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Edited by Michael J. Sidnell

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

In this final decade of the twentieth century, having survived a phase in which its very existence was in question, Western theatre flourishes; and it does so despite the dominance of dramatizations in other artistic media. One reason for this renewed vitality is that, having all but lost certain historic communicational and social functions to television, video, and film, theatre has reaffirmed its distinctiveness as a Hegelian mode of knowing through involvement <Hg/206; Hz/241>, a medium for live actors performing for present spectators in real time. On this understanding, it has drawn on the performance traditions of many cultures as sources for renewal,¹ and has partly thrown off the old submission to playwrights – or rather to writing – that has shaped its history for nearly five hundred years. But Western theatre has by no means surrendered its claims to the performance of literature: on the contrary, it has tended to widen its scope to include the staging of novels and other kinds of non-dramatic writing, in addition to the playscripts which remain its staple material.

The fourth volume in this series will attempt to match the intercultural emphasis on performance that animates contemporary theatre, but this second volume (and the third) will be concerned, like the first, with ideas about drama as a social practice that assumes – sometimes questionably – the stage performance of works written for that purpose; and assumes also that the dramatic literary genre and theatrical performance are congruent. In Schlegel and Hegel <Sl/193; Hg/209> especially, this supposed congruence is founded on (performed) drama's unique capacity for combining the sensuous with the ideal.

Before the end of the eighteenth century, “dramatic” usually referred to theatrical performance but during the nineteenth the term acquired more literary connotations and, in the course of the present century, began to provide English with the handy though insufficient distinction, now commonly used, between written texts (“drama”) and performance

¹ See Barba and Savarese 1991 and Fischer-Lichte, Riley, and Gissenwehner 1990.

(“theatre”).² In France, Mlle Dumesnil had tried much earlier to establish an equivalent verbal and conceptual distinction <Dl/95> by way of asserting the performer’s claims to a creativity equivalent to that of the playwright.³ In their wider uses, the two terms frequently imply different evaluations: “dramatic” words and deeds being generally more estimable than “theatrical” ones.⁴ This distinction, and the greater flexibility of the term “drama” – sometimes embracing film, television, and theatre, as well as literature – are consistent with the emphasis on the linguistic and literary components in most European dramatic theory <I:In/6–7>; and also with an actual practice in which the written text has aspired to dominate theatre. The valuation that Castelvetro, in the sixteenth century, gives to non-verbal theatrical expression <I:Cv/129> is exceptional in the context of theoretical writings of his time and earlier, and it remains so long afterwards.

If the traditional assumptions – or prejudices – about the fundamental literariness of drama are clearly limiting, they have also proved highly productive in the context of Western drama and theatre, sustaining theatrical, as well as literary efforts; and supplying the concepts and analytical methods for a theoretical discourse that has been in progress, now, for over two thousand years. In this discourse, the tripartite division of three genres of literature remains remarkably stable until, with Hugo, the neo-classical distinctions between lyric, epic, and dramatic begin to break down and the genres to fuse <Hu/260>. But, if the genre of dramatic literature is stable, the assumed literary-theatrical compound of drama in performance is less so, especially in the period covered by this volume, from the early eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, when the separation of its literary and theatrical constituents is sometimes quite unsettling for theorists of drama and playwrights. “Theatre is literature in action,” says de Staël <Sa/184> but Baillie <Bl/178> is only one of many playwrights who find in the theatre action that is anything but literary.

The importance commonly attached to dramatic literature is associated with that of language itself in instantiating cultural coherence and expressing national sentiments; and, when one adds to the literary and linguistic aspects of drama, the theatrical ones of culturally specific non-verbal conventions and manners, and immediate, collective reception, there is good reason for theatre to be more bound up with ideas (and prejudices) about ethnicity and nationhood than other fine arts; and for national theatres to be seen as vital political institutions: “if we had a national theatre,” says Schiller, “we would also be a nation” <Sr/161>.

² See also the brief account of “dramatic” in Williams 1983, 109–10.

³ François Riccoboni, similarly motivated, attempted to distinguish “l’art du théâtre” and “le poétique du théâtre”, the latter signifying the art of *writing* tragedies and comedies, and the former signifying the art of performance, Riccoboni 1750/1971, 4–5.

⁴ See Barish 1981, 323ff.

Such ideas are by no means new – in Lope de Vega <I:Lp/184> and Dryden <I:Dd/285> they are fundamental – but they are especially common in the dramatic theory of the period covered by this volume; and they are subject to critical scrutiny in the writings of Schlegel and de Staël, especially.

The usual privileging of the literary genre is founded on three main assumptions: first, that the writing precedes the playing; second, that what is essential in drama is, as Aristotle insisted – but with respect to tragedy only – accessible through reading <I:Ar/7>; and third, that written drama can actually inscribe theatricality and is thus distinct from other literary genres – lyric, for instance – that theatre uses. The first of these assumptions is founded on a general practice in Western theatre. In Diderot's theory, however, allowance is made for a non-verbal content supplied by actors: "We talk too much in our plays, and consequently the actors have little chance to act," says Diderot's Dorval <Dt/42>. He also allows his actors to "rearrange the text" somewhat, with the idea that such freedom enables that strong emotional involvement of the spectators which is stirred by representations of moments of silence and incapacity for speech. More oppositionally, we see writing set off against playing in Gozzi's defense of the *commedia dell'arte* <Go/103> from Goldoni's attempt <Gl/72> to reform the genre by bringing theatre more firmly under the control of literature, and thus making it socially critical. We also have the extraordinary dramatic spectacle – as it was conceived in its own time and has been since (Butwin 1975) – of the French Revolution, in which theatrical performance is regarded as, first and foremost, a political activity. Rather paradoxically, though, the officially preferred basis for such celebrations of republican citizenship was old tragedies <Fr/173>. In England, we hear the reiterated complaint <Bl/180> that "legitimate drama" is being driven from the theatre by all manner of "illegitimate" shows, about how ill-accommodated dramatic literature is by actual theatre practice.

The second assumption privileging the literary genre is tersely articulated by Dr. Johnson: "A play read, affects the mind like a play acted" <Jh/86>. The epigrammatic certitude of this statement is enabled by the ambiguity of "play," as it has developed in English usage from a word signifying such physical activity as dancing and leaping for joy to a term for a literary text: reading a "play" is rather like eating a bill of fare, from a certain etymological point of view. The French language does something similar in entitling a playwright's collected writings *le théâtre de . . .* somebody or other. In such usages there may be lurking the understanding that, if the staged play represents the world, the read play represents not the world but the stage <Sl/193>. Shakespeare's plays are particularly prone to be praised as dramas for which staging is superfluous.

As to the third assumption privileging writing, the idea that it can inscribe theatre, Steele asserts that "the greatest effect of a play in reading

is to excite the reader to go see it," but what the spectators saw of his *The Conscious Lovers* was not what he had devised for them, and he made publication an occasion for pointing out, and doing his best to make good, the stage production's substitution of instrumental music for a song <St/18>. Goethe remarks that "a good play can be in fact only half transmitted in writing, a great part of its effect depending on the scene, the personal qualities of the actor, the powers of his voice, the peculiarities of his gestures, and even the spirit and favorable humour of the spectators" (Goethe/Eastlake 1967, xxviii). Hazlitt agrees with him <Hz/241> but, on the other hand, mostly prefers his Shakespeare read, rather than performed. And, on this point, Goethe agrees with *him*, claiming that Shakespeare's "living world" is better conveyed by reading aloud than by stage performance <Gt/146>. Either way, to define what may be and cannot be transmitted in the theatre, or what may be and cannot be "committed to paper" – that is to say, what the relationship might be between the inscripted and unscripted parts of a "play" proves a compelling, intractable, and often contentious problem.

One thing is certain, though: in an age deeply preoccupied with the theory and practice of acting, ideas about acting are critical to the understanding of what belongs to writing and what to the stage. The different views and practices of the Riccobonis, father and son, bear on this issue, as do those of the rival French players Clairon and Dumesnil <DI/94>, or of two later players commonly paired, Bernhardt and Duse.⁵ François Riccoboni and Hippolyte Clairon both advocate systematic study and conscious application of acting technique, and tend thus towards the idea of the actor as an interpretive medium bodying forth the character drawn by the writer. On the other hand, Luigi Riccoboni's insistence on real feelings on stage, like Dumesnil's reliance on passion, intuition, and nature, comes from the conviction that the actor is a creator – not just an interpreter – of roles; one who introduces into the work an *authentic subject*, another author.

This key issue of the collaboration, intervention, or suppression of the performer as a distinct creative source and subject-presence arises in many forms. Diderot's fictional-theoretical actors of *Le Fils naturel* play themselves: in the most intimate possible relation between acting and living they *are* the characters they play <Dt/35>. Lessing discovers that mediocre plays leave more room for the actor-subject than great ones <Lg/115>, a view shared by Hazlitt <Hz/241>. In Goethe's *Wilhelm*

⁵ In his *Réflexions historiques et critiques sur les différents théâtres de l'Europe, avec les pensées sur la declamation* (1738) the *commedia dell'arte* actor Luigi Riccoboni (1676–1753) advocated the achievement of illusion through the actor's emotional immersion in the role: his son, Antonio Francesco Riccoboni (1707–72), in his *L'Art du théâtre: à Madame xxx* (1750), favored detachment, technique, and control. On Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) and Eleonora Duse (1858–1924), see States 1987, 166–70.

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Meister, the Manager, Serlo, insists that the actor give himself utterly to the character but also considers how Shakespeare's *Hamlet* might best be adapted to the demands of the public <Gt/143>! Elsewhere Goethe contrasts the epic narrator, who should be invisible, with the actor who should be intensely present to the audience, but only as the embodiment of the character represented <Gt/145>. Hegel insists that actors should be regarded as genuine artists but, at the same time, that the actor should be a "sponge," bound by the conditions of theatrical art to immolate all selfhood in the realization of the character drawn by the playwright <Hg/213>. Most insidious, because it appears to be a truism, is the view that the actor's person should conform with the playwright's imagination; that typecasting (as it has come to be called) is a given of theatrical performance. On this understanding, the playwright (or director) may rightly require that the actor not only "match as far as possible the prevalent conceptions of his fictitious original in sex, age, and figure, but assume his entire personality" <Sl/193>. In such matching of gender, age, and physique the theatre performs silently its office of imitating life and, at the same time, confirms prejudices, stereotypes, and ideals; as when Goethe's Wilhelm Meister persuades himself that Hamlet must be blue-eyed, blonde, and plump <Gt/140>. But Diderot – the later Diderot, at least – would not have found it impossible to accept today's conventions (which are not operative in the non-theatrical media and not ubiquitously on the stage, of course) whereby a black actor may be cast as an eighteenth-century European, a woman play a male role, or an adult actor represent a child. In the period covered by this volume, the discussion is about how actor and character might merge – whether by empathy or technique – rather than whether they should; though there is also a recognition that the spectators go to see a David Garrick or an Edmund Kean more than the characters they play <Hz/246>.

Garrick, indeed, was for many spectators the outstanding example of what, in theory, acting should be. Diderot, who became acquainted with him during Garrick's Continental tour of 1763–65, found in the English actor's performances the model for an art whereby the character's emotions might be conveyed through technique and control, rather than through the personal emotion or empathy of the actor. So, in the posthumously published *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, he writes:

As far as I am concerned, [a great actor] must have excellent judgment; he must have within him a cool and detached observer; it follows that what I require of him is perspicuity and not sensitivity, the art of imitating everything or, what is the same thing, an equal aptitude for all sorts of characters and roles. . . . What confirms me in this opinion is the unevenness of actors who play from the heart. Expect no unity from them; their acting is alternately strong and weak, hot and cold, flat and sublime.

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Tomorrow they will miss the moment that they have excelled in today; they will make up for this by excelling where they failed on the previous occasion. On the other hand, the actor who plays from premeditation, from the study of human nature, from a consistent imitation of some concrete conception, from imagination, from memory, will be coherent, the same at every performance, always equally proficient: everything has been weighed, combined, learnt, and mentally ordered. In his delivery there is neither monotony nor dissonance. Passion is progressive with its peaks and abatements, its beginning, its middle, and its end. The intonations are the same, the positions are the same, the movements are the same; if there is any difference from performance to performance, it is usually in the superiority of the most recent. He will not change day by day; he is a mirror, always poised to reflect actualities and to show them with the same precision, the same power, and the same truth. Every bit as much as the poet he will draw from nature's inexhaustible depths rather than confronting the exhaustion of his own resources.⁶

For Lessing, another admirer of Garrick, the sustained analysis of acting and theatrical production was the motive for initiating the series of papers later collected as *Hamburg Dramaturgy* <Lg/107>. His abandonment of this original intention in favor of a series of more abstractly theoretical discussions of drama, though it opened the way to achievements of other kinds, was a significant failure, anticipating some of the difficulties that have confronted later attempts to make objective analyses of the intersubjective arts of the theatre. But, in the early numbers of the periodical, Lessing does make really penetrating observations on the relation between writing and acting. For him, this relation is fundamentally a dialectical one, whereby the speech, gesture, and expression of the actor far from offering simply to reiterate, illustrate, or interpret anterior verbal meanings, should register, even resist, the impact of the given (abstract) words on a natural being – the actor <Lg/109>. In Kleist's subtle and prophetic meditation on marionettes, however, naturalness, knowledge, and self-awareness are antithetical to a non-human performative perfection <Kl/235>.

For Lessing, it would appear, the transformation of the playwright's words into the utterances and other physical expressions of the actor (in dialogue with the spectators) is the second stage of a transformation of the arbitrary signs of language into the natural signs of speech <Lg/126>. The first stage of this transformation (which is the antithesis of the *defamiliarization* associated with Brechtian theory) is writing in dialogue form, from which the supremacy of drama among the arts (for Lessing as for Hegel) derives; dramatic dialogue being the medium that, to a greater extent than

⁶ Newly translated from Diderot 1967, 128–29. See Burwick 1991, 44ff. for a succinct discussion of the levels of paradox in the *Paradoxe*.

any other, effects a sensuous, natural representation of abstract ideas (or spirit) <Hg/211>.

In Lessing, the processes of dramatic and theatrical naturalization serve to disclose the operations of a providential nature, which all proper art necessarily reveals <Lg/121>. Diderot (to whose thought Lessing is so heavily indebted) illustrates theatrical mediation between providence and human society in an extraordinarily subtle and complex work, of which it might be said that its mixture of genres is its message. The play it contains (*Le Fils naturel*) is deliberately – and perhaps rather deceptively – non-theatrical in that it is incorporated in a narrative context and is the occasion for a theoretical dialogue <Dt/45>. Overall, the work is generically less theatrical than narrative, more theoretical than theatrical. In it, Diderot envisages a role for the playwright as the (reluctant) dramaturge of his family's crisis, which he scripts for performance by its members, who play themselves for themselves alone. This performance is intended by its supposed originator to be a kind of secular, domestic ritual (celebrating the avoidance of unconscious incest) and it should be a more inspiring legacy than painted family portraits can ever be. Given in the privacy of the family drawing-room, such a performance is altogether different from others of its day but not radically different, in terms of its social function, from ancient theatre, perhaps. The kind of theatre envisaged by Diderot would be immune, incidentally, to the strictures against public theatres and professional players that Jean-Jacques Rousseau re-invokes in his *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles* (1758).⁷ But a better match for Rousseau is the unpuritanical Hazlitt, who sees actors as exemplars of style and grace and who experiences the theatre as matter for conversation, as a medium of history and morality, and as an engine of civility <Hz/243>.

As playwright, Diderot's Dorval has the office of giving performable shape to actual events, which in practice requires that the thoughts and feelings of the players, who have incomparably the most intimate understanding – but also a too involved and self-reflexive one – of the roles they play, be not only articulated but restrained by formal requirements. This playwright mediates between the personal involvement of the participants in the actual events and their mimetic reiteration of it, in order to make representation possible; but the playwright in Diderot's narrative is not “really writing for the stage” <Dt/38> and, what is more important, the players in it are unable, finally, to sustain the detachment necessary for the re-enactment of what they have lived through and are still, therefore, living. And this, perhaps, is the salient point: that the representation is *not*

⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) wrote it in response to d'Alembert's article on Geneva in Diderot's *Encyclopédie*. Rousseau uses some standard and some ingenious arguments <Lg/116> in favor of the prohibition of theatre in Geneva. His argument that drama ineluctably presents vice in an attractive form is echoed by Schiller in “Preface to *The Robbers*” <Sr/155>.

quite possible. Actual stagings of *Le Fils naturel*, or attempts to evaluate its “stage-worthiness,” negate this theme of the work, of course.

Conflicts between the needs of representation and the circumstances of performance necessarily arise in a medium founded on intersubjective relations amongst performers, and between performers and spectators. Lessing was surprised to discover what Hazlitt so acutely realized, that even writing about performances interferes with performances, and that acting does not consist of objective phenomena. Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* <Gt/137> comes to understand, through his intimate involvement in it, the modifications that theatrical performance undergoes in response to the pulsating emotional life of the occasions in which it is immersed. A very direct channel between the work and life is the dialogue with the audience that Hegel supposes to be a necessary characteristic of all works of art <Hg/209>. In the theatre, playwrights and actors may compete for control over that dialogue <Sl/194>, especially if they do not share with the audience, and with each other, an understanding about a creative polyphony <Dl/100>.

For playwrights, one radical solution to the problems of theatrical intersubjectivity is to avoid the theatrical medium. Dramatic form is employed without theatrical restraints or contamination for an audience of readers. This closeting of drama becomes a practice commoner in the nineteenth century than at any earlier time. Fears about the social effects of the theatre, contempt for its degenerate condition, a pre-cinematic drive toward visual images more fluid, extensive, and objective than scenography can match, and even, ultimately, the conviction that the compelling action in drama is an imaginative one that can only be hampered by physical action on the stage, and will be brought to a halt by dancing – all these conspire, in various combinations, to make “drama” separated from the theatre a viable and estimable literary genre.

Insofar as Joanna Baillie was a closet dramatist, she was so by default and her critique <Bl/178> of architectural determinants of performance, of the obstacles imposed by enormous theatres to certain kinds of plays and acting, discloses significant incongruities between ideas about dramaturgy on the one hand and about performance (and economy) on the other. This was a matter of concern for many writers but few inquired into it as closely as Baillie did. More commonly, contemporary theatrical practice was proposed as a major cause of the perceptible “decline of the drama.”

Many poets write plays, they say, without ambitions for the theatre; or not, at least, for the theatre of the day. Schiller’s *The Robbers* is a renowned example of a play intended for the closet, using the literary methods of drama in order to “catch the most secret operations of the soul,” as Schiller says in his Preface <Sr/154>. Schiller’s implication that dramatic form is an analogue of these “most secret operations” harks back to Plato and

anticipates many modern attempts (such as the Nighttown episode in Joyce's *Ulysses*) to dramatize subjective life. But the main reason Schiller gives for not staging the play is that its portrayal of vice is too realistic and (necessarily) too attractive for a proper decorum of the stage, given theatre's peculiarly immediate appeal to the spectators. (In the event, though, *The Robbers* proved immensely successful in the performance it was soon given.) Verse drama, especially, tends to retire to the closet, where the "supersensuous" ambitions of poetry <Sr/153> may be least inhibited. Byron, despite his personal and official (though brief) attachment to the theatre, and despite the fact that many of his plays were staged, often disavows any theatrical intentions in writing them. In the Preface to *Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice* (produced at Drury Lane in 1821) he insists that he "never made the attempt, and never will" to write "a play which could be deemed stage-worthy" (Byron 1844, 196). But Byron encouraged Drury Lane to produce Joanna Baillie's plays <Bl/177> and urged Coleridge to write for the stage <Co/219>, in the belief that playwrights with the requisite poetic ability were in a position to reform the theatre.

But the theatre's shortcomings are not always the reason for insulating "drama" from it. Sometimes the best artistry of the stage, especially acting, is what makes it an uncongenial medium. Charles Lamb takes both views in his commentary on the "painful and disgusting" spectacles offered by productions of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. On the one hand, theatrical presentation may be all too effective; on the other hand, it may demonstrate the hopeless representational inadequacy of the theatre. Lamb's undisguised susceptibilities to theatrical (as opposed to literary) effects are apparently founded on fundamental differences between reading and spectating:

The state of sublime emotion into which we are elevated by those images of night and horror which Macbeth is made to utter, that solemn prelude with which he entertains the time till the bell shall strike which is to call him to murder Duncan, – when we no longer read it in a book, when we have given up that vantage-ground of abstraction which reading possesses over seeing, and come to see a man in bodily shape before our eyes actually preparing to commit a murder, if the acting be true and impressive, as I have witnessed it in Mr. K[ean]'s performance of that part, the painful anxiety about the act, the natural longing to prevent it while it yet seems unperpetrated, the too close pressing semblance of reality, give a pain and an uneasiness which totally destroy all the delight which the words in the book convey, where the deed doing never presses upon us with the painful sense of presence

But, as with attempts to stage *King Lear*, the inherent feebleness of theatrical representation may also be an insuperable obstacle:

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The contemptible machinery by which they mimic the storm which he goes out in, is not more inadequate to represent the horrors of the real elements, than any actor can be to represent Lear . . .⁸

Lamb's rather ingenuously emotive responses to book and stage, like Schiller's rationalist concern with stage decorum, are not inconsistent with Lessing's developed theory in his *Laocoön*, published in 1766. This work may be said to ground such intuitions in a theory of the non-transferability of the content of representations, all such content being radically affected by the particular artistic medium.

Lessing argues for the distinct potentialities of the visual arts and of poetry: the first are founded on spatial arrangements of bodies (which also exist in time, however), and the second, poetry, on temporal sequences of actions (which are, however, embodied). He was frustrated by the opposing current of Romanticism in his attempt to arrest a tendency towards the confusion of the arts and did not himself follow up the question with respect to drama's apparent *fusion*, if not confusion, of the arts. In Coleridge, we find the common understanding of the stage as "a combination of several, or of all the fine arts to an harmonious whole having a distinct end of its own" <Co/2.24>; in Hegel the stage is comprised by a totalizing conception of an art of drama, which is now "liberated" from dance and music. The idea of a single art of drama appears to gather strength through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the mid-twentieth century it was still current, as in the following instance:

People are so used to defining each art by its characteristic medium that when paint is used in the theatre they class the result as "the painter's art," and because the set requires building, they regard the designer of it as architect. Drama, consequently, has so often been described as a synthesis of several or even all the arts that its autonomy, its status as a special mode of a great single art, is always in jeopardy. (Langer 1953, 320-1)

The habit of "defining each art by its characteristic medium" is precisely what Lessing hopes to encourage in *Laocoön*. He makes discriminations between the semiotics of the various artistic media in order to further the appreciation and interpretation of particular works employing them (Wellbery 1984). So, in the art of acting, the particular sensuous expression in itself, apart from (and in addition to) the fictive or other content of the representation is a major concern:

The reporting of someone's scream produces one impression and the scream itself another. The drama, designed for living presentation by the actor, might perhaps for that very reason have to conform more strictly to material representation [as?] in painting.

⁸ "On the tragedies of Shakespeare, considered with reference to their fitness for stage representation," in Lamb/Lucas 1912, 123-24.