

The Social Significance of the «Unity of Time»

EDITH HALL

... ὡς ἡμέρα κλίνει τε κἀνάγει πάλιν
ἅπαντα τάνθρώπεια

Athena to Odysseus in Sophocles, *Ajax* 131-132

τῷ δὲ τὸ μέτρον ἀπλοῦν ἔχειν καὶ ἀπαγγελίαν εἶναι, ταύτη
διαφέρουσιν· ἔτι δὲ τῷ μήκει· ἢ μὲν ὅτι μάλιστα πειρᾶται ὑπὸ
μίαν περίοδον ἡλίου εἶναι ἢ μικρὸν ἐξαλλάττειν, ἢ δὲ ἐποποιία
ἀόριστος τῷ χρόνῳ καὶ τούτῳ διαφέρει, καίτοι τὸ πρῶτον ὁμοίως
ἐν ταῖς τραγωδίαις τοῦτο ἐποίουν καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἔπεσιν.

[Tragedy and epic] differ, in that Epic poetry admits but one kind of metre, and is narrative in form. They differ, again, in their length: for Tragedy attempts to take place within a single revolution of the sun, more or less, whereas Epic is chronologically unbounded, and in this differs. Yet the first tragedies were done in the same way as epics.

Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449 b 9-16

This is one of the most influential passages in western literature, largely on account of the intellectual energy expended on its interpretation by the Italian critics of the sixteenth century. Their studies elaborated Aristotle's relatively simple observation into a canonical prescription for drama composition which was to dominate aesthetic debate for centuries to come. Niccolò Machiavelli was certainly influenced by it as early as his 1518 comedy *Mandragola*¹, but the importance of the «single revolution

¹ E.J. Webber, «The dramatic unities in the "Mandragola"», in *Italica* 33, 1956, pp. 20-21.

of the sun» was probably assured in 1548 by Francesco Robertelli's discussion and interpretation of the Aristotelian phrase in his commentary on the *Poetics*. The debate was continued by Bernardo Segni, Vincentio Maggi, and Gian Giorgio Trissino, and culminated, of course, in Ludovico Castelvetro's insistence, in *Poetica d'Aristotele vulgarizzata* (1570), that a tragic plot should dramatise events that not only take place in a single day but moreover that are all shown in a single place (which is *not* mentioned in Aristotle).

The precise meaning of Aristotle's laconic words was hotly contested. Did he mean twelve hours of daylight, or twenty-four from sunrise to sunrise? Castelvetro, an advocate of the twelve-hour theory, further elaborated the idea by telling his readers that the action should not take any longer than the actual time used by the actors performing it, *i. e.* that dramatic time should correspond precisely with extra-dramatic «real» time. There have even been some modern scholars — not many, but a few — who have much more recently revived Castelvetro's line of argument. They have claimed that Aristotle is not referring to the time as represented within the play at all, but to the amount of time it took for a whole tetralogy to be enacted (*i.e.* part or all of a day), rather than the two or three days it would require to recite the entire *Iliad* or *Odyssey*². Yet outside the Academy, despite these eccentric scholarly controversies, the ideal of the «unity of time» has without doubt produced some of the most beautifully crafted stage plays in the repertoire. In French classical tragedy the most outstanding example is surely the compression of retrospective and prospective viewpoints in Racine's *Athalie*³. The idea of temporal unity also played an important role, through reactions *against* it by authors such as Lope de Vega⁴, in the development of European dramaturgical practice.

By the 18th century, the experience of Shakespeare in the English tradition and the influence of Gotthold Lessing on the Continent underlay the most vigorous of debates on the «unity of time», a debate which permeated other media than drama, above all fiction⁵. In the 20th century, this discussion of time in art became central to the experiments of the most creative and influential avant-garde directors in the cinema, for example Alain Robbe-Grillet⁶. In the last three decades, the passage in Aristotle has remained prominent as the ultimate target of those Postcolonial and African Ameri-

² G.F. Else, *Aristotle's The Argument*, *The Classical Journal* G.F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*, Cambridge 1957, p. 195; R. T. Urban, «All or nothing at all: another look at the Unity of Time in Aristotle», in *The Classical Journal* 61, 1966, pp. 262-264.

³ J. Campbell, «The unity of time in "Athalie"», in *The Modern Language Review* 86, 1991, pp. 573-579.

⁴ A. M. Crino, «Lope de Vega's exertions for the abolition of the unities in dramatic practice», in *Modern Language Notes* 76, 1961, pp. 259-261.

⁵ See *e.g.* Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759) Book 3 ch. 12, Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) book 5 ch. 1, and Samuel Johnson's crucial argument in *The Rambler* 156 (1751).

⁶ J.V. Alter, «Alain Robbe-Grillet and the "Cinematographic Style"», in *The Modern Language Journal* 48, 1964, pp. 363-366, at p. 366.

can literary theorists who have launched important critiques of western aesthetic ideals from a politicised perspective. Nilgun Anadolu-Okur, for example, has shown how the «unity» of African American drama is related to a fundamentally circular concept of action, rather than the linear one privileged by the European tradition⁷. Feminist theorists of literature have mounted similar assaults on the unity of time, promoting readings which emphasise the fracturing and destabilisation of time rather than authoritarian controls on its representation⁸.

Given the fascinating role played by Aristotle's single revolution of the sun in cultural history, it seems to me that its *original* significance has been rather neglected. This passage in Aristotle has always bothered me, because it is unprecedented altogether in the earlier literary critical tradition as evidenced in Aristophanes and Plato, and yet identifies one of the most distinctive features of the surviving Sophoclean and Euripidean tragedies, and indeed of most of Aeschylus (*Eumenides* seems to be an exception). The actions of most Greek tragedies really do take place within less than twenty-four hours, and in many, such as *Antigone* and *Medea*, there is explicit discussion of the sunrise, or the number of hours' grace allowed to the heroine before she must go into exile. It is interesting that we see the visual artists of the same era experimenting with unity of time in their depiction of myths in two scenes on one vase, for example Euphronius, whose dates place him very precisely contemporaneous with the early evolution of tragedy⁹.

In Sophocles' *Antigone*, Creon asks the guard to speak not at length, but concisely (446), contrasting the idea of «extension» in a speech (*mēkos*) with the term *suntoma*. Greek tragedy represents time not with epic extension, Aristotle's *mēkos*, but *suntoma*. This compact, compressed, concise way of representing time, which both Aristotle and we associate with Greek tragedy, is in fact very extreme and distinctive. Moreover, there is no smooth, gradual evolution or genealogy that we can trace for it systematically from previous literature, whether epic, elegiac or narrative choral lyric. Some precursor of this future aesthetic can admittedly be seen in the Homeric epics, to be sure. Aristotle himself pointed out that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were not episodic, since they did not start at the beginning of a story that went on for years, unlike other epics (*Poetics* 23). As O. Taplin has shown in detail, considerable thought has gone into the presentation of time in both epics. In the *Iliad*, the events in books 11 to 18, 242 all take place in single day, Hector's day of triumph; once Odysseus has arrived back in Ithaca, from book 13, 93 onwards, the

⁷ N.A. Okur, «Afrocentricity as a generative idea in the study of African American drama», in *Journal of Black Studies* 24, 1993, pp. 88-108, especially p. 97.

⁸ E.g. W.-C. Dimock, «Feminism, New Historicism, and the reader», in *American Literature* 63, 1991, pp. 601-622, at p. 622.

⁹ H.A. Shapiro, «Narrative strategies in Euphronios», in M. Cygielman *et al.* (Eds.) *Euphronios: atti del seminario internazionale di studi, Arezzo, 27-28 maggio 1990*, Florence 1992, pp. 37-43.

Odyssey narrates only six days of narrative time¹⁰. Sunrises and sunsets are also crucial tools for opening and closing discrete actions.

But perhaps more important is the trope of the «day» which can bring extreme experiences and radical reversals in Homeric and other archaic literature: the *nostimon hēmar* (*Odyssey* 1, 9, 168, 354, etc.) which stands for «safe return» to hearth and home, and *eleutheron hēmar* (*Iliad* 6, 455; 16, 831; 20, 193), the «day of freedom», where the word «day», as Fränkel long ago argued, substitutes, in fact, for «status»¹¹. Other phrases clearly refer to a miserable status or fate are *doulion hēmar* («day of slavery», *Iliad* 6, 463; *Odyssey* 14, 340; 17, 323), the type of day which brings death and destruction (*nēlees hēmar*, *aisimon hēmar*, *olethrion hēmar*, *morsimon hēmar*, *anagkaion hēmar*), and the «day of becoming fatherless», *orphanikon*, of Astyanax (*Iliad* 22, 490). It is this trope which lies behind the Pindaric compound *ephēmeros* — humans are «creatures of a day». Here, as Fränkel put it, one element of the compound, the second, refers to our status or condition on any one day, and to «the wide range of contingencies» that, some day, Nature may bring to pass. And the other element, *epi*, indicates that this idea of «day» is «upon» us: «the term implies that man is moulded and remoulded by changing events and circumstances»¹².

Greek poetry had, then, experimented with the use of the day as plot compressor or narrative shaper, and the sunrise and sunset as structural markers that were of obvious use for opening poems and for their closure. The *topos* of man's subjection to radical changes, that could overtake him in a single day, is also apparent in the poetic diction of Homer and Pindar, as we have seen. Yet the Athenian dramatists' presentation of time was nevertheless quite new. A Greek drama enacts a story which has causes reaching back into the past, and consequences stretching far into the future, but in the temporal frame of a few concentrated hours. And in fact the evidence suggests that Aristotle was correct: it was a discovery made by the tragedians *in practice*. He offers us the crucial information that the first tragedies were temporally «unbounded», like epic. The *newness* as well as the *extremity* of the temporal compression have not been sufficiently appreciated even by scholars writing books dedicated to the topic, such as Jürgen Schwandt's *Das Motiv Der Tagesspanne* (1994). The distinctive and extreme nature of ancient Greek drama's way of portraying time is revealed especially by comparison with the conventions for representing time which developed in other mimetic traditions. A comparison with the discursive and often dreamlike representation of time in Noh drama¹³, or indeed Egyptian cinema of and before the 1950s¹⁴, is sufficient

¹⁰ O. Taplin, *Homeric Soundings: The Shape of the Iliad*, Oxford 1992, pp. 14-22, 144-178.

¹¹ H. Fränkel, «Man's "ephemeros" nature according to Pindar and others», in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 77, 1946, pp. 131-145, at p. 132.

¹² *Ibid.*, at pp. 132-133.

¹³ P. Nicholls, «An experiment with time: Ezra Pound and the example of Japanese Noh», in *The Modern Language Review* 9, 1995, pp. 1-13, at pp. 5-6.

¹⁴ M. Kiernan, «Cultural hegemony and national film language: Youssef Chahine», in *Alif*,

to make this point. In early Sanskrit drama there are conventions that limit the time that can be conveyed, but the key measure there is not one day but one year¹⁵.

Some scholars have offered at least partial explanations of the distinctive use of dramatic time in Greek tragedy. Some of them are aesthetic, or rather aesthetic-metaphysical. H. D. F. Kitto said, «As for unity of time, it would more closely correspond to the facts to say that time does not exist unless it is mentioned»¹⁶, meaning that there is a *timeless* quality to the inner world portrayed in Greek tragic illusion, reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's «Still point of the turning world» in «Burnt Norton», the first of his «Four Quartets»:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is.

H. Fränkel is intrigued by those tragedies which make an explicit point of the narrow temporal compass — *Trachiniae*, *Ajax*, and *Oedipus Tyrannus* for example. In *Ajax*, «As the plot of Sophocles' play develops, we learn that Ajax is safe if he can be kept within his tent for this one day; if not, he is doomed» (753-755). This leads H. Fränkel to propose that when the time element is stressed (*e. g.* in *Oedipus Tyrannus* 438: «This day will give you both birth and destruction»), there is a meaning behind it. H. Fränkel thinks that this technique of compression is «not so much for technical reasons, I believe, but rather to teach the lesson of man's *ephēmeros* nature»¹⁷. I do not disagree with this, and would actually add that the prominence given to the sun in many plays, invoked as witness to crimes or as the most profound marker between life and death, is part of the same tendency in Greek tragedy. So, perhaps, are plots in which Helios himself plays a significant role in the developing action, such as Euripides' *Medea* and most certainly his *Phaethon*¹⁸.

The most popular explanation for the «unity of time» in Greek tragedy, has, however, been the physical theatre conditions in which it was performed, a point influentially made by Lessing but developed at length by Roy Flickinger in an important article of 1911. He said that the convention «arose not from the whim of ancient writers but from the same theatrical arrangements which resulted in the unity of place, *viz.*, the absence of a drop curtain and the continuous presence of the chorus. Under these conditions an intermission for the imaginary lapse of time could be secured only by the withdrawal of the chorus [...] and without such intermissions the constant and long-continued presence of the same persons in the same place without food or slum-

Journal of Comparative Poetics 15, 1995 [= *Arab Cinematics: Toward the New and the Alternative*], pp. 130-152, at p. 132.

¹⁵ A.V. Williams Jackson, «Time analysis of Sanskrit plays», in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 20, 1899, pp. 341-359, at p. 343.

¹⁶ H.D.F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*, London 1939, p. 169 n.1.

¹⁷ H. Fränkel, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ See E. Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering under the Sun*, Oxford 2010, ch. 8.

ber involved a patent absurdity»¹⁹. The unities of time and place «are largely due to the striving for illusion in a theater comparatively bare of scenery and of facilities for scene-shifting»²⁰. Roy Flickinger pointed to the practice of writing groups of tragedies on the same general subject, such as the *Oresteia* or the *Prometheia* of Aeschylus. In these tetralogies, the chorus and setting could alter in the individual plays, and large leaps in time could be made «without loss of verisimilitude», but only at the point that the identity of the chorus changed: thirty thousand years elapse between the *Prometheus Bound* and the *Prometheus Unbound*²¹!

These are interesting and valid points, but they still do not seem to me to provide a satisfying *explanation* for the radical difference between the presentation of time in most Greek tragedy and many other traditions of outdoor and ritual theatre. I think the chief problem lies in the type of explanation which has been sought. In an interesting article on the degree to which the 17th-century French classical theorists actually rewrote Aristotle's prescriptions for drama, John Lyons has noted that «we usually think of such concepts as the unity of time and place as *aesthetic* ideals that have little or nothing to do with the politics of the audience»²². Aesthetics, however do certainly have *implications* for the ideology encoded in literature, as Maggie Günsberg²³ has noted with reference to the limiting effect of the «unities» on the representation of women in Italian Renaissance drama. But I want to stress that the relationship of course also works the other way round. Social experience affects artistic form as well as artistic content. In the second half of this article I therefore want to argue that the aesthetic principle can be looked at from a sociological perspective, and one, moreover, that is related to the actual political culture of fifth-century Athens: the unity of time offers us a good place to think about aesthetics *psychosocially*.

One art historian, Jocelyn Small, has recently suggested (although only in passing) that Aristotle's approval of containing tragic plots to the events of a single day was ultimately related to the shift from an oral to a literate society. An oral society requires an excellent memory, but with the advent of literacy the capacity of memory diminishes rapidly: the modern memory can apparently only hold between six to eight items in its «short-term» compartment, and Jocelyn Small suggests that Aristotle's advocacy of the events of a single revolution of the sun reflects the limitations of the human memory in a newly literate society²⁴. Yet the important point here, I think, is not to do with literacy

¹⁹ R.C. Flickinger, «The influence of local theatrical conditions upon the drama of the Greeks», in *The Classical Journal* 7, 1911, pp. 3-20, at p. 14.

²⁰ R.C. Flickinger, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²² J. D. Lyons, «The Barbarous Ancients: French Classical poetics and the attack on ancient tragedy», in *Modern Language Notes* 110, 1995, pp. 1135-1147 at p. 1141 (my emphasis).

²³ M. Günsberg, *Gender and the Italian Stage: from the Renaissance to the Present Day*, Cambridge 1997.

²⁴ J.P. Small, «Time in space: narrative in Classical Art», in *The Art Bulletin* 81, 1999,

per se, but rather with the political conditions — the new Cleisthenic democracy — that made functional literacy in the Athenian citizen body necessary. Literacy was necessary so that citizens could read laws and documents in the Assembly and the Council, and identify their names on lists which would call them up for military service²⁵.

Although naval warfare was central to both the defence of Athens and her imperial policies, and some Athenian citizens served as rowers and cavalymen²⁶, at the heart of the Athenian citizen's upbringing was training as an infantryman, a hoplite. Equipped with a long spear and a huge shield, the men on the front line of the hoplite phalanx smashed into their opponents, trying to force a way through or encircle them. Failing that, the battle turned into a violent pushing contest. Hoplite battles were brutal and short, the soldiers «knee pressed in the dust, and spear splintered in the onset» (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 64-65). As the Persian general Mardonius is made to say by the historian Herodotus, the Greeks «wage their wars in the most nonsensical way. The minute they declare war on one another, they look for the finest and flattest ground, and go there to do battle. As a result, even the victors suffer extreme fatalities. Needless to say, the losing side is annihilated» (7, 9, 2).

Victor Hanson has implied that the classical Greeks' extraordinary way of war can be associated with the all-or-nothing destinies dramatised in Greek tragedy, where prosperity and life itself can be taken away in a single day. «A citizen of a Greek city-state understood that the simplicity, clarity and brevity of hoplite battle defined the entire relationship with a man's family and community, the one day of uncertain date that might end his life but surely give significance to his entire existence»²⁷. Some have emphasised the relationship in the specifically *Athenian* mind between politics and short, sharp, pitched battle. In the democracy, the men who voted for a war were committing themselves to fighting in it to defend their own right to vote. Hoplite battle aimed at a speedy, unequivocal result. «Better the risk of death tomorrow, but the chance of a victorious return home the day after, than the interminable, deracinating, and wealth-draining uncertainties of guerrilla warfare»²⁸.

But it was not only warfare where the democratic Athenian male experienced and indeed participated in dictating radical changes in status that took only hours to be implemented. Law court trials had their own version of the dramatic and tragic rever-

pp. 562-575, at p. 563.

²⁵ R. Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, Oxford 1992; J. Wise, *Dionysus Writes: The Invention of Theatre in Ancient Greece*, Ithaca and London 1998; E. Hall, *The Theatrical Cast of Athens: Interactions between Ancient Greek Drama and Society*, Oxford 2006, ch. 1.

²⁶ For the different types of military service at Athens, and their relationship with the social class of the citizen, see the *Constitution of Athens* attributed to Xenophon, I, 2, and H. van Wees, «Politics and the battlefield: ideology in Greek warfare», in A. Powell (Ed.) *The Greek World*, London and New York 1995, pp. 153-178.

²⁷ V. Hanson, *The Western Way of War*, New York 1989, p. 220.

²⁸ J. Keegan's «Introduction» to V. Hanson, *op. cit.*, pp. xii-xiii.

sal (*peripeteia*). Once the speeches had been delivered, the jurors voted immediately, using the urns that were part of the theatrical scenery, standing on or very close to the *bēma* (Demosthenes 19, 311). In the Athenian court there was no delay for consultation with fellow jurors or for private reflection before the actual verdict was delivered²⁹. The drama of each trial was therefore enacted, like an individual tragedy, without an intermission. In theatrical terms, the *peripeteia* occurred immediately after the debate scene (*agōn*). Indeed, this affinity was clearly felt by Athenian litigants. When the penalty was heavy, litigants often adopted the personae of tragic heroes, stressing the danger in which they found themselves (Demosthenes 57, 1), and their emotions of fear and anger (Demades 1, 5). Supporters are asked to speak in order to save the defendant's life (Aeschines 2, 142). Apollodorus says that it brings him pleasure to relate to a sympathetic audience the terrible wrongs he has suffered at the hands of Phormio, in language clearly modelled on the tortured hero's words to the chorus of the Aeschylean *Prometheus Bound* (Demosthenes 45, 1; see *Prometheus Vincit* 637-639).

The other arena where the Athenian democracy had given large numbers of ordinary men the power to change destiny within a matter of hours — the same men who formed the audiences of tragedy at the Dionysia — was of course the Assembly, the executive decision-making body of the Athenian *dēmos*. In the Assembly, the Athenian citizens received advice in speeches from their leaders, and had to deliberate how to vote on crucial issues that really did often mean life or death for individuals and sometimes whole communities. I think that the ideal of *euboulia* or competent deliberation in tragedy has been too little discussed, and moreover that it is inseparable from tragedy's evolved temporal convention.

First, let us remember one occasion which illustrates well what I mean, Thucydides' account of the second debate on Mytilene in the mid-420s. Diodotus needed emphatically to fuse two proverbs about deliberation, «deliberate slowly» and «don't deliberate in anger», when he opened his response to the bellicose Cleon with the famous statement that the two things most inimical to good counsel are speed and passion (Thucydides 3, 42, 1). Diodotus' reproof was delivered just the day after the Athenians had taken an outrageously hasty decision to slaughter the entire male population of the city of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos, and within hours had sent a trireme sailing off over the Aegean to carry out the mass execution. The extreme volatility of the *dēmos'* temper is shown by what happened the very next day: after «a sudden change of heart» (*metanoia tis euthus* 3, 36, 4), they called a second assembly. At the end of the second debate, which was of extreme intensity, they voted — narrowly — to rescind the measure taken the day before, and managed, more by good luck than good deliberation, to get a second ship to Lesbos in the very nick of time (Thucydides 3, 49). Decisions the Athenians made in anger, or under the influence of another strong emotion, and at speed, just like the decisions made by Creon in *Antigone* or Theseus

²⁹ D.M. MacDowell, *The Law in Classical Athens*, London 1968, pp. 251-252.

in *Hippolytus* or Agamemnon in *Iphigenia in Aulide*, led to terrible suffering and sometimes death on a massive scale. In the world of tragedy, however, there are no chances to reconvene in that second assembly the morning after the night before.

The virtue of *euboulia* designates the ability both to deliberate to one's own (and/or one's community's) advantage and «to recognize good deliberation and the good advice arising from good deliberation»³⁰. It is part of Aristotle's third most important constituent of tragic drama (preceded only by plot and character), namely the representation of «intellectual activity» (*dianoia*), which is connected with both a political sense and with rhetoric (*Poetics* 1450 b 6-8). By far the most prevalent commonplace in the ancient Greek literature on counsel, however, is the injunction to «deliberate at night», which probably goes back at least as early as the original archaic «Phocylides» known to Isocrates as an assembler of advisory maxims (see above)³¹. The phrase *nukti boulēn didous* is certainly used in Herodotus, and seems to mean something similar to «making the night a counsellor», «taking night into one's confidence», or just «sleeping on it», as in the Euripidean phrase *nukti sunthakōn* (*Heraclidae* 994). The proverbial association of night and deliberation is clear in Menander's *Epitrepontes*, when Daos, in the arbitration scene, explains how he had had second thoughts about bringing up the baby he had found when he «took counsel in the night» (252, *en nukti boulēn...*). This idea also forms a line of the *Monostichoi* traditionally attributed to Menander (no. 150, *en nukti boulē tois sophoisi gignetai*). It is obvious, however, that tragic deliberators are offered little opportunity for nocturnal thought.

Tragedy may, in fact, in some cases contrast the sensible decisions to which deliberators have come during protracted night-time thought and those that they take precipitately within the timescale of the play's action. Phaedra's great monologue is a clear example: a lengthy process of deliberation in the long watches of the night has allowed her to understand why people are not always able to carry out what they know is right, and also has helped her to arrive at the view that the best course of action entails silence and self-control (Euripides, *Hippolytus* 373-99). It is only the intolerable stress that Cypris has put her under that has now made her resolve on death as «the most effective plan» (*kratiston... bouleumatōn*, 403). The proverb «deliberate at night» can, I think, illuminate considerably the normal practice of Greek tragic dramaturgy to confine the time enacted to less than a single day. The idea that Ideal Deliberators need to sleep on their decisions may at least explain why the compressed temporal dimensions of tragic theatre proved so longstanding a convention.

Lastly, the Unity of Time is connected with the temporal orientation of tragic thea-

³⁰ E.B. Stevens, «The topics of counsel and deliberation in prephilosophic Greek literature», in *Classical Philology* 28, 1933, pp. 104-120.

³¹ See E.B. Stevens, *op. cit.*, p. 109, and E.W. Handley, «Night thoughts (Archilochus 23 and 196a West)», in P.J. Finglass, C. Collard, N.J. Richardson (Eds.), *Hesperos: Studies in Ancient Greek poetry presented to M. L. West on his seventieth birthday*, Oxford 2007, pp. 95-200, at pp. 98-100.

tre as a distinctive medium: I do not think, with Francis Dunn³², that the sense of immediacy in some late Euripides is a feature to be related specifically to the bloody history and repeated shocks to the civic community of the very late fifth century. It is more helpful to look to Suzanne Langer, the disciple of the Symbolist Ernst Cassirer, who argued that all art forms have discrete immanent laws, and offer us a «virtual reality», a conceptual place with its own inner rhythms. What distinguishes different art forms is the nature of the specific virtual space they create. Narrative literature provides a «virtual past» or «memory», lyric a «virtual experience», but drama suggests a «virtual future», on account of its orientation towards *what will happen next*³³. Even the remote time depicted in ancient tragedy (which is set in its original audience's past), or in ancient comedy (set in its original audience's present), is transformed by live enactment into a dynamic representation of the margin between «now» and «after now». When we watch *Ajax*, we are always present in that camp at Troy, wondering how this man who stands so visibly disturbed before us will react when he discovers that he has slaughtered not men but cattle. Live drama has an *immediacy* that prevails over all other media, including recorded mimetic media such as film and television. Peter Szondi's famous study of time in drama, while acknowledging that it has a special «abstract» quality in the way it is evoked, nevertheless implies a reaffirmation of the inevitable «presence» of the visible moment, «a moment turned toward the future [...] one that destroys itself for the sake of the future movement»³⁴. Theatre's «what will happen next?» question suggests the immanent power of the collective to alter that future — a sense conveyed by ancient choruses who want to intervene in domestic violence but are unable to actualize their desire. Even alongside its potential for inspecting the worst atrocities and trepidations humankind can imagine, theatre offers a sense that the future is *partly* in the hands of those creating it, and that it could be changed. It is theatre for the sovereign power — the *dēmos* — who are creating and watching it, just as they stand together in battle, sit together in juries to decide men's fates, or show their hands on the Pnyx Hill to legislate, go to war, or decree a mass execution. The aesthetic value of the Unity of Time, if we must call it that, is not in question. But what *is* debatable is whether its original evolution and function was primarily a matter of aesthetics at all.

³² F. Dunn, *Present Shock in Late Fifth-Century Greece*, Ann Arbor 2007.

³³ S.K.K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: a Theory of Art Developed from «Philosophy in a New Key»*, New York 1953, pp. 215, 307, 258-279, 307.

³⁴ P. Szondi, «The play of time: Wilder», in his *Theory of the Modern Drama*, English translation and edition by Michael Hays, Cambridge 1987, pp. 87-91, at p. 87.