In the reversal of 'upper' and 'lower' worlds, as in the constant return of the past, Senecan drama gives voice to the dead who emerge from Acheron to impose their dreadful rule on the living. Time turns back not so much to redress the misfortunes of the past as to guarantee that no change and no variation can occur. It is difficult not to read in this reversal a pained scepticism about the regularity imposed by Augustus on time and space – a regularity and faith in the future that Augustan poets had tried to make their own. In, for instance, Virgil's promise of *imperium sine fine*[101] (a promise that the *Aeneid* powerfully questions at several critical junctures), or in Horace's *Epode* 16, we can read the hope that the new Augustan beginning has interrupted the law of cosmic cycles and, thanks to the king's vital force, has inspired a progression which will not have to be tempered by catastrophe.[102] Two or three generations after these hopes had been tentatively expressed, they have lost even their qualified problematic appeal and are ripe for deconstruction.

Seneca, as I mentioned, presents us with a dramatic visual icon for the fundamental disruption of natural laws which recurs with remarkable frequency in tragedy. His tragedies often display the sun's uncertainty in following its course or even its extraordinary retrocession.[103] Shocked at the sight of the *nefas* perpetrated by Atreus, the sun withdraws, throwing mankind into utter darkness as the text repeatedly emphasizes. It is indeed tempting to recall that Caesar's calendar, for the first time based entirely and reliably on the sun's regular movements, seems to have been one of the immediate motivations behind a surge in the popularity of solar cults.[104] The sun, elevated on the one hand to the position of supreme guarantor of the regularity of time, displaying in its perturbed and unpredictable movements the irrational criminality of human actions, can now become, in Seneca's obsessed and distraught universe, the ultimate symbol of disorder.

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[101] *Aen.* 1.257–96. [102] Eliade (1954) 133–40, esp. 136.

[103] Rosenmeyer (1989) 160 and Schmitz (1993) 90.

[104] Bickerman (1980) 51, with Nilsson (1932) 166 and Weinstock (1948) 37.

CHAPTER 6

The poetics of passions

INTERTEXTUALITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

I

The thematic insistence on the role of the past in the tragedies is displayed to great effect in the extensive and for some even hypertrophic allusive dimension of Seneca's writing.[1] I now want to explore this dimension of intertextuality further. By problematizing the relationship between intertextuality, poetry and the past, I also want to look again at the connection between poetry and passions, and at what implications such connections might suggest for the interpretation of *Thyestes* and other plays. In the second section of this chapter I will therefore focus again on the Stoics' theoretical discussion of the role of the audience confronted by theatrical outbursts of passion, and in the third section I will investigate how spectatorship is dealt with in the tragedies themselves. The last portion of this chapter will be devoted to an issue which is crucial both within the tragedies and in the possible modalities of their reception, that is, the relationship between this form of drama and epic. I will also look further at possible analogies between Seneca's plays and modern 'epic drama', which may be characterized by the particular mode of reception it demands and purports to foster. Can Seneca's theatre be considered 'epic' in any Brechtian sense? Was his notional audience predicated on a similar set of presuppositions?

Intertextuality is indeed one way of looking back, of allowing a past constituted by texts, words and narratives to shape the present and possibly the future. All texts are by definition intertextual, even if and when they happen to be only marginally engaged in overt allusive strategies.[2] Yet it is generally and rightly admitted that Seneca and, for that matter, several other first-century authors revel in the expressive possibilities afforded by a sustained dialogue with their models. The tragedies not only insert themselves explicitly in a history of literary production which revolves around well-known and repeatedly staged myths, but their language, too, signals at every turn their genetic connection with previous points of reference, tragic and otherwise. Considered in this perspective, intertextuality acquires a crucial role both as the marker of an ideological obsession with the past, and as a self-conscious form of critical reflection on a text's literary affiliations.

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[1] In his important discussion of Seneca's intertextuality Segal ((1986) 202–14) focuses especially on the implications of the sword at *Phaed.* 896 (*hic dicet ensis*, 'this sword will tell you'). The sword, which replaces the writing tablet with which Theseus accuses Hippolytus in Eur. *Hipp.* 877, is, according to Segal, 'the visible mark of Seneca's own "anxiety of influence"', 'the trace of the earlier writer's absence' (208).

In deciphering the connections between intertextuality and the ideology of the past, it is interesting to start by comparing the relationship established by the *Aeneid* with its Homeric models and the modalities that configure Seneca's connection with his tragic antecedents.

Senecan tragedy differs drastically from the *Aeneid* in its exploitation of and reflection on literary models. The *Aeneid* rewrites Homer in more senses than one. Its two halves follow the lead of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but the inverted order in which they are recalled establishes an active gesture of modification. The *Aeneid* follows in Homer's steps, but this time the Trojans will win, proving that the curse of repetiton can indeed be broken. Similar considerations arguably extend to Latin epic as a genre. Steeped as it is in a dialogue with its Greek models, Latin epic shows from its very inception the ability to Romanize a past that is connected with, but ideologically independent of, its Greek counterpart. Thus, from Ennius' *Annales* to Naevius' *Bellum Poenicum*, Roman epic emerges as the preferred medium for a negotiation of tradition and innovation in the literary (and historical) realms.[3]

Tragedy does not enjoy the same kind of freedom. Of course the playwright is able to choose from different versions of the same myth, and, by plotting it creatively, can easily shape his own distinctive voice. But tragedy as a whole, rooted as it is in a mythical continuum which is relatively flexible but ultimately fixed, is impervious to the insertion of completely new material, and to the same kind of active modification of the plot which is encouraged by epic. Even a play such as *Thyestes*, which testifies to the degree of originality and freedom that the poet enjoys in the treatment of his

chosen theme, cannot escape a largely predetermined series of events. The contrast is especially glaring if we compare the plays, again, with the epic *Aeneid*, which had enjoyed unprecedented freedom in the manipulation of the mythistorical *histoire* that it stages. There is no mythic masterplot to rule what should happen to Turnus, while Thyestes' children still cannot escape their fate. This lesser degree of freedom paradoxically entails a higher degree of responsibility. If the *Aeneid* can attempt to impose a new narrative order which carefully balances *nefas* and *ratio*, if it tries to continue and modify the Homeric plot by staging a reversal of fortunes which looks forward to general reconciliation, as opposed to endless revenge, Seneca's tragedies are constitutively denied any such illusion. They will only be able to reiterate the *nefas*, to return to it, incessantly and regressively.

Seneca's tragedies stem from a continuous, even obsessive confrontation with their models. As they give new life to the tragic experience first brought onto the stage by the Greeks, thus questioning with an elaborate scheme the apparently seamless experience of watching a tragedy, they inevitably problematize the relationship with their Greek counterparts. The metadramatic activation of the plot and the consequent denial of any immediacy to the tragic experience intensify features that Greek tragedy had only intermittently displayed (especially in such plays as Euripides' *Ion* or *Helen*, or, in different forms, in the case of Sophocles), and come to represent the most individual hallmark of Seneca's tragic writing.

The pervasive characteristic of Seneca's tragedies is their belatedness: they represent an anachronistic return to the past, a frustrated desire for lost forms mediated by an overwhelming and oppressive intertextual memory. Senecan tragedy validates its existence (and its novelty) by displaying total awareness of its epigonic nature and by laying bare its internal mechanisms.

Oedipus embodies perhaps more vividly than any other play the torment of Seneca's post-Virgilian quandary. And the thematization of 'posteriority' is what makes the opening scene of *Phoenissae*, for instance, so harrowing. In general, all the characters in these tragedies are intensely aware of their previous existence in the domain of literature, and they reflect, as do the tragedies themselves, on the intermediate stages of writing which divide these belated mythical narratives from their supposed 'originals'. It is precisely the metadramatic structure and the manipulation of time which colour the existence of these plays, and our enjoyment of them as acts of defiance – aesthetic as much as ethic. The author-on-stage – be it Medea, Thyestes or Juno – advertises in no uncertain terms the constructedness and artificiality of the text as well as the fact that a fresh representation of *nefas* could (should) have been avoided.

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[2] The divide between allusion and intertextuality is questionable, and, while it is certainly useful to retain a terminological distinction, these two concepts must often be considered more as different points on a graded continuum than as alternative options. On this point see now Fowler (1997a) = (2000) 115–37, and Hinds (1998).

[3] On this topic see now Goldberg (1995).

If all post-Ovidian literature is programmatically self-conscious to a very high degree, Seneca's own narcissism takes the form of a sustained critique of authorial responsibility as it is showcased in the author's staged counterparts – a group of obsessed, determined criminals. It is not just that poiesis is (literally) staged as a constructive process: it is portrayed as a pollution which inevitably involves author and audience alike. Whether they were staged or not, Seneca's tragedies imply a form of communication which is not primarily or exclusively written; yet the tension they dramatize between the visible (staged, spoken) and the invisible (implied, hidden, written) is their defining characteristic.

II

The analysis of intertextuality, especially this particular brand of Senecan self-conscious, metadramatic intertextuality, can fruitfully move towards an evaluation of rhetorical features as they interact with the psychological processes of the reader. All texts, especially those involved in the narration of mythical events, are necessarily repetitive: they repeat a mythic story, they repeat each other. But some texts more than others display a high degree of perceptible, thematized repetition, which they force the reader to acknowledge. The intertextual gesture that impels the tragedy of *Thyestes* from the shadows of non-existence makes explicit, as I showed in chapter one, the ethical problems implicit in the creation and fruition of this play. This intertextual impulse vehiculates the crucial metadramatic theme of the moral responsibility of a certain type of poetry and, at a more general level, makes an issue of the *decorum* of poetry by calling into question its limits.

Intertextuality, at any rate, can never be a neutral operation in either its contents or in the dynamics of its perception. It will offer the well-read reader the pleasure of recognition, a chance to share with the author control over the text and its signification; or it may puzzle and disempower those who perceive it in an unfocused manner. It will be a way to activate memories of pleasurable events (the very act of remembering can be pleasurable), or to recreate the painful experience of *nefas*; to encourage identification with the emotions provoked by the past, or to look at them with relief, anguish, hope or terror.[4] It is arguably in this intrinsic tension that we can locate the peculiar force of Seneca's poetic project (and of those authors

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[4] It would be interesting to extend the interpretation of intertextuality that I sketch here through an engagement with modern philosophical and psychological theories of memory and its ambivalent nature as either a source of pleasure or as a catalyst for the onset of psychiatric conditions. See, for instance, Hall (1996).

who are closest to him in this respect). Gone is the illusion that the world is ordained in a logical sequence of discrete events, of clearly defined ethical and aesthetical alternatives. Andromache's desperate monologue in *Troades* offers a sequence of thoughts that can be extrapolated as a more general epistemic protocol: the categories she carefully defines (living and dead, husband and son, honour and safety) turn out to be so intertwined as to be useless. There exists no real choice between giving up Hector's tomb *or* Astyanax's safety. Both have already been lost. The text provokes both pleasure and pain; its poetics invite us to rejoice in agnition and to recoil in horror as intertextual memories exhibit their violent, confusing potential. *Infandum, regina, iubes renovare dolorem*, in Virgil's words. Or then again: *forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit.*[5]

From this perspective the vast mass of circumscribed intertextual points of contact with previous poets, especially Virgil and Ovid, becomes in *Thyestes*, and in Senecan tragedy at large, a source of *horror* and at the same time a reiterated – if imperfect – apology for its legitimation. Intertextuality becomes an internal, ambiguous mode of defence for inconceivable monstrosities: it partially displaces responsibility while almost compulsively deepening the original wound, in a solution that is apparently preferable to the repressive force of silence. This is possible only – in all conceivable senses – *after*: after Virgil, after Ovid, after almost one hundred years of engagement with the memory of the systemic disruption that was witnessed in the first century.

As the poet Atreus has made abundantly clear, imitation of and competition with the past are also essential components of his poetics of the sublime.[6] The urge to transcend the limits of humanity seems to emerge from the same terrifying depths of horror from which his unquenchable thirst for revenge has originated. Atreus offers a compelling image of the mutually reinforcing connection between *furor*, poetic inspiration and an obsession with the past. Determined to take revenge for the wrongs he has suffered, he is equally determined to surpass the poetic models he explicitly chooses as points of reference. In the end, we are left to contemplate with surprising satisfaction the pleasure that his revenge, and his poetry, have been able to afford us.

It is precisely with these intimations in mind that I now return to the scene from *Oedipus* with which I opened this book.[7] There Laius' evocation of the ghosts of the underworld suggested a compelling vision of poetry slowly and painfully emerging from its chthonic dens. Tiresias, the seer whom Seneca forces to confess his impotence against the plague which ravages Thebes, had ordered this rite once his own attempts at understanding had failed (390–7):

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[5] 'The sorrow you bid me bring to life again is past all words' (*Aen.* 2.3); 'The day will come, perhaps, when it will give you pleasure to remember even this' (*Aen.* 1.203).

[6] See pp. 117ff.

[7] Above, pp. 8ff.

> nec alta caeli quae levi pinna secant
> nec fibra vivis rapta pectoribus potest
> ciere nomen; alia temptanda est via:
> ipse evocandus noctis aeternae plagis,
> emissus Erebo ut caedis auctorem indicet.
> reseranda tellus, Ditis implacabile
> numen precandum, populus infernae Stygis
> huc extrahendus . . .

Neither the birds which on their light wings cut the depths of heaven, nor entrails grabbed from still living breasts can summon up the name; another route must be attempted: the king himself must be evoked from the regions of eternal night, so that, released from Erebus, he may point out the author of the murder. The earth must be opened up, the implacable power of Dis must be implored, the people of infernal Styx must be drawn forth here . . .

It is from the dead, not from the living, that knowledge will eventually arise, and for that purpose the earth has to be prised open and forced to yield its secrets. (This is, incidentally, a scene that would have pleased Ps.-Longinus, the author of *On the Sublime*, who had not hesitated to include among his examples of sublimity a similar image that he found in Homer.[8]) As he prescribes a procedure that in Seneca's poetry acquires strong metadramatic overtones, Tiresias comes close to a number of other first-century characters whose competence in the domain of divination and prophecy was closely intertwined with the nature and effect of poetic creation.[9] Tiresias' own words are implicated in the language of poetics. *Alia temptanda est via* (392) echoes the programmatic passage from the beginning of the third book of the *Georgics* in which Virgil declares his dissatisfaction with a number of overexploited poetic subjects, and vows to embark on a project of startling novelty.[10] The Virgilian allusion not only underlines Seneca's analogous intention to innovate (in fact the whole scene with Laius is conspicuously absent from his Sophoclean model), but strongly reinforces the supposition that the scene as a whole can be read, at one level, as a reflection on poetics. What should not be overlooked, however, is the sharp antiphrastic undertone of the allusion. Virgil's aspiration to fame is couched, in metaphoric terms, as the desire to lift himself up

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[8] *Subl.* 9.6, which quotes together *Il.* 21.388; 5.750; 20.61–5.
[9] Cf. above, ch. 1, pp. 8ff.
[10] The parallel is pointed out by Palmieri (1989).

from the ground and to be able to fly from mouth to mouth (*G.* 3.8–9): *temptanda via est, qua me quoque possim | tollere humo victorque virum volitare per ora* ('I must attempt a path whereby I, too, may rise from earth and fly victorious on the lips of men'). Tiresias' project revolves around the diametrically opposed movement, an exploration of the depths of Acheron which will be made possible by the ghosts' ascent. The 'new way' of poetry outlined by Tiresias in his own programmatic statement will have to emerge from a deep involvement with chthonic forces, with the shocking world of Acheron. Poetry is to be the medium which enables underworld and upper world to communicate, and in so doing transgresses the semiotic and ethical boundary which should guarantee the separation of those worlds and protect the living from pollution. Poetry blurs the thresholds between dead and living and between past and present, thus preventing the former from being lost for ever, and subjecting the latter to the constant anxiety of unwelcome returns.

The choral ode that separates Tiresias' intimation from its actual fulfilment celebrates in 'a people's hymn' (*populare carmen*) the achievements of the god Bacchus.[11] Its seemingly digressive intonation heightens the level of dramatic suspense after the rites have been announced, and the audience knows that they are being performed elsewhere in the same time span (401–2: *dum nos profundae claustra laxamus Stygis, | populare Bacchi laudibus carmen sonet*, 'while we loosen up the gates of Styx in its abyss, let the people's hymn resound with Bacchus' praise'); the *carmen* is thus coextensive with those arcane procedures, is part of the evocation through *carmina* that had been mandated by Tiresias.[12] In fact we will hear from Creon that Tiresias pours wine – *Bacchus* – on the earth as he begins his rites (566–7). Bacchus is a uniquely appropriate character to be called into the picture at this point. (It is, as we know, with Bacchic figures, Agave, Pentheus, the Bacchae themselves, that Laius' tragic catalogue ends.[13]) In Tiresias' negotiation between the living and the dead, Bacchus appears as a powerful intermediary who embodies both the joyful enthusiasm of inspired love and the dreadful dangers of orgiastic rites. He is not only the divine patron of Thebes, but also a powerful reminder of the tragic confusion of roles and natural norms which Oedipus has brought on his city: he is, in fact, the very symbol of nature *acta retro*.[14] The ode focuses at an early stage on the confusion of sexual identity that characterizes the god, and on his power to metamorphose objects and human beings alike (418–22; 486–8).

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[11] See esp. Mastronarde (1970); Davis (1993) 202–7; Töchterle (1994) 362–7; Caviglia (1996).
[12] See *carmen magicum* (561); *canit* (567); *rata verba fudi* (572).
[13] Lines 616–18. See p. 9 above.
[14] See Paratore (1956) 125.

Bacchus continuously shifts between the dark violence of blood and the resplendent light of his smiling appearance; he is the principle of life as much as of deadly violence.

The numerous points of contact between the ode and the following necromancy scene[15] reinforce the notion that the invocation to Bacchus is an essential component of those rites and shares to a certain extent their metapoetic implications. Bacchus, the god of life and death, of light and darkness, of masculinity and femininity, of blood and milk, is also the perfect symbol of a poetry which constructs a bridge between the dead and the living, the joyful frenzy of the Bacchic orgy and its obscure, threatening undertones.

The form of poetry that emerges from *Oedipus*' metadramatic reflection is centred on a pained yet inevitable relationship with the past, one which passion, *furor* and Bacchic enthusiasm can access and elaborate for the living. The underworld is not only the repository of all things dead, but also of all the dark forces that project their grim shadow on powerless mortals. It is in the context of this ideology of the past that intertextuality should be set and allowed to acquire some of the eerie connotations that must inevitably accompany such an extended interaction with the world of the dead. It can hardly be meaningless that it falls to *Oedipus* to outline a poetics of regression, but it is *Thyestes* that focuses extensively on the extraordinary power which accrues to the character who has fully understood those principles and knows only too well how to exploit them. And Atreus, the Dionysiac poet, is the ultimate embodiment of this form of poetics, at once sublime and regressive.

PASSIONS AND HERMENEUTICS: THE AUDIENCE

> 'There is no such thing as a good influence, Mr. Gray. All influence is immoral – immoral from the scientific point of view.' (O. Wilde, *Portrait of Dorian Gray*)

> ac nescio quomodo ingenia in immani et invisa materia secundiore ore expresserunt sensus vehementes et concitatos; nullam adhuc vocem audii ex bono lenique animosam. (Seneca, *De clementia* 2.2.3)

The choral ode in *Oedipus* prompts us to confront once again the overwhelming force of poetry, its ability to dredge up from memory and *nefas* dark secrets and terrible truths, a cocktail of pleasurable and painful passions. It is a combination of emotions which brings us back to the same issues that I faced when I began this investigation: what are the function

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[15] See Mastronarde (1970) 310–11.

and effect of poetry? How are we, the audience, supposed to confront the emotional reality of Seneca's plays, sprung from their underworldly roots? What role do these emotions play as we try to assess the ideological balance of each play? Or, to put it in wider terms: can there be a truly coherent Stoic theatre?

In search of answers to these questions it is interesting to turn once more to Stoic thinkers in order to clarify, first of all, the theoretical framework of the issues at stake. Afterwards, however, it will be poetry, again, which must offer its own less systematic but hardly less compelling answers, in the form of metapoetic images culled from the plays themselves.

Although they insist on the potential educational value of poetry,[16] the Stoics are also keenly aware of the possible dangers it presents to the audience. Plutarch's *How the Young Man Should Study Poetry* (*Quomodo adulescens poetas audire debeat*), which is very close, as far as we can ascertain, to traditional Stoic thinking,[17] expresses all these concerns very clearly. Poetry can be dangerous for the very same reasons as it can be useful. It is a form of expression which is more effective than prose, both because it enables the poet to express himself more concentratedly, and because it arguably captures the audience's attention better than prose. Cleanthes, as we learn from a reference in Seneca (*Ep.* 108.10) formulated this thought with particular clarity: 'Cleanthes used to say, "As our breath produces a louder sound when it passes through the long and narrow opening of the trumpet and escapes by a hole which widens at the end, even so the fettering rules of poetry clarify our meaning." '[18]

There are two main ways in which poetry can be dangerous. First of all, listening to poetry produces pleasure in the listener, a passion that has to be accounted for, justified and contained. It is an irrational movement of the soul, and the Stoics must negotiate its existence by taking into account, on the one hand, the necessity to avoid passions altogether and, on the other, the potential benefit of the excitement of poetry for the reader. Secondly, poetry can deceive the reader into endorsing morally objectionable ideas, and, by representing passions in the characters, it can induce passions in the audience.

These different forms of influence rely on the assumption that poetry itself can be analysed into two separate entities, matter and form, or – in Stoic terms – *logos* and *lexis*, a rhythmical pattern of sounds which is peculiar to poetic expression. Much like music,[19] to which Stoic authors often compare it, poetry affects the hearer with harmonious sounds and the appropriately composed relationship between different parts,[20] and a well-crafted 'form' (*lexis*) alone can produce pleasure in the hearer, irrespective of the content it expresses. As an irrational movement of the soul, such pleasure should normally be avoided, but, if controlled and moderated, it can be justified because of its educational benefit, provided that the content of the poetry is morally acceptable. However, only those still struggling in the way to wisdom, the *proficientes*, will need such inducements, which the wise (*sapiens*) will normally eschew.[21] It is necessary to remember, in any case, that the ability of poetry to produce pleasure *irrespective* of its moral contents is a constant danger which educators should carefully guard against.

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[16] De Lacy (1948) and Tieleman (1992) 219–48.

[17] De Lacy (1948) 250, n. 47. Nussbaum (1993) 122, too, uses Plutarch, with caution.

[18] For a similar evaluation of Cleanthes see Philodemus, *De musica* (28.1–14 Neubecker = *SVF* 1.486).

At the level of *logos*, or content, as well as of education, poetry appears to be an equally double-edged form of expression. For one thing, poetry can produce sympathetic passions, and, for this reason, it is essential that the audience should restrain itself. The reader, says Plutarch (*Mor.* 16e):

> will check himself when he is feeling wroth at Apollo in behalf of the foremost of the Achaeans... he will cease to shed tears over the dead Achilles and over Agamemnon in the nether world... and if, perchance, he is beginning to be disturbed by their suffering and overcome by the enchantment, he will not hesitate to say to himself, 'Hasten eager to the light, and all you saw here lay to heart that you may tell your wife hereafter' [*Od.* 11.223–4].

Poetry can also represent immoral ideas and forms of behaviour. I quote Plutarch again on this point (16d–e):

> Whenever, therefore, in the poems of a man of note and repute some strange and disconcerting (δυσχερές) statement either about gods or lesser deities or about virtue is made by the author, he who accepts the statement as true is carried off his feet, and has his opinions perverted (διέφθαρται); whereas he who always remembers and keeps clearly in mind the sorcery of the poetic art in dealing with falsehood... will not suffer any dire effects or even acquire any base beliefs.

A little later (17d) Plutarch quotes two short passages from the *Iliad* and Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, and comments:

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[19] De Lacy (1948) 248, n. 33.

[20] De Lacy (1948) 246 and n. 20, 248, n. 33.

[21] But the Stoics also posit that even the philosopher can derive pleasure from poetry. His is not ἡδονή but χαρά, a state of 'rational elevation' which derives from a correct judgement, that is from a correct evaluation of the contents of the poem in question: De Lacy (1948) 250, with n. 48.

> These are the voices of persons affected by emotion and prepossessed by opinions and delusions. For this reason such sentiments take a more powerful hold on us and disturb us the more, inasmuch as we become infected by their emotions (πάθους) and by the weakness from whence they proceed. Against these influences, then, once more let us equip the young from the very outset to keep ever sounding in their ears the maxim that the art of poetry is not greatly concerned with the truth...

These two possibilities – that poetry will stir passions, and that it will liberate wrong ideas – come closest to the core of the issue here at stake, for they are inescapable in the case of tragedy. Plutarch gives an interestingly simple answer to the issue (18a–b). In the case of artists, such as painters, who depict unnatural acts (πράξεις ἀτόπους), for instance Medea slaying her children, 'it is especially necessary that the young man should be trained by being taught that what we commend is not the action which is the subject of the imitation, but the art, in case the subject in hand has been properly imitated'. To imitate ' "beautifully" means "fittingly and properly" and ugly things are "fitting and proper" for the ugly' (18d).

While Plutarch insists on the fact that education and judgement must avoid the audience's endorsement of wrong ideas represented on stage, Strabo seems more confident that the text can safely orient the reactions of the audience. A pleasant *mythos* (he says at 1.2.8) produces in the audience an impulse (προτροπή) towards that particular behaviour, while a frightening *mythos* exercises a deterring effect called ἀποτροπή. This clear-cut distinction, however, is undermined by the observation, in the same paragraph, that fear, too, can produce pleasure,[22] here called ἔκπληξις or κατάπληξις. De Lacy notes that the term ἔκπληξις is used in *On the Sublime* precisely to describe the pleasurable excitement provoked in the audience by great literature,[23] a state 'closely akin' to the *enthousiasmos* of the poet producing such literature.[24] Strabo's apparent trust in the idea that the intrinsic shape of the text can produce the desired effect of προτροπή or ἀποτροπή matches the rhetorical writers' confidence that the reaction of the audience can be safely oriented. This confidence, in turn, presupposes a set of 'shared values and cultural norms' which shape the audience's reactions and allow the rhetor to foresee them.[25] As Ps.-Longinus points out, however, *phantasia* operates differently in poetry and in rhetoric, since the latter is bound by verisimilitude and must eschew exaggeration. The impact of poetic *enthousiasmos* and *phantasia* are altogether less easy to gauge in advance even within a cultural system which does not admit the existence of a free, creative, 'modern' imagination.[26]

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[22] 'And what is new is pleasing, and so is what one did not know before; and it is just this that makes men eager to learn. But if you add thereto the marvellous (θαυμαστόν) and the portentous (τερατῶδες), you thereby increase the pleasure (ἡδονήν), and pleasure acts as a charm to incite to learning... Now since the portentous (τερατῶδες) is not only pleasing (ἡδύ), but fear-inspiring (φοβερόν) as well, we can employ both kinds of myth [pleasing and fear-inspiring] for children, and for grown-up people too.'

[23] *Subl.* 1.4. De Lacy (1948) 270.

[24] Russell (1964) 62.

So far, I have tried to show that Stoic theories on poetry fail to provide an adequate explanation of how the moral and educational value of poetry can be safeguarded in forms of poetry which represent negative *exempla*. The next step is to investigate the dynamics of aesthetic reception: how the audience perceives poetry and is influenced by it.

The Stoic theory of passion posits a fundamental distinction between instinctive reactions and rational assent. When presented with a frightening appearance (*species*), any human being, wise or not, will receive an involuntary 'impulse' (*ictus*) which will make him or her jump, or blush, or involuntarily perform any such acts. As Seneca points out in *De ira* 2.2.1, these reactions are not controllable, and therefore reason cannot prevent their unfolding (*quorum quia nihil in nostra potestate est, nulla quominus fiant ratio persuadet*). Among the various examples of involuntary reactions, *De ira* includes episodes related to the effect of poetry and other forms of artistic expression (2.2.3–6):

> This [impulse of the mind] (*ictus animi*) steals upon us even from the sight of plays upon the stage and from reading of happenings of long ago. How often we seem to grow angry with Clodius for banishing Cicero, with Antony for killing him! Who is not aroused against the arms which Marius took up, against the proscriptions which Sulla used?... [4] Singing sometimes stirs us, and quickened rhythm, and the well-known blare of the War-god's trumpets; our minds are perturbed by a shocking picture and by the melancholy sight of punishment even when it is entirely just... It is said that Alexander, when Xenophantus played the flute, reached for his weapons.

This 'impulse' (*ictus*), however, is not a passion, because, again in Seneca's words (2.3.1), 'none of these things which move the mind through the agency of chance should be called passions; the mind suffers them, so to speak, rather than causes them' (*nihil ex his quae animum fortuito inpellunt adfectus vocari debet: ista, ut ita dicam, patitur magis animus quam facit*). Essential to the existence of a passion (*adfectus*) is the assent (*assensio*) which the receiver of such an *ictus* will or will not grant to the *ictus*. 'Passions', says Seneca (2.3.1), 'consist not in being moved as a result of impressions of

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[25] Webb (1997) 123–5 at 125.

[26] Webb (1997) *passim*, esp. 123–4; Pedrick-Rabinowitz (1986) 107.

things, but in surrendering oneself to them and following up this fortuitous movement' (*ergo adfectus est non ad oblatas rerum species moveri, sed permittere se illis et hunc fortuitum motum prosequi*). The involuntary reactions to poetry or painting, in so far as they are 'the movement of minds not wishing to be moved' (*motus... animorum moveri nolentium*), are not proper *adfectus*, but only *principia proludentia adfectibus* (2.2.5):

> Such sensations, however, are no more anger than that is sorrow which furrows the brow at the sight of a mimic shipwreck, no more anger than that is fear which thrills our minds when we read how Hannibal after Cannae beset the walls of Rome, but they are all emotions of a mind that would prefer not to be so affected; they are not passions, but the beginnings that are preliminary to passions.

If we apply this doctrine to the case of poetry, or, more specifically, to dramatic poetry, we can say that the text produces an 'image' (*species*) which provokes an 'impulse' (*ictus*) of, for instance, fear, pleasure or hate, but that only when the mind has granted its assent to such an 'impulse' will poetry have produced a real 'passion' (*adfectus*). This structure appears to be consistent with Plutarch's almost exclusive emphasis on the fact that the audience should be educated to resist the 'impulse' of poetry, and it entails interesting consequences for the critical interpretation of Senecan tragedy.

Before, however, turning to these consequences by way of conclusion, I would like to elaborate further on the dynamics of passions and on other Senecan passages which shed light on the relationship between poetry and *adfectus*.

In *Letters to Lucilius* 115, Seneca criticizes poetic endorsements of wealth as a value (115.12): 'Verses of poets also are added to the account – verses which lend fuel to our passions (*quae adfectibus nostris facem subdant*), verses in which wealth is praised as if it were the only credit and glory of mortal man.'

The torch is a remarkable metaphor for the *ictus*, since it implies not only that the tragic endorsement of negative thoughts can produce an involuntary 'impulse', but also that such thoughts constitute intrinsically dangerous temptations.[27] As Seneca states in *Letter* 7.2, 'nothing is so damaging to good character as the habit of lounging (*desidere*) at the games; for then it is that vice steals subtly upon one through the avenue of pleasure'. The 'impulse', we know, can be resisted, but it is still a temptation, indeed a dangerous one since it is associated with the pleasure of poetry, the pleasure of hearing certain sounds and forms of expression, and, according to Plutarch, the pleasure essentially linked with the very act of mimetic representation.

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[27] The torches are also traditionally associated with the Furies, whose connection with poetry I explored above.

In the following paragraphs of *Letter* 115, Seneca relates an anecdote about Euripides' career. Hearing some lines praising wealth,[28] the audience rushed forward, pushed away the actors and tried to end the performance. Euripides came to the stage and asked them to wait and see what 'end' (*exitum*) that 'admirer of gold' would eventually get (115.15). This episode seems to imply that, in order to preserve its educational value, tragedy should stage evil actions only if it also shows the retribution they deserve. Again, we are confronted not so much with the fact that Senecan tragedy represents immoral conduct, but that it conspicuously fails to offer a convincing image of punishment.[29]

The relationship between passions and poetry that is established in the passages above implies a remarkable shift of responsibilities from the author to the audience. Surely, the author is responsible for his intentions, and should be judged accordingly (if we so desire). But, whatever these intentions, the real burden of interpretation falls on the audience, and ultimately lies outside the author's sphere of influence. It is left to the audience's *interpretation*, if they so wish, to fulfil the educational intentions of the author. It is perfectly possible to assume that Seneca's intention in portraying Medea was to move his audience to a stern criticism of the passions which dominate her. But it is equally possible that, contrary to his supposed aims, a reader will end up feeling great sympathy for Medea and her crimes, and thus forgo any chance of being morally improved. In the hermeneutic process that links the author to his text and the text to its audience, there is a gap which the author's intention cannot bridge and which effectively renders the question of the educational value of poetry aporetic.

Another section of *Letter* 7, the famous letter on circus games, provides an interesting confirmation that this particular brand of the Stoic theory of interpretation is heavily focused on the reactions of the audience. At 7.5 Seneca exclaims: 'Come now, do you not understand even this truth, that a bad example reacts on the agent? Thank the immortal gods that you are teaching cruelty to a person who cannot learn to be cruel.' Although some interpreters choose to read in these lines a disguised praise of Nero's

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[28] *Danae*, fr. 324 Nauck^2; Seneca mistakenly attributes the lines to the *Bellerophon*.

[29] *Letter* 108 also acknowledges the possibility that *adfectus* be stirred by poetry (108.11–12): 'but our minds are struck (*feriuntur*) more effectively when a verse like this is repeated: "he needs but little who desires but little" or "He has his wish, who wishes only for what is sufficient." When we hear such words as these, we are led towards a confession of the truth. Even men in whose opinion nothing is enough, wonder and applaud when they hear such words, and swear eternal hatred against money. When you see them so disposed, strike home, keep at them . . .'

clemency, I am inclined to think that the person 'who cannot learn to be cruel' is Seneca himself, caught watching the slaughter of the arena despite himself. Unlike the crowd, Seneca is able to resist the *ictus* that comes from the performance because his moral principles lead him to deny his assent to such a monstrosity. But, again, the point is precisely that he is uninfluenced by the evil example in front of his eyes not because of its intrinsic evilness, but simply because his principles are already against it. If his principles had been different, the same 'text' could have provoked very different results. This applies to the spectators of tragedy as well. A negative spectacle will probably not affect the *sapiens*, but it might well invite a wrong assent from the morally weaker *proficiens* (let alone the *insipiens*). And, regrettably, there are very few *sapientes* in this world.

ALLEGORIES OF SPECTATORSHIP

gaudet magnus aerumnas dolor
tractare totas. ede et enarra omnia.
(Seneca, *Troades* 1066–7)

Senecan tragedy can often be seen to dramatize the emotional quandaries of spectatorship, referring to watching and being watched as essential components of the actions performed on stage. It is easy enough to connect this emphasis with more or less obvious features of 'Silver Latin' aesthetics: an obsession with form over content; the substitution of voyeuristic detachment for a sense of active purpose that is now regrettably lost; the 'baroque' (or 'Mannerist') penchant for overwrought, graphic descriptions. Ovid started it, it is often assumed, with his flamboyant fantasy and his passion for *ekphrasis*. The history of later reception seems to have crystallized this figurative quality of Ovidian and post-Ovidian representations into consistent patterns: comparing the two is much like distinguishing between the restrained Virgilian landscapes of Poussin and the colorful reworking of Ovidian themes offered by Titian or Rubens. To say that this contrast is, by now, commonplace, is not to deny it a measure of truth, even less a *prima facie* appeal. Yet it pays to set aside for a moment the temptation to outline too neat a history of post-Virgilian literature, and to concentrate instead on how seeing and watching function in a specific Senecan context. I thus choose to discuss a scene from *Troades* which, I believe, offers the most engaging and poignant of paradigms. First, however, I will concentrate for one last time on *Thyestes* itself, in order not to lose sight of the relevance of the topic as far as this particular play is concerned.

At the very centre of the dramatic action in *Thyestes* stands the elaborate relaying of the slaughter scene to a hardly composed chorus by an equally distressed messenger. Seneca retains in this scene the structural pattern that characterizes the whole play: the messenger, an unseen spectator, guarantees that Atreus' deeds are not lost for the chorus and the audience in spite of the messenger's own wish that the image of that *nefas* might abandon him: 'what whirlwind will headlong bear me through the air and in murky cloud enfold me, that it may snatch this awful horror from my sight?' (623–5: *quis me per auras turbo praecipitem vehet | atraque nube involvet, ut tantum nefas | eripiat oculis?*). In fact the messenger's words – *haeret in vultu trucis | imago facti* ('the picture of that ghastly deed still lingers before my face', 635–6) – echo an expression previously employed by Atreus himself: 'already before my eyes flits the whole picture of the slaughter' (281–2: *tota iam ante oculos meos | imago caedis errat*), and thereby guarantee that the spectacle Atreus had envisaged has now been carried out in all its enormity. We should also remember that all those watching are in turn being watched: the Fury had said early on that Tantalus' ghost would be forced to watch, unseen, the macabre developments of the plot: 'let blood mixed with wine be drunk before your eyes' (65–6: *mixtus in Bacchum cruor | spectante te potetur*).

The detailed description of the site where the slaughter takes place, Atreus' royal palace, is a privileged locus for analysing the mixed emotional responses that are elicited by this spectacle, since the messenger's reaction to the horrific scene exemplifies the reactions that his own rhesis is expected to provoke in the reader. (The chorus, who might otherwise fulfil this function, is, as usual, rather restrained.[30]) The messenget makes only a lame attempt to stifle the overpowering force of the human sacrifice that he has watched. He starts by hoping that the dire image might be erased from his memory (624–5), and a few lines later he begs to be dragged away because that image is still painfully stuck in his mind (635–8). But his resistance is weak and fleeting: the chorus does not have to prod him much in order to obtain a full and emphatic report on the most minute aspects of the sacrificial rite. The words of horror carry an irresistible force: they flow unchecked past the superficial attempt at removal advocated by the messenger in self-protection. Once his initial opposition is overruled, the horrendous scene is recalled and described in an impressive display of eloquence. In his capacity to recreate for our eyes an otherwise irretrievable scene, the messenger is yet another authorial persona in the text and is subject in turn to the disruptive dialectic of the repressed and the repressive that shapes the play

at different levels. Here again we have a graphic account of a negative force that the messenger wishes he could resist, but which demands to be represented, and to which he can only succumb: there is no hiding what he has seen, just as Tantalus' shadow cannot help stirring up the dramatic actions demanded by the Fury. The rhetorical elaboration of the speech thus acquires a significance which goes beyond Seneca's 'Baroque' predilection for florid expression. The self-conscious richness of language in the rhesis becomes the clearest textual signifier of the unopposed literary triumph of Atreus' deeds; the pleasure of the messenger's words, both the pleasure he provokes in the well-read audience and the pleasure to which he yields as he relishes his own description, stand in direct contrast to the moral judgement of Atreus' deeds that is suggested by the messenger's and the chorus's incidental remarks. The Ovidian subtext which powerfully structures Atreus' thoughts about his revenge is also important here. We remember that the figurative story sent to Procne by Philomela provokes an explosive response (*Met.* 6.581–6):

> evolvit vestes saevi matrona tyranni
> fortunaeque suae carmen miserabile legit
> et (mirum potuisse) silet: dolor ora repressit,
> verbaque quaerenti satis indignantia linguae
> defuerunt, nec flere vacat, sed fasque nefasque
> confusura ruit poenaeque in imagine tota est.

the savage monarch's wife unrolled the cloth and read the tragic tale of her calamity – and said no word (it seemed a miracle, but anguish locked her lips). Her tongue could find no speech to match her outraged anger; no room here for tears; she stormed ahead, ready to confuse right and wrong, her whole soul filled with visions of revenge.

Fasque nefasque confusura ruit expresses, even more than the qualified moral detachment of the narrator, the notion that such a reading (or vision) will provoke emotional consequences of a morally ambivalent nature, a collapse of clear-cut distinctions between *fas* and *nefas*.

The rhesis of *Thyestes*, as we have seen, problematizes the emotional response of the readers and questions their possible identification with the chorus: once again the poetic word appears to be working against the repressive force of rational criticism. Nowhere in the Senecan *corpus* is this issue thematized more effectively than in the final scene of *Troades*, a tense three-way dialogue between the messenger, Hecuba and Andromache. As the messenger appears and announces to both women that they have suffered tremendous losses, Andromache invites him to relate the events in detail (1065–7):

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[30] On the chorus's reaction see above, p. 170.

expone seriem caedis, et duplex nefas
persequere: gaudet magnus aerumnas dolor
tractare totas. ede et enarra omnia.

Recount the order of the slaughter, and unfold the story of the double crime: a great grief delights to consider its sorrows entire: speak out and recount it all.

The messenger obliges by describing first the death of Astyanax. His language makes it clear that the underlying association is with a theatrical performance, a tragically real one. The centre of the 'stage' is occupied by the tower from which the Greeks plan to throw the boy. Around the tower stands a crowd of Trojans and Greeks alike (1075–87):

haec nota quondam turris et muri decus,
nunc saeva cautes, undique adfusa ducum
plebisque turba cingitur; totum coit
ratibus relictis vulgus. his collis procul
aciem patenti liberam praebet loco,
his alta rupes, cuius in fastigio
erecta summos turba libravit pedes.
hunc pinus, illum laurus, hunc fagus gerit
et tota populo silva suspenso tremit.
extrema montis ille praerupti petit,
semusta at ille tecta vel saxum imminens
muri cadentis pressit, atque aliquis (nefas)
tumulo ferus spectator Hectoreo sedet.

This tower, once famous and pride of the walls, is now a cruel outcrop, surrounded on all sides by the spreading crowds of princes and common folk. The whole throng has assembled abandoning the fleet. For some a distant hill offers a free view from open ground, for others a high cliff, upon whose summit the eager crowd poised the tips of its feet. A pine tree supports one man, a laurel another, another a beech tree, and the whole wood quivers with its load of people. Another man makes for the edge of a steep hill; yet another treads on a half-burned dwelling, or the projecting masonry of the falling wall, and there is even (o abomination!) a barbarous spectator who sits on Hector's mound.

Unlike the boy, the crowd weeps (1099–1100: *non flet e turba omnium | qui fletur*); as soon as the messenger relates Astyanax's brave resolve in jumping voluntarily from the tower, Andromache interjects with a histrionic lament (1104–9). Finally, we come to Polyxena's death. This time, the messenger emphasizes even more the theatrical aspects of the scene (1118–28):

praeceps ut altis cecidit e muris puer
flevitque Achivum turba quod fecit nefas,
idem ille populus aliud ad facinus redit

tumulumque Achillis. cuius extremum latus
Rhoetea leni verberant fluctu vada;
adversa cingit campus et clivo levi
erecta medium vallis includens locum
crescit theatri more.[31] concursus frequens
implevit omne litus: hi classis moram
hac morte solvi rentur, hi stirpem hostium
gaudent recidi.

When the boy fell headlong from the lofty walls and the Greek crowd had wept for the wickedness it had committed, the same people turned back to another wicked act and the tomb of Achilles. The Rhoetean waters beat on its far side with gentle breakers; a plain fringes the near side, and a valley grows, rising with an easy slope and enclosing a central space, like a theatre. The numerous throng filled the whole shore: some believe the delay of the fleet will be ended by this death, others are glad that the young shoot of the enemy has been pruned back.

The crowd's reactions are especially singled out, as the messenger insists on them three times (1128–31, 1136–7, 1147–8):

magna pars vulgi levis
odit scelus spectatque; nec Troes minus
suum frequentant funus et pavidi metu
partem ruentis ultimam Troiae vident.

A great part of the shallow crowd both hates the crime and watches it; the Trojans as eagerly attend their own burial and panicked with fear look on the last fragment of falling Troy.

terror attonitos tenet
utrosque populos.

Awe holds both peoples in shock.

omnium mentes tremunt,
mirantur ac miserantur.

The minds of all are trembling, they marvel and they pity her.

The final remark on the reaction of the 'spectators' once again conjoins the two different groups (1160–1):

uterque flevit coetus; at timidum Phryges
misere gemitum, clarius victor gemit.

Each crowd wept: but the Trojans sent up a hesitant groan, while the victor groaned more loudly.

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[31] On the textual issues raised by these lines, and their bearing on the interpretation of *theatri more*, see Fantham (1982) 377 and Zwierlein (1986) 111–12.

There are two intertwined elements of great interest in this scene. The first is the explicit use of the theatrical analogy which the messenger exploits throughout as a structuring device for his narration. The second is the insisted focus on the emotional reactions of the people watching the deaths of Polyxena and Astyanax, which, in the context of that analogy, invites reflection on the relationship between that form of involved spectatorship and the reactions which the audience would be expected to experience while watching the play.

The latter issue should perhaps be dealt with first. By watching watchers watch – an 'allegory of spectatorship'[32] – the audience is naturally invited to acquire a critical distance from the very act of watching. This is especially true since the messenger carefully distinguishes the reactions of Greeks and Trojans, and points out that the latter are able to refrain from crying out although they would be expected to be hit harder by the tragic events unfolding before them. If the Trojans are able to avoid uncontrolled despair, this should prove that a form of restrained spectatorship is indeed possible. One could consider this a form of 'critical spectatorship',[33] since the Trojans' moderate reactions must doubtless be rooted in their rational determination to offset the effects of the painful scene they are watching with the desire to maintain a dignified appearance in front of their oppressors.[34] Furthermore, both Trojans and Greeks are watching real events, not a mimesis of those events. Thus, *a fortiori*, spectators should infer that they can avoid being completely overwhelmed by emotions mediated by a mimetic representation.

The analogy between the Greeks and Trojans watching the deaths of Polyxena and Astyanax and the audience watching the play, however, is not immediate. The tragedy, in fact, presents an intermediate level which frames this allegory of spectatorship and complicates its extrapolation, since the messenger relates the events not directly to the external audience (us), but to an internal audience made up chiefly of Hecuba and Andromache. They, too, react to the speech, and, although their emotional involvement is obviously of a more directly compelling nature, their reactions represent another point of reference and comparison which is offered to the ultimate audience of the play. After the first part of the messenger's exposition (1068–103), Andromache reacts with an outburst of pained indignation (1104–10). Shortly after, upon hearing of her son's brave behaviour, her reaction is one of pride, as she observes the similarity between son and father: *sic quoque est similis patri* (1117). Finally, Hecuba expresses her feelings by voicing her despair and regretting that she has to survive the demise of her family (1165–77).

Between the events narrated and the audience watching the play there are, therefore, a number of layers. The event is (i) watched by the Greeks, the Trojans and the messenger, whose reactions are (ii) described to Andromache and Hecuba, whose own reactions are, in turn, (iii) displayed on the stage. At each of the first two levels, however, the tragedy foregrounds different modalities of reaction. The Greeks weep uncontrollably, and watch despite hating what they have to see; the Trojans – who cannot but detest the events in front of them – are able to superimpose a level of rational consideration onto their reactions; Hecuba, Andromache and the messenger react with violent emotions. The differing attitudes of the Greeks and the Trojans prove that emotional reactions are not a direct, univocal consequence of emotional involvement: hence we lose, I suspect, the exemplary value of metadramatic alienation. The *mise en scène* of spectatorship does invite the audience's critical reflection on its own acts, and thus fosters the possibility of critical viewing. But the further complication of this model finally turns it on its head, as it shows that no definite pattern of behaviour is really predominant. The audience is left with the tantalizing impression that a form of critical distancing is indeed possible, but that no coherent prescription for it can be given. What the scene ultimately provides is the *illusion* of critical spectatorship, a form of controlled reaction which is theoretically possible but actually elusive, since it depends too much on individual attitudes and reactions. By multiplying the internal points of reference, and thus (apparently) offering substantial stimuli for a critical analysis of the implications of spectatorship, the play finally leaves the audience alone with, and probably puzzled by, its own critical burden.

A critical juncture in the mirroring of spectatorship occurs in the final scene of *Troades*, and in the poignant observation that the text reserves for the behaviour of most Greeks in the 'shallow mass' (*magna pars vulgi levis*), which is described as 'hating the crime and watching it' (*odit scelus spectatque*, 1129). The paratactic arrangement of these verbs cannot obliterate the concessive force of *odit*: the epigrammatic tension of the expression represents intrinsically contradictory emotions: the 'authors' of the *scelus* abhor it and yet are compelled to watch it. There are several disturbing implications of this remark which need to be untangled. On the one hand, we notice that the *scelus* resists control on the part of its creators, since it elicits widely differing reactions from different groups of people: some of the Greeks rejoice at the Trojans' demise (1126–8: *hi classis moram | hac morte solvi rentur, hi stirpem hostium | gaudent recidi*), others 'hate' the crime. The latter also show by their reaction that the staged *scelus* they have planned cannot be controlled to its end, and in fact turns against them emotionally. Moreover, it is clear from the messenger's observations that the *scelus* commands attention in spite of its loathsome nature.[35] It should be noticed, however, that the concessive force of *odit* is far from determined by the syntax of the phrase; the modern reader, alerted by Freud's well-known *dictum*, might well be inclined to suspect in such a vague syntactical arrangement traces of a causal connection between *odit* and *spectat*. The *scelus* keeps the *vulgus* riveted precisely *because* it is cruel and hateful.[36]

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[32] A term I borrow from Stam (1992) 29 and *passim*.

[33] I anticipate here a reference to Martha Nussbaum's notion of 'critical spectatorship' which I discuss more fully in the next section of this chapter, p. 244.

[34] Presumably they must also moderate their cries for fear of retribution – tyrants may even order relatives to display 'joy' after the execution of their family members: Jal (1963) 286–7.

This suggestion finds circumstantial corroboration elsewhere in the speech. Shortly after line 1129, the messenger describes Polyxena's arrival on the scene of her death, exploiting the pathetic quality of the wedding-as-funeral motif.[37] The extended simile at 1140–2 foregrounds the 'perverse' reaction of the crowd to Polyxena's beauty, even as the reference to natural events tries to downplay the disruptive potential of the pleasurable association between imminent death and moving beauty. The three-line portrait of Polyxena is fraught with erotic overtones. Her beauty is especially resplendent, the messenger confesses, 'in spite' of her demure and shy behaviour (1138: *tamen*), a detail which would clearly befit a bride, and which in this context focalizes her as an object of sexual desire in the eyes of the male narrator and the predominantly (we assume) male crowd. Such an implication, moreover, is clearly brought out after the simile, as the messenger confirms that Polyxena's beauty stirs strong emotions in the beholders and – for the second time – reinforces the association between aesthetic pleasure and the awareness of a cruel, imminent death (1143–8):

> stupet omne vulgus, et fere cuncti magis
> peritura laudant: hos movet formae decus,
> hos mollis aetas, hos vagae rerum vices;
> movet animus omnes fortis et leto obvius,
> Pyrrhum antecedit; omnium mentes tremunt,
> mirantur ac miserantur.

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[35] A paradox already discussed by Plato, *Resp.* 439e–440a.
[36] See Boyle (1994) 229 on the theatrical force of *spectare*.
[37] The suggestion is made explicit at line 1132: *thalami more praecedunt faces*. For further references to this motif see Schiesaro (1985) and Seaford (1987).

The whole crowd is dazed, and generally all men praise more what is about to die: some the grace of her beauty moves, others her delicate youth, others the straying course of fate: but her brave spirit moves all as it goes to confront death. She goes before Pyrrhus, and the minds of all are trembling, they marvel and they pity her.

The generalizing remark at 1143–4 (*et fere cuncti magis | peritura laudant*) has been suspected as an interpolation,[38] but it actually reinforces the poignant tone of the simile, and suitably glosses the contrasting emotions that are experienced by the *vulgus* watching Polyxena's death.

The analysis of the final scene of *Troades* is consistent with my previous reading of Stoic theoretical statements on the emotional impact of performance. Critical distance is severely jeopardized, if not annulled, by the voyeuristic involvement of the audience in the spectacle that they are watching. It is not difficult to see how this involvement plays an important role in *Thyestes* as well. There Atreus himself is the delighted spectator of his own creation, who relishes all the details of Thyestes' distress: *miserum videre nolo, sed dum fit miser* (907), he exclaims, as the curtain rises on the crowning glory of his masterpiece, a drunken, ignorant Thyestes acting out a grotesque combination of inner pain and outward intoxication. While the reading I offer is always open to the objection that, in the final analysis, Atreus could actually be set up to provide a negative model of spectatorship (he is pleasurably affected by tragic events), this strategy would be less easy to uphold with respect to the Trojan audience, which is legitimately upset by the horrors it observes. In both cases, however, what we, as the audience, are offered, is the example of an internal audience deeply affected by the events in front of them, and unable to resist the *ictus* they receive.

THE CHALLENGE OF *EPOS*

If Stoic theories fail to offer a coherent and fully convincing account of how the emotional impact of the tragedies could be contained, and prevented from affecting the audience's internal balance, the allegories of spectatorship that I have examined appear to confirm that it is indeed difficult, if not impossible, effectively to insulate viewers from the *pathos* that they experience. Stoic theories emphasize the critical burden of the spectators, who are asked to evaluate the moral implication of the text without a firm and unequivocal internal point of reference.

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[38] Lines 1143b–1144a as well as 1147 are deleted by Zwierlein (1976) 190 and 188 respectively, as interpolated comments. Fantham (1982) 380 deletes 1143b–1144a but not 1147. Boyle (1994) rightly retains both. Further see Boyle (1994) 231 for a discussion of the role of spectacle in tragedy according to Aristotle, with reference to these lines.

My reading of the Stoic sources, and their implications for an understanding of Senecan drama, is, however, only one possible reading. For instance, Martha Nussbaum has eloquently argued that the Stoics intend to promote a 'critical spectatorship', and that such a form of spectatorship may escape the seemingly unsolvable contrast outlined by Stoic sources between the potential benefits and dangers of poetry.[39] The 'critical spectator' will observe the tragedy with 'a concerned but critical detachment' and will analyse every aspect of the play with a reasoned coolness: 'the Stoics hope to construct a spectator who is vigilant rather than impressionable, actively judging rather than immersed, critical rather than trustful'.[40] I sympathize with Nussbaum's assertion that we should look at the spectator as the locus for a resolution of these tensions. I am less optimistic, however, about the expectation that Seneca's tragedies can be seen to bear out such a hypothesis. True, the insistence of many plays on passions and their inner workings does highlight one of the elements that are crucial to the formation of a critical, detached spectator, who is reminded of the existence of such mental processes. But I am not sure that the repellent nature of many central characters discourages the audience's emotional identification, or that we could consider the chorus's moralizing orthodoxy as 'a guide for the spectator's response'.[41] But is the spectator's identification with such powerful characters as Medea or Atreus really discouraged, especially when their apparent lack of reason (of 'ordinary' reason) is set against the commonplace superficiality or moralizing dullness of the characters who surround them, primarily the chorus? And especially when the central negative character of the play is invested with the responsibility and prestige of creating his or her own play: can we really loathe Atreus if we enjoy *Thyestes*? This is not to say that the notion of 'critical spectatorship' could not be precisely the answer that Seneca himself would have given if asked how he would justify his poetic project on a theoretical level. What he could not have guaranteed, however, is that this solution would actually work in his tragedies, that the philosophical infrastructure of his plays effectively avoids the possibility of a 'misinterpretation' which would transform his supposedly didactic project into a dangerous source of passion and turmoil.

The notion of 'critical spectatorship' is rooted in Brecht's theories on drama. To bring Brecht[42] into the picture is doubly interesting, first because it enables us to explore further the issue of the audience's reaction, and secondly because it may be helpful in explaining the generic interaction between drama and epic which we have already had an opportunity to confront.

The idea that tragedies should inspire strong emotional reactions finds its most influential expression in Aristotle's canonic definition of the genre (*Poetics* 1449b24–8):

> tragedy is, then, a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of a certain magnitude – by means of language enriched with all kinds of ornament, each used separately in the different parts of the play: it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions.

The opposition that Aristotle draws here between drama and narration (ἀπαγγελία) is predominantly concerned with the tragedy's different impact on the audience and is echoed in the sections of the *Poetics* which discuss the relative features and merits of tragedy and epic.[43] Thus, towards the end of the surviving part of the essay, Aristotle notices that the tragedy's reliance on music (something which epic does not have) increases the pleasurable effects of tragic poetry by making them more evident (ἐναργές);[44] tragedy is more compact and concentrated than epic, and 'greater concentration is more pleasurable than dilution over a long period: suppose someone were to arrange Sophocles' *Oedipus* in as many hexameters as the *Iliad*'.[45] Drama affects the audience more deeply than epic does, since its strategies of communication, its plotting of actions, and its forms of expression hold readers and spectators more deeply enthralled in the mimesis in front of them. Drama relies on a swift, tightly connected succession of events, on a forward-looking momentum which inevitably builds up suspense and preludes to climax. As Friedrich Schiller remarked several centuries later in his insightful commentary on Aristotle's fundamental opposition,[46] 'dramatic action moves in front of me', while 'I move around epic action, and it does not, as it were, appear to move.'[47] Schiller emphasizes especially the different effects on the readers:

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[39] Nussbaum (1993). Nussbaum distinguishes between two different Stoic views, the 'non-cognitive' and the 'cognitive', represented respectively by Posidonius (and, to a large extent, Diogenes of Babylon), on the one hand, and Chrysippus, Zeno, Seneca and Epictetus, on the other. The 'non-cognitive' position argues that emotions are non-rational movements which poetry can order by equally non-rational forces such as rhythm, harmony and melody. The authors of the 'cognitive' line insist that emotions are evaluative judgements, and that poetry has an educational function in as far as it tries to modify those judgements. Pratt (1948) argues, on the contrary, that Seneca's tragedies reject Chrysippus' theory of passions while embracing Posidonius' notion that irrational emotions have no cognitive value. Tragedies would thus be, like music, means to affect the irrational (ἄλογον) and emotional (παθητικόν) part of the soul 'through the irrational' (διὰ τοῦ ἀλόγου).

[40] Nussbaum (1993) 137.

[41] Nussbaum (1993) 148.

[42] There is only a cursory reference to Brecht in Nussbaum, who is mainly concerned with ancient sources. For a cogent argument on the limitations of Brecht's view of Greek theatre see Lada (1996).

[43] *Poetics* 1449b; 1461bff.

[44] *Poetics* 1462a.

[45] *Poetics* 1462b.

[46] In an epistolary exchange with Goethe in December 1797.

[47] Letter of 26 December.

> When the event moves in front of me [i.e. in the case of dramatic action], I am firmly shackled to the present as I apprehend it through my senses, my phantasy loses all freedom, a constant restlessness rises in me and stays in me, I must always remain by the object, all looking back, all reflection is forbidden, because I am following an external force.

Not so with epic, which allows ample freedom for readers to set their own pace: 'I can proceed at uneven steps, I can, according to my subjective need, linger for a longer or shorter time, I can move backward or forward . . . I maintain a quiet freedom.'[48]

Schiller's masterful amplification of the contrast drawn by Aristotle already brings us back to some of the central interpretative concerns about Senecan drama which I have highlighted above. Yet it is necessary to move one step ahead and interrogate another theoretical application of Aristotle's opposition before I return to our author. A direct link connects Schiller's words with what arguably remains the most incisive attempt at a redefinition of theatrical communication in the twentieth century. Around the names of Peter Szondi, Erwin Piscator and especially Bertolt Brecht, a fully-fledged theory of 'epic theatre' has evolved, one which brings the contrast between epic and drama to its most radical consequences and suggests that drama should utterly renew itself by abandoning the essential characteristics which set it apart from epic. Brecht's theoretical reflection proves invaluable for widening our notion of theatre beyond the norms that are powerfully encoded in Aristotle. Comparing his notion of 'epic theatre' with Seneca's experimentalism, anachronistic as it obviously is, can have a heuristic value.

Beginning in the 1920s, Brecht's theoretical reflections and his dramaturgic activity are affected by his thorough re-evaluation of the basic premises on which theatre, even modernist theatre, had so far been predicated. His central point of dissatisfaction with 'bourgeois theatre' is that it encourages the audience's emotional identification with the characters and actions on the stage, and thus prevents them from reflecting critically on the circumstances which govern their lives, on the power structures which silently articulate their fate. Alienation ('the A-factor') is the only effective means of acquiring knowledge, and alienation should govern both the author's construction of the play, the director's staging of it, the actors' acting and, finally and consequently, the audience's reactions. With epic theatre:

> [t]he stage began to tell a story. The narrator was no longer missing, along with the fourth wall. Not only did the background adopt an attitude to the events on the stage – by big screens recalling other simultaneous events elsewhere, by projecting documents which confirmed or contradicted what the characters said, by concrete and intelligible figures to accompany abstract conversations, by figures and sentences to support mimed transactions whose sense was unclear – but the actors too refrained from going over wholly into their role, remaining detached from the character they were playing and clearly inviting criticism of him.

The production 'took the subject-matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding. When something seems "the most obvious thing in the world" it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up.'[49] 'It is thanks to these strategic choices that "the spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play" '.[50] This form of theatre – which Brecht, drawing on Aristotle's opposition, calls 'epic theatre' – effectively becomes a form of instruction, forcing the audience to acquire critical distance and to react rationally to the staged scene. The contrast between 'dramatic theatre' and 'epic theatre' thus becomes central to his theoretical approach. The opposition, he cautions, is not made of 'absolute antitheses but of mere shifts of accents'.[51] It is mostly a matter of 'different methods of construction' which depend 'on the different way of presenting the work to the public'.[52]

The audience's reactions to the epic, as opposed to the dramatic theatre, are described by Brecht in terms which echo Schiller's intimations:

> The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too – Just like me – It's only natural – It'll never change – The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are inescapable – That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.
>
> The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it – That's not the way – That's extraordinary, hardly believable – It's got to stop – The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary – That's great art: nothing obvious in it – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.[53]

There are numerous elements of great interest in Brecht's and Schiller's analysis of the spectators' reaction to these two different forms of theatrical communication. Indeed, it would be possible to adopt their description of the effects of epic theatre on the public and apply it to Senecan tragedy, where it would buttress the assumption that the plays are meant to furnish elements of moral and philosophical instruction, and do so by exploiting a form of critical spectatorship derived from alienation. However, I will first explore further the contribution that Schiller's and Brecht's insights make to an understanding of 'the different methods of construction' presiding over epic and dramatic theatre.

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[48] *Ibidem.*

[49] Brecht (1936) 71.
[50] Brecht (1936) 71.
[51] Brecht (1930) 37, n.1.
[52] Brecht (1936) 70.
[53] Brecht (1936) 71.

As Brecht rightly emphasizes, 'dramatic elements' can be found in epic works, and vice versa:

> The bourgeois novel in the last century developed much that was 'dramatic', by which was meant the strong centralization of the story, a momentum that drew the separate parts into a common relationship. A particular passion of utterance, a certain emphasis on the clash of forces, are hallmarks of the 'dramatic'. The epic writer Döblin provided an excellent criterion when he said that with an epic work, as opposed to a dramatic, one can as it were take a pair of scissors and cut it into individual pieces, which remain fully capable of life.[54]

Brecht is looking at a central feature which distinguishes epic from drama from the point of view of plotting and pacing. Drama creates tension by its strict adherence to unity of action, but also by organizing each scene in a continuum which creates an ever-increasing tension. What Brecht calls the 'linear development' of drama as opposed to the epic's development 'in curves'[55] is responsible for the drama's premium on emotional solutions which are precipitated by an unstoppable crescendo of tension. Walter Benjamin provided an apt analogy for this structural model when he intimated that the *peripeteia* (and, we might add, anagnorisis with it) is the crest of the wave which breaks and sweeps the audience with it and rolls forward to the end.[56] Epic relishes a plot which might ultimately be teleological, but which relies heavily on delay rather than suspense, on structural *parataxis*, on changes of viewpoints, on carefully orchestrated movements backwards and forwards in the temporal frame of the narration. The narrators who control the epic narrative are free from many of the constraints imposed on the dramatic writer, since they can alter the linear arrangement of the plot almost at leisure. They can pause to describe and refrain for a while from portraying actions. They can move sideways to a different plot or subplot without destroying the texture of their creation. In dramatic theatre, Brecht says, 'one scene makes another'. In epic theatre, as 'evolutionary determinism' is replaced by 'jumps', 'each scene [is] for itself'.[57]

I have insisted especially on the different notions of internal time and scene-succession which characterize epic and drama because they recall important (if problematic) aspects of Senecan theatre. Seneca, it is often claimed, constructs his plays as a sequence of relatively unconnected scenes which are not organically linked: such a lack of what Brecht would call 'growth' (as opposed to epic 'montage') is strongly reinforced by the chorus's suspended, dream-like interventions, which do nothing to ease the transition among different moments of the plot. The internal articulation of time, too, is remarkable. As we have seen in *Thyestes* and in *Troades*, for instance, Seneca tampers with the linear, unidirectional flow of time which is essential to traditional drama, and he replaces it with a complex intertwining of different temporal levels. In *Thyestes*, we also noticed, the centrality of Atreus' killing and his subsequent revelation to his brother are further problematized by the framing structure, which makes it clear that the central plot, so traditionally hinging on such climactic moments, is but a part of a larger whole whose borders are nowhere to be grasped in the play as we see it: all the play ultimately guarantees is that we can glimpse snippets of an extended sequel of actions without being able to know exactly how they may evolve.

What are we supposed to do with the substantial presence of epic elements in Senecan tragedy? One solution could be to extend Brecht's observations about the fact that dramatic and epic elements inevitably coexist in various artistic forms, and thus, in effect, expropriate the issue of much of its interpretative potential. Or, on the other hand, we could fully embrace, as I mentioned, all the corollaries which Brecht suggests concerning the effects of epic theatre on the audience. Again, I would first like to explore a middle ground which privileges literary history before turning to the epistemological and cognitive implications of Seneca's strategy.

We would do well to recognize, first of all, that by the time Seneca wrote his plays epic had become an extremely flexible and far from unambiguous medium in Latin literature. The 'epic' thread in a text which is still predominantly dramatic is much less surprising after Virgil and Ovid, who had shown that within an epic frame dramatic and dialogic scenes could be combined with sustained narratives and the constant presence of one (or indeed more than one) narrator. Virgil had shown, too, that extensive contacts with tragedy were essential to his poem, and he appropriated – both specifically and generically – a great deal of the Greek and Roman tragic tradition. Ovid, for his part, demonstrated that the interplay of frames and contents, narrators and tales, were essential elements in the work's fractured and polyphonic signification. The *Metamorphoses* are structured on the combined claims to truth and reliability of different narrators, whose narratives are often nested one inside the other in a confusing array of layers: some narrative frames, for instance, remain open for hundreds of lines. And, of course, what Ovid ultimately accomplishes is a violent disruption of the notion of closure.

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[54] Brecht (1936) 70. [55] Brecht (1930) 37.
[56] Quoted by Stam (1992) 41. [57] Brecht (1930) 37.

The bewilderment which is part and parcel of the effect of the *Metamorphoses* ultimately deprives epic of some of its supposedly 'critical' function *vis-à-vis* drama. The *Metamorphoses* show how an energetic exploitation of epic's structural freedom – its possibility to shift narrative, narrators and time – can lead not to the critical distancing and empowerment of the readers, but rather to a form of confusion which effectively denies the privilege of insulation, rendering them victims of an emotional identification which epic could theoretically discourage. A certain level of framing helps readers understand their position in the flow of narratives, provides critical distance and ultimately affords them a privileged point of view which they might understandably mistake for that of the narrator. But Ovid multiplies this effect to the point that readers, dazzled by the web of frames within frames and narrations within narrations, can only forget the larger, 'critical' picture, and are as likely as the audience of a play to focus on the tale in hand, identifying with a character while forgetting what is implied or suggested by part or all of the metadramatic framing. There is a noticeable analogy between this technique and Seneca's predilection for rather detached acts within a play, and both authors have often been censored for what critics have seen as their inability to create a coherent continuum between scenes. Such a continuum is exactly what works such as *Metamorphoses* or *Thyestes* radically question, by adopting, as we have seen, an internal logic which makes more space for patterns of thought akin to the working of the unconscious.[58]

When Seneca conspicuously introduces epic elements into his drama he accomplishes more than a mechanic *Kreuzung der Gattungen*, but less than a total revolution. 'Epos' no longer guarantees the interpretative effects that would be consistent with a distinctly didactic view of Senecan drama, since, at a basic level, its narrative norms are no longer based on clearly articulated structural patterns. Long rheseis and extended similes violate the relative stylistic homogeneity of the tragedy, without offering, on an ideological level, any less troubled or disconnected impression of reality. Stories such as those of Tereus and Polyxena hark back to epic, where in turn they had been imported from tragedy. The 'safety' of an external epic that is relatively unscathed by the pervasive violence of passions is questioned when tragedy and epic intersect not just once, but twice, and project onto each other a relativizing, troubling shadow.

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[58] On episodic narratives in imperial literature see Williams (1978) 246–53 and Johnson (1987) *passim*. For the unconscious rejection of temporality and causality see above, p. 211.

In the context of Senecan drama, therefore, even the Brechtian notion of epic theatre as a guarantor of critical distance can hardly ensure the ethical and didactic viability of the plays. Rather, the comparison between Brecht and Seneca illustrates how Seneca 'contaminates' epic with tragedy far more than he 'disinfects' drama with it. Framing, we have seen, is the main vehicle of metadramatic reflection in the play, as it enacts, before the spectator's eyes, the constructedness of the tragic experience and encourages speculation on the specific literary features of the tragedy. Responsibility is emphatically foregrounded, and an involuntary acquiescence on the part of the audience made more and more difficult.

THE PASSIONS IN PLAY

Thyestes *and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama*

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