

**“What am I to say while I pour these funeral offerings”
Stage Image, Word and Action in Aeschylus’s Libation Scenes¹**

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Recent studies focusing on the connection between ritual and theatre have engendered some very fruitful interpretations of the ritual scenes performed in Greek tragedies.² These interpretations, rooted in the research on ancient Greek religion and in structural anthropology, dealt, for the most part, with the use of ritual language and action. This would appear to be a natural course for scholarly research due to the components common to both ritual and theatre and, as Patricia Easterling explains it, “ritual forms and ritual language are very fully integrated and used with great intensity in our surviving plays.”³ Nonetheless, these intriguing studies have, for the most part, dealt with only two dimensions of the theatrical use of ritual in tragedy—the dramatic analysis of the text and the function of ritual action in the dramatic pattern of the play—while they have neglected one essential component shared by both ritual and theatre: performance. The performance of ritual involves movements and gestures, words and incantations, songs, dances, costumes and accessories orchestrated according to the requirements of its different stages. These audio-visual elements are also at work in the theatre where actors perform tragedy before live spectators.⁴ This common component, the performance, constitutes, I believe, a vast domain for investigation, particularly in the light of the enduring interest in the performative components of Greek theatre and the growing interest in performance analysis *per se*.⁵

I am aware of the fact that the scarce information we have about the production of tragedy at the time of Aeschylus presents some serious obstacles to the research of the performance of tragedy. My purpose here is not to participate in the debate as to whether Greek tragedy was simply a ceremonial declamation of the written text or a full production, involving acting, movement, gesture, music and dance. In this matter, I follow Margaret Bieber, Arthur Pickard-Cambridge and Oliver Taplin who believe that stage actions, movements and gestures of significance can be worked out from the available texts.⁶ Therefore, I assume that in the new theatrical tradition evolving in Athens, Aeschylus’ plays were written to

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be performed in all their aspects. For him, as for Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare, Moliere, and Beckett, the visual language of the theatre was an essential part of the tragedy and the theatrical images he designed for his audience to see were at least as important as the textual images he designed for them to hear. Nonetheless, although we do not have records of the performances of the plays, we can, nevertheless decode the performative information and reconstruct Aeschylus' theatrical language since his tragedies were written for potential performances, and the visual information of these performances is implied to the contemporary reader by his textual images. Following Pickard-Cambridge, I believe that the rituals, ceremonies and other stage actions we find in Greek tragedy were actually represented in the Greek orchestra. "The problem is to decide with what degree of naturalism the gestures and movements thus described or implied were actually executed by the actors."⁷

This article is part of a larger research project in which I follow Aeschylus' contribution to the formation of a special visual/performative language for the Greek theatre. My working hypothesis for the research is that, for the formation of this language, Aeschylus, as did his predecessors, used a visual language that had been developing in Greece since the eighth century BC; by the fifth century BC, it had become accepted within the entire Greek world. Its components were gathered from religion, tradition, social and political organization, and found expression in the arts: epos, lyric poetry, vase-paintings, sculpture, architecture, music and dance.

Being fascinated with the performative language of Aeschylean tragedy, I have chosen to concentrate here on one ritual, the libations offered for the dead, performed in two of Aeschylus' tragedies: the *Persians*, at Dareios' grave (598-709), and the *Libation Bearers*, at Agamemnon's grave (4-161). By considering the representation of this ritual as a "performance text" that can be analyzed through its visual codes, I intend to reconstruct the performative components of these scenes and analyze their integration into Aeschylus' theatrical language in order to inquire how, in Aeschylus hands, ritual becomes theatre.⁸

The Performance of Ritual in the Theatre

The performance of any ritual in tragedy is the encounter of the theatrical performance with the actual praxis of that ritual in the religious life outside the theatre. Recent studies of Greek religion reveal that descriptions of rituals in the tragedies are so elaborate and rich in performative components that scholars use tragedy (and comedy) as a reliable source of information for the reconstruction of the rites.⁹ According to Walter Burkert, the libation ritual in *Libation Bearers* unfolds in stages and at a rhythm parallel to those of the libation ritual conducted outside the theatre.¹⁰ Following this venue, I choose to accept the description of the rituals for the dead in these two tragedies as "reflections," symbolic as well as

metaphoric, of the extensive religious system existing without. This system serves as a wellspring of associations or an “image bank” that, being common to the playwright, the actors and the audience, charges the dialogue throughout the theatrical event.

In both tragedies, Aeschylus constructed the visual/physical aspects of his fictional world by using the cultural resonance of religious ritual, and exploiting the performative patterns of those “borrowed” rituals. The performance of libation rituals for the dead took place in a well-ordered succession of the ceremonial actions. Participants formed processions while carrying objects for the performance of the ritual, such as vessels and baskets full of libations and offerings, to the grave. They performed specific movements and gestures at every phase of the ritual: They prayed, sang laments accompanied by musical instruments, and poured the libations according to custom.¹¹ When transformed into the theatrical performance, these ritual actions served Aeschylus as basic materials for the construction of powerful theatrical images which resulted from of the *mise en scène* of all the visual aspects inscribed in the text.¹² These scenic images were orchestrated according to the interrelationships created between the audio-visual components of performance—stage-design and accessories, actors (body, costume, movement, gesture), music, sound, color, and light—in each given “moment” of the performance.¹³

In the *Persians*, the libation scene takes place at a crucial moment in the plot, after the Messenger has reported the news of the Persian defeat but before Xerxes’ return. On the dramatic level, the performance of the libation on Dareios’ grave has a specific purpose, to raise Dareios’ ghost from the dead and beseech his help. For the stage performance, Aeschylus designed three theatrical images to represent this dramatic sequence:

1. The procession of Atossa and the Persian elders to the grave (598-622);
2. The libations Atossa pours while the Chorus prays and laments (623-680);
3. The appearance of Dareios’s ghost at his grave (680-842).

In the *Libation Bearers*, however, the first 584 lines present a chain of dramatic events: the return of Orestes, son of Agamemnon, to Argos; his encounter with Electra, whom Clytemnestra has sent to pour libations at Agamemnon’s grave; their mutual recognition and their resolution to avenge their murdered father. These dramatic actions are represented on stage in seven theatrical images:

1. Orestes and Pilades stand by Agamemnon’s grave, Orestes offers his father a lock of his hair (1-21);
2. Orestes and Pilades go into hiding when Electra and the chorus approach the grave in procession, lamenting, tearing their robes and beating their heads with

their hands (22-83);

3. At the grave, Electra pauses to consult the Chorus on questions concerning her performance of the ritual (84-123);
4. Electra pours libations while the Chorus laments (165,¹⁴ 124-164);
5. Electra discovers signs of Orestes' presence on the grave (166-211);
6. Electra and Orestes face each other and reveal their identities (212-305).
7. Electra, Orestes and the chorus lament Agamemnon, calling upon him to help them in their resolution to take revenge upon his murderers (305-584).¹⁵

In staging the different phases of the ritual, Aeschylus gives ample indications of the *praxis* of the libation ritual and aims at rich and complex theatrical images. First, he defines the location where the ritual takes place and the space around it; in both *Persians* and the *Libation Bearers*, the libations are poured on the graves of the dead kings, Dareios and Agamemnon. Around their respective tombs, Atossa and her chorus in Sousa, and Electra and her chorus in Argos gather to lament and pray for help according to the ritual's observance: "As the libations seep into the earth, so, it is believed, contact with the dead is established and prayers can reach them."¹⁶

Along with place, Aeschylus defines the other visual components. The objects connected with the act of libation and significant in the religious domain are emphasized in the performance of the ritual on stage. Various vessels and baskets are brought to the grave containing the offerings and the libations connected with the cult for the dead. Atossa names them while she prepares for the conduct of the ritual: "Delicious white milk from a pure heifer, glistening honey distilled from the flowers, lustral water from a virgin spring, and pure liquid taken from its wild mother, this delightful product of an ancient vine"¹⁷ (610-615). Although there are also offerings of fruits and flowers (615-620), the libations of milk, honey, water, and wine are the most important for pouring them on the grave will secure contact with the dead.¹⁸ On stage, both Atossa and Electra call the spectators's attention to the actual libations, which form the central part of the ceremony (*Persians* 621-622, *Libation Bearers* 84-105).

Costumes and colors are also indicated. In the *Libation Bearers*, Orestes remarks on the black mourning robes of the women who approach the grave (10-13). Electra wears the same robes as the chorus of Trojan slaves; Orestes can identify her among the women only because her "bitter grief marks her out"¹⁹ (17).

Movement, gesture and sound also conformed to the emotional pattern of the scenes. The rites of the cult for the dead were never conducted in a calm rhythm or in silence. Margaret Alexiou states that "since each movement was determined by a pattern of ritual, frequently accompanied by the shrill music of the *aulos*, the scene must have resembled a dance, sometimes slow and solemn, sometime wild and ecstatic."²⁰ In both scenes, Aeschylus indicated voice patterns that would fill the scenic image with sound, mostly one-syllable cries such as *O*, *EE*, *OA*, or *OI*,

or stylized tragic wails such as *aiai aiai, popoi popoi, ottotoi tototi*, sounds that served to construct the emotional tension as well as the impact that supported the rhythm of gestures and movements. In the *Persians*, we find such repetitions of sounds: “*popoi tototi*” (550-551; 560-561); “*ee, oa, oa*” (569, 570, 574 and 577, 578, 581); “*ee*” (651, 656); “*oi*” (664, 671). The epodos itself starts with “*aiai, aiai*” (672). In the *Libations Bearers*, lamentations echo each other, and cries of pain accumulate in the *kommos* of Electra, Orestes, and the Chorus on Agamemnon’s grave. Orestes’ “*O pater*” (315) is echoed in Electra’s “*O pater*” (332) and later by the Chorus’s “*O pai*” (372). Orestes’ “*Zeu, Zeu*” (382) recurs in Electra’s “*Pheu, Pheu*” (396). These cries continue: Electra’s “*io io*” (429), Orestes’ “*oimoi*” (434) and a series of “*io*”, (469, 770), and “*oh*” (466, 489, 490) voiced by the chorus towards the end of the scene.

The description of movements is also detailed. In the *Libation Bearers* Orestes offers a lock of hair, which he puts on the grave (6-7), later to be found by Electra (168). The Chorus gives a detailed description of their own movements: The sharp blows to the body (23; 423-428), the self-laceration (24-25); as well as the movements (and sounds) that accompany their lamentations: the “ruining the linen texture” while they render their robes (27-29) and the sound of their hands flailing their chests (23; 423-424).

In constructing these scenic images, Aeschylus utilized components chosen from all levels of the theatrical performance. More specifically, on the visual/pictorial level, he used stage design (the grave); accessories (vessels, baskets, offerings); actors (costumes and colors); stage action (processions, pouring of libations, movements and gestures, laceration, beating the chest and head, cutting hair); and the aural level, which takes the forms the sounds (cries, weeping, and lamenting, as well as the text of the dialogue spoken by the actors). On stage, these theatrical images reflect the customary mourning costumes of the Greek in the *prothesis* (the laying out of the corpse) and the *ekphora* (the funeral procession, entailing gestures such as reaching out toward the corpse, the tearing of robes, and, above all, the lamentation for the dead).²¹

All these elements constituted a well-organized pattern of action, one that was customary at the traditional funeral.²² We know, however, that from the sixth century on, following legislation attributed to Solon, and later, at the beginning of the fifth century with the institution of public funerals, alterations were made in the arrangements. Their size and display was diminished and women, except for close relatives, were almost entirely excluded.²³ But Aeschylus, writing in the first half of the fifth century, refers his spectators to their common past, to their tradition. With these images, Aeschylus evokes in the spectators’ memory funerary scenes from the ancient cult for the dead, which still found shadowed expression in contemporary religious customs. Even if his spectators could not relate to these images through their direct personal experience due to the current changes in the

rites, the visual images of the cult for the dead were already entrenched in Greek culture. Spectators could recognize them through the verbal images of epic poetry and the visual images depicted on vase-paintings, reliefs and funerary plaques.²⁴ To illustrate, in the *Iliad* 18, Achilles reacts to the announcement of Patroclus' death with violent despair. He gathers dark dust and pours it over his hair, his face, and his garments; he falls to the ground and tears his hair out (23-29). His slave-girls also shout and scream, while beating their breasts with their hands (30-31). During Patroclus' funeral, Achilles places a lock of his hair upon the corpse instead of the lock that Patroclus would have dedicated to the river Spercheus had he survived the war and come home (23.140ff). Similar to Achilles' laments over Patroclus, Hecabe, Priam and all of Troy mourn their hero Hector (22.403ff). Homer's description of the two lamentation scenes offers an analogy between the mourning customs of both Achaeans and Trojans, particularly over the death of their war heroes.²⁵

For the scenic image of the calling for the dead, repeated in the *Persians* and the *Libation Bearers*, the specific literary example can be found in the *Odyssey* 11.27, where Odysseus, after he has dug a trench, calls for the dead while pouring libations of honey and milk, sweet wine and water.

The pictorial images of the ceremonies associated with the cult for the dead were depicted on vase paintings in scenes of *prothesis* and *ekphora* as early as the Geometric period. Depictions of *prothesis* on burial urns from the second half of the eighth century BC show the body of the deceased placed upon a bier with large groups of mourners surrounding the body. They raise their hands to their heads and tear their hair in a manner similar to the mourning images in Homer.²⁶ Depictions of *ekphora* from the same period show a funerary procession. The bier is placed upon one chariot, and the mourners on foot are shown to behave similarly.²⁷ The hand gestures in these mourning scenes take several patterns: Either both hands are raised to the head or both hands are raised to shoulder height as an attitude of exclamation, or in a combination of the two. In his book *Prothesis and Ekphora in Greek Geometric Art*, Ahlberg notes nine different head-hand attitudes.²⁸

Vases of the Archaic period present more complex pictorial images, while repeating the pattern of gesture and movement. The women always gathered about the bier, tore their hair and lacerated their cheeks.²⁹ Whenever men appear in the mourning scene, they usually stand at the foot of the bier, their right hands reaching out toward the dead. Sometimes, one of them approaches the bier and actually places his right hand on the dead man's head.³⁰ On some of these vase paintings there is an a chariot race, similar to the one held in the funerary games at Patroclus' funeral, on the lower part of the vase under the pictorial image of the *prothesis* or the *ekphora*. In his study of the iconography of mourning in Athenian art, Alan Shapiro states that the depiction of these funeral games on the vases constituted a nostalgic allusion to epic and not a record of the norm, explaining the

fact that these games were outlawed as early as the sixth century, and that there is no proof that they were held at funerals.³¹

A similar pattern of gestures is also found on burial plaques. The men raise their right hand and the women tear their hair, lacerate their cheeks and lament.³² But there are also variations. On several plaques, one of the women is seen near the head of the deceased, holding the shoulders or the head.³³ Sometimes, a young girl appears lamenting near the bier. On another plaque, a bearded man stands at the foot of the bier, facing a group of men approaching. He reaches out to them with his arms and they hold out their right hand to him, while the women surrounding the bier tear their hair and mourn.³⁴

In constructing his scenic images, however, Aeschylus directly relates to these pictorial images of the ritual rather than to current practice. The movements and gestures of the chorus in the *Persians* and the *Libation Bearers* refer the audience to these familiar visual patterns. Furthermore, as vase paintings could allude to epic poems, we can assume that Aeschylus would use such associations and allusions to arouse those verbal and visual images already deposited in the “image bank” of his spectators. But was Aeschylus satisfied with constructing scenic images that duplicated ritual or its depictions in poetry and visual arts? How did his theatrical “writing” differ from his sources? To answer these questions, I believe, we should turn to the core of the unique performative language of the theatrical performance—the complex composition of theatrical image, words and action.

Incorporating the Ritual into the Theater

During the performance of ritual in his tragedies, Aeschylus urges the Greek spectator to enter into a dialogue with the theatrical images on stage while using the tradition and culture he brought with him to the theatrical space. However, Aeschylus neither copies reality nor his artistic sources; on the contrary, he deliberately “plays” with his audience’s knowledge of tradition and culture. Put differently, when transferring the ritual to the stage, he uses different theatrical strategies to reframe and reorganize the customary ritual and present it as theatre.

1. **The symbolic pattern of the ritual:** In both the *Persians* and the *Libation Bearers*, Aeschylus composes the theatrical images of the libation scene by means of movements, gestures and sounds from different phases of the ceremonies of the cult for the dead. He mixes the most spectacular and meaningful actions, movements, and sounds from the *prothesis*, the *ekphora*, and the libations on the grave held during commemorative days. While designing them for the stage, he “shuffles” their ingredients in order to represent, on stage, only a symbolic pattern of the ritual, not the ritual itself. He does so by creating a complex of theatrical images that form the theatrical sequence of the ritual. Thus, during the theatrical event, while he urges his spectators to discover similarities and differences from the *normal* ritual, he guides his spectator in their revelation of the new hidden

meanings of that same ritual as presented on stage.

2. Reframing the ritual: Time, participants and succession of actions:

When transforming the ritual into theatre, Aeschylus reframes the ritual by changing its time frame; that is, he unfolds the ritual according to the needs of the dramatic action rather than the “normal” sequence of events. Thus, the time frame of the ritual is determined in order to serve the dramatic intent. The ritual performed in the *Libation Bearers* is characterized by the fact that it does not take place, according to the custom, either in a *prothesis* or an *ekphora*, but long after Agamemnon’s death. Orestes and Electra even admit that they could not mourn Agamemnon properly at the time of his death. Nor does the very conduct of the ritual conform to tradition: It is Clytemnestra, Agamemnon’s murderer who, for fear of vengeance sends Electra to the grave to perform the libations. Thus, in constructing the theatrical image of the libation scene, Aeschylus recomposes the habitual funerary movements and sounds in order to echo the rites that were neglected at the time of Agamemnon’s death (8-9; 429-433).

The identity of the ritual’s participants also alludes to a “different time, different place.” The lament, an important part of each stage of the cult for the dead, was the duty of women.³⁵ By assigning the performance of the ritual to males and to foreigners, in our case, Persians in Sousa or the Trojan female-slaves who admit that they are lamenting in the Medean manner (*Libation Bearers*, 423-424), Aeschylus further distances the staged performance of the ritual from the everyday experiences of the spectators.

Along with altering the time frame and the participants, Aeschylus also re-orchestrates the unfolding of the ritual, again according to the needs of the dramatic situation. The succession of scenic images in the libation scene in the *Persians* culminates in the appearance of Dareios in direct response to the rite and its prayers. However, in the *Libation Bearers*, Aeschylus creates a complicated pattern of libation, lamentation, and response from the dead by disrupting the sequence and by multiplying the rites. Thus, Orestes first performs the ritual according to the role of the male, the son. Then Electra and the chorus perform their respective rituals. Finally, Electra, Orestes and the chorus lament together; that is, a funerary rite is performed for the third time. As the rituals are duplicated, so are the “responses”: Electra’s entrance on stage is a visual answer to Orestes’ prayer, while the lock of hair that leads to the recognition scene between brother and sister is a material answer to the libation scene Electra has just performed.

3. The *mise en espace* of the ritual on the theatrical space: By specifying the place for the ritual, Aeschylus orchestrates the relationships among the important places on and off stage. He thereby constructs the topography of the play and locates the dramatic action on a map of the fictional world of his tragedy. In both plays, the grave, which represents the site where the living and the dead meet, also represents a junction for the conflicts that motivate the dramatic action. In the

Persians, these conflicts surround the enmity between Greece and Persia, the choice between war and peace, between victory and defeat. In the *Libation Bearers*, they involve the conflicts between murderers and victims, usurpers and legitimate heirs.

This topography is also the key to the *mise en espace* of the fictional world of the play within the theatrical space of the theatre. In the ancient Greek theatre, the *orchestra* was a vast, open and “empty” space, which changed its identity according to the *mise en espace* of the fictional world into the concrete space of the theatre.³⁶ Placing the libation scenes within the *orchestra* requires that we presume that in both plays, the grave, which was the center of attention was located at the *thymele* at the center of the *orchestra*.³⁷ However, the *mise en espace* around the grave was different in the two plays. During the first performance of the *Persians* in 472 BC., the *skene* (stage building) had not yet been built; therefore, the *thymele*, situated in the center of the *orchestra*, was the only structure on the acting area. Visually, then, the grave was caught in the tension between Greece and Persia. Greece was represented in the scenic space by one of the *eisodoi*, identified as such by the entrance of the Messenger; Persia was represented by the second *eisodos*, indicated by the entrance of both Atossa and the Chorus.

At the time of the performance of the *Oresteia* in 458 BC there were two structures situated in the space of the *orchestra*: the *thymele*, and the *skene*, a temporary structure constructed at the rear edge of the *orchestra*, facing the audience. In the *Agamemnon*, the first part of the trilogy, this *skene* represented the palace of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Within the dramatic action of the *Choephoroi*, however, two places are at work: Agamemnon’s grave and Clytemnestra’s palace. These two sites were so important to the play that it was essential that they be immediately identified by the spectators at the very beginning of the performance. The opening of the *Libation Bearers* has provoked many questions concerning its *mise en scène*: Exactly where is Agamemnon’s grave located within the *orchestra*? How do we identify the *skene* with Clytemnestra’s palace? From where did Electra and the chorus enter? Where is Orestes’ and Pilades’ hiding place?³⁸ I will not enter into all these questions now. Rather, I will concentrate on the two important structures that stood within the scenic space at the beginning of the play, and on the process of their transformation into theatrical locations, that is, the palace and the grave, their interrelationships and their visual contribution to the tragedy.

As for the grave, I accept David Wiles’s conclusion that the *thymele* designated Agamemnon’s grave. I see no problem with the fact that in the context of the entire event, the *thymele* filled an additional role.³⁹ In the theatre, structures, setting properties and accessories tend to transform their identities and roles throughout theatrical performances, as required by the *mise en espace* of the fictitious world on stage. Just as the *eisodoi* could be converted from entry aisles

for the spectators to passageways indicating directions in the topography of the plot, the alter could change its role and serve as the grave of Dareios in the *Persians* and of Agamemnon in the *Libation Bearers*.

As for the identification of the *skene* as the palace, it is difficult to agree with Taplin that the palace is not fully defined at the beginning of the play.⁴⁰ It is clear that there is no reference to the palace in the text; however, in the theatrical performance, the visual image is at least as potent as the words. The fact that the *skene* is in full view of the audience from the beginning of the performance, just where it had stood before in *Agamemnon*, associates within the spectator's mind the palace in the *Agamemnon* with the structure seen in the *Libation Bearers*. Even if Orestes does not refer to the presence of the palace, the Chorus, in line 22, by saying that they exit "from the house," invites the spectators to view the *skene* as the palace. When the Chorus later describes, at Orestes's request, what had happened in Clytemnestra's chamber that night, this connection is further emphasized. In the symbolic, conceptual space of the theatre, parallel sites can be identified on stage, and the distance between them symbolically represented. The audience can then mentally link the two and understand the theatrical image the playwright creates through extrapolation. This is, in fact, one of the major roles of the spectator in the theatre.

Moreover, judging from the specifications of space and place in the *Libation Bearers*, it appears to be significant that Electra and the Chorus exit from the palace. Such movements would reinforce the position of the palace within the physical setup of the *orchestra* and contribute to the visualization of the dramatic conflicts. In using the palace-grave axis within the space of the *orchestra*, Aeschylus emphasizes the conflict between Clytemnestra, who is inside the house, and Electra and Orestes, who are outside, near the grave. In the theatrical imagery, the libation scene performed on the grave is caught in the tension between Clytemnestra, who is hiding indoors, and Orestes, who is hiding outdoors. Although it is difficult to locate the exact location of Orestes' hiding place, I believe it can be found along this same axis. I have no doubt that in the symbolic codes of the theatre, there is no need for Orestes to hide behind or in the shadow of some actual structure.⁴¹ His act of hiding is immediately understood by the audience when he leaves the center of the action and distances himself from both the grave and the palace. His hiding is also emphasized by the fact that Electra and the Chorus take no notice of him. We can assume that the Greek audience—as any audience today—was willing to accept the symbolic division of the stage into seen and unseen places, especially when there was no indication to confuse the two.⁴² Thus, this *mise en espace* of the ritual in the symbolic space of the theatre charged the libation scene with dramatic and theatrical tensions foreign to the "normal" visual image of the ritual.

4. The scenic image of ritual as a composition of visual images, words and actions: The images of epic poetry are constructed with words, and pictorial images in painting and sculpture by means of materials, shapes and colors. Theatrical images function as integrated compositions of visual images, words and actions.

Throughout the theatrical performance, the visual image on stage and the words spoken by the characters maintain complex relationships. Words serve to illustrate a pictorial image, as in the *Persians* where Atossa's words describe her stage actions (609-619) as well as those of the Chorus (660-663), or in the *Libation Bearers* where, in the parodos, the Chorus depicts its mourning movements and gestures (22-32, 80-83). But words can also contradict that image and expose its different strata and complexities. In consequence, words can enrich the visual image by unveiling the dramatic conflicts buried within, as Electra does when she is about to pour the libations (87-155). They can also expand the visual image by raising questions related to dramatic issues such as motivations and the consequences ensuing from the actions taken, as in the opening scene of the *Libation Bearers*. On the dramatic level, Clytemnestra, in her dream, is warned of the avenger's return and decides, upon the advice of a dream-interpreter, to send Electra and the chorus to enact the ritual at Agamemnon's grave in order to appease his soul. On the theatrical level, the performance of the tragedy begins as Orestes stands at Agamemnon's grave. Thus, in terms of the visual image the avenger is already present on stage before the audience. Upon encountering the procession of women bearing libations, he introduces himself to Electra; only after their mutual recognition is he able to act and realize Clytemnestra's premonition.

In staging the libation scene, Aeschylus provides additional indications that the ritual viewed by the spectator is incorrect from the start. That Agamemnon's funeral does not include all the necessary stages of the funerary rites is further emphasized by the text. Not only was Orestes refrained from showing his father respect as should a dutiful son (6-9), but Electra decries the fact that her mother has dared bury Agamemnon without the rites appropriate for a king, and without mourning (429-433).⁴³ Furthermore, the ritual itself as performed on stage, is improperly conducted. Its flow is halted several times. First, Orestes' lock-cutting and lament are interrupted by the appearance of Electra and the chorus. Afterwards, as the libations begin, Electra, surrounded by the female slaves, faces the grave and stops to ask the women around her: "What am I to say while I pour these funeral offerings?" (87).

We should recall that every ritual must be carried out with the proper integration of actions and the choice of appropriate words.⁴⁴ Electra, because she finds herself in a situation plagued by contradictory objectives, has difficulty finding those words. Standing by the grave, this conflict is revealed when she tries to follow Clytemnestra's orders, which are opposed to her own profoundest wishes

(88-101). Thus, Electra stops to question the meaning of the relations between her words and her actions, with her words pointing to the importance of *intention*.

This rift in the sequence of the ritual exposes the character of the person conducting it along with his motives, goals and the consequences of his actions. This hesitation mars the wholeness of the ritual and creates, albeit for a short time, a chaos within the accepted ceremonial pattern. At this chaotic moment, when a fissure between intention and action appears, tragedy is born.

Through these dissonances between the performance of ritual and Electra's hesitation, and between the performance of the traditional ritual and the "melodramatic" recognition scene on stage, Aeschylus focuses on individuals and exposes their *active selves*, normally hidden behind the dictates of ceremony. He thus brings into focus the true object of his inquiry—*human beings in relation to their actions*: their motivations, intentions, hesitations and their rising to the challenge of the consequences of those actions.⁴⁵

The representation of this inquiry necessitated the well-organized visual language of ritual. Through the performance of the ritual on stage, Aeschylus invited his spectators to enter the common terrain of ritual, familiar to them both intellectually and emotionally. While walking with them through this "forest of symbols"⁴⁶ he suddenly breaks the thread of the ceremony and leaves them to confront the complexity of a human problem. Thus, by adopting theatrical techniques such as reframing, reorganizing, changing of focus and extrapolation, Aeschylus invites his spectators to reveal the hidden layers of the situations presented before him.

These disruptions in the ritual, together with Electra's conflict, will reverberate in the spectator's memory and be echoed later in the play at another moment of inner conflict, that of Orestes. When Orestes is about to murder Clytemnestra and she attempts to soften him by exposing the breast that suckled him, he halts, turns to Pilades and asks, "What shall I do, Pilades? How does one murder a mother?" (899). By that moment, when the spectators recognize the conflict between the stage image (the avenger hunting his victim) and the word (the personal question), they have already acquired one essential component of the Aeschylean grammar. In the process of "playing" with the performative language of ritual as one of his basic materials, Aeschylus creates a new idiom, the language of theatre. Language that combines the visual and the verbal in order to dismantle façades, reveal inner conflicts, and conduct an intensive inquiry into the complexity of the human condition.⁴⁷

When composing the scenic images in his plays, Euripides carries on a dialogue with the scenic images that Aeschylus created, while constantly "toying" with the theatrical language that he inherited. Aristophanes also contributes his share to this dialogue, but with laughter. Fifth century BCE Greek audience enjoying Aristophanes' description of the performance of the ritual for the dead in

The Persians, were experiencing the development of a theatrical language that perfected the duality of the visual and the verbal.⁴⁸

Notes

1. This research was supported by The Israel Science Foundation administered by The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

2. See especially, Froma I. Zeitlin, "The Motif of the Corrupted Sacrifice in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*," *TAPhA* 96 (1965): 463-508; Peter Burian, "Supplication and Hero Cult in Sophocles' *Ajax*," *GRBS* 13 (1972): 151-156 and "Suppliant and Savior: *Oedipus at Colonus*," *Phoenix* 28 (1974): 408-429; Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "Chasse et sacrifice dans l'Orestie d'Eschyle," *Mythe et Tragédie en Grèce ancienne* (Paris: Maspero, 1977) 135-158; Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Le Dionysos masque des Bacchantes d'Euripide," *Mythe et Pensée II* (Paris: Maspero, 1986) 237-270.

3. Patricia Easterling, "Tragedy and Ritual: 'Cry 'Woe, woe', but May the Good Prevail,'" *Metis* III (1988): 89.

4. "Provisionally, we might conclude that (and in the Greek context at any rate) ritual was able to provide tragedy with a range of particularly potent metaphors—which tragedy likewise expressed in words, music and action—because it was intimately concerned with all the most important perceptions and experiences of the community," Easterling 108-9.

5. It is not my intention to return to the questions of the origins of tragedy. I want only to emphasize this common constituent and indicate that given that ritual was practiced in Ancient Greece and in the Orient, long before the first theatrical performances, the performative components of ritual could have important effect on the elaboration of the theatrical performative language.

6. Cf. Margaret Bieber, *The History of Greek and Roman Theatre* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961) 54-73; Arthur Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, 2nd ed., rev. by J. Gould and D. M. Lewis, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) 57 ff; Oliver Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 1-6.

7. Pickard-Cambridge 175. Cf. Also Easterling 108-9.

8. According to the semiotic standpoint, "an image, or group of images is, or can be, a text" and can become "the object of textual analysis." Marco de Marinis, *The Semiotics of Performance* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP 1993) 47. Cf. Also Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974) 87; and Michael L. Quin, *The Semiotic Stage* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995) 119-131.

9. E.g. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP 1985) 190-215; Richard Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1994) 281-367.

10. Burkert 71.

11. Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1974) 23-4.

12. I use the term theatrical image in its performative connotation. The image composed on stage through the interrelations of all the theatrical components in each temporal segment of the

performance will be, then, the accumulation of these images into one global image of the performance.

13. Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Drama and Theatre* (London and New York: Mehtuen, 1980) 69-87.

14. In the Oxford edition, the reconstruction of the scene implies transforming line 165 before line 124.

15. Calling for revenge is a very important result of lament and libations, Alexiou 22. See also, Gail Holst-Warhft, *Dangerous Voices: Women's Lament and Greek Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992).

16. Burkert 194.

17. Edith Hall, *Aeschylus, Persians* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1996).

18. Burkert 70-73.

19. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *Aeschylus Oresteia* (London: Duckworth, 1982).

20. Alexiou 6.

21. Alexiou 4-23; Burkert 192-4.

22. Alexiou 14. See also: R. Garland, "The Well-Ordered Corpse: An Investigation into the Motives behind Greek Funerary Legislation," *BICS* 36 (1989): 1-15.

23. Dem. 43.21 and Plutarch *Vit. Solon*, 12.8, 21.4-5. For a detailed treatment of the law, and the problems of authenticity, see Alexiou 14-23 and R. Seaford 74-86.

24. Cf. John Boardman, "Painted Funerary Plaques and Some Remarks on Prothesis," *The Annual of the British School of Archeology at Athens* 50 (1955) 51-66; Donna C. Kurtz and John Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971); G. Ahlberg, *Prothesis and Ekphora in Greek Geometric Art and Poetry* (Berkeley: Berkeley UP, 1979); Donna Kurtz "Vases for the Dead: An Attic Selection, 750-400 BC," *Ancient Greek and Related Pottery*, ed. H.A.G. Brijder (Amsterdam: Allard Peirson Series 1985); Allard H. Shapiro, "The Iconography of Mourning in Athenian Art," *AJA* 95 (1991): 629-656.

25. See also Sappho, Fr. 140a (Lobel and Page).

26. See, e.g. Krater from the Hirshfield Workshop, in the Metropolis Museum (14.130.14). Gisela M.A. Richter, "Two Colossal Athenian Geometric or 'Dipylon' Vases in the Metropolitan Museum of Art," *AJA* 19 (1915): 385-397, fig. 17-20, 23; Amphora by the Dipylon Master, Athens, National Museum of Archeology (804), *CVA*, Greece 1, Athens 1, pl. 8; Amphora from the workshop of Athens 894, Cleveland Museum of Art (1927.27.6); Cf. Also Y.M. Davison, *Attic Geometric Workshops* (Rome 1968) figs. 26, 29, 34-46.

27. See, e.g., Krater from the Hirschfield Workshop, Athens National Archeological Museum (990); Amphora from the Vulture Workshop, New York, Metropolitan Museum (10.210.8) Davison, figs. 25, 69; Krater by the Dipylon Mater, Paris, Louvre, (A 517), *CVA*, France 18, Louvre 11, pls. 1, 1-6; 2, 5.

28. Ahlberg 327.

29. Painted terra cotta relief from Olympus, late seventh century, New York, Metropolitan Museum (14.146.3A); Attic funerary plaque, Boston Museum of Fine Arts (27.146), late seventh century. Vermuele 1979:19. fig. 13.; Black-figure lekanis, Athens, Kerameikos Museum (41), *ABV* 19.7; Vermeule 1979:63. fig. 19 pls. 94-6; Kerameikos VI. 2, ed. Karl Kübler, (1970) p. 500 pl.106;

Fragmentary red-figure loutrophoros by the Syleus Painter, early fifth century, Oxford Ashmolen Museum (1923:269), *CVA* Great Britain 3, Oxford 1, pl. 49, 1-3, *ARV²* 250.12; Black-figure loutrophoros, early fifth century, New York, Metropolitan Museum (27.228), Vermeule 14. fig 8A.

30. See, e.g., Red-figure loutrophoros by the Kleophrades Painter, Paris, Louvre (453), *ARV²* 184.22; *CVA*, France 12, Louvre 8, pls. 56,57 and another loutrophoros, Athens National Archeological Museum, 450. *CVA*, Greece 1, Athens, pl 8-9. This gesture is reminiscent of *Iliad* 18. 317, where Achilles lays his "man-killing hands" on the chest of the dead Patroclus while crying and lamenting.

31. Shapiro 642.

32. See, e.g., Attic Black-figured plaque, sixth century, New York, Metropolitan Museum 54.11.15; Boardman 1955: 51-66 pls. 1-8; Black-figure plaque, Paris, Louvre, *MNB* 905, *ABL* 229.58. (C.H.E. Haspels, *Attic Black-figured Lekythoi*, Paris, 1936); Funerary plaque by Exekias, Berlin, Staatliche Museum 1811,1814, from Athens, *ABV²*146.22. *Add²*41.60.

33. See, e.g., Attic Black-figure plaque, sixth century, New York, Metropolitan Museum, 54.11.15, Boardman 1955: pl. 4; Phormiskos, end of sixth century BC. Athens Kerameikos Museum 691m *ABV* 678, Lullies 1946-7: 65 no. 44 pl. 13; Loutrophoros 490-480 BC. Paris: Louvre. (CA 453), *ARV²* 184.22 This gesture is reminiscent of the gesture of Andromacha, who, while lamenting Hector's death, held his head between her hands. *Iliad* 24.724.

34. Boardman, "Painted Funerary Plaques" pl.8A.

35. Alexiou 7-8, 21.

36. I use the term "empty space" according to its definition by Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1968) 1. On the manner in which Aeschylus constructs the fictional world on the orchestra of the theatre, see Nurit Yaari, "Anchoring Thebes: Defining Place and Space in Ancient Greek Theatre," *Drama* 3 (1995): 94-110 and "Tragedy as Performance: The *mise en espace* of Aeschylus' Agamemnon," *Assaph* 11 (1995): 99-115.

37. Cf. Taplin 333-338; A.F. Garvie, *Aeschylus' Choephoroi* (Oxford: Clarendon Paperback 1986) xli-xlvii; David Wiles, "The Staging of the Recognition Scene in the *Choephoroi*," *CQ* 38 (1988): 82-5.

38. For a summary of the different answers to these questions, see Taplin, Garvie and Wile note 26.

39. D. Wiles 83.

40. Taplin 336.

41. 335-7.

42. An appropriate example of this technique, although later than Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* is the opening scene of Sophocles' *Ajax*.

43. Electra cries out Agamemnon's insult: Clytemnestra had dared bury him without the ceremony befitting a king and with no laments or mourning. See, *Libation Bearers* 8, 429-33; *Agamemnon* 1541-6; the *Persians* 674; *Seven Against Thebes* 1002-3, 1058-9, 1066-71.

44. Burkert 73.

45. Vernant 14-17.

46. I use here the title of Victor Turner's comprehensive research of ritual, *The Forest of*

Symbols, 1967.

47. See Charles Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization* (Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge UP, 1982)

46.

48. Aristophanes, *The Frogs* 1027-1028.