

# Acting Archives Essays

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## THEORY OF ACTING

### I

#### ACTING THEORY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD\*

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#### 1. *Divine Possession. Alteration and Contagion*

So far as we know, acting theory in western culture began to develop in Greece in the fifth century BCE; the first work on the subject is one of Plato's early dialogues, the *Ion*, written in the late fifth or early fourth century. In that period various forms of acting had already appeared in the Greek world, from the declamation of epic poems by rhapsodists who performed at private meetings and public ceremonies, often taking part in official prize-winning competitions, to the reciting of lyrical compositions and acting as we understand it, the theatrical performance of tragedies and comedies.

Plato's dialogue dealt with the subject by adopting a conception that was traditional in the culture of the time, by which poetic composition and delivery were not two separate activities, but two aspects of a single creative process that was the direct result of divine intervention. This conviction derived from the experience of the primitive *choreia*, a group practice that was widespread in archaic Greece and usually associated with religious worship. Participants uttered words, verses and rhythmical formulae and moved together in more or less pre-established patterns so as to reach a state of exaltation of shared feelings and passions, which was regarded as an unequivocal sign of the presence of the god.<sup>1</sup>

In its original form the *choreia* was a mixture of poetry, song and dance, which would later develop as separate arts in Greek culture. This meant that over the following centuries down to Plato's time there was a deep-rooted awareness of the link between these arts (words, gestures, movements and intonations were simply elements in a single expressive act), and their close relation with divine action.

All this must have conditioned the attitude towards acting for a long time. Composing a poem and reciting it seemed like two inseparable moments of a single

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\* Translated by Richard Bates, Università di Roma "La Sapienza". From C. Vicentini, *La teoria della recitazione dall'Antichità al Settecento*, in press (Venezia, Marsilio, February 2012).

<sup>1</sup> See W. Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, ed. by J. Harrel, 2 vols., The Hague, Paris, 1970, I, pp. 15-16.

operation, and at the same time a magic power able to act on those in the vicinity was attributed to the intonations and gestures with which the poem was delivered. Gorgias, a famous sophist of the fifth century BCE, insisted on the mysterious power of words: not for nothing, he observed, some words can gladden those listening, others frighten move the theatre audience to fear or sorrow.<sup>2</sup>

It also seemed clear that only a state of exaltation or rapture, which had previously been a mark of contact with a divinity, could set off the process of poetic creation, which then took form with words, gestures and sounds. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato claimed that poets who relied only on their ability were ‘incomplete’, because, he explained, ‘the poetry of conscious and deliberate artists is overshadowed by that of poets in a state of rapture’.<sup>3</sup> Only those who are ‘beside themselves’, he insisted, can properly compose or recite real poetry, and this opinion also persisted in the theoreticians who in Plato’s time kept poetic experience and divine intervention separate. Even Democritus of Abdera, famous for his materialist conception of reality, claimed that no-one could be a poet and ‘sane of mind’ at the same time, because it is impossible to compose real poetry ‘without being inspired to the limit of exaltation’.<sup>4</sup>

All these convictions are reflected in the *Ion*, which demonstrates how the rhapsodists declaiming a poetic text cannot have recourse to deliberate technique, regulated by rules that can be learnt and applied to obtain the desired effect. The use of voice, gesture and mimicry escapes the control of those who recite. This is demonstrated by a simple fact. Every rhapsodist, says Plato, specializes in the work of a particular poet. Ion, for example, the protagonist of the dialogue, is expert in Homeric poetry: in the presence of his author’s verse, he is at once moved by an irresistible impulse and his tongue is magically ‘loosened’. When, however, he recites passages from other poets he cannot concentrate and the result is disappointing.

Now, Plato continues, if there were a technique of declamation, with fixed rules for obtaining a good performance, any good, trained artist could deploy them and so recite any text properly.<sup>5</sup> But why is a technique of this kind impossible? Because the whole process of poetic expression, from composition to delivery by different performers over the centuries is completely dominated by divine intervention.

At the outset of the creative process the poet cannot even begin to compose verse without inspiration, which is sent to him by a god. Inspiration causes a profound alteration in his mental state: he seems to lose his own intellect and ‘take leave of his senses’. His self-control disappears, and he is literally invaded by the god who speaks and reveals himself through his mouth and the movements of his body. In short, the poet speaks, sings and dances ‘beside himself’, in the grip of a ‘divine madness’.<sup>6</sup> In their turn the performers who take the poetry composed by others and declaim it cannot recite it effectively if they are not in the same state of possession caused by the same divinity that had already possessed the author. Through the power of this intervention the rhapsodist is ‘infected’ by the verse he must utter, takes leave of his senses in turn and enters into something like a state of hallucination. While he sings

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<sup>2</sup> See Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen*, 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245a.

<sup>4</sup> According to Cicero, *De oratore*, II,194 and *De divinatione*, I,XXXVII,80, and Horace, *Ars poetica*, 295.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Ion*, 532c.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 534b.

Homer's words his soul really believes he is in front of the walls of Troy, he sees the heroes meeting in battle, hears the clang of weapons, observes the flowing blood, attends to the entreaties of the wounded, and so on. This vision is accompanied by appropriate emotions, and the rhapsodist is irresistibly taken over by the ardour of battle, by terror and by pity. 'At a tale of pity', explains Ion, 'my eyes fill with tears and when I speak of horrors my hair stands up in fright and my heart pounds'.<sup>7</sup> And while the rhapsodist declaims, the emotional contagion caused by the poem spreads to the spectators, who at once fall into a state of exaltation and are seized by uncontrollable passions. 'Every time', Ion continues, 'that I look down from the stage, I see them weeping, casting terrible glances, and all together terrified by my words'.

In short, the divine action first takes possession of the poet, placing him in a state of hallucination. The poet utters his verse and sees imaginary scenes and figures, as if they were true, while he is transfixed by irresistible emotions. Once his verse has been composed, its contagion creates the same state of emotional exaltation and hallucination in those who declaim it, and finally in the listening public, creating a kind of 'chain' of those 'possessed by the god'.<sup>8</sup>

In this way the experience of poetic creation and recital was assimilated to prophecy. The divinity, explained Plato, possesses poets and rhapsodists like seers and soothsayers, uses them as its means, and we know 'that it is not they that say things of such high value, as they have no intellect, but it is the god himself that says them, who speaks to us through them'.<sup>9</sup> As Plato describes it, the altered state of the poet and rhapsodist ended up taking on the characteristics that Greek culture attributed to the state of trance of priests and priestesses when they pronounced a god's oracles in his sanctuary, or of those officiating at and taking part in rites, like those dedicated to Dionysus, Attis or Semele, in which the participants danced and sang to the sound of obsessively rhythmical music that produced a contagious effect, enthraling all those present. At the moment of pronouncing the prophetic word or collectively celebrating the divinity, the subjects entered into a kind of excitement, threshed around, trembled, shook and, losing all self-control, spoke words and phrases whose meaning they would not normally understand. Poetic creation and recital as described by Plato are not very far removed from Cassandra's prophetic ravings, which had been depicted on stage a few decades earlier in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Before the closed doors of the palace of the Atreides, Cassandra is taken over by the power of Apollo, is carried away, starts to groan and see visions of past and future events, and is seized by fear and trembling and the emotions that these visions dictate to her, speaking under direct inspiration from the god.

Poetry, recital and prophecy are thus experiences that leave no room for human initiative and control: in writing and reading our poetry, as in the act of prophecy, it is the god who initiates and conducts the whole process, dictates gestures, movements and words, causes visions and the corresponding emotions and sensations. In these terms a technique of recital based on ability and practice, and consciously controlled by the artists, seems clearly impossible.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 535c.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 533d and 536a.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 534d.

However, though Plato excludes the possibility of the rhapsodist's art being conscious, he recognizes that those who recite are fully aware of the effects they produce on the spectators. When he declaims on stage, Ion not only sees the spectators weeping and panicking at the evocation of terrible scenes, but, he explains:

I must needs watch them very closely, for if I make them weep, I myself shall laugh for the money I will earn, and if I make them laugh, I shall weep for the money I shall lose.<sup>10</sup>

In short, those who recite know full well what they are doing, and, even in their state of exaltation, while performing they must keep a close eye on the results because their economic wellbeing depends on it. It is obviously a short step from this to the possibility of thinking up expedients, rules and regulations, and techniques that will most effectively draw out the audience's reactions.

## **2. *Development of Dramatic Forms. Acting as a Specialized Activity***

When Plato wrote the *Ion* the great season of fifth-century drama, with the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and the comedies of Aristophanes, had already taken place. In ancient Greece the early drama had originally derived from the primitive *choreia*, being essentially combinations of poetry, music, dance and song organized in certain ways. All the traditional sources agree that tragedy originated as a kind of danced choral singing, the dithyramb. In the sixth century BCE Thespis had introduced some additions to the dithyramb (a prologue and some monologues), which were delivered by a single person standing apart from the chorus. Then, around 534 BCE, performing tragedies was given institutional status in the celebrations of the City Dionysia in Athens, which involved a competition between three different tragic poets. A few decades later Aeschylus introduced a second actor, which opened the way to dialogue and action. Sophocles then added a third person to the stage, and in this way, according to the ancient commentators, tragedy achieved its complete and definitive form.<sup>11</sup>

Now, in the very period in which the dramatic forms took shape, the inadequacy of the traditional conception of recital seemed to become clear, and the very development of theatrical practice showed the impossibility of explaining the actor's experience in the usual terms – the terms in which the *Ion* still continued to present the rhapsodists' activity towards the end of the fifth century BCE. In the following century – the period of Plato's mature thinking and of Aristotle's philosophical work – and for a long time after, Greek thought was dealing with the problem of acting in its own characteristic way. It kept most of the original outlook, but tried to mediate and change some aspects of it so as to give a more adequate account of the complexity of the phenomenon.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 535e.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle's is obviously the fundamental account, in the *Poetics*, 1449a. But see also the passages quoted by A. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991, pp. 130-131 and particularly the passage by Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, III,56: 'in the past the chorus acted everything in the tragedy, until later Thespis invented the single actor to give the chorus a pause, and Aeschylus the second actor; with the third actor Sophocles gave tragedy its final form'.

In the face of the experience of theatrical performances, it was difficult to claim that acting was simply a moment of poetic creation and that it did not require particular abilities or talents different from those necessary for composing verse. The very development of the ways of staging dramatic works between the sixth and fifth centuries was an evident example of the gradual separation of the two activities. At first, when a tragedy was performed, there was no distinction between the function of the poet and that of the actor. Thespis himself recited his own works, as did Aeschylus. Once a second person had been brought onstage however, and engaged in dialogue with the first character, performed by the author-actor, then a new figure was created: a theatrical performer with a unique and exclusive function. He was no longer involved in poetic creation, but did no more than act.

Of course, in those early days the actor depended closely on the author. Not only was the poet onstage, acting, but he chose and directed his partner. He also handled all fundamental aspects of the performance, trained the chorus and devised the dance movements.<sup>12</sup> Little by little, however, his control had to be reduced. When acting began to take on the characteristics of a specialized activity, the task of training the chorus members was transferred to genuine experts, and the choice of actors was made by the state, which organized the performances. It gradually became clear that the indispensable gifts for writing a text did not necessarily coincide with those required for acting it. According to tradition, Sophocles was the first to give up acting his tragedies because his voice was not sufficiently powerful. Then, in 449 BCE, alongside the traditional prize for the best poet the City Dionysia established a prize for the best actor: acting was formally recognized as having a value of its own.

However, though Greek thought recognized a distinction between poetry and acting, it was never to abandon the perception of a profound unity linking them. Their qualities and their virtues, the natural possibilities of language and of acting might not be identical, but at least they remained connected and fed into each other. That it was the power of poetry that encouraged and fostered acting remained a deep-seated and widespread conviction. Poetry spontaneously ‘unleashed’ acting. Those who express themselves ‘whether in song or in words without music’, observed Plato a few decades after writing the *Ion*, naturally tend to display what they are saying with their bodies too, for they ‘cannot keep their members absolutely calm’.<sup>13</sup> And in a later treatise that has been attributed to a scholar of the fourth century BCE there is a reference to the stylistic devices that make it possible to compose verse so as to ‘oblige’ ‘even those who don’t want to’ to act.<sup>14</sup>

Reciprocal recognition was given to acting for its capacity to support the poet’s work with its own natural, specific means. The effects that only acting can produce, Aristotle later observed, are essential to some passages, because ‘if we remove the acting’ they seem ‘banal’.<sup>15</sup> In short, poetic creation and acting are two different activities, yet closely linked. Poetry ‘excites’ and ‘gives rise to’ acting, but acting, in

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<sup>12</sup> Aeschylus was actually famous for his ability in this field. According to one rather late account, he not only invented and introduced new dance moves, but ‘took personal control over the tragedy’ (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, I,39,21e).

<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Laws*, VII,816a.

<sup>14</sup> Demetrius of Phalerum, *On Style*, 194. But the attribution to Demetrius of Phalerum is doubtful, as is the dating of the treatise. On this, see P. Chiron’s introduction to the critical edition of the text, *Deu style*, Paris, Belles Lettres, 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1413b.

turn, animates the poet's verse with its own special powers and with the special abilities of the performer.

The recognition of acting as an activity distinct from poetic creation clearly opened the way to studying the effects that only acting could create, and the most effective means for achieving them. In this way it became possible to admit the usefulness of a technique that the actor had to learn, perfect with practice and experience, and use astutely onstage. A passage in which Aristotle observes how the study of delivering was a late development, and another in which he claims that ability in theatrical delivery depends more on a natural 'gift' than on 'technique' demonstrate that a study of this kind, however late in the day, was now being cultivated, and that even though technique was less important than natural gifts, it was still necessary to the actor.<sup>16</sup> Again it is Aristotle who reminds us that Thrasymachus of Chalcedon dealt with the principles of delivery in his *Appeal to Pity*, and we know that a certain Theodorus wrote a treatise on the art of the voice.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, the voice was generally considered to be the essential element in acting, and it was the most famous orator of the ancient world, Demosthenes, who claimed that actors were to be judged by their voices.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the overwhelming majority of the technical observations that we have on Greek acting concern the voice, which was to be above all beautiful, powerful and clear, and which depended largely on the natural gifts of the performer. But this was not enough: the voice also had to be intelligently manipulated. The actor needed to be able to project it across a distance so as to be heard by the whole audience, and at the same time to modulate its volume and tonality to respect the conventions of the stage, which, for example, obliged secondary actors not to distract attention from the main performer.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, although the actor worked in a context that was not at all realistic, his face covered by a mask, sometimes declaiming and sometimes singing the verse, at times to musical accompaniment, he had to give the impression of using 'a natural voice' that did not appear at all 'artificial'.<sup>20</sup> The poet's text had to be effectively coloured by the intonations and cadence of his voice, giving the words the different inflexions of command, entreaty, narrative or menace, depending on the lines being recited.<sup>21</sup> The same word repeated in the same passage, observed Aristotle, had to be uttered with suitable vocal variations, to give it different overtones each time.<sup>22</sup> At the same time the actor had to regulate rhythm, intonation and volume to render the characteristics of the particular passion that was to be expressed.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, critics were ready to identify defects in the use of the voice, and a lexicon of the second century CE gives the terms that various treatises on vocal exercises used to indicate

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 1403b and 1404a.

<sup>17</sup> See *ibid.*, 1404a. Theodorus' lost treatise is mentioned by Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, II,103. We do not know if the author was the famous Theodorus, an actor contemporary with Aristotle, or a later author.

<sup>18</sup> See Pseudo-Plutarch's, *Lives of the Ten Orators*, 848b.

<sup>19</sup> See Cicero, *Divinatio in Caecilium*, 48.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1404b.

<sup>21</sup> See Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1456b.

<sup>22</sup> See Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1414b.

<sup>23</sup> See *ibid.*, 1403b.

inadequacies in acting. They distinguished between voices that were ‘sonorous’, ‘bombastic’, ‘solemn’, ‘weak’, ‘feminine’ and so on.<sup>24</sup>

To improve their vocal ability actors submitted themselves to intensive training. The early hours of the morning, before eating and the moments before going onstage seem to have been spent on exercises.<sup>25</sup> In the first century BCE Cicero was to describe the way in which tragic actors practised in these terms:

for years they perform exercises in declamation, seated, and every day, before acting in public, they lie down and gradually raise their voices and, after giving their speech, they sit and bring their voices down from the highest to the lowest tone and in some way they do this to return, so to speak, to themselves.<sup>26</sup>

Along with the voice, gesture and movement were of crucial importance, but of these we have few accounts. Of course, wearing a mask, the actor could not use any facial expression, but precise movements of the head allowed him to give the fixed expression of the mask different overtones, and there were masks painted so as to show a dual expression, allowing the actor to change position to show the audience the attitude most appropriate for the character’s feelings.<sup>27</sup>

Most of the available accounts on the gestures of actors concern dance movements, both those performed by the choruses in comedies and tragedies, and those of the pantomime, a performance similar to the dance that had developed quite apart from the drama. The mimic ability of dancers was particularly appreciated: ‘with the rhythm of gestures and movements’, says Aristotle, they managed to depict ‘character and experiences and actions’.<sup>28</sup> In the second century CE Lucian insisted on the importance of the dancer depicting the passions, feelings and above all the disposition of the character with his movements, avoiding any superfluous gesture. We also know that the use of the hands was particularly studied, and that the positions and patterns of the dance in the end made up a kind of repertory that could be classified.<sup>29</sup>

### **3. Emotional Tension and Frenzy. Persistence of Ion’s Doctrine**

The development of a wide range of techniques and practices perfected with long exercises not only defined acting as a specialized art that was essentially different from poetry, but excluded the possibility of regarding it as a series of uncontrollable actions performed by the actor in a state of exaltation. Faced with this problem, however, Greek thought proved particularly resistant to abandoning the traditional position, as expounded in the *Ion*, and for several more centuries the actor’s ability to feel and project the most authentic and lacerating feelings during the performance, in

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<sup>24</sup> Iulius Pollux, *Onomasticon*, IV,114. See also II,111.

<sup>25</sup> See Aristotle, *Problems*, XI,22, and Iulius Pollux, *Onomasticon*, IV,88, where he describes how Hermon, an actor alive in the fifth century BCE on one occasion actually missed his cue to come onstage because he was rehearsing his voice outside the theatre.

<sup>26</sup> Cicero, *De oratore*, I,251.

<sup>27</sup> See Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, XI,3,74.

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1447a.

<sup>29</sup> See Lucian, *Of Pantomime*, 67 and 69. See also Iulius Pollux, *Onomasticon*, IV,103-105.

a state of extreme exaltation, continued to be considered an obvious, or at least possible, part of his stage performances.

On this point three famous episodes were handed down. The first concerned Polus, a celebrated actor in the fifth century BCE whose technique was said to be so sophisticated as to surpass all his colleagues ‘for clarity and grace of gesticulation and voice’, and who was known to act the most famous tragedies ‘with subtlety and passion’. In despair at the loss of a particularly loved son, he returned to the stage at the end of the period of mourning, interpreting Sophocles’ *Electra*. In one scene of the tragedy Electra holds in her hands a funeral urn she believes contains the ashes of her brother Orestes, and bewails his death. Polus, according to a story that was still current six centuries later, did this:

clad in the mourning garb of Electra, he took from the tomb the bones and urn of his son, and embraced them as if they were those of Orestes, and filled everything not with the appearance and imitation of sorrow, but with genuine grief and unfeigned lamentation. Therefore, while it seemed that a tragedy was being acted, it was real grief on stage.<sup>30</sup>

Polus then, an expert in theatrical technique, based his performance on the obsessive display of an authentic and personal grief, projecting it ‘genuine and unfeigned’ onto the stage. Another anecdote, concerning Aesopus, a famous tragic actor of the first century BCE, shows the state of profound exaltation that an actor could achieve during his performance:

One day he was playing the part of Atreus in the theatre. On reaching the point when the king is meditating how to avenge Thyestes, he was so beside himself with passion that he struck with his sceptre one of the servants who was running past him, and killed him.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, we have the description of a dancer who got so carried away acting Ajax’s fury onstage ‘that one might have thought that he was not acting mad, but was truly so’.

He tore the clothes of one who was beating time with an iron sole and, snatching a flute from one of the musicians, broke it over the head of Odysseus, who was nearby, full of pride for his victory. Had his hat not borne the brunt of the blow, the unfortunate Odysseus would have been dead merely for having encountered a demented pantomime actor. As it was, the entire audience became wild with Ajax, leaping, shouting and tearing their clothes.<sup>32</sup>

Clearly, performing alongside this kind of actor involved an element of risk. But, more important, the fact that these episodes were preserved indicates the stubborn persistence of an archaic perception of the actor’s experience. In the description of Polus wearing Electra’s mourning clothes, holding onstage the urn with the ashes of his own son and lamenting his own ‘real’ grief in Sophocles’ verse, we can see – in the forms of theatrical performance – the primitive ritual character of the old *choreia*,

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<sup>30</sup> Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*, VI,5.

<sup>31</sup> Plutarch, *Cicero*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Lucian, *Of Pantomime*, 83.

in which the participants displayed authentic passions and feelings, channelling them in the manner of a religious ceremony. The stories of Aesopus slaying the servant and the dancer maddened by Ajax's fury show a return of the old idea of acting as close to a state of uncontrollable mental alteration. We can also see again the idea of a contagion that possesses the audience, excited by the performer's alteration, unleashing among them a corresponding madness.

Of course it is impossible to know if these episodes were true or not; but the mere fact that they were preserved and handed down indicates a continuity in the culture of the ancient world of the archaic way of conceiving acting, associating it with a state of profound frenzy.

#### **4. Moderation and Self-Control. The Emergence of the Character**

The traditional conception of acting, however, was bound to clash with an ideal that was gradually imposing itself in Greek culture between the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, and that received much attention, first in the teaching of Socrates, and then of Plato and Aristotle. This was a moral ideal, which posited the ability to control our impulses and desires through the exercise of our rational faculties as a value. In the field of aesthetics this ideal extended to the recognition of the importance of self-control and moderation, which became essential requisites in any work of art: 'moderation', claimed Democritus, is everywhere beautiful, 'what is excessive' can never seem beautiful.<sup>33</sup>

As far as acting was concerned, it meant rejecting any uncontrolled emotional expression, reflected in disorderly and excessive gestures. In the *Laws* Plato condemned the members of the chorus who went into a frenzy, 'venting all kinds of blasphemy on sacred things' and who tried to stir the souls of the audience and to 'make them weep at once' with 'words, rhythms and dismal harmonies'.<sup>34</sup> In his *Poetics* Aristotle criticized actors who 'indulge in restless movements onstage', precisely like 'those lamentable flautists who twist and twirl'. Again in the *Poetics* he later recalled how the actor Callippides was called an 'ape' because his gestures 'were so extravagant'.<sup>35</sup> Several centuries later, Lucian was to conclude his story of the dancer seized by a frenzy while interpreting Ajax's fury, observing that when the artist came to his senses at the end of the performance, he was sick with remorse and shame, and long regretted his excesses, particularly as one of his rivals had later performed the same subject without making the same error and had won general approval.<sup>36</sup>

The development of acting techniques and the ideal of moderation as an indispensable requisite for all artistic expression thus required actors onstage to keep their irrational impulses under rigorous control. Not that this meant eliminating any emotional tension. Indeed, it remained an indispensable qualification. But in the new cultural climate the tempest of feelings that was originally supposed to take them over and madden them tended to be conceived in profoundly different terms, and

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<sup>33</sup> Diels, *Democritus*, fragment B 102.

<sup>34</sup> Plato, *Laws*, VII,800d.

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1461b-1462a.

<sup>36</sup> See Lucian, *Of Pantomime*, 84.

was closely linked with a new requirement, that of presenting rigorously and convincingly the precise image of a particular character.

In fourth-century theory, the character – its function in poetic composition and the significance of its presence in making a work – had gradually become the distinctive element of theatrical dramatic form. In the *Republic* Plato traced the difference between ‘simple’ poetry and ‘imitative’ poetry, observing that in the former the poet spoke ‘in his own person’, while in the latter he reported the discourse ‘as if he were someone else’, and in this way suited ‘his own words to those of the individual character’ as far as possible. And, he concluded, the form of this poetry is that ‘of tragedy and comedy’.<sup>37</sup> Aristotle later established the famous distinction between ‘narrative’ or ‘epic’ poetry and ‘dramatic’ poetry, explaining that in the latter it is the actors who directly represent the whole action ‘as if they were themselves the characters who lived and acted’.<sup>38</sup>

It is the presence of the character, then, the living motor force of the action, that constitutes the distinctive element of dramatic form. If, however, the character is to seem convincing and effective onstage, he needs an indispensable quality: an underlying ‘coherence’ in his essential nature, the passions that agitate him, and the actions he performs. He cannot feel passions that are ‘out-of-character’, or show moral qualities that have nothing to do with the actions in which he is involved, or perform actions that seem improbable for a person of his kind. As Aristotle explains:

given, for example, someone with a character of this or that kind, what he says or does should seem to emerge from his character in accordance with the laws of truth and verisimilitude.<sup>39</sup>

The figures in the drama were, then, a rigorously pre-arranged combination of character, passions and actions. The different forms this combination could take were codified, and this defined a sort of gallery of figures, or a typology of exemplary profiles of various kinds of humanity, identified by generational, social, economic or moral categories. The typology was widespread in treatises on rhetoric or ethics. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, for example, distinguished the categories of the ‘young’, ‘mature persons’, and the ‘old’, or the ‘rich’, the ‘powerful’ or the ‘unfortunate’. Each of these figures was assigned specific forms of passion and behaviour.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, in a perspective of this kind, each theatrical character had to correspond to the parameters of an established typology, and, to render him adequately on stage, the actor had to reproduce precisely his expected passions and behaviour, avoiding attitudes or ways of behaving that might clash with the accepted code. It was absolutely wrong, Aristotle insisted, for example, to represent ladies of the nobility as if they were loose women, or, observed Lucian, bold heroes with a languid and effeminate gait.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Plato, *Republic*, III,393a-c and 394c.

<sup>38</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448a.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 1454a.

<sup>40</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1388b-1391b. The typology of characters, defined by social, generational and moral categories, is also reflected in the form of the masks. On this see the list of masks described in Julius Pollux, *Onomasticon*, IV,133-154.

<sup>41</sup> See Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1462a, and Lucian, *The Fisherman*, 31.

### 5. *The New Form of Emotional Involvement*

Representing characters and displaying their passions and attitudes was, then, the actor's fundamental task. But to really depict a character in action it was not enough to coldly put together a combination of features that fitted together with each other. A simple combination of the kind would have seemed inert and unconvincing. To animate it, the artist had to really feel, in the act of creation, the passions experienced by the character.

This rule, according to Aristotle's *Poetics*, concerned the poets above all:

the most persuasive poets are those that start from the same state of mind as their characters, and experience each time the very passions they intend to depict: so that, for example, one whose soul is in turmoil will succeed in representing a soul in turmoil with much greater truth, one who feels angry a soul in anger.<sup>42</sup>

It was an opinion that had been widespread in the Greek world for some time. Eighty years before, Aristophanes had already used it satirically in a comedy, the *Thesmophoriazusa*, in which the poet Agathon, whose homosexual tastes were well known, appeared, stretched out languidly on a bed, clad in female clothing and surrounded by elegant toilet articles. He explained that he had to behave like this for purely professional reasons, claiming that no poet could write his plays if he did not assume the manners of his characters. To depict the female figures effectively he therefore had to adopt all their ways and costumes.

Thus Greek culture from the late fifth century BCE reveals a new way of understanding the artist's emotional involvement at the moment of creation. Alongside the archaic way, which theorized divine intervention able to produce a state of hallucinated and uncontrollable frenzy, there was a more recent conception, in which the artist's participation consisted in his capacity to reproduce in himself a range of passions that rather than being 'extreme' and 'disruptive', were precise and carefully defined, following the indications dictated by the type of character.

Given this premise, then clearly the actor could do nothing onstage without bringing his own inner self into play. To represent the character he must really feel its passions, and only in this way can he effectively render its attitudes and expressions. This is a carefully controlled and moderate emotional involvement however: the actor uses his own interior tension exclusively to render, with voice and gesture, pre-determined expressive attitudes that are rigorously coherent with the figure to be represented.

On the other hand, the control that the actor must exercise over his feelings by no means limits the intensity of the emotional effect of his performance on the audience, which is led to suffer, despair or delight as it follows the vicissitudes of the characters onstage. The ability to unleash the audience's passions remained, in the opinion of the time, the fundamental criterion for evaluating the mastery of a performer, and it was not for nothing that the most famous actors continued to boast of their ability to make the audience weep unrestrainedly.<sup>43</sup> But the audience's involvement no longer happened through a mysterious contagion of divine origin. It was the simple result of a wholly natural process, already described by Plato, by

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<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1455a.

<sup>43</sup> See Xenophon, *Symposium*, III,11.

which all human beings are induced to participate spontaneously in the same feelings and the same passions that they see effectively expressed by others.<sup>44</sup>

The new theory thus managed to explain much more articulately the phenomenon of acting and its emotional characteristics. At this point, however, a major problem arose. According to the archaic conception the actor's inner condition was determined by divine action, which wrought havoc in his mind, generating a turmoil of feelings. In the new conception any reference to divine intervention disappeared, and rather than getting carried away, the actor had to feel a series of precisely defined passions: anger, grief, joy, and all the variety of emotions that animated the character as the story developed. An explanation was therefore required as to how through his simple personal resources he could call them up in himself, scene after scene, just at the right moment and with reference to the exact type of character.

In actual fact Plato had spoken of a kind of influence that the character being played could exercise over the actor's inner frame of mind. Describing artistic creation as a form of imitation in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, he had observed that imitations extended over time 'become consolidated into habits and constitute a second nature'. It is something that happens, he explained, not only 'for the body and the voice', but also 'for the thought'.<sup>45</sup>

Now the actor on stage produced an imitation of the character. Indeed, 'imitating another in his figure or his voice' was the 'most excellent' form of imitation, and the imitation inevitably involved the artist's inner frame of mind.<sup>46</sup> Thus while those who acted could not effectively represent figures too distant from their own nature,<sup>47</sup> at the same time the character's qualities and inner frame of mind could not fail to impinge on the soul of the person rendering them onstage – to the point that interpreting inferior and unworthy figures seemed to Plato harmful and dangerous, and it became necessary to adopt some severe precautionary measures:

those whom we claim to care for and who should be honest men, we shall not allow to imitate a woman, young or old, while she insults her husband or challenges the gods [...] Nor should they imitate slaves or slave-girls performing the work of slaves [...] Nor bad men and cowards, it seems: men that behave contrary to what we have just said; who insult and mock each other and utter obscenities, drunk or sober; and all these other unseemly things that individuals like this do to themselves and others when they speak and act.<sup>48</sup>

A state regulated by fair and wise laws, then, cannot allow its citizens to play the part of low and ignoble characters. Yet someone has to, because 'we cannot know what is serious without the ridiculous, or any opposites without all their opposites'. Therefore we must have recourse to slaves and foreigners:

Imitations of this kind should be performed by slaves and paid foreigners, yet people should in no wise ever dedicate themselves to occupations of this kind; let no free man be known to learn such things, no man and no woman.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See Plato, *Republic*, 605e.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 395d.

<sup>46</sup> Plato, *Sophist*, 267a.

<sup>47</sup> See Plato, *Republic*, 394e-395a.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 395e-396a.

<sup>49</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 816e.

This moral concern, then, gave rise to a vision of acting in which the actor assimilated the qualities and frame of mind of the character whose gestures and external behaviour he was reproducing. However, this process of internal assimilation took a considerable time. The qualities of the character gradually worked on the deep structure of the actor's soul, where the vices and virtues of the figures repeatedly imitated were consolidated. It was therefore a process of moral transformation that had little or nothing to do with the actor's ability to draw out of himself instantly during the performance, a variety of passions that had to follow each other precisely, as quickly as was necessary for the progress of the scene.

For his part, when Aristotle claimed that poets must 'move from the same frame of mind as that of their characters' and 'experience each time the passions they want to represent', he had solved the question by appealing to a 'natural gift'. But this simply avoided the problem. Divine intervention able to suddenly unleash the necessary emotional states in the artist had been replaced by a gift of nature that the poet or actor could in no way solicit or regulate.<sup>50</sup> It was a mysterious faculty, beyond any form of control, impossible to excite by any conscious resource of the actor, or through any deft technical expedient.

### **6. *The Actor's Art and the Orator's***

The principles Aristotle expounded imposed themselves on the aesthetic tradition of the ancient world and reappeared towards the end of the first century BCE in Horace's *Ars poetica*, which insists on the coherence necessary for character-creation according to the canonical connection of fundamental character, passions and behaviour, and also supplies an example of generational typology that includes the figures of the child, the youth, the adult and the old man.<sup>51</sup> Above all the *Ars poetica* repeated the need for emotional involvement in lines that were to become famous:

Just as a man's face smiles with those who smile, so it weeps with those who weep. If you want me to weep, you must first suffer yourself: then your misfortunes will hurt me<sup>52</sup>

However, not even the *Ars poetica* explained how it was possible to arouse the necessary feelings at the right moment. And the solution to the problem, at least according to the surviving documents, was suggested in treatises by Cicero (*Orator* and *De oratore*) and Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria*), written respectively in the middle of the first century BCE and towards the end of the first century CE. These works, along with Plato's *Ion*, are, indirectly, the most extensive treatments of the actor's art in the ancient world that are still available, and had a fundamental influence on acting theory in the modern age, down to the late eighteenth century.

Cicero's and Quintilian's writings actually concern the orator rather than the actor, but are full of comparisons between the techniques of oratory and acting, and start from the declared premise that they are very similar.<sup>53</sup> Above all oratory and acting, Cicero and Quintilian explain, are similar in their aims. When he declaims to an

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<sup>50</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1455a.

<sup>51</sup> See Horace, *Ars poetica*, 114-118, 156-175 and 312-316.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-103.

<sup>53</sup> See Cicero, *De oratore*, III,83.

audience, the orator must not only inform and convince, but, like the actor, he must move and delight those present.<sup>54</sup> There is also a similarity in the relation that binds each of them to the text to be spoken. The actor has a play that the poet has composed bearing in mind the effects to be produced onstage. The orator, before facing his audience, prepares his speech, not only choosing the most suitable arguments but also identifying the images, words and phrases that will work most effectively on the audience's imagination. In this way, declaiming what he has prepared, just like an actor he uses intonation, gesture and movement, in short, all the physical expressiveness that is necessary to impress his hearers and shape their minds. It is a kind of 'eloquence of the body', which in the terminology of the treatises is called '*actio*'.<sup>55</sup> According to Cicero it is a fundamental and indispensable language that 'springs directly from the soul', has an effectiveness 'that comes from nature' and can also have an extremely intense effect 'on the ignorant, on the mad, and even on barbarians'.<sup>56</sup>

The orator's and the actor's task consists, then, in transmitting carefully prepared words and images with the physical language of *actio*. And in both cases the ability to master gesture and intonation – the characteristic tools of acting – seems much more important than the text to be communicated. As actors in the theatre, observes Quintilian, 'add so much charm to the best poets that they give us infinitely more pleasure listening than reading, and manage to ensure an audience for even the worst authors', so *actio* 'has an extraordinary effectiveness and power in oratory'. Indeed, 'the nature of what we have prepared in our mind is not so important as the way in which it is expressed'.<sup>57</sup> On this point one might invoke the testimony of Demosthenes, who was an exemplary model of an orator in the ancient world:

When Demosthenes was asked to name the primary element in the whole of oratory, he made declamation pre-eminent, and also put it in the second and third position, until his questioner asked him no more: thus it might seem that he regarded it not as the main element of oratory, but the only one.<sup>58</sup>

Their ends, their use of the same type of expressive language, the greater importance of vocal intonation and gesture over the simple effectiveness of the words and images in the text thus make the actor's task very similar to that of the orator. But there is also another more specific element linking them. Both the actor in a play and the orator must be able to assume the attitudes and expressions of a personality that is not their own. The actor onstage speaks and acts so as to represent a character. Not dissimilarly, according to Quintilian, the orator must often stand in his client's shoes, and speak and act as if it were his client who was addressing the audience.<sup>59</sup> At this point there seems to be such a close affinity between the

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<sup>54</sup> See Cicero, *Orator*, 69 and *De oratore*, II,115 and 128. See also Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, III,5,5 and XI,3,154.

<sup>55</sup> Cicero, *Orator*, 55. See also Cicero, *De oratore*, III,222.

<sup>56</sup> Cicero, *De oratore*, III,221 and 223.

<sup>57</sup> Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, XI,3,2 and 4. See also Cicero: *actio* 'is the prevailing factor in oratory; without it the best of orators is worth nothing, while a mediocre orator who is good at it, can often surpass his betters' (*De oratore*, II,213).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, XI,3,6. See also Cicero, *De oratore*, II,213.

<sup>59</sup> See *ibid.*, IV,1,47. See also III,8,49 and XI,1,39, and Cicero, *De oratore*, II,192.

techniques of oratory and acting as to make it extremely advisable for the orator to take lessons from actors. Demosthenes, as Quintilian reminds us, had had the actor Andronicus as his master, and Cicero at the outset of his career had drawn on the art of two other celebrated actors, Aesopus and Roscius.<sup>60</sup>

However, two fundamental differences were identified between *actio* and acting. While the orator dealt with authentic facts and real persons, the actor represented imaginary figures and stories that he had to make living and plausible for his audience.<sup>61</sup> In addition, for the orator to be convincing and credible, his own personal authority was essential. In this way, not only when he spoke in his own person but also when he entered the figure of his client, whoever it was, he had to be able to project an image of correctness and decorum.

This led to some important stylistic variations, and the orator had to make a rigorous selection of the expressive possibilities offered by theatrical art. He would avoid gestures that were too heavily imitative, which the actor used to evoke an imaginary situation. In oratory, observed Cicero, the expression of different emotions is ‘accompanied by gesture, but not of the theatrical kind, which gives expression to every word’, but rather ‘by gestures that clarify the situation and the thought in general, not with mimicry but with simple hints’.<sup>62</sup> Also, while it was certainly advisable for the actor to maintain decorum onstage in the interest of good taste, the orator’s authority and dignity constituted a genuine rhetorical weapon which he absolutely could not do without. As Quintilian explains, ‘grimaces and strange gestures that make us laugh when mimes use them’ were unsuitable to him, and ‘the scurrilous pungency of the stage’ still more so.<sup>63</sup> In short, he had to seem generally more sober and measured than the actor:

the actor may use pauses of hesitation, modulations of the voice, various gestures with his hands, different movements of the head. The [orator’s]discourse has a different taste and should not be too highly flavoured; it is based on the action of oratory, not on imitation. Therefore a declamation is rightly criticized when it is full of grimaces, irritating gesticulation and constant changes in the tone of voice.<sup>64</sup>

## 7. *The Use of Emotion*

Apart from these stylistic differences, however, the main aim of the actor’s and orator’s whole expressive apparatus was identical: to succeed in unleashing passions and emotions in the audience. Nothing was regarded as more important, not only to gain applause in the theatre, but also to win a case in court, than the ability to emotionally involve the audience. ‘Convincing an audience is necessary’, wrote Cicero, ‘delighting gives them pleasure, but it is moving them that wins the case’, because men ‘judge more on the basis of hatred or love, desire, anger, grief, joy, hope, fear, error, or some other inward emotion, than on the basis of truth, or authority or some question of law’.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup> See *ibid.*, XI,3,7. See also Plutarch, *Cicero*, 5 and Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, III,14,12.

<sup>61</sup> See Cicero, *De oratore*, II,34 and 192-193, and III,214.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, I,251. See also Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, XI,3,88 and 89.

<sup>63</sup> Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VI,3,29.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, XI,3,181-183. See also I,8,3 e XI,3,22-24.

<sup>65</sup> Cicero, *Orator*, 69. See also 121 and Cicero, *De oratore*, II,178 and 185-86.

And so the orator had to make use of emotional effects in carefully calculated quantities during his oration. He would use them cautiously at the outset, briefly in the next part of his speech, coming to a climax at the end, leaving audience and judges wholly in the grip of the feelings evoked, just as in theatrical performances: ‘the theatre’, claimed Quintilian, ‘should be stirred at the moment in which the ancient tragedies and comedies close to the sound of applause’.<sup>66</sup>

This was because the emotions that were so carefully produced might disturb the judge’s rational faculties, not only influencing his opinion, but actually compromising his ability to rigorously evaluate arguments, facts and witness statements:

Let us admit that the evidence makes the judges believe that our case is better: their feelings induce them actually to want it to be so; but what they want, they also believe. When they have started to feel anger, support one side, feel hatred or pity, they now think that it is something that concerns them, and as lovers can no longer judge beauty, so the judge in the grip of feelings completely loses his ability to verify the truth. He is swept along by the tide of passion, and yields himself up to the torrent.<sup>67</sup>

Thus the emotional impact causes the judge to identify with one of the parties to the case until he thinks that it is something that concerns him, just as a member of the audience normally sympathizes with the hero of a play. Carrying all before him with the flood tide of feelings, the orator manages to blur his perception of reality. Just as on the stage, the real facts lose their objective contours and are shaped according to people’s subjective feelings. An image of the world constructed according to the rigorous parameters of the intellect and adherence to reality is replaced by a vision called up by feeling.

But commanding the emotional reactions of the audience is not easy. To succeed, the orator, like the actor, must make use of a number of tools relating to the form of the text to be spoken and what in theatrical terminology we might call its production, as well as everything connected with the specific resources of acting.

As regards the form of the text, the story and the lines of a tragedy are studied to attract the attention and feelings of the audience. In the same way, in the orator’s speech all the events described must assume a precise emotional colouring, and Quintilian gives several examples of this. To horrify the judge, the orator must make the crime to be condemned seem particularly odious. If it is an assault he will underline its atrocity, recalling that the victim is an old man or a young boy, or a magistrate, or an honest man. He will recall that the fact happened at a dangerous moment for public safety, when ‘most of the trials being held are for acts of this kind’. Or, to arouse compassion, the orator will dwell on the victim’s condition and the sad future his children and his parents can expect, describing the fate of those who have sued for violent attacks when they do not obtain justice: ‘they have to flee the city, give up their goods, put up with all manner of harassment from their enemy’ and so on.<sup>68</sup>

Then there are the expedients on the ‘production’ side. These are particularly spectacular and are actions the orator can perform, displaying to the audience figures and objects, with effects like a chamber of horrors:

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<sup>66</sup> Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VI,1,51 and 52. See also IV,2,27 and 28, and VI,1,9-10.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, VI,2,5-6.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, VI,1,15-19.

The prosecutors may display bloody swords, bones extracted from wounds and blood-spattered clothes; they may remove the dressing from wounds and reveal the parts of the body that have been beaten [...] In this way Caesar's bloody *praetexta*, placed at the head of his funeral cortege, drove the people into a furious rage. They already knew that Caesar had been assassinated, and his body had even been placed on the catafalque; yet that garment, drenched in blood, called up the scene of the crime so as to give the impression not that Caesar had been killed, but that he had been killed at that very moment.<sup>69</sup>

Other expedients exploit the typical resources of acting, like the ability to bring out the effect of the sounds of the words in the lines. Rhythms and sounds in themselves work on the listener's feelings, and it is significant, observes Quintilian, that musical instruments can produce emotions without the use of words at all. In this way, a clever use of rhythm and sound will enable the orator to make use of the 'secret power' of the melodies and rhythms of music, and this power acts on the mind of all listeners without them being aware.<sup>70</sup>

Finally, to get an emotional reaction from the audience, at the right moment the orator should declaim his speech as if it is being pronounced by his client, just like an actor who assumes voice, tones and gestures of the character to be represented:

Only the naked facts move people; but when we pretend that it is our clients who speak, then the person causes emotion too. Indeed the impression is not that the judge is listening to someone complaining about someone else's problems, but that he is hearing the feelings and voices of the victims whose silent faces also move him to tears; and just as those words would obtain greater pity if they were pronounced by them, so, to a certain extent, they are more effective in moving when they are said as if from their mouths; the same happens for actors in the theatre.<sup>71</sup>

## 8. *Emotion and Expression*

All these expedients would have little or no effect, however, if the orator were not able to express with voice and gesture precise and clear emotions. This is the essential requisite, in the theatre and in court, for acting on the audience's feelings. The listener cannot feel 'grief, aversion, rancour or fear', explains Cicero, if these emotions 'do not seem to be branded on the orator himself'. To provoke a feeling in others one must 'give the impression of experiencing that [same] feeling intensely', and so resemble 'those who really feel it'.<sup>72</sup>

The signs of a particular passion must involve the whole of the orator's physical expressiveness, from the eyes to the face, to the gestures, down to the extremities of his limbs and the movement of his fingers.<sup>73</sup> And if these expressions are really perfect, their effect will be irresistible, to the point that even adversaries will fall victim to him and be forced to feel despite themselves all the emotions that the orator wants to arouse.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., VI,1,30-31.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., IX,4,10-13. See also Cicero, *De oratore*, III,195-198.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., VI,1,25-26.

<sup>72</sup> Cicero, *De oratore*, II,189 and 190; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VI,2,27.

<sup>73</sup> See Cicero, *De oratore*, II,188.

<sup>74</sup> See *ibid.*, III,214.

Now, the external expressions of a passion appear spontaneously in all of us, in the various moments of our lives, when we really feel them. It is a natural process that allows us to understand what others are feeling in their souls: ‘the gesture matches the voice and obeys the feeling together with it’, and in this way ‘the state of mind is recognizable from the expression on the face and the gait’. Besides, observes Quintilian, ‘even in beings without language we can recognize anger, joy and simpering from the gaze and from certain other movements of the body’.<sup>75</sup> So spontaneous and natural is the process that translates the internal passions into external signs that everybody, however coarse and ignorant, is absolutely expressive when he is possessed by authentic and intense emotions:

If people in tears, particularly as a result of recent grief, seem to succeed in giving vent to their feelings to some extent, showing remarkable expressiveness, and sometimes anger makes the ignorant eloquent, what other cause is there, if not that in them there is emotional power and, with it, sincerity of feeling?<sup>76</sup>

Thus, in exploiting the immediate expressiveness that passion possesses in itself, the actor and orator can easily make their gestures and voice more convincing and effective in the theatre and in court. That actors use this system appears, in any case, clear. When they act onstage, notes Cicero, their acting is supported by a lively emotional involvement: to render the poet’s text they have recourse not only to art, but also to authentic and genuine emotion. And he claims to have seen many times at the theatre ‘the eyes of the actor who was declaiming seeming to burn behind the mask’.<sup>77</sup> For his part Quintilian insists that he has often seen not only tragic actors but also comic actors ‘go away still in tears after removing their mask at the end of a particularly touching action’.<sup>78</sup>

The natural process that produces the signs of passion on a face and in the gestures of the person feeling it also has another, more precious virtue however. It not only produces immediately and effortlessly the expressions corresponding to the various states of mind, but makes them particularly intense and effective, giving them a special energy. That is why when orators trust to the authenticity of their feelings they achieve effects that would otherwise be impossible. They can, for example, burst into genuine tears in front of the audience, and even turn pale; but above all, their expressions take on an irresistible power, which would disappear if they simply pretended feelings they were not experiencing.<sup>79</sup>

Mere cold-blooded pretence actually deprives the expressions of their necessary energy: the orator’s manner seems inert and empty, and comes across as a laborious and evident simulation. The result may be disastrous, above all when the orator tries to heighten the effect. The more he tries to coldly reproduce the traits of impetuous passion, the more he risks seeming ridiculous. On this subject Cicero mentions the comments of the famous orator Antonius, who was delivering an impassioned defence, and Quintilian draws the appropriate conclusion in his treatise:

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<sup>75</sup> Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, XI,3,65 and 66.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, VI,2,26. See also X,6,15.

<sup>77</sup> Cicero, *De oratore*, II,193, and *Pro Sestio*, 120.

<sup>78</sup> Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VI,2,35.

<sup>79</sup> See *ibid.*, VI,2,36.

My lament and my entreaties to all the gods, to men, to my fellow-citizens and to our allies were not without tears or great grief. If all those words I pronounced had lacked any real feeling of suffering on my part, my oration not only would not have been moving, but would have been actually ludicrous.<sup>80</sup>

Sometimes, indeed, the imitation of mourning, anger and indignation will seem ridiculous, if we adapt only our words and the expression on our face to it, but not our mind.<sup>81</sup>

If it is possible, then, to try to simulate more or less well the signs of a feeling with gestures and the voice, only those who really feel it can manage to transmit it through their external expressions; and if the audience falls prey to the emotions it is because, before they were transmitted to them, those emotions actually existed in the actor's or orator's mind. So, to emotionally influence someone who is deciding a case, writes Quintilian, our words must come 'from a state of mind like that we wish to create in the judge'.<sup>82</sup>

### 9. *The Techniques of Identification*

This seemed to mark a return of the old theory of contagion, by which the passions are transmitted from the mind of the actor to the minds of the audience. The contagion is no longer produced by a divinity, but by the very nature of emotional processes. The external expressions are a mere means for the orator's flow of feelings to enter into contact with the members of the audience. Then the emotions, which are naturally contagious, inevitably pass into the new subject.

The recurrent metaphor for explaining the phenomenon is that of a fire, which spreads through contact from one material to another:

Just as no material is so inflammable as to catch fire unless it is brought close to a flame; so, no mind is so disposed to be influenced by the orator's power, that it can become inflamed if he does not approach it inflamed and burning.<sup>83</sup>

But to set off the contagion and provoke emotional reactions in the audience the orator must be able to really arouse in himself the various passions he wants to unleash in his hearers while he pronounces his speech. He must, as Cicero observes, 'acquire the ability to become angry, to grieve and to weep in the course of his oration'.<sup>84</sup>

And so the fundamental problem returns, which concerns both acting technique and the orator's *actio*. No one, notes Quintilian, can feel an emotion to order, by mere force of will, and we have no power over our inner motions.<sup>85</sup> How then can someone performing to an audience create in himself, moment by moment, all the inner feelings he needs?

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<sup>80</sup> Cicero, *De oratore*, II,196.

<sup>81</sup> Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VI,2,26.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., VI,2,27.

<sup>83</sup> Cicero, *De oratore*, II,190. See also Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VI,2,28.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., II,196. See also Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VI,2,28.

<sup>85</sup> See Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VI,2,29.

To demonstrate that it is possible Cicero cites the example of theatrical actors. When a fine actor performs a scene he manages to become fired, not just the first time, but also in later performances, day after day, for a long time. So there is no reason why the same should not be possible for an orator, who pronounces his speech just once, without running the risk of his sensibility being ruined by infinite repetitions of the same scene.<sup>86</sup>

Now, according to Cicero, the actor and the orator manage to become fired in the right way at the right time by following a particular procedure, which originates in the very conditions in which they find themselves when they are before an audience. It is a situation that makes them particularly sensitive to the stimuli created by their own words and actions. The actor is aware that he must show his prowess and put his reputation at stake. The orator also knows that the destiny of real persons and the affirmation of moral values that are close to his heart depend on his words.<sup>87</sup> Uncertainty as to the outcome of his performance, which can never be guaranteed, as well as the presence of people who are observing, waiting for and judging his gestures and words, generate a special tension in him that leads to a sort of emotional hyperactivity. The words, themes and images – and the very way in which words, themes and images have been carefully arranged, as we have seen, to stir the emotions of all those present, bringing out distressing, terrible or horrible details – in short ‘the very nature of that speech, which is aimed at moving the feelings of others’, moves the speaker ‘even more than his hearers’.<sup>88</sup> All the visual effects prepared with the same aim, like the appearance of a pitiful or terrible figure onstage, or the display in front of the judges in court of an old, sad defendant, in shabby clothes, his body marked by war-wounds, overpowers the actor or the orator ‘even before he moves others to pity’.<sup>89</sup>

The procedure, then, seems to be this. The words and artifices designed to play on the public’s emotions awaken above all the actor’s or orator’s passions, given his very special emotional state in front of an audience. The passions emerge from his soul in external expressions, marking his features, his gestures and the intonation of his voice, which thus seem particularly effective. From here they are then transmitted by contagion, firing the souls of those present.

For his part Quintilian makes use of the theories of Stoic doctrine, identifying a particular technique that can be used in oratory and acting. All of us in our daily life are accompanied in our minds by images of scenes at which we are not actually present. They are images we create ‘while we daydream our time away’, and we have the impression of ‘travelling long distances, sailing, fighting, haranguing peoples, having great wealth at our disposal’. Some particularly gifted people can call up these visions so vividly and in such detail as to be able ‘to imagine perfectly objects, voices and gestures, as if they were real’. But it is an ability that can easily be developed. Anyone who is able to conceive believable and vivid scenes in this way can easily arouse the corresponding feelings in his mind. Thus the orator and the actor will inevitably feel, moment by moment as the speech or play develops, all the necessary

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<sup>86</sup> See Cicero, *De oratore*, II,193 and Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VI,3,35.

<sup>87</sup> See Cicero, *De oratore*, II,192.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, II,191.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, II,195.

emotions, if they manage to fix detailed images of what they are declaiming or acting in their mind's eye.

I lament the murder of a man: will I not have before my eyes everything that might credibly have happened in actuality? Will not the assassin suddenly leap out? Will not the victim feel terror, will he not cry, or plead, or flee? Will I not see the one strike and the other fall? Will not the blood, the pallor, the groans, and finally the open mouth of the dying man breathing his last be fixed in my mind?<sup>90</sup>

Absorbed in the tension of performing to an audience, at once engrossed by the words he is pronouncing and the actions he is performing, easily able to call to mind the appropriate images, the actor in the course of his performance thus experiences a series of feelings that spontaneously shape his expressions, make them intense, effective, and able to work on all those present, projecting the emotions that agitate him onto the audience.

### **10. Control and Perfection of Expression**

Once the fundamental problem of the actor has been solved in this way, the process of acting is based on a simple sequence of feelings, their spontaneous expressiveness, and their innate power to spread by contagion. The actor's ability consists, then, in very little. Once he has found a decent text and an audience ready to listen to him, he need only call to mind clear and detailed images corresponding to the words he is speaking, and the rest follows automatically. His situation steeps him in a kind of emotional hypersensitivity, the feelings rise immediately in his mind, called up by the words and images, and so give his body and voice the most effective expressions. And that is all.

Cicero and Quintilian insist, however, on the actor and orator having a sure and conscious technique, long and difficult, carefully cultivated and practised. Their treatises are based on the conviction that oratory, like acting, can achieve excellent results only if what we are given by 'nature' is developed by 'art'. An orator, for example, must certainly possess particular natural gifts, like an adequate physical appearance, an absence of defects that prevent him speaking correctly or moving easily, a good memory, and a sensitive mind that will readily kindle. All these qualities are indispensable, but without technique they are little use: art must work on them, and only art can perfect what is directly supplied by nature.<sup>91</sup>

The natural process of the sequence of feelings, which is the basis of *actio* and acting, is not in itself enough, then. An actor or an orator who simply displayed to his audience the external signs that were immediately stamped on them by the passions of their souls, would certainly be inadequate to their task, for the obvious reason that the passions of the soul, as Cicero explains, are often 'confused', and so the expressions they produce seem obscure and uncertain. To display a passion perfectly it is therefore necessary to remove from its external appearance 'what causes obscurity', at the same time bringing out 'its most clear and visible aspects'.<sup>92</sup> Only in

<sup>90</sup> Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VI,2,31.

<sup>91</sup> See Cicero, *De oratore*, I,113-115. See also Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, I, 26-27, II,17,5-15, II,19,1 and XI,3,10-12.

<sup>92</sup> Cicero, *De oratore*, III,215.

this way can one act really effectively as the great actor Roscius did, who managed to form every gesture so that it was absolutely clear and perfect, with grace and propriety, producing in the audience both ‘emotion and pleasure’.<sup>93</sup>

Quintilian agreed. The expression of ‘real emotions’ that ‘burst out spontaneously’ should be shaped ‘by teaching and method’.<sup>94</sup> In short, they should be worked on and controlled by the person delivering the speech. Otherwise they look crude and imprecise, and their inadequacy may leave room for the excesses of ‘ignorant’ orators who ‘shout on every occasion, and bellow every phrase’, move and gesticulate wildly ‘and wag their heads like lunatics’.<sup>95</sup>

There is another reason that makes it indispensable for the actor to control his expressions. Those acting, observes Cicero, need to regulate the intensity of every gesture, rationing them appropriately, so as to prepare the effect of the next gesture. For example, to make one gesture particularly meaningful and emphatic, the one before should be lighter and more muted so as not to ruin the effect. The performance thus develops through a series of variations, in which each expressive moment becomes effective in relation to the preceding one, and should therefore bear in mind those that are to follow. In this way while the actor and the orator display an expression dictated by an emotional state, they must maintain a lucid awareness of how the whole speech or scene develops, and decide the intensity of gesture and intonation on this basis.<sup>96</sup> Control of the body is therefore extremely rigorous, requiring long rehearsals before the mirror, as Demosthenes is said to have done.<sup>97</sup>

Now, to perfect the expressions that arise spontaneously from his inner feelings, to refine them of any ‘obscurity’ and make them perfectly ‘clear’, the actor or orator must know exactly what the characteristic external signs of each individual passion are: otherwise he will not be able to control their exact reproduction on his face, in his gestures and in the modulation of his voice. Indeed, as Cicero explains, ‘nature has assigned each emotion an expression, a tone of voice and a specific gesture’, and they ‘are available to the orator to express the various overtones of his speech, as a painter uses colours’.<sup>98</sup>

In *De oratore* Cicero gives an example by describing some expressive intonations of the voice, which correspond to the exact reproduction of anger, compassion, fear, violence and despondency.<sup>99</sup> While in Book XI of *Institutio oratoria* Quintilian gives a detailed list of a long series of gestures and movements, with a veritable catalogue of expressions that was to inspire many treatises on oratory for several centuries.

Even while he is being trained, says Quintilian, the orator should learn chironomy, or the laws of hand movements.<sup>100</sup> Later, he must master a complex code of voice and gesture for every part of the body, starting from the positions of the head:

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., I,130.

<sup>94</sup> Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, XI,3,61.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., II,12,9.

<sup>96</sup> See Cicero, *De oratore*, III,102.

<sup>97</sup> See Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, XI,3,68.

<sup>98</sup> Cicero, *De oratore*, III,216.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., III,217-218. See also Cicero, *Orator*, 55 and 56.

<sup>100</sup> Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, I,11,17.

Seemly postures include first of all keeping the head erect and in a natural position, as when it hangs down it suggests humility, when it is thrown back arrogance, when inclined to one side languor, when it too stiff and rigid a brutal nature.<sup>101</sup>

But the greatest expressive ability lies in the face: the eyes, the cheeks, the lips, the nostrils and even the eyebrows, which indicate anger when they are ‘knitted’, sadness when ‘lowered’, and joy when ‘extended’. Quintilian then proceeds to shoulders, arms, feet, hands and fingers, indicating all the appropriate movements down to the least detail.

If one gently takes the last joint of the index finger on both sides, with the other two fingers slightly crooked, but the little finger less so, the result is a gesture suitable for argument. Yet one has the impression that someone is discussing more animatedly if he holds the middle joint of the finger and contracting the last two fingers still further to match the lower position of the middle finger and thumb. [...] The hand slightly hollowed as when someone makes a vow, and then moved slightly to and fro, the shoulders swaying in unison, is particularly suitable for someone expressing reluctance and timidity. A gesture that expresses wonder consists in turning the palm of the hand slightly upwards, bringing each finger in turn into the palm, starting from the little finger, then, while the fingers are returned to their previous position, opening it and at the same time turning it in the other direction.<sup>102</sup>

In the meticulous description of all these movements, the search for maximum expressiveness is associated with the need for precise stylization that can confer on the orator’s action not only decorum, but also the grace and beauty that will give the audience an indispensable ‘delight’.

Specialists forbid the hand to be higher than the eyes and lower than the chest; it is seen as still worse to move it downwards, starting from the head, or let it descend beyond the lower belly. The hand should be allowed to rise towards the left, but not beyond the shoulder, further than that is not proper [...] It is never correct to gesticulate with the left hand alone [...] Standing with the right foot and right hand forward is ugly.<sup>103</sup>

### **11. Possibility of an Anti-Emotional Theory**

Acting in front of an audience, then, combines two kinds of behaviour. One is spontaneous, letting face and gestures display what it simply dictated by the emotions, and one is conscious and regulated, adopting gestures and movements that have been studied and catalogued, both to make the expressions more incisive and to give them a special grace and beauty. Losing the delicate balance between these two forms of behaviour would run the risk of a crude and overexcited performance, or one that was cold and artificial. And this is the explicit position of the treatises of Cicero and Quintilian.

However, the possibility of codifying the expressive signs of the various passions, indicating them down to the last detail, as in Quintilian’s painstaking catalogue, opened another path. By long-practised technique the actor or orator might try to

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., XI,3,69.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., XI,3,95 and 100.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., XI,3,112-114 and 124.

deliberately reproduce these signs – head, arm and hand movements, inflexions of the voice – instantly in himself. The forms of expression used had been studied and codified so as to respond perfectly to the requirements of the theatre or the courthouse, and so appeared absolutely convincing in those particular contexts. Someone able to reproduce them skilfully, adapting them to his own personal characteristics, would therefore be able to render the presence of passions and states of mind well enough to satisfy the most demanding member of the audience. His actual emotional involvement would at this point be superfluous: it would be a mere tool to make use of when his technique was insufficiently perfected, and in certain cases might actually be harmful, disturbing the orator's necessary concentration on giving a perfect artistic rendering of his expressions.<sup>104</sup>

The possibility of a model of acting based on the cold but perfect and artistically convincing simulation of the emotions appears in the thought of the time. In a passage of *De oratore* Cicero actually seems to acknowledge that with 'greater art' it might be possible to express a passion effectively without feeling it, merely through deliberate simulation.<sup>105</sup> In the *Tusculanae disputationes* too, though he touches on the problem in a special context, while discussing the effects of anger, he certainly takes it as a genuine possibility, and actually makes it the very basis of the actor's and orator's art:

It is certainly not seemly for the orator to feel anger, but it is not improper for him to simulate it. Perhaps we seem enraged to you when we speak sharply and aggressively during a hearing? [...] Perhaps you think that Aesopus was angry when he declaimed these verses, or that Accius was when he wrote them? Passages like this are splendid to declaim, and an orator, if he *is* an orator, does it better than any actor, but one should declaim calmly, in cold blood.<sup>106</sup>

And the same passage was referred to again a few decades later in Seneca's *De ira* too.

'The orator', he says, 'is sometimes more effective when he is angry'. No, but when he imitates someone who is angry: actors too affect people with their declamations, not if they themselves are personally angry, but if they act well the part of someone who is. And with judges and in the assembly too and wherever we have to bend someone else's will to our way of thinking, we will simulate now anger, now fear, now pity, to inspire them in others and what sincere passions would not have obtained, pretence often does.<sup>107</sup>

The vision of an art of acting whose effects on the audience are not based on direct, immediate contagion of the emotions, but rather on the perception of a special talent in simulation, emerges above all, however, in one of Plutarch's writings from the same period as Quintilian.

In the *Symposiacs* Plutarch tackles a characteristic problem: why is it that we derive pleasure from watching an actor imitating anger or sadness onstage, while we feel distress or displeasure when we watch someone with these feelings in real life. The

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<sup>104</sup> See *ibid.*, XI,3,25.

<sup>105</sup> Cicero, *De oratore*, II,189.

<sup>106</sup> Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes*, IV,55.

<sup>107</sup> Seneca, *De ira*, II,17,1.

problem has no easy answer, and Plutarch solves it like this. If we feel pleasure watching an actor lamenting in despair bereavement and misfortunes, it is because we all have an innate taste for everything that seems produced by art, technique, or by a specific, intelligent, rational ability. Our nature is spontaneously attracted by any demonstration of skill and ingenuity. An actor's performance displays ability, skill and ingenuity precisely because it is not a simple expression of actual feelings, but an astute and expert simulation:

someone genuinely angry or sad shows only the ordinary effects of the passion and the emotion, while an imitation, if it is at all successful, displays ability, which makes it attractive. In this case we take a wholly natural pleasure while we feel distress in the other.<sup>108</sup>

Thus, between the time of Cicero and that of Plutarch a vision of the art of acting emerges that sees it as residing exclusively in the ability to simulate. It is the result of ability more than inspiration or real emotional involvement. It is all the more attractive, pleasant and effective when the actor manages to use sophisticated technique to reproduce perfectly the symptoms of a passion – but only because that shows special skill. The authentic expression of an emotion that was truly felt would be inert, clumsy and distressing onstage.

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<sup>108</sup> Plutarch, *Symposiacs*, V,1,2.