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Giants, from a Distance

What the Greeks call *phantasia*, and we Romans (of course) visions, by which the images of absent things are represented to the mind such that we see them with our eyes and they appear to be present¹.

My aim here is to consider whether the collective space of the Ancient Greek theatre offers a model for our own theatre, which at the present time is in crisis. The crisis is, as I see it, a reflection of a wider malaise in Western culture: a sense of decline, a fracturing of community. My response is to ask: what kind of a space do we find at the beginning of Western theatre? I want to return to the earliest extant Greek play. Aeschylus' *The Persians* won first prize at the City Dionysia festival in 472 BC. It is a key work for understanding the Athenian mindset².

For a culture to flourish, people must solve the problem of collective action. They must deal with the fact that there will always be individuals who will behave selfishly within a group given the opportunity. If there are people who gain advantage by cheating, then sooner or later the group will collapse under the pressure of competitive selfishness. Hence there must be something in place to prevent free riders and bullies from destroying the community – that is, a system of norms and behaviours that rewards prosocial behaviour and punishes selfishness.

In other words, rituals are needed – rituals that bind a community together. The anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse has drawn a distinction between *imagistic* and *doctrinal* rituals³. Imagistic rituals lead to intense social bonding. Typically, they involve the enactment of traumatic ordeals that trigger transformative experiences which will lodge in the memory of participants to become a future point of shared

¹ D.A. Russell, *Quintilian: The Orators' Education*, Cambridge-London, Loeb Classical Library, 2001, p. 29 (trans. by the author).

² For this paper the following editions of the play were consulted: Aeschylus, *Persians and Other Plays*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008 (trans. by C. Collard). Aeschylus, *Persians*, Warminster, Aris & Phillips Ltd, 1996 (trans. by E. Hall). H.D. Broadhead, *The Persae of Aeschylus*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009. A.F. Garvie, *Aeschylus Persae*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009.

³ H. Whitehouse, *The Ritual Animal: Imitation and Cohesion in the Evolution of Social Complexity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022.

reference. At the same time that they create strong cohesion within the group, they can also intensify feelings of hostility between groups. The more arduous – the more costly the ritual to participants – the more cohesive the group, a process that Whitehouse calls *identity fusion*. More common are doctrinal rituals, which are designed to routinize a set of beliefs and practices in a large population. Such rituals not only presaged the arrival of large-scale agricultural societies, but the systems of complex governance required to maintain such societies – bureaucracy, law, the priesthood and so on. Whitehouse calls this *extended fusion*.

All ritual acts are to some extent costly, but some are more costly than others, and their cost is related to their power as signals to elicit commitment. What happened in Greek tragedy was that the modes of ritual that Whitehouse has defined became subject to imitation – to *mimesis*. All ritual involves imitation – in fact, over-imitation in the sense that participants will imitate actions without seeking to explain the causal properties of those actions. Rituals are a matter of faith, not logical explanation. Greek tragedies packaged together several costly signals. They were full of music. The chorus had to sing. And the chorus had to dance in synchrony and wear masks while they did so.

The masks present us with an interesting problem. David Wiles touches on it in a chapter on the use of masks in modern performances of Greek drama:

Masks are almost ubiquitous in non-western cultures. The western and Islamic worlds are unusual in regarding the mask as a mode of concealment, not a mode of revelation and transformation. It seems to be a correlative of monotheistic religions that they want human nature to be single, not multiple... Non-western masks are often bound up with the idea of possession, when one of the many divine forces of the cosmos enters a human being through the medium of the mask⁴.

To talk of possession is to stray into the territory of imagistic ritual. I think there is some validity to Wiles' distinction between Western and non-Western conceptions of the mask, but it doesn't get us closer to how the mask really functioned on the Ancient Greek stage. Why did the actors go to the trouble of wearing masks? Looking at the representations on vases of tragic and comic masks, there doesn't seem much reason to want to adopt them. No doubt they were well-made objects. But they had fixed expressions – they lacked the openness, the ambiguity that might have lent them something of the expressive quality of, say, Japanese Noh masks. Did they help the actors project their voices better? It is true that the mouthpieces are larger than with most full masks, so to some extent the mouth of

⁴ D. Wiles, *The Use of Masks in Modern Performances of Greek Drama*, in E. Hall, F. MacIntosh and A. Wrigley (edited by), *Dionysus Since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 245-246.

the mask will function like a megaphone. But a full mask muffles the voice and makes it hard for the actor to speak. Indeed, the mask strikes me as a handicap to the actor. And I think that was exactly what it was intended to be. Many modern productions of Greek tragedies have dispensed with the masks, or the singing, or have reduced the dancing to relatively simple group movements, or reduced the chorus numbers severely, as in the well-known 1993 production of *The Persians* directed by Peter Sellars⁵. I think this is partly because of the sheer difficulty of choreographing a group that must sing, dance, wear masks and communicate the poetic words of a tragic play with persuasive force while pretending to be someone else. In the case of *The Persians*, the *choregos* – who was the statesman Pericles, in his first public act as a patron of culture – had to deliver to a crowd of many thousands in the open air (and no doubt in hot sunlight) a performance that also included a ghost, a notorious tyrant and his mother, a chorus of old Persian councillors in full robes (probably played by young men), and a long descriptive speech about the Battle of Salamis by an exhausted messenger. The part of the tyrant, the ghost and the messenger were most likely played by the same person. This is not easy to pull off.

We can expand the idea of costly signalling further. It is hard to overstate the sheer scale of the effort involved in mounting the City Dionysia, which was one of four festivals dedicated to Dionysus each year. On the first day a ceremonial procession took place featuring the sacrifice of a bull and placing of the statue of the god in the theatre, followed by a competition in which ten choruses, each consisting of fifty men or boys, sang dithyrambic odes accompanied by flutes. On day two the spectators were treated to five new comic plays. Over the next three days, three competing playwrights each presented three new tragedies and one new satyr play. Overall, something like a thousand men and boys took part, and up to something like fourteen thousand people attended as spectators. This happened every spring without fail, including while the Peloponnesian War was raging. The theatre in Athens was not a small-scale affair.

Tragedians like Aeschylus set a precedent for future playwrights by concentrating on the fundamental human dilemmas their chosen situations exemplified, whether rooted in current affairs or myth. This may have been partly the influence of philosophy upon playwrights, since philosophy was accorded a high status by the aristocracy. But, significant though this use of the drama to deliver philosophy is, it is not the real agenda, because what matters to the playwright is not that the work is judged as a suitable vehicle for philosophy. The real agenda is, to use the words of Jon Elster, to maximize the value of the work as art⁶. In order to do this, criteria for judgement must be agreed upon; in what Elster calls the strong Classical sense

⁵ For a discussion of this production, cfr. E. Hall in *ivi*, pp. 176-185.

⁶ J. Elster, *Ulysses Unbound: Studies in Rationality, Precommitments, and Constraints*, Cam-

the criteria take the form of specific rules such as adherence to the unities of time and place. Elster's point is that the conscious setting of constraints constitutes the artistic stance we call Classicism; it is the insistence that expression of content demands significant form. Elster argues that the creation of a work of art can be seen as a two-step process: a choice of constraints is made, then choices within those constraints are made. The prestige accorded to the artwork is due to the fact that every added constraint creates another risk of failure and increases the cost of that failure. The point is that the artist doesn't have to take the risk but chooses to. Aeschylus did not have to introduce a second actor into the drama. He imposed a constraint upon himself in doing so. If it didn't work, the public would have taken a dim view of his competence. The game, then, as Elster shows, is to maximize your aesthetic value:

It is not merely a question of artists producing the best work they can, but of choosing a framework that is optimally suited to let them do so⁷.

Elster suggests that artistic conventions work as coordination equilibria. By this he means that conventions set rules that people prefer not to deviate from. If everyone is following the convention, there is no good reason to deviate from it; in the case of artists, not least since they need others to judge their work. Standards of judgement that everyone can understand are often formed first by artists and then by critics – Aristotle was responding to what playwrights like Aeschylus had previously laid down as conventions whilst also imposing his own preferences. Thus, not only must the artists be competent within the framework of conventions, the judges must be as well. Artistic conventions, then, mirror what Whitehouse describes as the routinization of rituals in a large-scale society.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle wanted us to view a tragedy as a unified imitation of an action rather than a collocation of individual constituents such as particular characters, music and dancing⁸. Through this focus upon the unified action Moses Finley argued that tragedy was «invested...with its highest religious quality»⁹, supported as this investment was by references to gods and oracles, by the use of myth, by choral singing and so on. But in *The Persians* very little actually happens. The root of the word drama is in the word *dran*, which means “do, act, perform”. Someone does something in the present moment, rather than someone reporting that someone did something in the past. Does talking while standing on a stage in front

bridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000. Cfr. Chapter three, *Less is More: Creativity and Constraint in the Arts*, pp. 175-269.

⁷ Ivi, p. 200.

⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, Newburyport, Focus Publishing, 2006 (trans. by J. Sachs).

⁹ M.I. Finley, *The Ancient Greeks*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1963, p. 99.

of an audience count as doing – especially if the talking is about things that have already happened elsewhere? In *The Persians* we find:

1. The chorus, who await the return of their king Xerxes, sing of their growing anxiety regarding the war.
2. The Queen Mother Atossa enters and tells the chorus that she had a bad dream, before asking them a few questions about the Athenians.
3. A Messenger enters and tells the chorus and Atossa that the Persians have been defeated at Salamis.
4. Atossa leaves, upset, and after a brief amount of lament from the Chorus returns in mourning clothes. They perform a ritual at the tomb of Darius her dead husband.
5. As their song concludes, the ghost of Darius rises from his tomb. Atossa tells him the news of Persia's defeat and humiliation. Dismayed, he blames it on Xerxes's youthful pride.
6. After Darius has gone back into his tomb, the Chorus sing about what a good king Darius was.
7. Xerxes arrives, dishevelled. The Chorus ask him about the fate of some of the Persian commanders, which turns out to have been bad. They finish the play by singing a lament for the fate of Persia.

All the fun, it seems, happens offstage, and all we get is people talking about it. Of course, this is not entirely fair, since there is singing and dancing to enjoy, and some masks and costumes, and a bit of spectacle when the ghost of Darius appears. But is this play remotely dramatic? The answer to that is yes, because by appearing on-stage and talking, the characters are doing something in the present. Yet the play seems to want to distance us from its own action, and as a result it comes across like a message from outer space, remote and abstracted from the events that inspired it.

The closer an event is to us in space and time, the more immediately relevant it becomes. If the drama finds a way to bring the characters closer to us – most obviously by giving them airtime – and then ramps up the relevance of events to those characters, the story becomes more grabbing. But proximate relevance is not the same as the feeling of a larger ultimate meaning, and this distinction is the result of the different effects of closeness and distance upon our thinking patterns. The branch of psychology that addresses the workings of psychological distance is called Construal Level Theory. The idea is that we think about objects and events – we construe them – in terms of their temporal and spatial distance from us, and we construe abstract concepts or imagined objects and events in a different way to objects that are immediately present to the senses. Indeed, we think in two different modes, “near” and “far”. We pay attention to the finer details of things that are near, although usually just a few things seem close to us at a time, which we then see as important in terms of guiding our immediate decisions and actions.

We construe something far away in less detail since it offers reduced information, and it will seem less immediately important, but the trade-off is that we can think of many things at a time in the far mode. Thus, the degree of abstraction (the construal level) is mapped onto the psychological distance, so that the far mode is more likely to be used in an abstract, symbolic way. Furthermore, if something strikes us as near or far in one way, we will tend to imagine it is near or far to us in other ways. Thus, we think about indirect experiences – ones that are not immediately present to the senses such as the past, the future and imaginary scenarios – differently to how we think about direct experiences, and this difference is reflected in our judgments, predictions and behaviour¹⁰.

Let us consider the sense of wonder and awe – of the sublime. Feelings of the sublime often seem to depend on an inhuman scale. Things that are too big or too small for our minds to fully grasp – such as ideas about the cosmos, or about atoms – lead us to translate literal distance into psychological distance, and with greater distance we tend to think in higher-level, abstract terms about the subject. Hence, art that summons up feelings of the sublime often has a built-in ambiguity, rather as objects, when looked at from far away, are misty. Things that are profoundly distant from us remind us that we are not the centre or the measure of things, and that the vast majority of what exists is unknown to us. These phenomena are not close to us: they are unutterably strange; they are not “about” us, we don’t know what to do with them, and perhaps that’s why they can cause feelings of dismay as well as wonder.

The drama, though, tries to bring fictional people closer to us. The two main ways of achieving that are by choosing stories that highlight socially relevant information through an imitation, and by choosing a mode of communication that reduces the psychologically distant “not here, not now” by placing imagined persons and events in front of our eyes and ears – using what the Greeks called *phantasia*, about which more in a moment. Even so, Athenian tragedies usually presented stories drawn from a distant, legendary history – in that respect *The Persians* is unusual, though probably not unique. The Trojan War, a rich repository of material for the playwrights, was considered a matter of historical truth, but it was also a story populated by gods and demi-gods. Thus, the tragedies might be seen as sublime in their effects, and this feeling was enhanced by the fact that they were staged in a vast open-air space, where the actors in their archetypal masks and *kithurnoi* would have seemed distant from the spectators and at the same time curiously large, like giants.

¹⁰ Y. Trope and N. Liberman, *Construal-Level Theory of Psychological Distance*, in «Psychological Review», CXVII, 2010, n. 2, pp. 440-463. For a recent bibliometric analysis of the theory, cfr. S. Adler and M. Sarstedt, *Mapping the jungle: A bibliometric analysis of research into construal level theory*, in «Psychology and Marketing», CXVII, 2021, n. 9, pp. 1367-1383.

With *The Persians*, the most powerful presence on stage is a supernatural character – the ghost of Darius, who rises from his tomb to condemn his son Xerxes for foolishly attempting to invade Greece. Darius is more than just a ghost: he is an ancestor, and he carries the cultural weight of the ancestor. Darius is something of a paradox. On the one hand, he is not like the spirits of hunter gatherer or forager communities because, while they certainly required appeasement through rituals, they seemed as a rule uninterested in pronouncing judgements upon human behaviour. The reason for this is that they presided over small tribes, where everyone knew each other and saw each other on a regular basis, so it was much harder to cover one's tracks and escape detection and punishment. Thus, the tribal members did not need their spirits to approve or condemn their actions.

On the other hand, Darius does not behave like the Big Gods of the Axial Age that are described by Ara Norenzayan in *Big Gods*¹¹. Those gods are omniscient, omnipotent and moralizing agents who enable small societies to grow into big ones by acting as a kind of supernatural surveillance system that creates an atmosphere of cooperation among people. Big Gods thrive on the premise that humans are nicer when they think they are being watched. Atossa is described as the wife of the Persians' god (*theou*) and mother of a god (l. 157). The use of *theou* is significant, since in no other surviving fifth century tragedy do we find a king described with this word. In line 711, Atossa says that, when he was alive, Darius lived like a god – or perhaps as a god: the Greek is ambiguous. In any case, the best explanation seems to be that Aeschylus was hinting at the Persian ritual of honouring the dead king: Darius was posthumously deified, and this may have been seen by the Athenian spectators as a distinctively Persian practice. Yet, the Greeks too honoured their ancestors. They even had special festivals of the dead, at which it was believed their forefathers would rise from the underworld and walk the city streets¹². Most importantly, though, Darius differs from the Big Gods in that he does not intervene. He is neither omnipotent nor omniscient and comes across as all too human in his emotional reaction to the news of his son's disastrous mistakes.

Complex societies require institutions that in turn exert costs in terms of coordination and control of large numbers of people. The City Dionysia was such an institution. In competitive situations, those societies that are better able to manage such coordination as is needed to run costly institutions will win out. By the time Aeschylus wrote *The Persians* there was a powerful motive for coordination: the threat of invasion from the gigantic Persian (Achaemenid) Empire. The empire emerged from around 550 BCE when King Cyrus with his son Cambyses took control over Lydian, Babylonian and Egyptian territories, and along with those

¹¹ A. Norenzayan, *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict*, Princeton, NJ and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2013.

¹² J.D. Mikalson, *Athenian Popular Religion*, London, Chapel Hill, 1983, pp. 96-97.

absorbed into his kingdom the Medes, an ancient people of the Northwest. The empire spread west as far as into Egypt, and east into central Asia and the Indus region. North of Athens, it reached to Thrace and Macedonia, and during the Persian wars made headway into mainland Greece. After the Ionian Revolt of 500-494 BCE, in which Athens was involved, a campaign to punish the Athenians – with whom the Persians had previously had a treaty – was begun by King Darius (the ghost of *The Persians*) and continued by his son Xerxes (the tragic protagonist of the play). On two separate occasions the Athenians had to evacuate their city, whereupon it was taken by the Persians. It is likely that Xerxes wanted to secure recognition from the Greeks of his sovereignty through setting up a series of Greek satellite powers under him. Where the Persians suffered defeats, as at Marathon (in which Aeschylus fought), Salamis (to which some say Aeschylus was a witness) and Plataea, this did not mean the end of the Persian empire; arguably, that was not achieved until the reign of Alexander the Great. Rather, it meant that Athens realigned its political priorities by stamping out expressions of allegiance to Persia and by the creation of a strong, politically independent culture. By around 460 BCE, Persia had retreated to the Eastern part of the Mediterranean and into Asia Minor, and Athens had become a force to be reckoned with in the region¹³.

Just how extensive had been the reach of the Persian empire is suggested in the play by passages in which the names of places and leaders aligned with Persia are given. In the parodos (ll. 21-51), for instance, the Chorus recites the names of Persian commanders and satraps: Amistres, Artaphrenes, Megabates, Astaspes, and so on. Edith Hall notes how the sounds of these names are part of a wider linguistic strategy by the playwright «to create within Greek diction the impression of barbarian speech [...] the lists imply both the strangeness of the Persians' language and their superiority in numerical terms»¹⁴.

The chorus are a collective body, not an assortment of individuals. Given the fact that it was young men who made up the chorus, they must on occasion have seemed like a hoplite formation, although probably not so much in this particular play, since they represent elderly Persians. The infantryman was a foundation stone of the idea of justice in the Greek world, showing equality before the law along with a feeling of communal pride. The hoplite stood in overlapping formation so that his otherwise exposed right side was protected by his comrade's shield. The hoplite's weapon was a spear used in close fighting, not as a javelin; this should be contrasted with the image of the Persian archer on horseback, a fearsome and

¹³ Cfr. G. Cawkwell, *The Greek Wars: The Failure of Persia*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005. Also, cfr. T. Harrison, *The Emptiness of Asia: Aeschylus' Persians and the History of the Fifth Century*, London, Gerald Duckworth, 2000.

¹⁴ E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991, pp. 77-78.

skilled figure but yet an individual who could be driven back or overcome with sufficient numbers of well-organized, determined foot-soldiers protected by their formation – as the Spartan hoplites certainly were, while the Athenians themselves were presented as masters of the waves. In *The Persians* the name Astaspes derives from *aspes*, the Iranian for horse¹⁵. The Achaemenid Empire was far ahead of Greece in the use of mounted warfare, which helps to explain its remarkably rapid spread, and by the sixth century BCE deployed cavalry all across its frontiers. There is, though, some evidence that southern parts of Greece were making more significant use of cavalry in the fifth century BCE¹⁶. Aeschylus makes use of this contrast between the bow and the spear in the play. The chorus tells us in the parodos (l.85) that Xerxes will bring death on the spear-carrying Hellenes with his bow. The frightening image of the king laying waste to the Greek cities in his path (ll. 21-58) is, at the end of the play, reversed. The Persians drown in the sea, and among the final moments of the drama is a verbal image of the royal quiver of Xerxes, now rendered useless (ll. 1017-23).

The chorus are both victims and witnesses to the punishment of Xerxes, and in that respect could be seen as proxies for the Athenian spectators. The need to witness punishment partly motivated the production of this play as it has countless others. But revenge is bittersweet at best and is made more bitter by the memories of the hurt that led to it. There is no sense in which we can comfortably say that *The Persians* is an exercise in communal glorying; it is, after all, a tragedy, and shows sensitivity to loss on both sides. Yet I suspect there were political reasons as well as dramaturgical ones for the peculiar standpoint the play takes towards the enemy. We do not know who was among the spectators at the original production in Athens, but not all of them would necessarily have been Athenians, and some of them may have taken a message about Athenian values away with them to their own communities. The City Dionysia was held in March, which was the beginning of the sailing season, so foreigners and tourists would have been able to attend. In addition, orphans of the war dead attended the parade, wearing battle gear, and were honoured by the citizens.

In invoking the concept of *phantasia*, the Roman rhetorician Quintilian was drawing upon the legacy of Plato and Aristotle. There has been considerable ink spilled over how to translate the word *phantasia* into English. My reading of Quintilian's meaning is that an orator uses words to cause images to appear in the mind of the listener. The mental images are felt to be real objects in front of the listener's eyes. To place something in front of the eyes of the audience was the usual rhetorical description of *energeia*; what is different with *phantasia* as Quintilian explains

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 91.

¹⁶ P. Turchin, T. Currie and E.A.L. Turner, *Mapping the Spread of Mounted Warfare*, in «Cliodynamics», VII, 2016, n. 2, pp. 217-227.

it is that it is not only the mind of the listener that is stimulated into seeing pictures but the mind of the speaker also, arising as the pictures do as if unbidden during the spontaneous flow of the speech¹⁷.

A common case of *phantasia* in plays is when people imagine they have seen a ghost. Ghosts, of course, have had a rich stage life in many cultures since Aeschylus. This should not come as a surprise. While there is disagreement over the origins of theatre in Ancient Greek cult practices, the theatre has always been associated with the invocation of sacred values and the emotional experiences through which we access them: wonder and awe, pride and shame, terror and disgust, anger and outrage, ecstasy and joy. Ghosts often function to remind us of our commitments to certain sacred values, such as honouring one's ancestors.

By sacred values I mean values that are considered transcendentally important to a community, such that they cannot be exchanged with non-sacred (secular) values¹⁸. A particular community holding a sacred value will feel there is an impassable barrier that protects that value. That said, community members will inevitably at times feel the pull of conflicting sacred values. The tragic theatre of Ancient Greece was a space for expression of such conflicts. The pull between values will sometimes lead individuals to behave in a way that, by prioritizing one sacred value, violates another one. The inevitable constraints of reality often challenge one's sacred values; the costs of maintaining those values become very expensive. If we are forced to confront the contradictions between reality constraints and sacred values, we will often seek a reframing of the problem that will transform unacceptable trade-offs into ones that we can live with.

Greek tragedy places a conflict of sacred values in a world of the distant past. It is a common move of mythological stories that they are set in a distant time¹⁹, a time when the world was inhabited by supernatural beings and the boundaries between humans and non-humans was permeable. A cross-cultural trope of forager myths is that there was a Transformation period during which, as a result of the actions of ancestral beings, the world changed into the more recognizable world it is today. Before the Transformation, the world was a land of giants. Nonetheless, Greek tragedy presented an imitation of recognizable human actions, rather than the strange workings of ancestral beings.

There are a few nuances to note regarding mimesis in terms of recognizability. The first is that the Trojan War may well have been in the distant past, but the Persian war was not. So, it was not out of the question to present recent history on

¹⁷ G. Watson, *Phantasia in Classical Thought*, Galway, Galway University Press, 1988, pp. 69-70.

¹⁸ P.E. Tetlock, *Thinking the unthinkable: sacred values and taboo cognitions*, in «Trends in Cognitive Sciences», VII, 2003, n. 7, pp. 320-324.

¹⁹ M. Scalise Sugiyama and P. Hogan, *Distant Time: A possible typological literary universal*, 31 January 2017, <http://literary-universals.uconn.edu/2017/01/31/distant-time-a-possible-typological-literary-universal> (last access: 17 July 2024).

the Athenian stage, and we do not know how many plays would have been about recent history, since most of the plays are lost. A second point is that there was nothing to stop playwrights from nudging their audiences into drawing parallels between mythic and contemporary events; it is well-known that Euripides' *Trojan Women* (*Troiades*) was performed in the thick of the Peloponnesian war and was probably taking a swipe at recent atrocities committed by the Athenians.

The third point is one made by Alan Sommerstein in *The Tangled Ways of Zeus*: the popular idea that the Greeks already knew how the stories they were watching in the plays would turn out does not stand up to scrutiny:

The long and short of it is that within very wide limits, poets, and particularly dramatists, treat myth as they please: almost the only constraint is that the dénouement of a play must not be radically incompatible with the well-known course of subsequent events – so that it would not, for example, have been possible for Euripides to have Achilles sacrifice his life at Aulis in an attempt to save Iphigeneia. Even this constraint is partly nullified by the *deus ex machina* convention²⁰.

The Athenian audiences knew that the play they were about to watch would very likely provide a fresh spin on mythic events. What they couldn't predict was what that spin would be. The game is not to replace what happened, but to insert hypothetical scenarios which provided a space to speculate upon a character's motives.

Mimesis is the basis of the Greek drama, and it has dominated Western theatre ever since. That is a big claim, and of course mimesis is a notorious concept. Let's recall there are two aspects to it. The first is that it speaks about an image of something absent (Achilles is not literally on stage), but that bears some resemblance to the absent thing. And it is not some internal, invisible quality of the object that is being imitated in the image: it is the appearance, we might say the form. The second aspect is that the image is drawn from a source that functions as a template. This understanding of mimesis as the basis of the drama is indebted to Daniel McInerny²¹. What I want to add to his excellent parsing of the topic is this: it was only through mimesis – formal resemblance to an original example – that the Athenian playwrights were able to make alterations to that original. The freedom to manipulate myths so as to appeal to their spectators would have served to de-ritualize the drama to a significant extent: the shadow of the ritual remains, but in the true ritual, there is no investigation of motive, whereas in the drama, there is.

Rituals are not spaces for the exploration of motives; yet sacred values, which

²⁰ A.H. Sommerstein, *The Tangled Ways of Zeus and other studies in and around Greek Tragedy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 212.

²¹ D. McInerny, *Beauty & Imitation: A Philosophical Reflection on the Arts*, Elk Grove Village, Word on Fire, 2024.

appear to be set apart from the kinds of constraints put upon us by everyday secular reality that would surely matter urgently to us, are in fact at least as motivating. Reasons for buying into sacred values are not like inherited instincts: we must learn them from our communities. And we learn them by copying customs, traditions, habits – i.e. rituals. Neither are they subject to rational discourse. They are embodied practices, and the knowledge they impart is tacit because it is embodied. In effect, we learn them mimetically – we learn to imitate the behaviours that call up the emotions attached to those values. The behaviours function like source examples in the game of representation. We imitate the formal appearance in the ritual, and in doing so we summon up the absent thing – the feeling – which motivates us.

What is distinctive about the drama is that it represents the formal aspects of its original object in a medium other than the medium in which the original resides: as McInerney (quoting the poet and painter David Jones) puts it, «For all art re-presents a given reality in matter other than that in which it is naturally at home, and this is a kind of abstraction»²². While this is obviously the case with painting, it is also the case with drama, which uses human actions to imitate other human actions. The matter – the human actions – are not naturally at home because they have been recontextualized, reframed in and for a theatre audience in a theatre space.

Rational arguments are not the point in the conflict between sacred values that characterized the Athenian drama because the conflict cannot be resolved: it is too mysterious; yet we are compelled by our sacred values, like the characters in the drama, to take decisions that lead to actions. The motives for such decisions are often inexplicable to us. They do not strike us as the result of personal choice – unlike the secular motives that drive our proximate behaviours such as making a sandwich when we're hungry. And this is my point: it is motivating to us that there could be sacred things whose existence we admit but whose power over us is essentially a mystery because they have no clear instrumental relationship to resources like sandwiches. Sacred values soar above the realm of the practical; we feel that there are some obligations we must honour, some duties we must attend to, some sacrifices we must make, and asking why we must do so is irrelevant or insulting: if you have to ask why, then you just don't get it. And the amazing thing is that these sacrifices, duties and obligations in service to one's sacred values have so often given people compelling motivations for actions that come with a huge cost, as Harvey Whitehouse shows. It is amazing because logically one would imagine that it's more immediately motivating to get a sandwich when you're hungry, but behaving in accordance with one's sacred values often overrides such secular motives. Commitment to the sacred values of one's group has to be shown, and the showing may well involve a costly signal, like wounding oneself, abasing oneself before one's god for long periods of time, challenging someone to a duel, not having sex – and so on.

²² Ivi, p. 22.

The Athenian theatre was a public space in which absent things holding a sacred value for the community were made available to the senses. They were, in that sense, *phantasia* – experiences involving vivid imagery. Imagery here means audio-visual imagery: pictures presented in words, gestures and actions such as dancing, pictures bound together with music and sounds. The use of imagery was a method by which the community gained access to the sacred, to achieve what the sociologist Émile Durkheim described as collective effervescence²³. Durkheim's point about the sacred rituals of collective effervescence was that they bind us to our respective communities. They do this by inspiring powerful feelings of awe, wonder, religious devotion and so on, feelings that are projected beyond the minds of the individual participants into a song, a dance, a prayer, or a gesture.

For collective effervescence to be effective at binding individuals to a community, the members must demonstrate to each other their agreement regarding what values are sacred; as I have said, this may well involve costly signalling. It is costly in order to show that you mean it; costly signals are amongst other things a way of keeping out people who would dilute the sacred values of the group.

Rituals bring sacred things, which are construed in far mode, present to the senses – we collectively treat the far thing as if it is a near thing. We don't tend to carefully analyse the contextual details of sacred things. The far mode is construed through intuitive heuristics and aesthetics, as when we struggle to find the words to describe some transcendent experiences such as seeing a ghost. But this leads to a paradox, since we tend to want to be closer to the things that we value. So we create rituals with near mode effects on our bodies, but whose operations cannot be finally explained in terms of near mode causes.

The theatre, while it emerged from ritual practice, was not and is not simply a ritual. Being a fiction rather than a ritual, it returns us finally to the far mode. Productions that exist only in the near mode are to my mind ultimately trivial and will not save the theatre from withering away in the fog of technological distraction and cultural malaise. Here I am thinking of some immersive or participatory performances I have experienced, which may have felt phenomenologically grabbing, but have left no deep mark on my memory, and provided me with none of the consolations of philosophy. I think that if we are to rescue theatre from its crisis, we should construe it, as I submit the spectators at *The Persians* in Athens did in 472 BCE, as if looking from a distance at a land of giants.

²³ E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. by C. Cosman, Oxford, Oxford World's Classics, 2008.