives of strangers’, I will press on.

I intend taking as my starting point the suggestions of Wiles, Calame and others, that the fifth century tragic mask appears to have been a 'relatively featureless' mask, somewhere in between the 'neutral' and the 'character' mask, with general characteristics only, and no indication of 'character' (an inappropriate term, as I shall suggest) or feeling. The distinction between 'neutral' and 'character' masks is put succinctly by Vervain and Wiles (2001, p.256): 'Whilst the neutral mask is both pre-societal and non vocalising, character masks are stylised versions of the sort of individuals who inhabit actual societies'. There have been many anecdotes about the inability of an actor inhabiting a neutral mask to speak the lines of a play text, or indeed even to agree that he/she is in a play at all (see for example Lecoq 2000, pp.29-41). Clearly such a mask is impossible for the text-heavy Greek tragedy. But nor does it seem likely that even the more heavily etched 'character' masks of Greek New Comedy would have been suitable for classical tragedy, let alone a fully inscribed character mask. Calame (1995) cites the meagre (and late) textual evidence for the issue, and suggests that at the beginning of the classical period, the tragic mask appears to have been nothing more than a cloth veil, perhaps with some simple facial features, which however also seems to have covered the whole face and head, concealing the identity of the citizen actor. Such a mask, did not, he concludes, 'indicate the type of existence the dramatic actor is supposed to "embody" on the stage; the features are not intended to impose a new persona on the *I* of the enunciator' (Calame 1995, p.101). Even taking the more defined features of Pollux's second century A.D. taxonomy into account, Calame asserts that 'the Greek tragic mask was not used in any way to identify someone with a name' (*ibid*, p.102), that is, anything more than general age and sex. Wiles asserts that 'Tragic masks of the classical period are characterised by a lack of expression' (Wiles, 2000, p.148). This kind of mask does not impose a new identity on the actor, it simply conceals his own. As far as tragic costume can be identified, it seems to have similarly concealed the physical features of the actor to a certain degree, in that it covered the length and shape of the body.

Consequences of the Featureless Mask

If the fifth-century Greek tragic mask was 'relatively featureless', some important consequences follow. To contextualise the implications I discuss below, I need first to briefly outline my own understanding of a central and distinctive aspect of the theatrical medium.

The central working relationship of theatre is a triangular interaction between the three principle arenas of 1) the 'acting event', 2) the 'mental' space of perception and imagining, and 3) the 'real' world of daily, lived experience. 'Theatrical space' is a term that encompasses physical, mental, aesthetic, socio-political, cultural, historical, and other spheres. During the 'acting event' (tragic actors and chorus performing, for example), the spectator/listeners experience and/or observe (to give phenomenology and semiotics each their due) in actual three-dimensional space (the theatre of Dionysos, for example) a layering of aural, visual, spatial, and kinetic performance textures. Performers move, speak or otherwise deliver text, relate to one another (or not), relate to the audience (or not), in an environment consisting of and articulated by the physical properties of the performance space and temporary design elements, non-verbal music and sound, light, spatial shifts and so on. I use the word 'textures' because these various elements weave together at each moment in constantly shifting and more or less sophisticated ways. Usually the 'acting event' relates directly or indirectly to an 'enacted event' that takes place in another, fictional place (Thebes, Athens etc). 'Social realities' (or socio-political and cultural spaces) of course inform all of this, as does the location of the 'performance space' or theatre building in its physical environment. In the audience we experience, process and interpret this textured data of the performance, but there is no straightforward way to analyse this processing, which we do in our own subjective, more or less ineffable ways, as studies of vision, perception and consciousness have shown. We perceive the data; we also *imagine*, we 'see' things other than what is *actual* in the visual field before our eyes, we make connections and interpret. This 'mental' or conceptual space' is the virtual space we have been familiar with for millennia, the mental space of response, making sense of, ordering sensations according to our own past experiences, personalities, needs and desires. And one can even by-pass the acting event altogether [1], with all its 'phenomenal distraction', as Bert States (1985, p.28) calls it, by resorting to private reading, where 'everything is susceptible to envisionment ... however fantastic or surreal the image, it is all real in the sense of its springing to an imagined actuality'.

The point of relevance to Greek tragedy is that this relationship varies according to historical period, style, intention and convention. In Symbolist theatre, the three 'spaces' are radically different, though crucially connected. By this I mean that what the actor does on stage is intended to minimise both the actual body in a sparse physical performance space, as well as its daily world context, in order to evoke a higher, spiritual realm (see Deak, 1993). In Realist theatre, the three spaces are relatively identical; the actors and physical setting on stage look and behave like the 'real' world, and what is intended is that the mental world of the spectator focuses on the nature of that 'real' world in both its personal and societal aspects. Other styles vary this pivotal relationship in their own way. It is in this context that the comments made by Vervain and Wiles, cited at the top of this paper, in relation to the white as opposed to painted mask and the 'location' of the action in the spectator/listener's imaginations, can be understood. Wiles and Calame, amongst others, have suggested that the effect of the 'relatively featureless' mask in performance is to increase the importance of the mental space of the spectator in Greek theatre. Calame (1995, p.111) glosses the

Greek word *prosopon* (face, mask, actor wearing a mask, and dramatic 'person') as 'what is in front of [others'] eyes', or 'that which faces the eyes [of another]' (Calame 111). In other words, it is something that is open to interpretation by the perception of the spectator. Calame (*ibid.*, p.107) writes:

"the main role [of the mask] is to reverse the way the action is represented by setting it face to face, so to speak, with its enunciated [the audience] ...the Greek tragic mask is thus ... the instigator of a confrontation with the person who watches the action on stage [the audience] and with the wearer of the mask itself [the actor]."

A number of important consequences follow from the 'non-inscriptive' nature of the tragic mask.

Being non-inscriptive, the mask does not inscribe an identity; rather the persona is created through the words and actions of the play. I am avoiding the English word 'character' in this context because of its modern, psychological implications; 'persona' has more appropriate implications of functionality rather than psychology [2]. When the play begins, we know the basic events of the plot, because they belong to the shared language of myth; we know the names of personae likely to be featured and their familial relationships to other personae. But we do not know *how* the personae in the play will be portrayed, or how the basic events in the narrative will be connected and given cause. We know that the actor who has just arrived in the performance space is, for example, Creon, but we do not know who *this* Creon is until he makes decisions within the framework of the myth as manifested and used in the plot of that particular play. There is no continuous identity for Creon, only momentary existences in whatever guise the playwright chooses to portray him in that play and performance. As Calame says, 'the tragic mask of the Greeks does not represent any individual identity; it is therefore not comparable to a proper name' (Calame 107). The featureless mask is crucial to this process of 'becoming a persona', and Aristotle's explicit emphasis in the *Poetics* (50a15-34) on action over character reinforces this notion.

While in bourgeois theatre the 'character' actor presents the spectator with a mirror image of him or herself, the frontal gaze of the Greek tragic mask is, as Calame (1995, p.111) writes, 'a gaze which offers the spectator an image of the different, of that which lies beyond himself'. The mask emphasises the 'otherness' of the wearer, that is, the actor/persona. On a very basic level, one did not generally meet people wearing masks in the agora or assembly meetings. Nor was it the case that every kind of performer wore a mask, only in tragedy and comedy where the notion of an acting persona had been introduced. What lay beyond the spectator in tragedy also lay beyond the actor, in the sense that the personae of tragedy were not of the everyday world of the Athenian audience, but beings of a mythic era long past, and who were 'closer to the gods' and 'more' in many ways than the human beings of the fifth century. The featureless mask, in veiling the face of the here and now actor without inscribing a new set of characteristics, distanced him, and the audience, from these mythic figures.

The non-inscriptive mask also has implications for the emotional content of tragedy in relation to the text. As Wiles suggests (2000:152), the plain mask acts as a canvas that the words (along with the music, movement and so on) paint with emotion. I will argue below the importance of the energised body of the actors and chorus in this process. I follow Wiles in his conviction that the tragic actor did not in any way realistically act out emotional states, a (regrettable) tendency invented by Realist theatre, and which in the context of Greek tragedy I have labelled elsewhere as 'hysterical Realism' (Monaghan, 2006; expanded in Monaghan, 2007). The heightened, literally more-than-human, mythic situations in tragedy are, in my view, only reduced to awkward human proportions by realistically portrayed emotions, resulting in, at best, an awkward and unsatisfying disjunction between mimetic and poetic, concrete and abstract representation. Tragedy was, I believe, written more for the excitement of the ears (through language and music) than the eyes, and the non-inscriptive mask allowed the actor to 'present a situation and not wallow in emotion' (Wiles, 2000, p.149) while at the same time allowing the spectator/listener's imagination to go where a personalized human face could not take it.

The 'Word-Scene Ratio'

The importance of the text in relation to the featureless mask is further elucidated by reference to what Bert States (1985, p.59) calls the 'word-scene ratio'. By this he is referring to the symbiotic relationship between what the *aural* field, or what we might call the 'audiotext' (all that is heard by the spectator/listeners, consisting principally but not exclusively of the word in Greek tragedy), generates in the listeners' imaginations, and what is manifested actually in the *visual* field, in the physical three-dimensional space. These are two of the three domains I suggested above formed the substantive triangular relationship inherent in the theatrical medium. There is a tension, says States (1985, p.56), particularly noticeable in Shakespeare, but also in Greek tragedy [3], between 'seeing and hearing', between the virtuosity of his verbal trapeze act and what is taking place in actual space. 'The very thickness of Shakespeare's world', he says (*ibid.*, p.56), 'is derived from the way in which poetry triumphs over neutral space', where by 'neutral space' he means the platform stage of the Globe theatre. The 'chief virtue' of this 'open stage', which is really a version of the Greek performance space, is that it 'served as a tabula rasa on which the actor could draw the

ever-shifting pictures of the text' (*ibid.*, p.56), relatively unencumbered by actual scenery. Such a stage is, says States (*ibid.*, p.56), a 'poetic precinct where actualities will not be insisted upon'. The striking difference between the specificity of nineteenth and twentieth century Realist locations and the lack of specificity in the stage of Shakespeare and Greek tragedy is telling in this regard. In the latter, the text 'creates a verbal world that bathes what we see before us in its quality' (*ibid.*, p.57). In the former, long descriptions of actual scenery fill one or more pages at the start of each Act. When the richness of the poetry does the job, in other words, we do not need physical enactment or facial features to do it as well. Indeed, when 'a dense metaphorical world collides with a dense real world', the result can be a 'phenomenal strangeness', like 'two artists trying to paint the same landscape' (*ibid.*, p.58) at the same time, on the same canvas. One or other, usually poetry, will then seem too much.

A very similar discussion of the relationship of text to the work of the actor is found in a chapter of Etienne Decroux's *Words on Mime* (1985, pp.33-7; see also Wiles 1991, p.209). Decroux (*ibid.*, p.35) calls text in which the word-scene ratio falls on the side of the word, 'rich', and text that falls the other way, 'poor'. Referring to the work of the actor that adds meaning, context and body to the text as 'the actor's music', Decroux suggests (*ibid.*, p.35) that 'the richer the text, the poorer the actor's music must be; the poorer the text, the richer the actor's music must be' [4]. It is in the context of both States's 'word-scene ratio' and Decroux's rich and poor text, I believe, that Aristotle's infamous comments in *Poetics* VI.19 about the relative unimportance of *opsis* make perfect sense. These two concepts help to explain why some productions of tragedy are decidedly odd.

The word-scene ratio in relation to the inexpressive mask may also have ramifications for the vocal delivery of tragic text. In *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (1998), Charles Bernstein (1998, pp.5-6) explains why so many modern poetry readings are famously dull. He regards what he calls the 'anti-expressivist' mode of poetry readings as exhilarating in their dullness, arguing that a more expressive mode of delivery (for example by a conventional, realist actor) puts the audiotext into what Erving Goffman called the 'disattend track'; that is, it ceases to live in the immediacy of our conscious attention. The Anti-expressive reading is opposed to 'acting' which:

"frames the performance in terms of character, personality, setting, gesture, development, or drama, even though these may be extrinsic to the text at hand. That is, the 'acting' takes precedence over letting the words speak for themselves (or worse, the eloquence compromises, not to say eclipses, the ragged music of the poem)" (Bernstein 1998, p.11). [5]

Bernstein introduces the notion of concave and convex acoustic spaces in this context. The anti-expressivist mode of delivery, he suggests (1998, p.11), 'works to defeat the theatricality of the performance situation, to allow the listener to enter into a concave acoustic space rather than being pushed back from it, as in a more populist reading mode (which creates a convex acoustic space)'. The spectator/listener may 'enter into' a concave space but is repelled by a convex space. The relevance of this notion to the issue of the emotive actor, discussed above, is clear.

Whether or not Greek tragic text was delivered in such an anti-expressivist mode, I cannot, of course, assert with any confidence, but certainly the verse text was 'artificial' ('made into art') and its delivery would surely to some extent have been abstracted from normal speech patterns.

Revealing another World – the Metaphysical World of Myth

The image of an actor gazing at his mask, such as we see in various ancient depictions, is the image of 'self' confronting 'other'. John Mack comments in *Masks: The Art of Expression* (1994, pp.xviii-xix), that the actor in masked performance must redefine his/her 'self', 'in order to wear the other's face and be true to it in spirit, thought and action'. But what kind of 'other' does the Greek mask relate to? Calame (1995, p.97) suggests the Greek mask inhabits 'a new, radically different reality, a mythological reality', a 'sacred reality on which the order of the community is founded'. Mack (1994, p.31) similarly notes that, in general, 'The world of masks is not a direct reflection of the real world, but rather another form of reality'. Everything about Greek tragedy suggests that this is true, and that this other reality is the reality of Greek myth, a metaphysical realm such as was being examined contemporaneously by fifth century Presocratics, albeit through their different means.

A key element in the web of textures that constitutes a theatrical performance is the body in space. Debates about the extent to which props or objects were used in fifth century Greek tragedy tend to obscure the obvious fact that even if there were such objects, their presence was far outweighed by the dominance of bodies (actors and the chorus) in space, and that the constructed presence of human bodies in an outdoor environment was *per se* an expression of the relationship of man to the cosmos. When Vervain and Wiles (2001, p.268) were working in an outdoor setting approximating ancient performance conditions, they noted that:

“we could sense in this space the function of Greek theatre to explore the relationship between tiny human beings and a huge world they cannot master. The space became a metaphysical space.”

The visual field of Greek tragic performance was not bounded by black brick walls, but included the natural world, temples and other reminders of the relationship between men and gods. The performance space of tragedy was a liminal space, and not only in the usual sense of all performance. In Greek religious cult only three gods are associated with the mask: Artemis, Demeter and Dionysos. Each of them, in one way or another, is associated with the liminal space between civilisation and disorder, interior and exterior, same and other (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1990, pp.189ff).

Vervain and Wiles (2001, p.268) also noted that they found the mask to constitute a crucial factor in the metaphysics of the space. The mask's:

“inanimate nature bridges the gap between human beings and their physical environment. Naturalistic facial acting rests on the premise that there is an absolute divide between the human being endowed with a self and the natural, inanimate world, while masked acting creates an enhanced sense of the relationship between human beings and the cosmos.”

I suggest it is the non-inscriptive, depersonalised quality of the mask that has this effect. To act as a bridge between human beings and the cosmos the mask needs to be other than personal; it also needs to activate that mental space which alone is capable of grasping concepts such as cosmos and divinity. Masking traditions tend to be about transformations from one state to another, though not always complete ones. As Mack (1994, p.17) comments, the mask conceals the wearer but instigates a masquerade, and ‘negotiating the exact line between concealment and revelation in any given situation is one potent source of the variability of masking traditions. The ‘mixture of the familiar and the strange’, he says (*ibid.*, p.16), is precisely what makes a mask intriguing, and it is a non-inscriptive mask, a mixture of ‘face’ and ‘not face’ which, I suggest, best achieves this intrigue and transports us into the world of those more-than-human mythic personae. Of particular importance in this transportation is the fact that the Greek mask was a ‘helmet’ mask, covering the entire face including the ears. I have frequently noted in workshops and performances that covering the ears as well as the rest of the head is essential if such a transformation is to take place.

The Body of the Masked Actor

In this other order of reality, the body of daily life has no place; a different order of physical reality is required, and I suggest that the un-inscribed Greek tragic mask generated a heightened, ‘non-daily’ physicality in the actor. Or to put it the other way round, in order for the tragic mask to ‘live’, a heightened physicality was called for. Indeed, as John Emigh (1996, p.275) points out in his study of masked performance, it is through the actor's body that the mask takes on a life that is otherwise only a potential. The actor's body is the meeting place of ‘self’ and ‘other’, and failure to achieve this meeting results in the mask remaining a decorative costume item.

Our perception of the actor's body in Greek tragedy has been adversely affected by a number of factors. Firstly, Plato's disdain for the body, Aristotle's focus on text and plot over performance, and the fact that it has been texts not performance documentation that has survived the ravages of time and circumstance have tended to remove the tragic body from consideration. But as Wiles asserts (2000, p.153), conventional Greek thought before Plato understood the mind or soul to reside *in the body*, not separated from the body and located in the ‘mind’ [6]. In addition, some of the few scholars who have tried to imagine the tragic body have been either diverted by the dominance in the twentieth century of realistic forms of performance, or have looked for it in misleading kinds of ancient evidence. In one of the very few articles written to date on the body of the tragic actor, Kostas Valakas (2002, p.69) notes that until the 1960s researchers generally took one of two views on fifth century B.C. Athenian tragic performance practice: either their performances were as realistic as possible within limited means – a theory has an air of positivism about it, and presupposes that the Greeks would have wanted the more ‘advanced’ realist devices of the twentieth century if only they were available to them at the time; or performers remained fairly static, apart from some conventional postures – an uninformed view of the possibilities of physical performance. A number of attempts have been made to explore the connection between the physicality and gesture of the tragic actor and that of the everyday Greek man in his daily life (Boegehold 1999; Bremmer 1991), or to identify vase paintings that seem to have responded to an ancient performance of tragedy, and to draw conclusions about physicality in tragedy and in daily life, sometimes in one and the same breath (Green and Handley 1995; Green 2002). But there is often an assumption in such works that gesture and posture either in daily life or in the practice of rhetoric would have been identical to that found in tragedy, and that, given comprehension in theatre is desirable, ‘comprehension’ in tragic gesture meant ‘realism’ [7]. These assumptions cannot be sustained.

From the point of view of theatre anthropology, the daily body – as I discuss below – is significantly different from the extra-daily body in performance; from a semiotic point of view, all the elements of the performance text inside the theatrical frame are

in quotation marks, or 'uplifted to the view'. Working from vase paintings is notoriously fraught, and often involves ignoring the specific framing procedures that are involved in creating a work of art on a specific canvas (the vase) [8], and/or leading too many scholars to make unsupportable connections between shards of evidence. Of course there must be some kind of correspondence between physicality and gesture inside and outside the theatrical frame, but it is not a direct equivalence, and the relationship can be significantly distorted. The process that transforms aspects of everyday life into art does not leave the body unmodified. In response to this difficulty, Richard Green (2002, p.93) notes that 'what is usually depicted on vases is not the process of performance but what the audience was persuaded to see, as it were the "real" Agamemnon of Greek myth-history rather than the actor playing that role' [9]. This statement I support, for it is a restatement of the central importance of the mental world of the spectator/listener that I have argued above.

Given the virtual impossibility of finding persuasive evidence for the physicality of the actor in the fifth century, we are forced to imagine it – consciously or unconsciously – from our own more recent experience. Symbolist theatre practitioners at the end of the nineteenth century believed they were recreating Greek tragic conventions when they drew on the techniques of contemporary puppet theatre to depersonalise the actor in the service of the poetic word, covering the body of the performer, using hieratic gesture, shadows instead of substantial bodies and so on. Expressionists, too, believed they were recreating the theatre of Greece, and their ecstatic physicality was of a fundamentally different order to the Symbolists. Which of these or other twentieth century models might lead us towards an image of the body of the fifth century B.C. masked tragic actor?

Vervain and Wiles (2001, p.272) concluded their article on the mask in Greek tragedy with the comment that 'The challenge for the actor in a Greek mask is to stay faithful to an authored text while not allowing mind to dominate over body – a serious challenge in a world riven by the mind-body split'. The world they refer to is, of course, our own. I suggest that the highly physicalised strand of the European and Russian avant-garde, in which there is a conscious attempt to overcome the mind/body split, may provide some pathways into the performance of Greek tragedy both in antiquity and our contemporary world. A contemporary Greek mask-maker, Thanos Vovolis, has experimented with featureless masks such as seem to have been used in fifth century. He argues that the Greek mask created 'a mind/body state of panic free emptiness' (Wiles 2000, pp.151-52). Michel Saint-Denis's (1960, p.104) experiments similarly showed what countless theatre practitioners have known for centuries: that immobilising the face makes the body more expressive. This is one of the core concepts of Jerzy Grotowski's training, and of many who work in a similar way. Vovolis claims that the eye-sockets of the mask limit peripheral vision, and that this assists the body to become more concentrated, focussed and aware of others around him. The work of Grotowski and Eugenio Barba, however, shows that the mask is not necessary to achieve this kind of awareness. Vovolis' 'mind/body' state is what Grotowski called 'a passive state of readiness', and what Barba calls the 'extra-daily' and 'pre-expressive' body. Barba (cited in Yarrow 1997, p.35) defines pre-expressivity as 'The level [of performance] which deals with how to render the actor's energy scenically alive, that is how the actor can become a presence which immediately attracts the spectator's attention'. Meyerhold called a similar state 'excitability'. Jacques Lecoq (cited in Yarrow, p.41) called it *disponibilit *, which roughly translates as 'a state of being unattached or available'.

What I am suggesting here is that the new, poetic, mythological reality to which the mask transports us to required of the actor a physicality that can be described as typical not of a 'daily' but an 'extra-daily' body. Barba (cited in Yarrow 1997, p.35) defines 'daily behaviour' as the '[mainly unconscious] processes through which our bodies and voices absorb and reflect the culture in which we live'; 'extra-daily behaviour' is 'the specific codes of movement pertaining to specific performance forms, which, in their aesthetic function, differ from daily behaviour'. Emigh (1996, p.275) points out that in order to actualise the potential of the mask, a 'specific and precise' physicality is required. In order to understand this physical specificity in more concrete terms, it may be useful to compare the physical work of Grotowski with that of Stanislavski. Vervain, for example, has proposed, in a number of workshops that I have attended [10] as well as in at least one article (Vervain 2004), that the Stanislavski system is useful for working with the mask in Greek tragedy. But what I have observed, both in those workshops and in mask work elsewhere (including some workshops of my own) is that the Stanislavski system, even the 'method of physical actions' within which he worked towards the end of his life, produces a realistic body. When a mask is added to a realistic body, the result is phenomenally disjunctive and unconvincing. Grotowski saw himself as continuing the work of Stanislavski at the end of his life on physical actions, but there was a very significant difference in focus and outcome between the two men that is pertinent to my argument. Impulses were seen by both to be 'morphemes of acting', basic, elemental beats that when prolonged become actions. Both used the term 'organicity' (the quality of being organic) to describe the force that drives impulses towards action. But for Stanislavski the word denotes the natural laws of 'normal' or daily life that, by means of structure and composition, appear on the stage and become art; the source of impulses is located in facial expression. For Grotowski, on the other hand, organicity indicates something like the potentiality of a current of quasi-biological impulses that comes from deep inside the centre of the body and moves towards the accomplishment of a precise action (Richards 1995, p.95). Grotowski's work was focused on facilitating a basic stream of life (*ibid.*, p.99), organic impulses in an unblocked body moving towards a fullness that is not of daily life (*ibid.*, p.95). He located the impulses in the place he referred to as 'the cross', that is, somewhere between the root of the

navel and the small of the back. As David Wiles (2000, p.153) notes, other cultures have identified a similar location: in Japan it is called *hara*; in India, *nabhi*.

The need for a 'specific and precise' physicality, both to animate the mask and to allow the all-important audiotext to generate the imaginative and metaphysical spaces described above, cannot be over-emphasised. Saint-Denis's (1960, p.104) extensive work with mask revealed that the mask becomes mobile and expressive through an active body, but that the mask 'can only be animated by controlled, strong and utterly simple actions'. Vovolis also points out that vocal quality is maximised when the whole body is activated as a unity (Wiles 2000, p.151), a concept explored over many years by Grotowski and the member of his group responsible for voice work, Zygmunt Molik, and easily demonstrated in a practice situation. I have also observed, in many of my own workshops and performances, the striking effect of an actor's precise physicality on the imagination of the spectator, and the same effect on the imagination when that precise physicality is accompanied by the delivery of text. It is as if there is a direct correlation between the vividness of the 'scene' in the spectator's imagination and the precision of the actor's body and vocal delivery. If, as I have suggested above, the word/scene ratio in the performance of Greek tragedy was heavily weighted in favour of the word, then the actor's heightened physicality was essential for the word to live in the mental space of those watching and listening.

I do not believe, however, that the Greek masked actor was in a state of 'possession' by the mask. Possession is equivalent to what Emigh (1996, p.22) calls 'visitation', the furthest point away from 'Me' towards 'Not Me' on his 'Continuum of Experiential States'. Emigh names the signposts along this continuum as 'Performance in everyday life' (at the 'Me' end), 'Pretending', 'Acting in Character', and 'Visitation'. This last state tends not to occur in highly scripted theatre. But nor is the Greek actor simply 'acting in character'. Rather, I suggest, he is somewhere between those two, physically mobilised yet speaking lines of sometimes great complexity. He is neither a neutral, 'pre-societal and non vocalizing' mask, nor a character mask ('stylized versions of the sort of individuals who inhabit actual societies': Vervain and Wiles 2001, p.256). He is required to be filled with the 'other' while remaining fully aware of 'self', the script, and his own actions within it. This would appear to be more or less the state termed *disponibilité* by Lecoq (cited in Yarow 1997, p.41), described as:

"an almost intangible and nearly undefinable state of being: having at one's finger tips, and any other part of the body, the capacity to do and say what is appropriate, and to have the confidence to make the choice. It's a kind of total awareness, a sense of being at one with the context, script, if such there be, actors, audience, theatre space, oneself and one's body."

I have experienced this state myself in performances based on the Grotowski training, in which the face is immobilised and the body is intensely activated, and I can vouch for the fact that it really does exist. The actor in this work does not emote in any realistic sense, because that is the responsibility of the body supported by other performance textures. The more the energy is located in the face (as in Stanislavski's late work), the less it is 'in the body' and 'through the whole body'. Richards (1995, p.103) reports that for Grotowski (and even for Stanislavski at the end of his life), emotional pumping is clearly felt by both spectator and actor instinctively as something unnatural, and in the face of such displays the spectator feels repelled.

Vervain and Wiles (2001, p.255) make the point that vase paintings which *may* be depictions of tragic performance 'apparently never show the masks in performance'. They suggest that this 'melting' of the mask into the face in such vase paintings 'is evidence of the way the actor was seen to vanish into his role'. But if what I have proposed above about the physicality of the Greek masked actor is (or rather, *might be imagined to be*) true, then a different interpretation of this 'melting convention' is suggested. As a spur to the imagination on the one hand, and to the body on the other, the non-inscriptive mask may simply not have been worth recalling. And if it is true that the painters chose to by-pass the particulars of the theatrical performance and go straight to the mythical narrative, the reason may have been that the visual dimension of tragedy, or *opsis* as Aristotle calls it, consisting primarily of an actor in a state of *disponibilité* exhibiting strong and clear physical actions, was not *visually* (as opposed to aurally and experientially) striking enough to merit the painter's attention. Or not anywhere near as interesting as what could be conjured in the imaginations of the spectators ... and painters. The *opsis* of tragedy was, I think, already an abstracted form, already in a parallel mode to that of vase painting, and for the latter to respond imitatively to the former would make no sense.

Conclusion

I have argued that when the Greek listener/spectator looked into the mask of the tragic actor and into the outdoor performance space, he saw his own metaphysical imagination. The primary site of 'action' in ancient tragedy was in the imaginations of the listener/spectators, but this effect could only be achieved by means of, and in response to, the precise and energised physicality of the tragic actor delivering complex, 'rich' text in a way that created a concave acoustic and emotional space, all of which was informed by the non-inscribed mask. The framework I have constructed may of course exist purely in my own imagination, but – or 'and'? – I hope it may in some way assist in bringing us 'into touch with the lives of strangers' as Geertz proposed.

Foot notes

- [1] I am not suggesting this was generally possible in the fifth century B.C., since it seems that the vast majority of 'dramatic experiences' were obtained through performance and not private reading, at least until the fourth century B.C.
- [2] A persona is an 'analogue' of a person, defined usefully by Garton (1972, pp.16-17) as 'Neither an individual nor a person in the full sense ... [but] an analogue limited by some kind of functionality, ... an aspect of identity, verging towards individuality and selfhood and having in consequence as much unity as his complex functionality will allow'. More than anything else, a persona is 'a function of the action of the play'.
- [3] States comments particularly on the word/scene ratio in Aeschylus. I would suggest that the concept is valid for Greek tragedy as a whole, though perhaps with slightly diminishing strength from Aeschylus through to Euripides.
- [4] Decroux (1985, p.37) adds a delightful anecdote: 'While we were rehearsing a play by Marcel Achard at the Atelier, an actor complained that a particular sentence was not explicit enough. Achard pretended to think about it, then commented from where he was sitting: "I ought to tell you that for this particular play, I had intended to have actors" '.
- [5] Decroux implicitly agrees with Bernstein's caution on the performance of poetic text. The poetry of Baudelaire, says Decroux (1985, p.35), 'is too musical for us to be able to add our music to his. The actor must stand back from the poem ... and must present the work rather than embody it; monotony becomes a virtue'.
- [6] Wiles (1997, p.2) also makes this point and takes it further (ibid., pp.76-77) arguing that before Plato's dualism (drawing, one should add, on certain of the Presocratics) that split the thinking mind and the feeling body, in Greek thought 'The centre of the body was taken to be the seat of thinking and feeling ... in the world of Greek tragedy, thinking is indissoluble from feeling ... One thinks and feels ... with the centre of one's body'.
- [7] See for example Boegehold (1999, p.7): 'We can accordingly read an Archaic or Classical Greek text as one that both author and readers read aloud. As a natural consequence of doing so, because they acted out their speech in daily life, they acted out the texts they read as well.'
- [8] Csapo and Slater (1995, p.64), for example, nominate a gesture as the standard gesture for grief in Greek art, and claim that it was so 'doubtless also in the theatre'. T.L.Webster (1956, p.xvi) in 1956 asserted that the majority of this kind of evidence 'can be accepted at its face value as illustration of actors as they appeared in theatres where the artist had seen them perform'.
- [9] In an earlier work, Green and Handley (1995, p.68) assert that 'we hardly ever see pictures of tragic actors acting: they are depicted in the reality of the parts played'. Csapo and Slater (1995, p.53) suggest that 'Artists generally ignored drama's signifiers in direct contemplation of what it signified: it is the impact of the dramatic illusion, not the performance, that one can detect on many hundreds of mythological scenes in Attic art'.
- [10] The workshop presentations were part of two symposia held by the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama and Royal Holloway, University of London, June 26-27, 2002, and 25-26 June 2003.

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