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Poetic Language and Corporeality in Translations of Greek Tragedy

The translation of ancient tragedy is often considered at a linguistic level, as if the drama consisted simply of words being written, spoken and heard. This article contends that translation for the stage is a process in which literary decisions have physical, as well as verbal, outcomes. It traces existing formulations concerning the links between vocal and bodily expression, and explores the ways in which printed texts might be capable of suggesting modes of corporeality or systems of movement to the embodied performer. It sketches some of the ways in which the range of possible relationships between language and physicality might be explored and understood, drawing upon recent practice-based research into the work of three modern poetic translators of Greek tragedy. Stephe Harrop is a theatre practitioner and academic, whose work explores the links between text and physical performance. She originally trained as a dancer, and currently teaches at Royal Holloway (University of London). David Wiles is a Professor of Drama and Theatre at Royal Holloway. His research interests include Greek theatre, masked performance and drama in translation. His most recent publications include *A Short History of Western Performance Space* (2003) and *Mask and Performance in Greek Tragedy* (2007).

Theoretical Introduction

IN HIS ADVICE to the playwright about the process of working out the *lexis* or language, Aristotle urges three things: (1) the writer should place the scene before his eyes; (2) he should as far as he can work out the *schemata* or 'gestures'; and (3) he should feel the emotions of the play.¹ If this is how the Greek playwright worked, what of the translator? Can the translator of ancient drama simply concentrate on the words, without thought as to how those words were once actively made, or should the translator of words somehow enter into these three dimensions of the writing process in order to produce an acceptable equivalence? We wish to argue for the second proposition on the grounds that *lexis* and *schemata* should be indisseverable.

Stephe Harrop is currently using conventional and performance-based research methods to explore the relationship between text and movement in some poetic adaptations of Greek tragedy. This paper sketches a theoretical basis for that project, and offers some preliminary conclusions. The embodied nature of language appears to be entirely

neglected in theoretical discussions of translation, yet for purposes of recreating Greek tragedy on the modern stage it seems to us that there is an urgent need to address the problem.

We begin with two propositions about translation that derive from a generation exposed to the shock of modernism, when the umbilical link between the artist and classical tradition seemed to have been cut. First, Walter Benjamin, in relation to the task of translating Baudelaire, called attention in 1923 to the problem of poetry. A poem, he argued, cannot be defined in terms of how the ideal reader will respond to its meaning.

For what does a literary work 'say'? What does it communicate? It 'tells' very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information. Yet any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information – hence something inessential. This is the hallmark of bad translations.²

Benjamin's argument remains as relevant today as it ever was. If the translator transmits the content of a Greek play, informing us, for

example, about a plague in Thebes, he or she may in the process lose the essential poem. To consider plays as poems is today unfashionable, particularly in departments of drama wary of literariness. Yet without a sense of the poetic, the experience of the performance is in our view impoverished.

In an essay on the 'Art of Translation' published a year later, the philologist Ulrich von Willamowitz-Moellendorff took the opposite line to Benjamin. When 'a creative poet takes up an ancient work and transforms it recreatively in his own spirit,' he argued, this is perfectly legitimate, 'but it is not a translation'. Writing before the Serbo-Croatian oral tradition had made its impact on western scholars, he pronounced Homer 'untranslatable because we do not have an epic metre. . . . A Homer in prose must divest himself of his jewels'. However, 'the dialogue of Greek drama stands a better chance, because in this case we have our classical style and a verse form that can be modified to suit comedy as well'.³

The question Willamowitz poses remains pertinent today: do we still have a 'classical' style? For English-speaking theatregoers the answer is probably yes, and that style is Shakespearean blank verse. Whether blank verse is compatible with the process of linguistic renewal sought by Benjamin seems doubtful. We doubt also whether it can be compatible with theatrical renewal.

Just before we gave the oral version of this paper in Oxford in May 2005, a vigorous electronic seminar took place online, as part of the Reception of Classical Texts Project at the Open University.⁴ Three papers from that seminar give a sense of current debate. Seth Schein gave a paper on translating for the classroom, the relevant classroom being in the field of comparative literature. His aim was to maximize the student's ability to interpret, and he did not aspire to the highest poetic qualities.

When David Wiles asked him about the difference between translating for the classroom and translating for performance, he

apologized for not, or not yet, being able to reconcile his 'sense of fidelity to the Greek with speakability'. He went on to argue, reasonably enough, that a translation with critical apparatus could certainly enrich the work of performers. We simply call attention here to two assumptions that are representative of current practice: that a translation for students of literature does not need to be 'speakable', and that a translation deemed suitable for performance is defined as 'speakable' rather than singable, movable, or danceable.⁵

In his paper, Michael Ewans repeated some of the premises that underpinned his Everyman *Aeschylus* series.⁶ Coming from an academic background in drama, his aim is to create a text that is 'accurate' but also 'actable, capable of being delivered effectively by an actor on the modern stage'. The trick for Ewans is to find an idiom that does not 'sound over-poetic to an audience of modern theatregoers who, unlike the original audience, are unused to verse drama'. In the discussion he criticized poet-translators for lacking 'clarity'.

In response to a question from Lorna Hardwick about 'actability' and the cultural implications of standard English, he pointed to the wide accessibility of his Everyman editions. Greek choruses were not conspicuous for their clarity, however, and their Doric dialect was not the language of Everyman. Ewans notes elsewhere that Aeschylus 'wrote in a *Kunstsprache* which incorporated words and phrasing which would have been archaic if spoken in daily life'.⁷

Hardwick's question about standard English reminds us, for example, of the poetic vigour imparted to Greek plays by Scottish, Irish or Yorkshire translations in recent years, and there is room for much further discussion about poetic language in the theatre.⁸ The question which Benjamin raises about language applies more broadly to theatricality: should translators conform to an idiom that is familiar, or seek to break existing moulds?

Finally Oliver Taplin (May 2005) offered a paper entitled 'Translating Choral Lyric for Performance'. He contrasted his own draft

version of *Oedipus Tyrannus* 1204–22 with Robert Fagles’s version, of which extracts were first published in 1977.⁹ He perceives, and we endorse his judgement, that Fagles’s version is poetic without being performable. David Wiles once acted as consultant to Glasshouse Theatre Company, who in 2003 embarked on a masked performance of *Antigone* using the Fagles text. It is a feature of masks, which are used by this company, that the lack of facial mobility throws extra emphasis onto the animation of the body as a whole. Fagles was plainly a disastrous choice because his text, despite the qualities of metaphor and rhythmic variety that first attracted the director to it, actually demands nothing beyond a speaking voice.

Taplin proffered his own simpler and more direct version of the *Oedipus* ode which he felt combined ‘audibility’ with ‘accessibility’, wondering, however, if there was not ‘too little that is poetically surprising’. When Lorna Hardwick asked him if it was possible to write poetry without placing oneself in a poetic tradition, Taplin cited Hardy as the poet who had influenced him most. Again we note the unquestioning emphasis on audibility rather than watchability. But as Lorna Hardwick points out, a poet can only work within a tradition. While blank verse as a medium for theatrical speech has deep cultural roots, there is no equivalent English tradition of verse to be danced.

There need be little debate about certain movements inscribed in a Greek text: both big gestures, like clasping another’s knees in supplication, and small directional gestures. Oliver Taplin notes that the deictic *hode* (‘him/it’) ‘was presumably accompanied by a gesture in the direction of whatever is being talked about’, and he describes such run-of-the-mill bodily movements as ‘essential for a good performance’.¹⁰ It is the most obvious mark of a literary rather than performative translation that it replaces with a noun many a *this* and *that*, *you* and *he*, for the benefit of the reader who cannot see the gesture. More subtle correlations between

text and movement are implicit in rhythm and sound, but here analysis is a much more difficult matter.

The basic unit in Greek metre is the foot, and there must have been some correlation between the metrical foot and the footfall of the dancer.¹¹ Since Greek metre is based on time values and not stress, the correlation between language and the steps of a dance was probably a very precise one. In his book on the Greek chorus, T. B. L. Webster rightly gives no credit to Prudhommeau’s theory that one could find from the evidence of vases a particular step corresponding to each metrical category – the iamb, the dactyl, etc. Webster does nevertheless refer to links in an appropriate dramatic context between metres and established cultic dance forms. He is clear that anapaestic dimeters (short-short-long-short-short-long) ‘were certainly a marching metre’, and on the final page of his book he speculates how a run of short syllables ‘gave the kind of variation of rhythm necessary for pirhouettes’.¹²

Leo Ayles, inspired by Webster, went further in describing how Greek metres contained choreographic instruction, declaring, for example: ‘I think we can say without any doubt that what defined the *dochmiac* was a particular violent movement, almost certainly involving a kick’, whilst the *cretic*, likewise using five-time, also contains an ‘instruction for kicks’. The slow three-time ionic, by contrast, ‘is especially linked to sinuous movement with back-bends, as we see from the vase pictures to be characteristic of maenads’ dances’.¹³

Such claims are not easy to substantiate intellectually, and represent the instinctive responses of a performer. In Ayles’s case, sustained exposure to Zulu dancing enriched his intuitive sense of what dance could achieve. The translator who lacks such a training or instinct about how the musicality of language *might* translate into movement is likely to produce a text that discourages movement.

The relationship between sound and movement was explored by Plato in the *Cratylus*. Cratylus is a sophist who argues that there is an inherent link between words and what

they signify, and Socrates initially endorses his argument. Thus something of Orestes' wild nature is caught in the etymological link with *oros*, a mountain. But the question of sound seems more important and interesting. An 'r' sound implies flowing or movement, as in *krouein*, equivalent to strike. The Greek letters *phi*, *psi*, *sigma*, and *zeta* are related to the expenditure of breath, as in the Greek words for shivering or shaking. Labials are of course smooth as liquid, while gutturals involve retention (cf. the English 'gag'), and the combination of the two becomes 'glutinous'. Making the N sound (cf. our 'in', Greek *en*) involves inwardness.

In respect of vowels, an 'i' is expressive of penetration, 'o' of roundness and 'ee' of magnitude.¹⁴ Poets thus create sounds as painters apply daubs of paint. Socrates goes on to argue that mimesis through sound is approximate and imperfect, and that convention plays too great a part in determining how sound relates to essential meaning. The conclusion of Plato's dialogue is that we must go beyond language in order to seize the true beauty and essence of things. For our purposes, however, concerned as we are with the mimetic art of theatre, Cratylus' argument provides insight into how Greek poets may have thought about sound. If sound is formed physiologically by movements of the breath and mouth, and is expressive of movement, then it is reasonable to suppose that movements of the body as a whole are also caught up in the processes of theatrical mimesis.

In modern theatre training, movement specialists and voice specialists are different breeds. Voice specialists of course emphasize the importance of centering the body and supporting the breath, but their primary concern is with communication through the word. Part of the Stanislavskian legacy is the search for truth *behind* what is said. Stanislavski was noted for his work on prose drama, or Shakespeare in translation, and he did not satisfactorily engage with the phenomenon of poetry.

Either text or body seems to dominate in twentieth-century theory, and it is hard to find a satisfactory synthesis. Lorna Marshall,

a teacher who aims at integration, explains to the student:

When you find the corresponding physical reality for the sound, it feels right; it just 'clicks into place'. You know it connects and it feels truly pleasurable to vocalize from that place.

But the process she describes of finding that reality is a random one, 'fiddling about' in trial and error.¹⁵ In her method of working, pulling the elements of voice and movement together seems to be an unsystematic last-minute job in the move towards performance.

The great French mime and pedagogue Étienne Decroux makes a useful distinction between texts that are rich and poor: 'The richer the text, the poorer the actor's music must be; the poorer the text, the richer the actor's music must be.' His example of a rich text is a poem by Baudelaire: here the actor must stand back and present the text, as if unworthy of it, and monotony becomes a virtue, for one should not endow poetry with a music it already possesses.

His middle case is French neoclassicism, where 'the actor must behave modestly, although he can still determine speed and force'. Texts associated with the *commedia dell'arte* provide his 'poorest' example, where the actor can engage in verbal fireworks and other vocal wonders. Thus, Decroux concludes:

In the course of an evening with friends, you can read Baudelaire sitting down; but in order to do justice to Corneille you must strip off your jacket; and in order to play a text in *commedia dell'arte* style you must strip down to your shorts.

He ends with the paradox that if actors were more willing to stand still on stage, writers would have more trust and be more willing to write 'poor' texts.¹⁶ The relationship between text and movement is thus one of balance, and Robert Fagles is a prime example of one who writes rich texts that strip the actor of a physical role.

Where then does the original Greek text

stand on this rich/poor spectrum? To address this question, one might take French neoclassicism as a reference point. Phaedra's confession of guilt to her nurse is something of a *locus classicus* for the mind/body distinction. Racine¹⁷ requires a full couplet:

Grâces au ciel, mes mains ne sont point
criminelles.
Plût aux Dieux que mon coeur fût innocent
comme elles!

By comparison Euripides¹⁸ seems 'poorer' with his requirement for only a single line:

cheires men hagn/ai, phr n d'echei/miasma ti.

In the Racine, the two lines are in perfect balance, with heaven balancing gods, and the assonant 'c' and 'm' sounds supporting the rhyme, while the lines are individually balanced with two stressed syllables either side of a caesura.

This relates to the physically balanced pose of an actress in *contraposto* (a position derived from classical sculpture where all weight is put on one leg with the other knee bent, but the hips shift towards the bent knee). On a tiny stage, itself crowded with spectators, the actress relied on gesture, and it is not hard to trace the trajectory of her hands from heaven to the watching confidante, to the heart, and then away from the heart – the smooth flow of the movement conforming to the smooth modulation of the verse.

The Euripidean line also contains rhetorical balance, but there is more expressiveness in individual words. An analysis of the word *phrēn* by the Cratylan method is revealing: the letter *phi* (ph) is related to breath, *rho* to movement, *eta* to magnitude and *nu* to interiority, supporting the notion that *phrēn* in the sense of 'mind' or 'thought' has a physiological basis in the area of the diaphragm.¹⁹ *Miasma ti* ('some pollution') is also an interesting physical challenge for the mouth. The short *iotas* (the 'i' vowels) imply penetration according to the Cratylan theory, and the final syllable is an *anceps* bringing the line up short to mark a line ending. The

onomatopoeic force of the 'sm' sound can be found in the English 'smear'. Experimentation will reveal that the formation of the mouth at the end of pronouncing *miasma ti* is similar to the formation formed by an emotion of disgust. Language on this level of micro-analysis has physical substance.

Moving to a more conceptual level, one notices that the French opposition of hand and heart implies that the rational ego, evidenced through the face, retains a certain autonomy in relation to physical passions rooted in the heart. Ultimately it is in the candlelit face of the actress that the authentic Phaedra is to be sought, and the movements of her body are a secondary phenomenon. The heart affects the mind, according to Galenic theory, only through a slow effluence of the humours. In the Greek *phrēn*, by contrast, rational processes and the sources of the breath are caught up together. The masked face offers no access to an autonomous ego behind the eyes.²⁰

Body and mind are more fully integrated. Whilst Racine's Phaedra is suffused with a Jansenist notion of sin that reaches to an invisible soul,²¹ the Euripidean Phaedra experiences pollution as a physical substance that elicits physiological revulsion. The embodiment of a figure experiencing *miasma* is quite unlike the embodiment of one who experiences Christian guilt, and the poetry of the two dramatists expresses that difference. In theatrical performance, poetry, body, and meaning become a single entity.

The quest for the physiology of sound has not been a major concern for twentieth-century theoreticians. The best account we have come across has been an account by the holistic spiritual philosopher Rudolf Steiner, whose wife was a pioneer in the field of eurhythmy, and who was himself the author of mystery plays. He deplored the way Reinhardt was destroying theatrical poetry. To give an example of his method:

In eurhythmy we have the full, the macrocosmic gesture for vowel and consonant. 'I' (arm stret-

ched out); a still more intensely pointed 'i' (fingers also stretched). And now try to continue inwards the feeling you have in making the eurhythm for 'i'. I do not mean merely the feeling of having one's arm and hand in that position; the 'i' lies in the feeling that is experienced in the muscle. Try to hold this feeling fast within you; let it be for you as though a sword were being thrust straight down into your body.²²

More extensive exercises designed to integrate sound, mind and body were drawn from the harmonious movements of Greek athletics.

A similar philosophical idealism and quest for the universal in performance lies behind the collaboration of Peter Brook and Ted Hughes. A master of expressive sound in poetry, Hughes attempted to create in the eponymous language of *Orghast* a synthetic Ur-language in which sound would equate with meaning. He and Brook used this language to retell the story of Prometheus, who brought civilization to humanity. Portions of Aeschylean Greek and a hieratic Persian language were woven into the performance in Persepolis. The project was driven by a quest for sound rather than movement, with the environment providing spectacle.

In a vivid sketch, Hughes pictures *Orghast* as a sun located in the belly of Prometheus, a belly that has been ripped open by a dark, destructive and male crow/vulture called Krogon. Around *Orghast* is pictured Mōa, the creative earth/womb principle. The sound-language of *Orghast* was something that emanated from the belly, not from intellectual concepts located in the head. But Hughes's sound is also a gendered sound, defined as male and solar in relation to the fertile womb that embraces it.

The idea that language is essentially male while the body is female belongs to a cultural dichotomy that one might, in another paper, trace back to the Greeks, where the androgyny of Dionysus could be interpreted as a cultural effort to overcome that dichotomy. Writing through the body is an important notion in modern feminist theory, which has most obviously impacted on tragic performance through the collaboration of Hélène Cixous and Ariane Mnouchkine. Even in *Les Atrides*, despite the high level of physical

acting and the importance of the rhythmic backing, dance and the delivery of text bifurcated.²³

There are many different ways in which translators can legitimately translate Greek plays, and choruses in particular, given the lack of any cultural successor to Greek *choreia* with its balanced integration of poetry and dance. Some may choose to concentrate on oral intelligibility, with the emphasis on a conceptual grasp of the argument embedded in every Greek chorus. Others may, in the spirit of Hughes, concentrate on the visceral, onomatopoeic sound values in the Greek text that capture something of the gut emotions. Others like Fagles may be more pictorial and descriptive, for the benefit of readers and listeners prepared to surrender the intensity of the narrative drive.

Modern Loeb editors quite reasonably supply a crib to help those who can refer to the Greek, unlike their predecessors who felt they had to versify. But some translators have sought, and we hope will bravely continue to seek, some means of capturing the embodied nature of the chorus, caught up in physical interactions. This paper has been prompted by the experimentation of Stephe Harrop, who has been developing choreography from texts including those of Robert Browning, Gilbert Murray, and Ezra Pound in an attempt to see how printed words may suggest physical performances. This is by no means an exercise in historical reconstruction. The performability of Hölderlin's translations, a key reference point for both Benjamin and Willamowitz, only became clear in the twentieth century long after his death. He was admired by Benjamin as one creating a new language rather than operating within received theatrical conventions, and Browning, Murray, and Pound have no less right to be regarded as innovators. It is the potential of their work that is our concern.

It is our contention that poetic versions of ancient tragedy by Browning, Murray, and Pound each imply (on some level) different parameters for the development of physical

performance. Stephe Harrop's project is to uncover, in the light of an historical understanding of the theatre familiar to those translators, a sense of what the dancing or moving actor is invited by the language to do. Printed texts suggest appropriate systems of movement in many different ways, ranging from obvious authorial stage directions through to the performative implications of textual structure, rhythm, tempo, rhyme, sound patterning, and imagery.

Robert Browning

Robert Browning's *Agamemnon* (1877) is not a text which obviously presents itself as amenable to the development of physical performances. The translation is almost legendary for its difficulty. Tony Harrison, himself an accomplished theatre-poet, diagnosed the problem as one of rhythmic momentum becoming 'clogged' by Browning's 'highly Hellenized and un-English grammatical word order'.²⁴ His mistake, Harrison suggests, 'was to dam the natural flow and current of English syntax and word order', resulting in a poetic text which does achieve something of the 'weight' of Aeschylus, but only at the crippling expense of losing 'dramatic momentum'.²⁵

To the practitioner, the complex language of Browning's choral verse initially appears to be utterly impenetrable. Yet, upon closer practical engagement with the text, what we discover is a detailed map of a potential performance. The psychological and behavioural detail (which performers would usually expect to invent and append for themselves) is all there: the doubts and waverings, thoughts begun, then broken off, and then taken up again. Browning denotes, without explicitly describing, the anxiety, anger, evasion, and grief which evoke the plight of the individual within the tragic environment, as in this passage:

Who may he have been that named thus
wholly with exactitude –
(Was he someone whom we see not, by
forecastings of the future
Guiding tongue in happy mood?)
Her with battle for a bridegroom, on all sides

contention-wooded,
Helena? Since – mark the suture! –
Ship's-Hell, Man's-Hell, City's-Hell.²⁶

The verse is muscular and emphatic with moments of alliterative lucidity. But the sequences of consonants and fragmented syntax are complex, chopping thought into tortured and tattered bits. The recurrent 's's of the final line imply a speech which is physically as well as mentally laborious to formulate and pronounce. In the briefest of pauses over the 's' endings and the hyphens one can almost feel in one's own mouth the intense difficulty of rationalizing all of those 'hells'.

Practical work on staging this text requires the performer to expand this laborious articulation of tragic experience from the mouth and face-muscles outwards to the whole of the performative body. Speaking Browning's fragmented dramatic verse, the performer seems impelled to use gesture and movement in order to fill the narrative gaps in which the mind hesitates and the tongue falters. The speakers of the chorus apparently grope their way toward the expression of the unspeakable through supplementing their faltering speech with an urge to embodiment. And there is some biographical evidence to suggest that Robert Browning might have envisioned a comparable system of performative physicality.

Browning had learned his trade as a playwright many years previously during the 1830s and 1840s as the protégé and friend of William Charles Macready, the pre-eminent tragic actor of his day. And this was the day when the star actor was everything. His personality and style would make or break a play, a company, a theatre. The star actor's individual style was a highly bankable commodity, and new plays were carefully tailored to his precise needs and preferences.

Macready's trademark style was pronounced and well known. Decades after the great actor's death old-stagers could mimic what were known as the 'Macready gait', the 'Macready pause', and the 'Macready burst'.²⁷ He was infamous for chopping up blandly sonorous verse – the preferred medium of many serious Victorian playwrights – into

exciting and expressive explosive outbursts, interspersed with dramatic dumbshow. A great deal of the actor's energy and expressivity were focused in idiosyncratic 'passages of noiseless but intense feeling'.²⁸

This element of mime was vital to his success. Nineteenth-century theatres were often cavernous, and artificial voice amplification non-existent. A theatregoer could expect to hear 'very little of the dialogue even when it was shouted (as most of it was)'.²⁹ What audiences could not hear they expected to see expressed visually. Getting the story across by any means possible, hurling one's conception of a character across the massive auditorium, was crucial, and Macready's exceptionally vigorous approach to physical performance formed the backbone of his popularity and commercial success.

One observer recorded the intense effect which the actor achieved through manipulation of his body. As Macready's Macbeth crept offstage to murder Duncan, his stooped posture and trembling leg and foot, in striking physical contrast to the 'erect martial figure' which he had presented at the beginning of the play, were described as 'the moral of the play made visible'.³⁰

In writing for this idiosyncratic star actor, Robert Browning began very early to explore ways of devising a written text which left room for Macready's characteristic range of non-verbal expressiveness. Browning accordingly wrote leading roles for him in plays including *Strafford* (1837) and *A Blot in the Scutcheon* (1843), where the verse is broken, the thoughts gasped out, syllable by syllable. Expression of meaning is a cumulative, but not a sequential, process. Characters do not tell us how they feel, but we are instead privileged to eavesdrop on their process of thought. The dramatic poet presents characters who think and speak 'not about, but passionately within, experience'.³¹

The total effect is a dramatic revelation of a divided self, engrossed within the intellectual and emotional complexities of the instant. Such an approach to the delineation

of character and experience invited the explanatory qualities of a complementary performance physicality, with internal, mental conflicts manifesting themselves in the visible body of the character on stage – what Browning described as the unwritten *every-other-line*' of the verse (his emphasis), the absence of which thoroughly unsettled many readers – was, in the case of texts performed in Macready's theatre, illuminated through the eloquent physicality of the performer.³² Browning had learned early in his career that, for the accomplished actor, the words of the written text are only one element of successful performance.

It is characteristic of Browning that, when he depicts the individual in the grip of engrossing thought, the process is implied rather than described. In the choruses of his *Agamemnon*, so dense and intimidating at first glance, a sense of the argument develops slowly through recognition of the internal conflict and a piecing-together of emotion and image. The modern practitioner feels tempted to make the performer's body a part of this conflict just as Macready might have done. Browning implies physicality most eloquently through what he leaves out.

The intentional grammatical lapses of his highly-charged choral verse are indicative of a human mind (or a collection of minds) under deep and lasting strain. Would-be speakers falter, as if gobsmacked by the accumulation of tragic atrocities. When conventional eloquence breaks down, what takes its place if not the sight of the stricken speaker? The expressive body struggles to complete the impossible utterances from which the mind recoils and upon which the tongue falters. Speech and motion must collaborate in order to communicate the enormity of emotions which demand that the flimsy human frame should devote the totality of its potential expressiveness to their articulation. The effect is complex, ragged, jarring and capable of being deeply impressive in performance.

Gilbert Murray

Gilbert Murray was another classical scholar

who made it his business to learn about theatre from the inside. During the first two decades of the twentieth century Murray was the pre-eminent translator of classical drama for the English-speaking stage. This situation was made possible, in part, by the scholar's close relationships with active and knowledgeable men of the theatre, including George Bernard Shaw and Granville Barker. It was close association with such theatre professionals, and with the gruelling business of rehearsing and staging ancient plays with suspicious actors in inappropriate theatre spaces, which shaped Murray's keen appreciation of the need to tailor his personal vision of Greek tragedy to the practical requirements of the London stage.

Murray's Greek theatre was a sphere of ritual and mystery. His choruses are not the anguished inarticulate of Browning's conception, but the celebrants of a holy rite, partaking of a joy or a grief as the ritual requires, their temporary abandon circumscribed and sanctified by the artifice of the poetic form. Murray was adamant in his belief that choruses should dance, regarding the process as central to the religious mystery which lay at the heart of Athenian tragedy.

In *Euripides and His Age* (1913), Murray laid out his conviction not only that 'tragedy originated in a dance', but also that 'dance was in ancient times essentially religious, not a mere capering with the feet but an attempt to express with every limb and sinew of the body those emotions for which words . . . are inadequate'.³³ As a prominent member of the Cambridge Ritualist school, Murray was committed to the anthropological concept that choral dance, as a remnant of Greek religious mysteries, lay at the root of the tragic drama. The stage directions printed in his translated texts often make specific reference to sequences of choral (and occasionally individual) dance. Murray's interest in tragic dance was not merely intellectual, for he took care also to ensure that this should be a practical performative possibility on the twentieth-century stages for which he composed his translations.

Of the three writers under discussion,

Murray's choruses are the most open to conventional notions of communal dance. Their rhythms are relatively regular, with repeated stanza forms and rhythmic shapes loaning structure to the precarious business of dancing a choral narrative. His choruses are also hypnotic in their deliberate archaism, reiterated rhymes, and beguilingly gentle tempos. The ecstatic dance is developed out of, and gains its power from, the most innocuous of regular verse forms, with self-entrancement serving to frame the ritual re-enactment of nightmares. So, for example, in the first stasimon of *The Trojan Women* (1905) we find:

O Muse, be near me now, and make
A strange song for Ilion's sake,
Till a tone of tears be about mine ears
And out of my lips a music break
For Troy, Troy, and the end of the years.³⁴

The measured accumulation of phrase upon phrase builds the intensity of the stanza towards the climactic emotional outpouring. Likewise, a physical sense of cumulative emotional power can be explored through the use of developing patterns, repeated movement phrases, and a sense of measured motion incessantly building towards the point of explosion.

For the practitioner, the concept of a deep emotional impact being articulated by means of ritual evocation provides a fascinating approach to Murray's highly wrought and consciously archaic verses. The poetic speech of the chorus begins and ends by standing outside an action, evoking a past event, and then, as the intensity of rhythm and image increases, the chorus see the past pass before their eyes, ultimately becoming swept up within the anguish of their own tale. As the chorus closes, the speakers slip back into the roles of self-conscious ritual performers, exhorting their audience to 'weep, weep, for Ilion!'

To embody this variation of perspective is one of the greatest challenges involved in

deriving corporeal realization from Murray's choruses. Performance is supported by the beautiful way in which his verses breathe. He was determined that no amount of dancing should be allowed to obscure the clarity of the choral verse: 'the words of the choruses must be heard' became the mantra he shared with his long-time collaborator, Granville Barker.³⁵

So the vocal needs of the potential performer were carefully pre-empted and accommodated. The breathing spaces in his rhyming iambics fall with a thoughtful regularity which reminds us just how much time the scholar devoted to learning the practical needs and preferences of the performer. As the intensity of the verse grows, and with it the depth of emotional memory to be expressed through physical performance, the thought-phrases embedded in the verse are bracketed by breathing places, even when no obvious punctuation interrupts the descriptive flow of the written text.

Movement-phrases echo the progressive dramatic and thematic effect of breath-phrases and phrases of thought. The ways in which verbal meanings are developed on the page, and the ways in which they can be expressed physically by the performer, are associated by Murray's artful manipulation of verse as a medium for embodied speech. For the Cambridge Ritualists, 'the classical serenity of the Olympian religion' was just a decorous veneer concealing 'the worship of darker forces',³⁶ and in the performance of Murray's choral verses an almost Nietzschean melding of Apollo and Dionysus takes place: physical expressivity, circumscribed and guided by the boundaries of linguistic formality, becomes the medium for the communication of extremes of emotion and memory enshrined in ritualized performance.³⁷

Ezra Pound

By contrast with Murray's meticulous care for breathing spaces, it sometimes seems that Ezra Pound does not expect his actors to breathe at all. The sheer density of his verbal clusters often appears to preclude anything so mundane as respiration from interrupting

their remarkable aural intensity. As an example, a passage particularly hard on the lungs comes from a violent choral ode in *Women of Trachis* (1957):

TWO gods fought for a girl,
 Battle and dust!
 Might of a River with horns
Crashing.
 Four bulls together
Shall no man tether,
 Akheloos neither,
Lashing through Oneudai
 As bow is bent.³⁸

Hard enough to say without trying to dance it. But if the performer who is attempting to make theatrical sense of these texts sometimes struggles for breath, or wishes the spate of equally-weighted words would occasionally relent, there is compensation. In Pound's choruses, one of the great pleasures and challenges for the performer is that the speaker is within the action. Not describing, not observing, not commenting, perhaps not even performing the action evoked, but there, within the energy and motion of the instant.

For example, the following extract from an earlier celebratory chorus from Pound's *Women of Trachis* is short on conventional grammar and recognizable vocabulary, but high on immediacy and full of possibilities for practical experiment with physical interpretation:

APOLLO
and Artemis, analolu
Artemis,
 Analolu,
 Sun-bright Apollo, Saviour Apollo
analolu,
 Artemis,
Sylvan Artemis,
 Swift-arrowed Artemis, analolu
 By the hearth-stone
brides to be
 Shout in male company:
APOLLO EUPHARETRON.³⁹

There is not a huge amount of syntactical sense to be had here, on the page at least, and this is intentional. Pound described the basis of all drama as being 'Men and Women moving and speaking'.⁴⁰ Like Browning (and

utterly unlike the negative stereotype of the theatrically illiterate page-poet) he believed that the written theatre text was incomplete without physical enactment.

On its own, the extract above is hardly strong on narrative sense, even if it is evocative of the rhythmic pulses of some unknown and alien ancient world. Pound's adaptations from ancient Greek frequently use words and syllables (like the elusively allusive 'analolu') lacking in conventional semantic meaning. He delights in the possibilities of deriving meaning from melodic and rhythmic patterning, and exploiting what he called the 'melopoeic' qualities of transliterated Greek words and phrases. When developing physical sequences, the practitioner gains a great freedom in the development of visual meanings from this unconventional approach.

Pound drew a great deal of his inspiration for his Greek translations from what he had learned of the traditions of the Japanese Noh theatre, a traditional and highly disciplined form of musical dance-drama which had formed the basis of an extremely fertile period of intellectual collaboration with W. B. Yeats which resulted in the production of *At the Hawk's Well* (1916). Pound involved himself, with characteristic energy, in numerous aspects of the genesis of this production, from providing Yeats with translations of Japanese plays and devising experimental dance-poems in collaboration with Miscio Ito to assisting Yeats's rather frustrating endeavours as director, and even standing in for actors in rehearsals.

The experience of this period seems to have convinced Pound of the potential of the ritualistic Japanese theatre to function as a formal analogue to the conditions of ancient Greek tragedy. Within the Noh tradition of simultaneously verbal and physical suggestivity, Pound declared that 'the poet may even be silent while the gestures consecrated by four centuries of usage show meaning'.⁴¹ For Pound, in his dramas the written word can only attain life through a symbiotic relationship with the concrete physicality of the performer's body. Word and gesture are each mysterious in isolation, but can be eloquent in relation to one another and within a

sequence.

For the practitioner attempting to derive physical performances from Pound's texts, the poet's theory of the Chinese ideogram might suggest some intriguing methods of reading the potential relationships between text and bodily movement. Pound was fascinated by the concept of the ideogram: the idea that a sign would not merely represent, but could somehow actually be the thing it meant. This fascination was fuelled by his close engagement with the writings of the Oriental scholar Ernest Fenollosa, who wrote that 'Chinese words are alive and plastic because *thing* and *action* are not formally separated'.⁴² To demonstrate this theory, both Fenollosa and Pound described the striking pictorial qualities of the Chinese characters which make up the simple sentence 'Man Sees Horse':

First stands the man on his two legs. Second his eye moves through space: a bold figure represented by running legs under an eye. . . . Third stands the horse on his four legs.

To Pound's fascinated eye, this group of symbols 'contains something of the quality of a continuous moving picture'.⁴³ With this in mind, it is tempting to consider whether the evocative way in which some of Pound's choruses wind across the page might have relevance to the potential physicality with which the poet invested his theatre translations.

It is intriguing to speculate that the 'analolu' choral ode offers a visual counterpoint to the dance depicted and evoked through its verbal signals. The backward and forward motion of the lines on the page are suggestive of the dance they were designed to convey. This highly visual style of versification evokes collective movement – a snaking dance figure which summons up images of the Greek chorus performing complex step-patterns in an undulating single file. The form of this verse recalls the ancient tradition of 'emblematic, or figured, verse', within which poems were laid out 'in such a way that they resemble something related to the subject matter'.⁴⁴ It may well be that in

choral passages of daring virtuosity Pound was actually attempting to make printed text embody the motion which its sounds represent.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Each of these translators of Greek tragedy has – at least at some point – had their work stigmatized as unperformable. We hope that the preceding discussion, though it barely begins to scratch the surface of the performance potential of the versions under consideration, may begin to suggest new ways in which poetic translations can be read and interpreted as cues for embodied performance. The varying methods used by these poetic translators of Greek tragedy to define the parameters of potential physical performances have something to teach future translators. The contrasts between Robert Browning, Gilbert Murray, and Ezra Pound are many and obvious, yet what unites all three is the appreciation of the word embodied in the physique of the actor as the central locus of dramatic communication.

All three demonstrate a striking commitment to finding a modern way of performing Greek tragedy where words and body function as symbiotic partners. Conceptual spaces embedded within the different poetic forms of these poets stress the necessity of the expressive body as a partner in the creation of performative meanings, in an attempt to re-create (using modern literary means) the conditions of dramatic composition which made possible the simultaneously aural and visual qualities of the Athenian chorus.

This openness to the interpretive role of the performing body in the creation of theatrical meanings perhaps explains the fascination which these varied texts can still exercise for the physical practitioner. What Browning, Murray, and Pound had in common was their concern to construct translations which would actually be playable upon what, for each of them, was an available contemporary stage. All three poets had experience of working closely with professional actors and directors, in staging poetic dramas, all coming to terms at a relatively early stage in their

careers with the actual needs and preferences of performance practitioners. Indeed it was in engaging seriously with the needs of their contemporary performers that each of the translators was able to develop his poetic conceptualization of the lost physical traditions of the ancient tragic theatre.

It is in leaving open a portion of the creative process to the potential eloquence of the physically-present performer that these translations most strongly resist the threat of obsolescence as poetic conventions change. These are enduring theatre-translations because they are incomplete, or, in Decroux's terminology, 'poor'. They all strive, whether by means of poetic rhythm, syntactical incompleteness, or pictogram, to suggest a complementary strand of physical performance in which, as Gilbert Murray put it, 'the whole body, every limb and muscle' might be used 'to express somehow that overflow of emotion for which a man has no words'.⁴⁶

Richard Green has called attention to an early fifth-century BC water-jar in St Petersburg which depicts Hermes dragging two aged chorus-men to Dionysus and carrying a writing tablet and stylus. He argues that the image is inspired by the novelty of committing a choral song to writing.⁴⁷ Hermes often leads people to Hades, which gives extra force to the reluctance of these figures to engage with any written record of their dance, albeit mere notes on a tablet not a full script on a papyrus roll.

The tension between text and performance is an ancient one. However, there is no evidence that the fifth-century dramatists imparted lines, gestures, and choreography to performers by any means other than personal demonstration. Since the invention of the printing press the split between script and performance has become ever more problematic. Speech is a product of the body: producing breath involves the whole body and formations of the mouth may instinctively be echoed by other parts of the body. This corporeality of the spoken or sung word tends to be forgotten in a culture of the book, and it is symptomatic that discussion of embodiment has virtually vanished from academic discussions of drama in translation.

Poetry today is generally thought of as a medium that does not require an investment of the body, and in poetry readings poets often dress down with a maximum of informality to emphasize this point. Despite the best efforts of Coleridge, Shelley, Browning, and others, the old Elizabethan link between poetry and drama has proved impossible to sustain. This makes the role of the modern translator of Greek theatre a very difficult one.

We would like to think, with Benjamin and Pound, that the adage 'Make it New' is the best way to show respect for the old. Since no form of physicalized verse drama is readily available on the modern stage, it falls to translators to try and create one afresh. We have argued that this is what Browning, Murray, and Pound all tried to do in their day. They attempted to innovate on the basis of their experience working with actors on the rehearsal floor. The success of their dramatic verse rested upon that experience.⁴⁸

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Notes

1. *Poetics*, xvii.1–3. A few logocentric scholars interpret to translate *schēmata* as figures of rhetoric.
2. Benjamin (1923), p. 69.
3. Lefevere (1992), p. 3–34.
4. The website for The Reception of the Texts and Images of Ancient Greece in Late Twentieth-Century Drama and Poetry in English project is <http://www2.open.ac.uk/ClassicalStudies/GreekPlays/index.html>.
5. Seth Schein (March 2005), 'Translating Greek Tragedy for the Classroom'. All three papers and the discussion they stimulated are to be published online at <http://www2.open.ac.uk/ClassicalStudies/GreekPlays>.
6. Michael Ewans (February 2005), 'Translating for the Stage'. His translation of *Oresteia* appeared in 1995, and a second volume with the other Aeschylean plays in 1996 (London: Everyman).
7. Ewans (1989), p. 121.
8. David Wiles addresses some of these issues in 'Sophoclean Diptychs: Modern Translations of Dramatic Poetry', *Arion*, third series, XIII, No. 1 (2005), p. 9–26.
9. Fagles (1984).
10. *Greek Tragedy in Action* (London: Methuen, 1978) p. 58.
11. See, for example, Aylen (1985).
12. Webster (1970), p. xi, 205, 212.
13. Aylen (1985), p. 118–9.

14. *Cratylus*, 26–7.
15. Marshall (2001), p. 73–4.
16. Decroux (1985), p. 35–6.
17. 'Thanks to heaven my hands are not criminal. / Please the Gods, my heart may be as innocent as them!' *Phèdre*, I, iii.
18. 'Hands are pure, but the mind holds some pollution.' *Hippolytus*, 317 (authors' translation).
19. See, for example, Thalmann (1986), p. 491–4.
20. David Wiles has addressed these issues in Wiles (2007).
21. See Goldmann (1964).
22. Steiner (1960), p. 253.
23. *Les Atrides* was directed by Mnouchkine for Théâtre du Soleil in 1990–91 and consisted of *Iphigénie à Aulis* (trans. Jean Bollack), *Agamemnon* and *Les Choéphores* (trans. Mnouchkine), and *Les Euménides* (trans Cixous) (= *APGRD Database Production ID 2235*). See Wiles (2000), p. 86–8.
24. Harrison (2002), p. 12.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Browning (1889), p. 301–2.
27. Trewin (1955), p. 240.
28. Archer (1890), p. 37.
29. Reed (1960), p. 599.
30. Downer (1966), p. 325–6.
31. Ward (1968), p. 115.
32. Wood (2001), p. 13.
33. Murray (1913), p. 62.
34. Murray (2005), p. 32.
35. Granville-Barker (1936), p. 243.
36. Wilson (1987), p. 119.
37. At the 'Reassessing Gilbert Murray' conference (Institute of Classical Studies, London, July 2005) Stephe Harrop performed a chorus from *The Trojan Women* which specifically drew upon the concept of developing physical expressions of extreme emotional states with close reference to the formal ritual framework of Murray's verse. Repeated physical motifs and gestures were used to emphasize the formal rhythmic properties of Murray's dramatic poetry, and progressively to heighten the emotional intensity of the chorus. This performance provoked some fascinating critical discussion about the ways in which physical patterns, derived from poetic rhythms, might influence and enhance the emotional responses of an audience to poetic text in performance.
38. Pound (1985), p. 24.
39. Pound (1985), p. 12.
40. Pound (1970), p. 179.
41. Pound and Fenollosa (1977), p. 4.
42. Fenollosa (1968), p. 17.
43. Fenollosa (1968), p. 8–9.
44. Carrol (1970), p. 50.
45. A physical performance which developed these ideas was given by Stephe Harrop at a conference exploring 'Sophocles' *Trachiniae*: Modern Perceptions and Productions' at the University of Nottingham (April 2006). A winding floor-pattern, reflecting the visual appearance of Pound's choral verse on the page, was used as the basis for an undulating step-sequence. This proved to be a particularly valuable means of injecting directional momentum to the choreography, and of achieving direct eye and gestural contact with many different segments of the audience, which was arranged on three sides of the performance-space. Observers responded very positively to the performance, and subsequent discussion was especially focused on the variety of ways in which poetic pictograms might be interpreted and embodied by practitioners.
46. Murray (1913), p. 229.
47. Green (1995).
48. Although we take joint responsibility for all that is said in this article, Wiles is primarily responsible for the theoretical introduction and Harrop for the three case studies.