KUNGL. VITTERHETS HISTORIE
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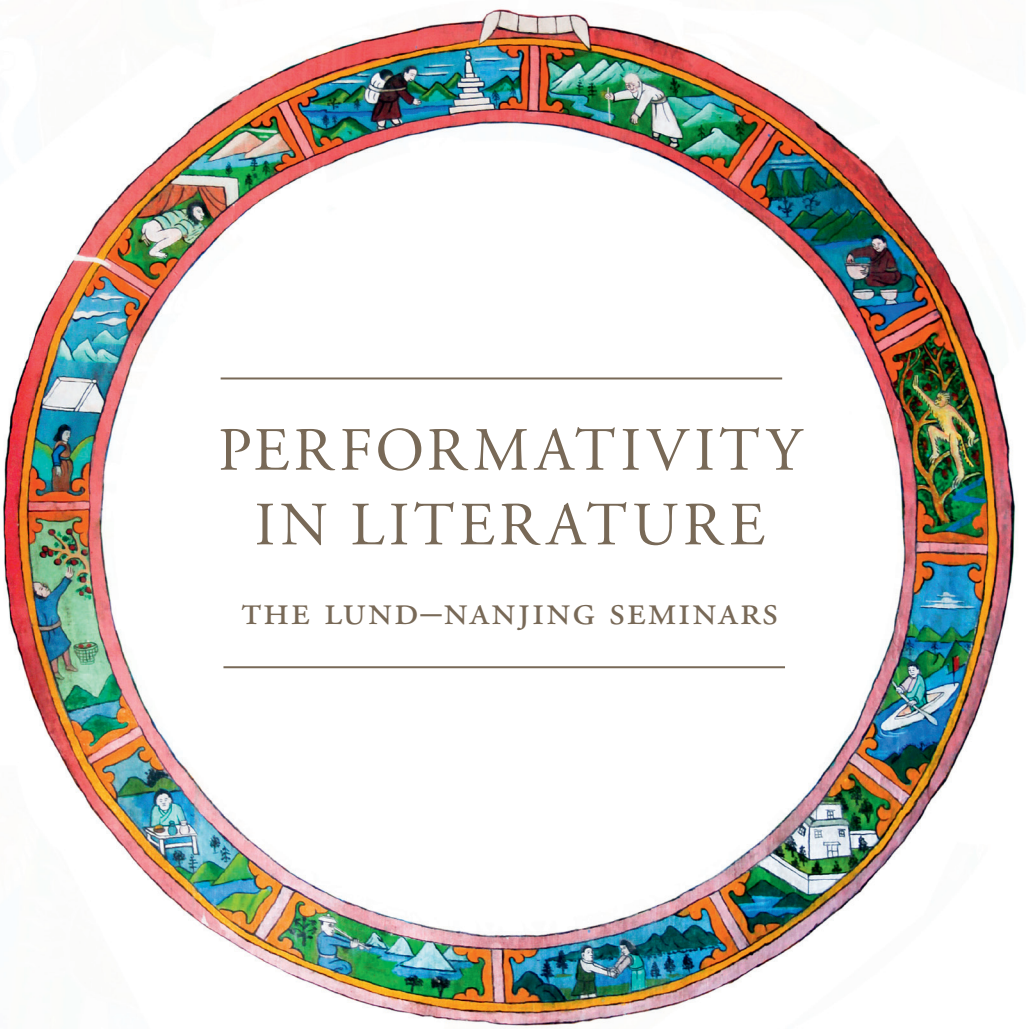
KONFERENSER 91



PERFORMATIVITY IN LITERATURE

THE LUND–NANJING SEMINARS

KVHAA KONFERENSER 91

Performativity in Literature

The Lund–Nanjing Seminars

Editors:
Eva Hættner Aurelius, He Chengzhou & Jon Helgason

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Performativity in Literature. The Lund–Nanjing Seminars. Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien (KVHAA), *Konferenser 91.* Stockholm 2016. 280 pp.

Abstract

The volume *Performativity in Literature. The Lund–Nanjing Seminars* contains a series of wide-ranging essays on the application of performance theory and the concept of performativity in literary studies, as well as on the practical and theoretical implications of such applications. In three thematic sections, 'Identity', 'Changing reality', and 'Beyond eventness' – with literary examples from China, Sweden, and the English-speaking world – the essays seek answers to the fundamental question of what a particular text does in a certain situation. And, in answering, each essay conceives of the text not only as meaning but as action.

The seventeen papers were originally discussed in joint seminars in Lund and Nanjing in the beginning of 2014, and presented at a conference in Stockholm in October 2014.

Keywords

performance studies, performance theory, performativity, Performativität, Chinese literature, world literature, theatre studies, Mo Yan, Henriette Widerberg, Henry David Thoreau, Athena Farrokhzad, Edgar Allan Poe, Malin Biller, August Wilson, Christina of Sweden, Wang Youqin, Song Binbin, Helen Vendler, Han Shaogong, William Shakespeare, Shen Xiling, Farley Mowat, Gao Xingjian, Gertrude Stein, Harryette Mullen

ISBN 978-91-7402-443-2/pdf
ISSN 0348-1433

Publisher	Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien (KVHAA, The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities) Box 5622, SE-114 86 Stockholm, Sweden http://www.vitterhetsakad.se
Distribution	eddy.se ab, Box 1310, SE-621 24 Visby, Sweden http://vitterhetsakad.bokorder.se
Illustrations	See captions
Cover image	Detail from *The Six Stages of Samsara* (see p. 35), Photo: Oleksii Ustiuzhanin/Shutterstock
Cover design	Lars Paulsrud
Graphic design	Bitte Granlund/Happy Book
Printed	in Sweden by Danagård LiTHO, Ödeshög, Sweden 2016

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INTRODUCTION

Performativity in Literature

The Lund–Nanjing Seminars

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In recent decades, the importance of performative processes in the history of European culture has been increasingly recognized. This awareness is manifested in the rise of the academic discipline of performance studies and in the fact that the concept of performativity has been widely discussed in the humanities and social sciences, with J. L. Austin's linguistic philosophy concerning 'speech acts', Richard Schechner's theory of theatre and performance as an anthropological phenomenon, and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity being some of the cornerstones of the related studies. In terms of the relationship between literature and performativity, a number of scholars, including Jacques Derrida, J. Hillis Miller, and Jonathan Culler, have done significant research. So far, though, no thorough study of the topic and no systematic application of the theory of performativity in literary studies has been attempted. Since the theory of performativity (of literature) does not denote one single theory or one single methodological approach, the term referring to a range of theoretical and methodological approaches originating in different academic traditions, there is a need for systematic clarification – and a development of appropriate methods – for analysing the performativity of literature.

The reason systematic approaches to performance studies have been scarce is in part due to the fact that performativity has proved difficult to handle from a methodological point of view, pending from macro (structure) to micro (action) levels of investigation. To some extent this can be explained by the dual heritage of performance studies, stemming from on one hand linguistics, on the other from anthropologically formulated theatre studies – in other words, a narrow linguistic concept applied to a wide aesthetic concept. Also, there has been a lack of consensus on what performativity theory encompasses (or should encompass). Is it a theoretical concept that allows us to analyse individual aesthetic phenomena, or an area of research which enables us

to study these phenomena?[1] Also, a performative approach embraces a radically different understanding of culture, history, and, ultimately, the aims and purposes of the cultural sciences. Performance theory implies a change of research objects and research perspectives.

One of the crucial challenges is the extent to which text-based methods and conventional literary methodology can be combined with theories concerning performativity. It is perhaps not surprising that performance studies in this phase have sometimes been criticized for a 'lack of methodology'.[2] As Vujanović observes, 'performance' is sometimes conceived as an *ontological category*, meaning that a performance is a certain artefact (play, musical, etc.), Yet equally often, 'performance' is regarded as an *analytical-interpretive tool* 'for understanding various social phenomena as performances'. This perspective analyses objects of study that are not performances in the normal sense of the word by conducting a theatre-, drama-, and performance-based analysis, thereby charting how these objects are organized in temporal and spatial categories and how they relate to social conventions. A notable example of this approach is Victor Turner and his concept of social drama; another is Judith Butler's concept of performing gender. The most common and, according to Vujanović, the most problematic use of 'performance' is when the term is used 'as a metaphor based on analogy and without interpretive and analytical power'. One of Vujanović' examples is 'politics is performance'. She also makes clear that it is only rarely stated which notion of 'performance' is used, something which she ascribes to a self-sufficiency of performance studies 'that does not address any particular social reality'.[3] Also, she concludes that, without making performance a methodological concept, the notion functions as a 'rather empty signifier, signifying a lot of things and thus nothing in particular'.[4]

In 'Kulturen des Performativen', one of the largest research programmes on performativity, these challenges have been addressed by two methodological approaches: by changing what defines text-based study, not only by widening and/or multiplying the range of available modes of reading, but also by a fundamental change in the modes in which the research object is handled; and by emphasizing the dynamic tension between textuality on the one hand and performativity on the other as the foundation of research within the cultural sciences.[5] Andrea Seier expresses the need to treat the

1 Andrea Seier, *Remediatisierung: die performative Konstitution von Gender und Medien* (Berlin: Lit, 2007), p. 12.

2 Ana Vujanović, 'Critical Performance Studies: A Practical Response to the Celebration of New Modes of Work in Performing Arts', *Performance Research: A Journal of Performing Arts*, 17:6 (2012), pp. 63–71, here p. 63.

3 Ibid., pp. 65–66.

4 Ibid., p. 67.

5 Kulturen des Performativen (SFB 447), <http://www.theaterforschung.de/institution.php4?ID=151>.

field of performance theory as something which allows for a positive and productive diversity of meanings. She describes this as a delicate balancing act between retaining theoretical and methodological preciseness and a perspective that tends to transfer all artefacts and contexts to the realm of the performative.[6]

Performance studies is one answer in the attempt to dissolve the traditional division between theory (a critical activity) and practice (a creative embodied process). Vujanović encourages us to practice theory instead of merely producing and/or reproducing it.[7]

The Lund–Nanjing seminars

These questions have been the topic of joint seminars in Lund and Nanjing.[8] The seminar series has set out to discuss new theoretical problems in literary studies. By drawing on the literatures of Sweden, China, and other parts of the world, the seminars have dwelled on various issues relating to literature and performativity. Doctoral students have been encouraged to apply the theoretical concepts to the interpretation and discussion of a diverse range of literary examples. Differences in transcultural understandings of both the theories and the literary examples are also addressed, in order to both complicate and enrich our understandings of the topic. Thus, the principal aims of the seminars, and ultimately this volume, are to develop a systematic overview of the theories and methodologies of performativity, and to apply them to different literary texts (performances).

Literary studies are about reading *texts*, and theories of literature centre on the interpretation of texts. Thus, theories of *meaning* – for example, hermeneutics and deconstruction – play an important role in the field. This focusing on 'textuality' and 'meaning' is of course necessary and natural – literary studies are about 'letters', after all – but there are still theories that conceive of texts not only as 'meaning' in a narrow sense, and try to capture literature's power to *do* something. The text can be conceived of as an *action*. The obvious examples, of course, are texts connected to religious or political practices. These texts perform something; they are part of the construction of identities, emotions, and fantasies. And this action is closely connected to a single moment in a single space: the action is an *event*. This understanding of literary texts – that reality, life, and language are intertwined in a number of ways – is attributed

6 Seier 2007, pp. 12–13.

7 Vujanović 2012, p. 70.

8 The seminars, two in Sweden (in Lund and Stockholm respectively) and one thus far in Nanjing, have been funded by STINT, the Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education, the Royal Society of Letters at Lund, the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, and Nanjing University.

to the insights of Wittgenstein in *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (1953).[9] These ideas were later famously developed by J. L. Austin, following Wittgenstein, in his influential *How to Do Things with Words* (1962).[10]

To describe the decisive impact of Austin's theory of the performative nature of language on literary and cultural theory is beyond the scope of this introduction, and indeed the anthology as a whole.[11] For the purposes of this study, it has proved more instrumental to proceed from 'Performativität', an umbrella term used in German literary studies (*Germanistik*), to encompass different theoretical perspectives that all share the conception that literary texts actually *do* something. First, we will outline these different theoretical formulations – the genealogy of this term, so to speak – and then we will proceed to a formulation of our understanding of the terms 'performativity', 'performance', and '*Performanz*', all terms that have proved important in the seminar discussions that resulted in this anthology.

Language as action

Our perspective is not only indebted to Austin's theory. The theory of performativity in literary and cultural studies has two distinct roots, the first being Austin's theory of the performatives in language, in contrast to the constatives, the second being the application of performativity within the fields of anthropology and theatre studies: a dual heritage that reflects the fact that the term 'performativity' – 'the unique occurrence of an act in the here-and-now' – comes from the branch of philosophy of language named speech-act theory, whereas 'performance' is derived from aesthetics, denoting the unique execution of a work.[12] We agree with Mieke Bal that this dual heritage is a necessary background, since the concepts of performance and performativity are intertwined and operate together.[13]

Austin analysed language as something else than a merely abstract entity ('langue'). He suggested that there are utterances, whose meanings are wholly determined by the

9 For an introduction to Wittgenstein's philosophy of language in *Philosophische Untersuchungen,* see Franz von Kutschera, *Sprachphilosophie* (2nd ed. Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1993), pp. 132–203.

10 J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

11 James Loxley gives an excellent, short survey of this field in *Performativity* (London: Routledge, 2006); see also Anders Pettersson, *A Theory of Literary Discourse* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1990), for a survey of theories of literature that ascribe a special force or function to literary sentences, largely parallel to the different illocutionary forces of ordinary sentences.

12 Mieke Bal, 'Performance and Performativity', *Traveling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 176.

13 Ibid., p. 212.

situation in which they are uttered, and which also change reality by doing something. A distinctive feature of such performative utterances is that they cannot be regarded as true or false, but instead either felicitous or infelicitous – in other words, that the interpretation of such utterances differs according to a set of conditions, depending on whether the utterance is a declaration, a request, or a warning. Austin made a distinction between the illocutionary force of the utterance (what the utterance actually is doing, such as warning, promising, etc.) and the perlocutionary force (what the utterance is intended to achieve in the recipient, the listener). The illocutionary force is subject to the rules of convention – follow them and the action will be accomplished – but the perlocutionary force is normally not ruled by linguistic and cultural conventions. Austin's concept of performativity is in itself a critique of language-as-representation.

The distinction between felicitous or infelicitous utterances has been criticized, in particular Austin's very sketchy saying that utterances in fiction and literature in general are infelicitous, parasitic even, since they are not seriously meant. Jacques Derrida famously exploded the distinction in 'Signature, événement, contexte' (1972), stating that a fundamental characteristic of language is its iterability, with particular letters, signs, and phrases able to be identified as the 'same', belonging to the same type.[14] If this is not the case, Derrida says, then the marks on the paper are just marks, nothing else. This is why it is misleading to call quotations, allusions, and grafting parasitic. They in fact display the most fundamental characteristic of language: the act of iteration. And thus they also establish the possibility that all utterances are liable to failure.

Austin's theory and Derrida's point about the fundamental iterability of language were further developed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and subsequent works. According to Butler, gender identities are acts – social or cultural constructions, more akin to theatrical performances than signs or symptoms of innate identities. Gender is 'performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence'; it is always 'doing', always performing, repeated acts, which are repeated in a rigid regulatory frame and so 'congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort being'.[15] According to Butler, gender is thus not an expression of an innate identity, but rather the effect of acts and gestures. Gender is produced through 'the stylized repetition of acts'.[16]

Austin's, Derrida's, and Butler's theories are about the ability of language (inclu-

14 Jacques Derrida, 'Signature, événment, contexte', in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1972).

15 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 13; see also her 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', in Sue-Ellen Case (ed.), *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

16 Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990), pp. 33 and 140.

ding literature) to construe our world, shaping identities, emotions, and phantasms. Regardless of one's stance on the theoretical debate about the seriousness of literary utterances, one can say that literary texts in a vague sense can possess an illocutionary force, can do something, so that an autobiography can be said to construe a personal identity, and a historical novel, a drama, or a speech can be said to construe a national identity. From a certain perspective, the literary text can also be conceived of as aiming to achieve a perlocutionary force: when a person is reading or reciting a poem or singing a song, this can create emotions, while a hymn can be said to create faith, and so on. This is an important aspect of performativity theory.

The performance – the event

Equally, performativity theory is also rooted in developments in the fields of anthropology and theatre studies. In these traditions, the idea that cultural events not only carry a textually mediated meaning but also convey a performative function, that they *do* something, is obvious and central. The close connection between the concept of action and the concept of event can also be seen here. Milton Singer in 1959 coined the term 'cultural performance' in his *Traditional India: Structure and Change,* and this term designated organized cultural events – theatrical and musical performances, and religious events such as services or weddings.[17] Certain cultures mark their cultural identity in particular events; they secure their identity and their communal cultural tradition in the execution of these events for themselves and in front of strangers. These events obviously have a self-reflexive function.

The term 'performance' in this anthropological sense was later adapted in the cultural sciences to denote phenomena related to performance in modern societies. In this development the anthropologist Victor Turner and theatre scholar Richard Schechner played important roles. Turner stressed the social function of the performance, its capacity to transform its participants. The function of the ritual, for example, is to enact changes in the real world; Turner's term for this processing of changes was 'the liminality' of performances.[18] Schechner, influenced by Turner's insistence on the impact of performances in real life, thus included both ordinary performances such as theatrical performances and everyday behaviour in his concept. Performances represent, according to Schechner:

17 Milton B. Singer, *Traditional India: Structure and Change* (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1959).

18 Victor Turner, 'Liminality and Communitas', in Henry Bial (ed.), *The Performance Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 79–87; idem., 'Are there Universals of Performance?', in E. S. Shaffer (ed.), *Comparative Criticism, IX: Cultural Perceptions and Literary Values* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 35–58.

> a 'broad spectrum' or 'continuum' of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music), and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles, and on to healing (from shamanism to surgery), the media, the internet. ... The underlying notion is that any action that is framed, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance.[19]

This concept of performance covers a wide and heterogeneous field of art forms, religious and cultural phenomena, and the enactment of social roles. At the heart of this theory lies the blurring of the boundaries between real life and 'theatre', but Schechner nevertheless acknowledges the distinction between 'make belief' (inducing faith, persuading) and 'make-believe' (pretending).[20] The 'performative turn' in theatre studies has led to a change of focus from the staging of a play or a theatrical text to the staging as a dynamic process between actors and spectators, producers and recipients.[21] In accordance with Jens Roselt's idea of a 'dialogical interaction' ('dialogisches Zwischengeschehen'), the productive gaze of the spectator is emphasized, and by focusing on mediality and performativity, the spectator-as-producer is highlighted in theatre studies.[22] As a consequence, the possible scholarly objects of theatre studies have multiplied and expanded into other forms of 'staging', including sporting events and pop concerts.[23]

In Germany, within the discipline of theatre studies, Erika Fischer-Lichte stresses the performative element in the theatrical event, as well as in all instances of cultural performances. Consequently, the theatrical event is not perceived as a work of art (a drama text), nor is the relation between the spectator and the actor seen as a subject–object relationship. Fischer-Lichte underscores the significance of the bodily co-presence of spectators and actors in the theatrical event, and that this event itself is not entirely steered by the acting on the stage, but through interaction. This bodily co-presence is of a special importance:

> the specific mediality of performance itself consists in the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators. ... Their encounter – interactive and confrontational – produces the event of the performance. ... The actors act, that is, they move through space, gesture, change their expression, manipulate objects, speak or sing. The spectators perceive their actions and respond to them. Although some of these reactions might be limited to internal processes, their per-

19 Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2nd ed., London: Routledge, 2006), p. 2.

20 Ibid., pp. 42–43.

21 Annemarie Matzke, '"Das Theater wird Pop nicht finden" – Medialität und Popkultur am Beispiel des Performance-Kollektivs She She Pop', in Marcus S. Kleiner & Thomas Wilke (eds), *Performativität und Medialität Populärer Kulturen: Theorien, Ästhetiken, Praktiken* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2013), p. 374.

22 Jens Roselt, *Phänomenologie des Theaters* (Munich: Fink, 2008), p. 194.

23 Matzke 2013, p. 374.

> ceptible responses are equally significant: the spectators laugh, cheer, sigh, groan, sob, cry, scuff their feet, or hold their breath; they yawn, fall asleep and begin to snore; they cough and sneeze, eat and drink, crumple wrapping paper, whisper or shout comments, call 'bravo' and 'encore', applaud, jeer and boo, get up, leave the theatre, and bang the door on their way out.[24]

The mediality of performance, the co-presence, is founded in the materiality of the event, namely the actors' bodies – the true aesthetic material of the event. The 'feedback loop' is Fischer-Lichte's term for a special type of interaction, namely the effect of the audience on the actors, that the spectators sometimes actually break through the wall – the fourth wall – separating the audience and the stage, so that this border is transgressed.

At the core of these theories lies firstly the *eventness* of these phenomena, secondly that these events are closely connected to *cultural practices*, thirdly a *transgressing of borders* (theatre – reality, actor – spectator), and fourthly the *effect or action* of these performances, what Fischer-Lichte calls 'the transformative powers of performance'. In a similar vein, Mieke Bal proposes that during a performative gesture an act is performed that alters the way we perceive reality.[25]

Text as event and conduct

The concept of event in these theories is clearly connected to certain cultural practices such as theatrical performances, where actors and spectators are bodily co-present. But this type of eventness is certainly not always the case when it comes to literature; here, rather, the cultural practice of silent reading is the usual way of encountering literature. Of course there are important cultural practices where literature is presented in performance, where this bodily co-presence is the case: in recitals, in singing, as part of different cultural practices.

The theory of performativity has mostly been limited to these kinds of events. However, Hans Rudolf Velten's definition of the concept 'performativity' in his 'Performativität. Ältere deutsche Literatur' (2002) opens up the possibility of a wider definition of 'eventness', for, as he argues, 'the concept can relate either to Performance or to *Performanz*, and then in all cases designates the characteristics of an object or an event'.[26] Per-

24 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, transl. Saskya Iris Jain (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 38.

25 Bal 2002, passim.

26 Hans Rudolf Velten, 'Performativität. Ältere deutsche Literatur', in Claudia Benthien & Hans Rudolf Velten (eds), *Germanistik als Kulturwissenschaft: Eine Einführung in neue Theoriekonzepte* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2002), p. 2: 'Als ein aus dem Adjektiv 'performativ'

formativity thus can be applied to an object, for example a text, when it can either denote the quality of performance in the text – that is, its quality of *Vorstellung* or 'eventness' – or denote the quality of the text as an action. What does the text actually do?

Of course, the concept of performativity can denote both the eventness and the action of the text, but it is possible to limit its application to either the eventness or the action. The concept of performativity also can be applied to a performance that is some kind of cultural (theatrical, religious, political) event, whereupon it can denote either the *quality* of the eventness or the *action* of the performance. While certainly a very general definition, its value lies in its very generality: it captures at a fundamental level the ability of a literary text to do something, not only to mean. From this perspective, literature is an *action or conduct* first and only secondly an *event*.

Velten's definition succeeds in merging the linguistic and anthropological theories of performativity: something is done in the event. As the English word 'performance' makes clear, it denotes a process (the performance as theatre, ritual, and so on) as well as an accomplishment (the enactment of social roles, for example). As a consequence, literature is no longer merely an archive of texts, but a set of cultural practices. This perspective can contribute to a more profound understanding of the social function and impact of literature. The long history of the official regulation and control of literature – from censorship to the protection of young people – shows that the question of what literature does to its audience has always had educational, social, and political dimensions.[27]

J. Hillis Miller has written several books on the subject of the text as conduct.[28] His major contribution to the notion of performativity in and of literature lies not just in his comprehensive and provocative theorization of the subject, based on his close reading of the major figures in the field, such as Austin, Derrida and Paul de Man, but also in his pioneering application of the theory to his reading of individual authors and literary texts. In his book *The Conflagration of Community: Fiction Before and After Auschwitz*, Miller argues that literature is an act or event that is able to bear witness to what happened in the past. In the section 'Can One Testify to Auschwitz in a Work of Fiction?', Miller writes:

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abgeleitetes qualtitatives Substantiv kann sich der Begriff [Performativität] aber auch entweder auf Performance oder auf Performanz beziehen und bezeichnet dann jeweils die Eigenschaft eines Gegenstand oder Vorgangs.' Unless otherwise noted, all translations are our own.

27 See, for example, Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982) and Michel de Certeau, 'Reading as Poaching', in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 165–176.

28 See J. Hillis Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); idem., *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) and *The Conflagration of Community: Fiction Before and After Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

> The central questions of this essay are the following: Is it possible to bear witness to the Holocaust in a work of fiction? If so, just how might that be done, by what narrative procedures? Does *Fatelessness* succeed in performing that work of testimony? What should I do after reading *Fatelessness*, if anything? Is a critical analysis of the novel's narrative procedures an appropriate response, or would some other action be better to perform? Just what does critical or narratological analysis contribute by mediation to what might be called the performative force of *Fatelessness*? I mean by 'performative force,' the novel's ability to do something with words, for example possibly to bear witness to Auschwitz? (pp. 181–182)

Literary scholars have also used the term 'event' in their readings of literature. In *The Event of Literature* (2012), Terry Eagleton claims that event is an essential characteristic of literature, and he discusses the nature of fiction in light of the theories of performativity: 'There is a relation, for example, between speech-act theory and the question of fictional truth. Literary speech acts belong to the larger class of verbal acts known as performatives, which do not describe the world but accomplish something in the act of saying. ... Fiction, too, accomplishes its ends simply in the act of saying. What is true in a novel is true simply by virtue of the discursive act itself. Yet it can have a palpable impact on reality.'[29] And fictional statements, concludes Eagleton, can for the same reason function as performative acts, being neither true nor false, since they are not assertions about the world.

In a similar vein, Toril Moi has observed that Wittgenstein's and Austin's ideas concerning 'everyday language' show us that language and attention are intertwined, something which, according to Moi, has serious implications for literary studies:

> We are emerging from a long period in which literature and literary studies have been convinced that language never can represent reality, and especially that 'literary language' only refers to itself. The basis for these ideas are to be found in modernism's scepticism about language and linguistic theories, which, in the wake of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, conceive of language as a closed system, completely cut off from reality.[30]

What Hillis Miller, Eagleton, and Moi have in common is their unease with the poststructuralist conception of language, prompted by their almost common-sense understanding of what literature (and language) does and can do. This is in fact an interesting backlash, since it re-establishes the unity of cognition and action, grounded in Marxist critical theory.[31]

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29 Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 131–132.

30 Toril Moi, *Språk og oppmerksomhet* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2013), pp. 23–24: 'Vi er på vei ut av en lang periode der litteraturen og litteraturforskningen har vært overbevist om at språket aldri griper virkeligheten, og spesielt om at det "litterære språket" bare refererer til seg selv. Grunnlaget for slike tanker finner vi både i modernismens skepsis i forhold til språket og i språkteorier som i kjølvannet av lingvisten Ferdinande de Saussure oppfatter språket som et lukket system, helt avskåret fra virkeligheten.'

31 Vujanović 2012, p. 64.

Methodological considerations

Though these definitions of performativity are very general, some methodological conclusions can be drawn, the chief of which is that three issues are central in the application of the theory of performativity in literary studies.

Firstly, action. Literary texts are regarded as embedded in a cultural setting. This implies that texts are regarded not primarily as autonomous works of art, but as symbolic actions within a given cultural context.

Secondly, event. Literary texts are considered in conjunction with cultural practices, which constitute the eventness of the text. This eventness could be the writing of the text, or the reading of the text, but in either event it is a crucial part in capturing the action of the text, since the *eventness* often constitutes the cultural context of the text. An alternative term is the *situatedness* of the text, for some types of literary texts are clearly closely linked to a specific situation – autobiographies, letters, diaries, satires, allegories, political and religious texts, libels, and so on.

And thirdly, textuality. Since the text is the central medium here, the analysing of the text is crucial. This analysis, following Velten's definition of performativity of literature, concerns both the quality of performance (the quality of the eventness of the text) and the quality of the text as an *action* (what does the text do?). Methodologically, this means that such textual elements that connect the text to its cultural settings, its audience, its aims, must be accounted for. That includes the textual elements that can be interpreted as an act, of course – 'Does this text state, construe, or proclaim a political idea?' – and such textual elements that Irmgard Maassen calls the structural performativity of the text.[32] In Maassen's definition, this includes those textual strategies that convey participation, closeness, orality, the simulation of bodies, sensuality, presence, and linguistic means of simulating oral communication, fictions that produce authenticity, self-fashioning, and audience-fashioning, and imitating social and cultural scripts with parodic intent.[33]

In some cases the literary text is part of a performance, and then two additional concepts are of particular importance. The first one is *performance*, where the reception of a text in this case is a special form of the event. Here the event represents the interaction of several participants – in other words, the participants are all considered to be part of the creation. This undermines the traditional aesthetic relationship between the subject (the observer) and the object (the work of art), and replaces it with the concept of the interactive event. After all, the types of cultural practices where literary texts are central in an interactive event – reading aloud (as in recitals or speeches)

32 Irmgard Maassen, 'Text und/als/in der Performanz in der frühen Neuzeit: Thesen und Überlegungen', in Erika Fischer-Lichte & Christoph Wulf (eds), *Theorien des Performativen* ([*Paragrana,* 10]; Berlin: Akad.-Verl. Berlin, 2001), pp. 291–292.

33 Velten 2002, pp. 227ff.; Maassen 2001, pp. 291ff.

and singing (as in concerts) – are clearly performances, and often play an important role in a variety of cultural, social, or political events.

The other important concept is the *materiality and mediality* of the interactive event, which must be considered whenever the literary text is a part of a performance. Special attention should be paid to those linguistic and thematic features that can be traced to an oral style, with a strong rhythmic quality, repetitions, antithetical forms, euphonic elements, clichés, and the like. Phenomena such as additive structure and redundancy should also be noted. It is equally important not to overlook the degree of ideological conservatism, closeness to the ordinary, trivial life-world, and empathy with the world of the text, but also agonistic themes – the themes that underscore the dichotomies in culture.[34]

It goes almost without saying that these five methodological aspects of the text can be very differently operationalized, depending on its nature and the kinds of cultural practice it is situated in. But these aspects must be seen as a heuristic strategy when exploring the possibilities of the theory of performativity in literary studies.

Performanz – functional performativity – extra-textual performativity

Whether a literary text is the sole actor in a cultural practice such as reading a text or is part of a performance, the fundamental question remains. What does the text do in this particular situation, or, synonymously, what is the *Performanz* of the text? We have chosen the German term to denote the effect or desired effect of the text: its *Performanz* is equivalent to its functioning in a cultural setting, a synonym for *Performanz* is Maassen's 'functional performativity' or Velten's 'extra-textual performativity' of the text.[35] This aspect of the performativity of literature is alert to what the text achieves – or intends to achieve – in an extra-textual reality, and how it affects or sets out to affect its audience, its readers. Some of these functions are constructing identities (individual or collective, national, ethnic, social, gender); creating imaginative spaces; shaping emotions (ecstasy, shock, amazement, laughter, tears, assurance); and educating readers or the audience.[36] Schechner, in turn, lists seven functions of performance, which to some degree overlap with this: to entertain, to make something

34 See Ong 1982.

35 Maassen 2001; Velten 2002; a valuable discussion of the complexity of the different terms 'performance', performativity', '*Performanz*' and '*performativität*' is to be found in the introductory chapter to Seier 2007.

36 For imaginative spaces, see Maassen 2001 and Roselt 2008; for shaping the emotions, see Fischer-Lichte 2008.

beautiful, to mark or foster community, to heal, to teach, persuade, or convince, and to deal with the sacred and/or the demonic.[37]

To the question of what performativity in literature is, our answer will be a polyphonous one, as is evident from the contributions in this anthology. We believe that one way, although perhaps not the only way, to come to terms with what performance studies can be in literary studies is to obtain praxis by doing, thereby overcoming the theory–practice gap in performance studies.

* * *

All essays in this anthology adhere in various ways to the idea that literature and texts are connected to the world, and that texts have a real or potential impact. The essays all address the question of *Performanz* in some way or another, with the anthology loosely structured around three main themes: identity, changing reality, and beyond eventness.

The first eight essays concern establishing *identity*, and by studying various textual 'acts' they show how identity is formed through such acts.

He Chengzhou's essay thus centres on the special rural Chinese identity Mo Yan creates in his work and performs in his speeches. This identity is performed for Mo Yan's 'audience and his readers', and he 'builds a literary identity of rural Chineseness in his writings'. First, Mo Yan's Nobel Lecture 2012 is analysed in the context of the heated debate which saw the laureate accused of being unworthy of the prize on account of his supposed obedience to the Chinese regime. He makes clear that Mo Yan's account of his childhood experiences and his positioning of himself as a 'storyteller from rural China' are a performing of identity, thus answering his critics. He's readings of Mo Yan's novels present a map of various literary devices that stem from traditional Chinese literature, among them 'local opera', thus showing how Mo Yan creates a rural Chineseness in his novels. Lastly, he shows how some of Mo Yan's novels, taking the perspective of Chinese farmers, provide an unofficial narrative of the history of modern China, 'an alternative view of revolution and social progress'.

Peter Henning considers the autobiography of the Swedish actress Henriette Widerberg (1796–1872) in a frame of aesthetics of performance, demonstrating how Widerberg's text is immersed in theatricality on three levels: its theme is the theatre, the life lived in the world of the theatre; the narrative text uses formal devices from dramatic genres; and it uses the theatre as a symbol of human life and behaviour (*theatrum mundi*). Henning then addresses the *Performanz* of the text, and in an elaborate contextualizing move shows that Widerberg's intended *Performanz* was the public's recognition of her performance, her text, in at least two respects: she would again expe-

37 Schechner 2006, p. 46.

rience fame, and she would profit by it financially. This close connection between the theatre, the text, and the public, is found to explain the remarkable fact that Widerberg's was the first Swedish autobiography published during the lifetime of the author – the normal procedure was to publish autobiographies posthumously.

In Jiang Yuxing's essay, Henry David Thoreau's famous speech on 30 October 1859 in Concord, Massachusetts, is analysed as an action and an event, with special focus on the *Performanz* of the lecture. Thoreau's speech was first given a fortnight after the capture of John Brown, a militant American abolitionist, in the aftermath of his famous raid on Harpers Ferry in Virginia on 16–18 October 1859. By locating the delivery of the speech in the antislavery movement's history and viewing it against the tension between the North and the South, Jiang argues that Thoreau's speech and subsequent essay shifted people's conception of John Brown, shaped his martyrdom, and significantly contributed to the ideological transformation of the antislavery movement, which, in turn, served to spark the outbreak of American Civil War. Jiang makes it clear that the action was the establishing of the identity of Brown not as a madman and criminal, but as a New Englander, a Puritan, a Transcendentalist, and Christ-like martyr, thus claiming Brown as *the* American, and ultimately changing his image in the court of public opinion.

Evelina Stenbeck's essay scrutinizes the Swedish poet Athena Farrokzhad's collection of poems, *Vitsvit* (2013, *White Blight*, 2015), within the frame of the theory of performativity, focusing on the materiality of the poems – the materiality of language, such as the words spoken by different actors in the poems or signs on the paper. Stenbeck also studies the idea expressed in the poems about language as a representation of the world, and hence the possibility for the poet or the poems to interact with reality, to have an impact on society. The idea of poetry's *Performanz* in the case of *White Blight* is thus at the heart of Stenbeck's essay. The main theme of the collection is the struggle for voice and the representation of the foreigner, the Other, the immigrant. Stenbeck investigates the ways in which Swedish as a (foreign) language connects to the body, a white language for white bodies, but how the I of the poem has conquered the white language, in all its double materiality, cultural whiteness, and ability to interact with social realities. This whiteness of the Swedish language is expressed through a mother's determination to integrate, with the mother tongue being the Swedish language, as also is shown in the use of white letters instead of black in the poems. This materiality is quite contrary to the materiality of the immigrants' materiality, bodies, culture, and language.

The complex relationship of public persona and autobiography, illustrated in the dramatic career of Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), is the subject of Luo Xiaoli's essay. Luo highlights the obvious discrepancies between the available recollections of the seemingly quiet and thoughtful real life Poe, the elaborate autobiographical link be-

tween Poe and his brilliant detective protagonist, C. Auguste Dupin, and what became the public image of Poe, the author, – an image better befitting the apparent madness and gloominess of his *oeuvre*. The essay addresses the question of a performative public image as an adaptation to the harsh conditions of being a market author in mid-nineteenth century USA.

An upsetting autobiographical narrative of childhood trauma is the nub of Nina Ernst's contribution. By examining Malin Biller's prize-winning graphic memoir, *Om någon vrålar i skogen* (2010, 'If Someone Howls in the Woods'), Ernst illustrates how Biller uses rituals as a central strategy in both the narration and the visual composition of her work, and how writing and drawing about one's own life and experiences become means to stage oneself. Ultimately, Ernst shows how rituals, even 'performed' within a fictional space, function as tools for coping and healing.

The American playwright August Wilson (1945–2005) and his different personas, whether as a writer or as a political activist promoting African American cultural values, are the subjects of Chen Xi's essay. Unlike authors who keep their distance from their own work, Wilson often explicitly stated the artistic and political connotations of his plays. By studying interviews, two decades' of public lectures, and a live public debate between Wilson and one of his fiercest critics, Chen illustrates the nature of Wilson's many public 'performances'.

Eva Hættner Aurelius examines the autobiography of Queen Christina of Sweden (1626–1689), starting with the queen's concept of 'self'. The queen obviously conceived of the self as a role, a mask, a performance, as is evident from the different generic patterns she used when describing herself – one pattern is Alexander, as depicted by Plutarch. The action of the autobiography is this depicting of the various selves, and its *Performanz*, or intended effect, is clearly tied to the eventness of the text, namely Christina's precarious situation once she had been attacked in libels as an oversexed monster or a homosexual. Christina's choice to depict herself as virgin-like, uninterested in sex, sacrificing herself for the good of her fatherland Sweden, was thus a defence against those libels.

The next six essays consider different ways in which literature and texts – and language – can try to *change reality*, including our notions of the past-as-narrative, as well as that of language, politics, and aesthetics and how these concepts affect reality.

Dan Hansong's essay starts with the distinction between ordinary history (the narrated event) and oral history (the narrating event), or the telling of it in the present, thus focusing on the eventness of eyewitness reports. The case in question is the apology of Song Binbin, a member of the Red Guards, who joined in the killing of a teacher in 1966 in the early days of the Cultural Revolution. The apology was subsequently denounced by the oral historian Wang Youqin, who has collated and edited witness reports from victims of the Cultural Revolution. Dan carefully analyses the issues in

the controversy – the truthfulness of the different reports of the killing, the obvious subjectivity of Wang's editing, and the question what kind of linguistic action an apology is – stressing the importance of the eventness in the action of telling.

Erik Erlanson investigates a very dominant idea in the *Performanz* of lyric poetry in the Western world: that it moulds the minds and sensibilities of its readers with its 'soul-making' or 'self-making' powers. The American critic Helen Vendler is a prominent spokesman for this idea, and her theory and practice, which emphasizes the recognition of the reader's self in the act of reading, are analysed using Judith Butler's theory of subjection – the making of a subject. This means both being subordinated to power, discourses, structures, and being a subject, and Vendler's theory of the *Performanz* of poetry very much resembles this theory. Erlanson, indeed, dissects this process of subjection, pointing to its blindness to power, its ideology, and comparing it with other ideas of poetry's *Performanz* by the likes of Adorno and Stewart. Erlanson then formulates an extended version of Vendler's theory by way of Butler, taking into account Foucault's distinction between subjection and subjectivation, where the latter signifies the more active form of subject formation. This distinction allows for a poetry in which the element of recognition in the reading process is diminished, leaving the reader to play a more active part in the reading process.

In his essay, Jiang Ningkang discusses Han Shaogong's *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, a novel written as a part of the so-called root-seeking tradition of Chinese literature. The novel is a history of a rural society in Hunan, a southern province of China, elaborating on local expressions and jargon that formulate, argues Jiang, a performative force of language linking the past with the present and reshaping the mind of local people. The narrator tries to decode the norms and cultural identity of the south by charting the vicissitudes of a remote village, in which southern values are vividly narrated and performed in the local popular idiom. By resorting to this narrative strategy, the author makes the novel a good example of the performative narration of norms and events.

Lin Yi focuses on several key scenes in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and discusses the essence and significance of language in the play, more specifically against the backdrop of speech-act theory and Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of the 'Saying' and the 'Said'. Lin's contribution explores performative enactment on three distinct levels. Firstly, the level of the characters' language, which reveals that the performative function of language is indispensable in every utterance. Secondly, on an allegorical level, the play can be appreciated as a parable for the ethics of performative language. Thirdly, on the level of fictional narrative, the play explores the efficacy of the 'non-serious' literary rhetoric to bring things and events into being.

The portrayal of the 'New Woman' in Chinese society, as found in Shen Xiling's feature film *Chuanjia nü* (The Boatman's Daughter) (1935), is the subject of Rebecka Eriksson's essay. This film, made during what is popularly referred to as the golden

age of early Chinese cinema, mirrors a politically tumultuous and culturally significant chapter of modern Chinese history, particularly concerning the emancipation of women and the contemporary debate about their changing social role. By relating to such concepts as the New Woman, modernity, and the ways in which modern woman was portrayed by the May Fourth or the New Culture movement intellectuals, Eriksson shows how the New Woman could be imagined, written, and performed on screen during the period.

The Canadian writer Farley McGill Mowat's *Never Cry Wolf* (1963) is the subject of Yuan Xia's analysis. This fictionalized first-person account of the author's research into the nature of the Arctic wolf has been widely acclaimed for dramatically changing public opinion about wolves. The book's pro-wolf message eventually led to a popular reaction against wolf-extermination efforts at home and abroad. Mowat calls attention to the relationship between human beings, animals, and nature, leading Yuan to argue that the success of the book is a clear manifestation of literature's performative function – that literature can transform the world.

Li Shuling focuses 'on the eventness of the play, especially on the text as an action, and the *Performanz* it brings about' by analysing the action in Gao Xingjian's drama *Bus Stop* from 1981 on three levels: the statements made by the characters in the play; Gao's remarks about the absurd life he was forced to live during the Cultural Revolution; and the critical response to the play's ideological statements and modernist form. Li thus shows the *Performanz* of the play to be the performing of a conflict between individualism and collectivism, the criticism of the Cultural Revolution offered by Gao through the medium of the play, and its powerful impact on the Chinese drama to this day, accelerating the move towards Western modern drama.

The final two essays suggest different strategies for how to *escape* the eventness – meaning the eventness of a specific performance – of performativity theory. From a methodological point of view, it is important to be able to loosen the text from a specific performance.

The performative poetics of Gertrude Stein are examined by Solveig Daugaard in a theoretically progressive essay, in which she puts an interesting twist on some of the key concepts of the theatrical tradition of performance theory, most notably Erika Fischer-Lichte's concept of the autopoietic feedback loop. Literature in print, Daugaard argues, can uphold aesthetic and social interactions across long stretches of time and vast distances; however, if we insist on confining the aesthetics of the performative to live situations and binding it to the present moment, we cut ourselves off from the many ways that a book can be a performance. The collaborative aspects of Stein's performative poetics are furthermore studied in the works of American poet and literary scholar Harryette Mullen.

On a similar theoretical note, Jon Helgason investigates how the theory of per-

formativity can be applied in literary studies, and in so doing addresses the question whether literary studies are ready to embrace its more radical implications. One such is that literature should no longer be regarded as primarily interesting in terms of form and structure, nor is the meaning of the individual text on a semantic level of primary importance. What this perspective emphasizes is the function of literature and its effects within a specific context at a given period of time. To embrace the theory of performativity, as Helgason suggests, one also has to embrace another and radically different concept of the literary text; a concept quite foreign to the traditional notion of the literary text current in literary studies, since it radically undermines the Romantic concept of an aesthetic of autonomy. So while we may gain something from performance studies, this theory also, ultimately, means that literature loses something of its exclusivity.

II.
IDENTITY

Rural Chineseness

Mo Yan's Work, and World Literature

He Chengzhou

The 1990s brought a performative turn in cultural and literary studies, wherein the paradigm of culture and literature as text was transformed into the concept of culture and literature as event and action. Theories of cultural performativity provide a vitality to discussions about literature as cultural components. In his 'Culture and Performance in the Circum-Atlantic World', Joseph Roach suggests that the category of literature itself be expanded beyond its traditional sense of a collection of texts, and should instead encompass a wide range of cultural activities, including oral storytelling, song, mime, ritual, and other such enterprises.[1]

The theory of performativity originates in the 'speech-act theory' of J. L. Austin, whose 1962 book *How to Do Things with Words* remains a seminal text. Austin distinguished two categories of utterances: constative and performative utterances, where the latter are not true or false, but perform the action they refer to. But Austin also points out that such a performative utterance may be 'infelicitous' or unhappy, if the circumstances are not sufficient to make the action happen for real. Therefore, Austin excludes literature from his theory of performative utterances.

Jacques Derrida and others have criticized Austin's 'prejudice' against the so-called 'non-serious performatives' in literature. In 'Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative', Jonathan Culler encourages scholars of literature to remain open to the various interpretations of the performative, and to seek opportunities to read literature and performativity both against each other and in concert: 'I think that rather than try to restrict or simplify the performative's domain by choosing one strand of reflection as the correct one, we ought to accentuate and to pursue the differences be-

1 Joseph Roach, 'Culture and Performance in the Circum-Atlantic World', in Andrew Parker & Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (eds), *Performativity and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 45–63.

tween them – so as to increase our chances of grasping the different levels and modes in which events occur; and I take this to be a project requiring the cooperation – albeit the inevitably contentious cooperation – of philosophy and literature, the thinking of philosophy and of literary theory.'[2]

To understand performativity, two key connotations of its root word 'perform' are especially useful. To perform is in equal measure to do and to act: that is, one performs a task or performs for an audience. The concept of performativity keeps both of these senses of performance firmly in view.[3] A third term, '*Performanz*' refers to the effects of any social/cultural action. Literary *Performanz* may refer to how literary events influence participants by shaping their emotions, constructing identities, and creating imaginative spaces. Performativity is the characteristics of an object, for instance a literary text or an event such as a literary recital. These characteristics are apparent in a performance, when the object or event is framed, presented, highlighted, or displayed.

To say that Mo Yan (the author's pen-name, literally meaning 'don't speak') performs rural Chineseness, then, means that he both performs a rural literary identity for his audience and readers and builds a literary identity of rural Chineseness in his writing. I argue that the rural Chineseness Mo Yan has performed in his texts and in literary events functions as a counter-discourse to resist, revise, and supplement, if not subvert, the dominant grand discourse of modern China in a reflective or corrective manner. Further, I argue that Mo Yan's rural Chineseness is performed on different, interrelated levels: on the textual level through such devices as nativist narratives of story-telling and local opera under the label of an imaginative landscape called the Northeast Gaomi Township in Shandong Province, and on the cultural level through the author's performances in speeches and interviews (such as during the award ceremonies for the Nobel Prize in Literature on 10 December 2012), which consolidate his image as an author of and from rural China.

'A story-teller' from and about rural China

Immediately after the announcement on 11 October 2012 that Mo Yan was the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature and again following the Nobel Prize ceremonies in December in Stockholm, there was a rash of articles and interviews with him across China and the globe in various media. In contrast with the warm reception and praise

2 Jonathan Culler, 'Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative', *Poetics Today*, 21:3 (2000), pp. 503–519, here p. 518.

3 Matthew Wagner, 'Performativity and Cultural Studies', in *The Encyclopedia of Literature and Cultural Theory*, ed. Michael Ryan (Malden: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 1203–1206, here p. 1203.

of his Nobel Prize by Chinese readers and media, the international media embarked on a heated debate about the author, his literature, and his views on politics. Most of the negative criticism was not so much literary as political. The criticism was targeted in particular at Mo Yan's position as vice-president of the government-run Chinese Writers Association and his participation in an event prompted by Mao Zedong's 1942 speech on literature and arts in Yan'an – in June 2012, a number of Chinese authors joined in a state-sponsored project to hand-copy Mao Zedong's 1942 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art' in commemoration of its seventieth anniversary. In 'Does This Writer Deserve the Prize?', Perry Link thought that Mo Yan had made conscious, albeit reluctant, compromises with the regime, and concluded that this was 'the price of writing inside the system'.[4] Herta Müller, the 2009 Nobel laureate, went so far as to say that the choice of Mo Yan by the Nobel Committee was 'a slap in the face for all those working for democracy and human rights'.[5] While Torbjörn Lodén spoke highly of Mo Yan's literary achievements, calling him 'a lavish storyteller with roots in century-old oral tradition', he nevertheless voiced his doubts about the decision of the Swedish Academy to give the prize to 'an author who is so obedient to the regime that he participates in the praise of Mao's Yan'an Speech'.[6] Others, such as Charles Laughlin and Göran Sommerdal, defended Mo Yan and launched a criticism of the criticisms against him. The former posed the rhetorical question: 'am I to understand from Mo Yan's critics that unless Chinese writers and artists are more "politically courageous" and invite imprisonment and exile – or worse – by speaking out directly against their government and political system, their lifetime of artistic labors and achievements will never be worthy of international recognition in the form of a Nobel Prize in Literature?'[7]

I outline this debate not to join it, but to examine Mo Yan's subsequent defence of his political views and thus address the comingling of politics and aesthetics in the performance of his literature, especially how he reflects on modern and contemporary Chinese history and society, and the mainstream representations of both his speeches and his texts.

First and foremost, Mo Yan has often presented himself, and indeed has been presented, as a story-teller of and from rural China. His Nobel Lecture was entitled 'Storytellers', a far cry from the grand and provocative title of Harold Pinter's 'Art,

4 Perry Link, 'Does This Writer Deserve the Prize?', *New York Review of Books*, 6 December 2012.

5 Müller, quoted in Alison Flood, 'Mo Yan's Nobel Nod a "Catastrophe", Says Fellow Laureate Herta Müller', *The Guardian*, 26 November 2012.

6 Torbjörn Lodén, 'Mo Yans hyllning till Mao förvånar' ('Mo Yan's Praise of Mao is a Surprise'), *Dagens Nyheter*, 10 December 2012. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine.

7 Charles Laughlin, 'What Mo Yan's Detractors Get Wrong', *ChinaFile*, 11 December 2012.

Truth, and Politics'.[8] Mo Yan indeed told stories in his lecture, including those about his mother and his childhood. As an attendee in Stockholm at the invitation of the Swedish Academy, I found the story of his mother, who died of hunger, disease, and hard work especially touching: 'After my mother died, in the midst of almost crippling grief, I decided to write a novel for her. *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* is that novel. Once my plan took shape, I was burning with such emotion that I completed a draft of half a million words in only eighty-three days.'[9] He also shared that his childhood herding cattle and sheep after primary school provided rich material for his writings. He said that he learned through listening to 'tales of the supernatural, historical romances, and strange and captivating stories, all tied to the natural environment and clan histories. What I should do was simplicity itself: write my own stories in my own way. My way was that of the marketplace story-teller, with which I was so familiar, the way my grandfather and my grandmother and other village old-timers told stories.'[10] Mo Yan's stories in the lecture, as in his fiction, were mostly about his family and home town.

These stories of his rural Chinese upbringing were clearly related to the wave of criticism. By way of introduction to the stories of his Nobel Lecture, he addressed the negative criticism directed at him and his literature, specifically in terms of performance:

> The announcement of my Nobel Prize has led to controversy. At first I thought I was the target of the disputes, but over time I've come to realize that the real target was a person who had nothing to do with me. Like someone watching a play in a theatre, I observed the *performances* around me. I saw the winner of the prize both garlanded with flowers and besieged by stone-throwers and mudslingers. I was afraid he would succumb to the assault, but he emerged from the garlands of flowers and the stones, a smile on his face; he wiped away mud and grime, stood calmly off to the side, and said to the crowd: 'For a writer, the best way to speak is by writing. You will find everything I need to say in my works. Speech is carried off by the wind; the written word can never be obliterated. I would like you to find the patience to read my books. I cannot force you to do that, and even if you do, I do not expect your opinion of me to change. No writer has yet appeared, anywhere in the world, who is liked by all his readers; that is especially true during times like these.' Even though I would prefer to say nothing, since it is something I must do on this occasion, let me just say this: I am a story-teller, so I am going to tell you some stories.[11]

Mo Yan's performance of rural Chineseness and story-telling in his lecture may be

8 Mo Yan, 'Nobel Lecture: 'Storytellers', transl. Howard Goldblatt, Nobelprize.org (2012), <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture_en.html>; Harold Pinter, 'Nobel Lecture: Art, Truth, and Politics', Nobelprize.org (2005), <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2005/pinter-lecture-e.html>.

9 Mo Yan, 'Nobel Lecture' 2012.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., my emphasis.

interpreted as his response to a subset of his 'readers' – his critics. As he pointed out, he is first and foremost a writer who tells stories. What he has written is based on his own experiences, especially from his life in his home town. In the speech he gave at the Nobel banquet, Mo Yan called himself 'a farm boy from Gaomi's Northeast Township in far-away China', and he ended with thanks to 'my older relatives and compatriots at home in Gaomi, Shandong, China. I was, am, and always will be one of you. I also thank the fertile soil that gave birth to me and nurtured me. It is often said that a person is shaped by the place where he grows up. I am a story-teller, who has found nourishment in your humid soil. Everything that I have done, I have done to thank you!'[12] Mo Yan's repeated self-portrayal as 'a story-teller of and from rural China' for his readers and audiences was deliberate, and not only that, it was deliberate for audiences in ever-larger concentric circles: his immediate critics, the audience at the banquet, and posterity, in the shape of the readers who were to read his speech in future years.

'A story-teller from rural China' was also how Mo Yan presented himself to his large local and international audience at the Aula Magna of Stockholm University on the day before the banquet. There he recited in Chinese his short story 'The Wolf' and an excerpt from the beginning of *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*. Following each, a Swedish actor performed them again in Swedish. Both stories are characterized by animal fable, nativist language, and rural Chinese life. After the readings, a local journalist interviewed Mo Yan before the audience. The following are from the notes I took: 'In rural culture there are historical figures, legends, events, and even myths and ghost stories such as a wolf or a rooster turning into a human. The folk elements and oral tradition figure strongly in my books, as they are part of my experiences at that time.' When asked about his views on literature and politics, Mo Yan answered: 'Any reader is entitled to ask a writer questions about his views of politics. I am not a politician, but my novels are about politics. The major task of a novelist is to create characters, who then express what the author thinks.' He once again asked that his readers and critics judge his political attitudes based not on what he had said and done in public, but on what he had written in his *oeuvre*. Anyone who has read Mo Yan's writings carefully cannot fail to notice how critical he has been, socially and politically, of China and of the human condition.

What Mo Yan said and did before, during, and after the Nobel Prize ceremonies suggests three aspects to his performance: first, he is an author from the countryside; second, literature is about politics; and third, he is a writer who does not announce his views and thoughts verbally or in live social performance, but conveys them with his pen.

12 Mo Yan, 'Banquet Speech', NobelPrize.org, 10 December 2012, <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-speech.html>.

The nativist narrative in Mo Yan's novels

In terms of the 'Chinese' or nativist aspects of story-telling and narrative, Mo Yan is indebted to Pu Sung-ling (1640–1715) and his 1680 *Rulin Waishi* (*Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*). In his book *Xuexi Pu Sung-ling* ('Learning from Pu Sung-ling') Mo Yan tells the story of how Pu might have collected material for his stories sitting under a big willow tree by a main road in his village, preparing tea and a pipe to smoke for the passers-by, who were then asked to tell stories of any kind in return: 'Thus, numerous unreliable and fabricated stories became resources of the book *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio.*'[13] In those stories, the boundary between reality and the odd or fantastic is often blurred, and the characters include magical foxes, ghosts, scholars, court officials, and so on. *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* has been one of the most popular books in China among both old and young, and there have been numerous adaptations for different media in modern times. Pu's home town is not far from Mo Yan's, and both were nurtured by the rich folk tradition of their native cultures in which people express their wishes and fears, their joy and sadness.

In *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* and Mo Yan's other novels and stories, there is a blurring of the boundaries between humans, ghosts, and beasts. *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* is about a dead man called Ximen Nao, who is reincarnated in the human world six times in animal and human forms: as a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog, a monkey, and at last as a Millennium baby. At the beginning of the story, Nao is executed by the local revolutionaries without having done any harm to the community except for being a landlord. Performing as narrator, as well as the first bestial reincarnation, Ximen Donkey reveals to readers that he had been a hardworking and kind-hearted landlord and should not have been killed. He once saved a dying child, who later became his tenant, and he treated him well. Thus, as the donkey, he avers… 'For that alone, you people should not have shot me with your musket. And, on that point, Lord Yama, you should not have sent me back as a donkey! Everyone says that saving a life is better than building a seven-story pagoda, and I, Ximen Nao, sure as hell saved a life. Me, Ximen Nao, and not just one life. During the famine one spring I sold twenty bushels of sorghum at a low price and exempted my tenant farmers from paying rent. That kept many people alive.'[14]

Mo Yan's rural experiences also included religious traditions he learned through listening and observing. As is seen in Ximen Nao's reincarnations as animals, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* is influenced by the Buddhist ideas of human afterlife. In his Nobel Lecture, Mo Yan told another story, this one about how he got his inspira-

13 Mo Yan, *Xuexi Pu Sung-ling* ('Learning from Pu Sung-Ling') (Beijing: Zhongguo Qingnian Chubanshe, 2012), p. 1.

14 Mo Yan, *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, transl. Howard Goldblatt (New York: Arcade, 2008), p. 12.

The Six Stages of Samsara or The Wheel of Life, is a traditional symbolic representation of the buddhist beleif in cyclic existence. The figure most commonly depicted as holding the wheel is Yama, the lord of death, symbolizing impermanence. *Photo: Oleksii Ustiuzhanin/Shutterstock.*

tion for this novel from a Buddhist painting: 'But it wasn't until the year 2005, when I viewed the Buddhist mural *The Six Stages of Samsara* on a temple wall that I knew exactly how to go about telling his story.'[15] *The Six Stages of Samsara* is a complex image, and contains strange figures such as a snake body with a horse's head and a human body with a dragon's head. The images illustrate the basic beliefs of Buddhism about the necessity of suffering, the idea of karma or supernatural cause-and-effect, and so on, with the overall message being to do good things during one's lifetime in order to be treated well in future metamorphoses in the afterlife.

In nativist narratives, nature and animals are usually mythologized. In an interview shortly before the Nobel Prize banquet, Mo Yan spoke about the influence his childhood in the countryside had had on him and his writings: 'Firstly, I was able to establish an intimate relationship with nature. A child growing up in school and a child growing up in the field have different relationships to nature, different feelings for animals and plants. The others were surrounded by other kids and teachers every day. But I was surrounded by sheep, cattle, plants, grass, and trees every day. The feelings I had towards nature were so delicate and sentimental. For a long time, I thought animals and plants could communicate with humans. And I felt that they understood what I said. This kind of experience is unique and valuable.'[16]

This 'intimate relationship' is characteristic of what is called the 'magical or hallucinatory realism' in Mo Yan's *oeuvre*, reminiscent of, but distinct from, such works as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez. As Mo Yan himself explained time and again, he had only read a little bit of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner, and thus he was not familiar with the details of these works. Rather, he was interested in how these authors wrote creatively about reality, and then he drew his inspiration from the stories in his home town's rural culture and in the Chinese tradition of story-telling, such as in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*.

Another feature of Mo Yan's narrative is the element of local opera in his story-telling. Before television sets became affordable in the Chinese countryside in the 1980s, local opera was a popular form of entertainment and education. In China, there are hundreds of local operas, such as *yueju* (*yue* opera) in Zhejiang province and Shanghai, *huaiju* (*huai* opera) in northern Jiangsu province, and so on. In Mo Yan's home town of Gaomi, *maoqiang* opera is popular. It has a history of more than two hundred years and a repertoire of more than one hundred plays. There are many *maoqiang* opera houses in Gaomi and neighbouring regions.

15 Mo Yan, 'Nobel Lecture' 2012.

16 Yu Sie Rundkvist Chou, 'Mo Yan: Interview', Nobelprize.org (2013), <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-interview-text_en.html?print=1>.

In 'Reading with Ears', Mo Yan defines going to *maoqiang* opera performances as part of his education – he left school after the fifth grade – and praises opera as 'the open school' for rural people.[17] In many of Mo Yan's novels, local opera is an intertext that interacts with the main stories, *Sandalwood Death* being the prime example. The beginnings of some chapters in the novel contain a passage of *maoqiang* opera that is suggestive of what is going to happen in the story. These passages are written in a poetic language intended to be sung. Additionally, some of the main characters are actors in the local *maoqiang* opera, and the protagonist of the novel, Sun Bin, is a well-known actor of *maoqiang* opera. His role in the opera mixes with what he is doing in life. His ideas of heroism, for example, are influenced by the heroic characters he plays in the opera. In Chapter thirteen, the people who participate in the peasants' rebellion wear costumes of the local opera. The blending of performance levels takes on a serious overtone in Chapters seventeen and eighteen, with executions enacted as if they were scenes from a local opera, and crowds of local people gathering to watch the spectacle. With 'Sun Bin, up on the Ascension Platform the narrator had assumed that the wail was an expression of torment over seeing the Maoqiang Patriarch endure such suffering. Once again, I realized my mistake, for the mournful cry was actually a call for the musicians to prepare their instruments, an opening note.'[18]

Mo Yan generates multiple levels of performativity, especially with the character Zhao Jia. Zhao performs his role as one of the executioners as if it were a great performance for which he has to prepare in order to ensure his reputation as a high-ranking executioner. It is for the occasion of killing of Sun Bin that he invents the cruel and bizarre method of execution called 'the sandalwood death'. What is more, the victims are willing to accept or are forced to accept the kind of role they are expected to play in this show of death. To satisfy the onlookers' thirst for excitement, the victims recite some often-quoted words or even sing a familiar song before their execution. It is made explicit in the novel that *Sandalwood Death* is also a play, and the characters in the novel are also actors. The back jacket of the novel thus announces: 'This is truly a nationalized novel, really from the nativist circles and devoted to the grassroots.' This mixture of fiction and traditional opera is one of the author's strategies to revive the tradition of the classical Chinese novel:

> To be sure, this return was not without its modifications. *Sandalwood Death* and the novels that followed are inheritors of the Chinese classical novel tradition but enhanced by Western literary techniques. What is known as innovative fiction is, for the most part, a result of this mixture, which is not limited to domestic traditions with foreign techniques, but can include

17 Mo Yan, 'Yong erduo yuedu' ('Reading with Ears'), in *Jianzheng Moyan* ('Witnessing Mo Yan'), ed. Wuchang Tan (Guilin: Lijiang Press, 2012), pp. 210–213, here p. 212.

18 Mo Yan, *Sandalwood Death: A Novel*, transl. Howard Goldblatt (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), p. 388.

> mixing fiction with art from other realms. *Sandalwood Death*, for instance, mixes fiction with local opera, while some of my early works were partly nurtured by fine art, music, even acrobatics.[19]

This kind of blending is essential to a modern Chinese literature inclined to learn from both classical Chinese and non-native, mostly Western, literature. This is the new literary Chineseness that I would contend Mo Yan is etching out. A blending of fiction and Chinese opera can also be found in the novel *Farewell My Concubine* by Lilian Lee, which was made into the internationally successful film of the same name, directed by Chen Kaige.

The performativity of Mo Yan's works includes his inscription of a fictional Mo Yan in his fictionalized home town of the Northeast Gaomi Township. The following example from his 1992 novel *The Republic of Wine* is characteristically self-mocking and satirical:

> As he lay in the relative comfort of a hard-sleeper cot – relative to a hard-seater, that is – the puffy, balding, beady-eyed, twisted-mouthed, middle-aged writer Mo Yan wasn't sleepy at all … I know there are many similarities between me and this Mo Yan, but many contradictions as well. I'm a hermit crab, and Mo Yan is the shell I'm occupying … There are times when I feel that this Mo Yan is a heavy burden, but I can't seem to cast it off, just as a hermit crab cannot rid itself of its shell. I can be free of it in the darkness, at least for a while. I see it softly filling up the narrow middle berth, its large head tossing and turning on the tiny pillow; long years as a writer have formed bone spurs on its vertebrae, turning the neck stiff and cold, sore and tingly, until just moving it is a real chore. This Mo Yan disgusts me, that's the truth.[20]

The appearances of the character Mo Yan in other works by the author Mo Yan, such as *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* and *Wa* (*Frog*) produce multiple effects, which is illustrative of what was referred to earlier as *Performanz*. They suggest that the author's experience of a split between fiction and reality, and his enjoyment of the freedom it brings, is narrated in the imaginary worlds of his creation. Notably, Mo Yan the character does not accord with what Mo Yan the author has done or said in public. Mo Yan the character thus paradoxically mimics Mo Yan the author's wilyness in his responses to the criticism about his political attitudes.

Northeast Gaomi Township as an emblem of rural Chineseness is performed in Mo Yan's texts and in his public performances. At the beginning of his Nobel Lecture, he indicates as much: 'Through the mediums of television and the Internet, I imagine that everyone here has at least a nodding acquaintance with far-off Northeast Gaomi

19 Mo Yan, 'Nobel Lecture' 2012.

20 Mo Yan, *The Republic of Wine: A Novel*, transl. Howard Goldblatt (New York: Arcade, 2011), p. 331.

Township.'[21] He mentions Gaomi eight times in his lecture, and at the end he says that 'I hope to make tiny Northeast Gaomi Township a microcosm of China, even of the whole world.' Since the Northeast Gaomi Township made its first appearance in his 1984 short story 'Autumn Floods', it has become his own land on which he has built his home and with which contemporary readers around the globe formulate their concepts of rural China.

By presenting rich and diverse pictures of people's lives in his home town, Mo Yan consolidates his nativist identity and position as a writer while distancing himself from the official orthodox discourse of history, although he now resides in its political centre, Beijing. His literature of rural China provides an alternative discourse of modern China, and this serves for a better understanding of the relationship between aesthetics and politics in his fiction.

Rural Chineseness as an alternative discourse

Rural Chineseness is intrinsic to Mo Yan's literary persona performed through his texts and across media. The discourse of rural Chineseness in his writing challenges, or rather subverts, the dominant grand narrative of Chinese history and politics. Under the device of ruralness, Mo Yan avoids being over-politicized by his interpreters while he simultaneously criticizes the social and political realities of modern China. *Red Sorghum* and *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* provide an alternative view of revolution and social progress. *Red Sorghum* does not follow the usual official pattern of narrating a story of how the Chinese people fought against the Japanese invaders during the war (1937–1945). David Der-wei Wang and Michael Berry rightly note that 'as the story develops, family history and national history gradually merge, climaxing with "My Granddad and My Grandma's" annihilation of the Japanese in a guerrilla attack. In this respect, Mo Yan appears to be paying tribute to works of revolutionary historical fiction. But on closer examination, we realize that not only does his revolutionary history fail to deliver the promise of ultimate meaning, but it actually reveals a historical degeneration in which each generation fails to live up to the preceding one.'[22] In most Chinese stories about the Second Sino–Japanese War, the protagonists are either Chinese Communist Party members or their supporters, fighting in the name of defending the nation and liberating the people. In *Red Sorghum*, on the other hand, Grandpa leads an attack on the Japanese purely out of revenge for the Japanese soldiers' killing many of the villagers. This brave act, passed down by word of mouth and later

21 Mo Yan, 'Nobel Lecture' 2012.

22 David Der-wei Wang & Michael Berry, 'The Literary World of Mo Yan', *World Literature Today*, 74:3 (2000), pp. 487–494, here p. 490.

inspiring Mo Yan, is part of a rural history that supplements, if not deconstructs, the official narrative of history.

Big Breasts and Wide Hips constitutes a further challenge to the progressive narrative and patriarchal ideology that are dominant in the official discourse: 'The reason why I think *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* is a great Chinese novel is that it represents the beauty and poetry of the traditional society in the countryside. To put it simply, this novel can be read as a fictional narration of the process in which the traditional society of Chinese countryside was invaded and destroyed. Under the impact of the complicity of the external politics and power, the people and the nativist world that the mother represents were subject to severe harm and damage in both physical and spiritual senses.'[23] Covering the different eras of twentieth-century China from the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 to the market economy of the 1990s, the novel portrays the gradual breakdown of traditional rural life in China through the story of one family. The impotence of Jin Tong, the 'Golden Boy', son of a Swedish father and Chinese mother, is metaphorical in that it is used to 'examine the viability of the model of intimate integration' between East and West and its impact on just one component of the Chinese nation, rural China.[24]

Mo Yan's novel *Frog* is an incisive commentary on the one-child policy as experienced in his home town. Like *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, it has been viewed as 'a great Chinese novel', not least after being awarded the prestigious Mao Dun Literature Prize in 2011. The one-child policy was of great importance to China in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and continues to exert a huge impact on almost every aspect of Chinese life and society. In most parts of China, especially in cities, it has been strictly implemented, with violations severely punished. Mo Yan says: 'Getting to know the issue of Chinese paternal planning does not mean that one is able to understand China. However, if one is ignorant of the Chinese paternal planning, it is impossible for him to form a sensible understanding of China.'[25] Recently, the policy has again become controversial in China as it confronts an ageing society.

In *Frog*, Mo Yan adopts an ethical perspective of the grassroots in the countryside, characterized by an attitude of regret and forgiveness for the lives that have been lost in response to the national policy. The theme of atonement is mainly expressed on three levels. First, the atonement of the character 'my Aunt', who started her medical career as a barefoot doctor and rural midwife. Later, she becomes an administrator who car-

23 Zhang Qinghua, 'Nuojiangzhi yu Mo Yan, Mo Yan zhi yu dangdai zhongguo wenxue'('Nobel Prize to Mo Yan and Mo Yan to Contemporary Chinese Literature'), *Wenyi Zhengming* ('Art Criticism'), 12 (2012), pp. 1–3, here p. 3.

24 Cai Rong, 'Problematizing the Foreign Other: Mother, Father, and the Bastard in Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*', *Modern China*, 29:1 (2003), pp. 108–137, here p. 123.

25 Mo Yan, 'Tingqu wa sheng yipian: dai houji' ('Listening to Frogs: Postscript') in *Wa* (*Frog*) (Shanghai: Shanghai Literature & Art Press, 2012), pp. 341–343, here p. 342.

ries out the family planning policy, ensuring that 'illegitimately' pregnant women – married women who did not get permission from the local government to give birth – in her township get abortions. Because of her role, the locals give her the nickname 'Living Lord of Hell'. In the countryside, extreme action used to be taken to ensure birth control among the peasants, as the novel chronicles in great detail. After her retirement, Aunt begins to repent for having taken the lives of so many unborn babies.

The narrator's atonement comprises the second ethical commentary. Tadpole's agreement to his pregnant wife Wang Renmei's abortion causes her death. As a member of the People's Liberation Army, Tadpole chooses to abide by the government's family planning policy in order to retain his chances for promotion in the military. Later, he feels responsible for the death of his first wife and their unborn baby. It is explicitly mentioned in the novel that the author wants to fulfil his wish for atonement through his writing. However, it did not provide the consolation he had wished for, but rather even more guilt. Atonement, however, is performed in *Frog* in a collective sense in the countryside. Two native craftsmen devote themselves to making earthen figures of babies. Near the end of the novel, Aunt worships the earthen babies, full of rich and specific details of the unborn dead: 'Aunt puts the earthen baby in her hands into an empty square, and then she withdraws one step. After having ignited three sticks of incense, she kneels down in front of the small altar in the middle of the room. Putting her palms together, she murmurs incessantly.'[26]

Clearly, such nativist narrative is a response, resistance, or even subversion of the grand narratives of the one-child policy. This local atonement for a national policy performs an understated yet bold atonement at an international level and, by extension, a fully human one. Mo Yan structures the novel to broaden the theme of atonement with the story being told through long letters to a Japanese friend, whose father had been an officer in the Japanese army that invaded China and had been stationed in the region. The atonement of a Japanese man for the harm and damage to the Chinese people caused by his father and the Japanese army thus generalizes the theme of atonement.

It must be noted that, from time to time, Mo Yan addresses political issues directly in his writings, as in *The Garlic Ballads* and *The Republic of Wine*. But more often he writes in a metaphorical manner to resist or complement the grand discourse of history and revolution. Literature cannot avoid politics, but it can distance itself from and transcend politics through various literary techniques, such as satire and form. Mo Yan used the rare opportunity of his Nobel Lecture to outline his views on the relationship between aesthetics and politics: 'My greatest challenges come with writing novels that deal with social realities, such as *The Garlic Ballads*, not because I'm afraid of being openly critical of the darker aspects of society, but because heated emotions

26 Mo Yan, *Wa* (*Frog*) (Shanghai: Shanghai Literature & Art Press, 2012), p. 270.

and anger allow politics to suppress literature and transform a novel into reportage of a social event. As a member of society, a novelist is entitled to his own stance and viewpoint; but when he is writing he must take a humanistic stance, and write accordingly. Only then can literature not just originate in events, but transcend them, not just show concern for politics but be greater than politics.'[27]

For Mo Yan, then, rural Chineseness is his method of raising questions about the grand narratives of history and politics in China and beyond. For his critics, Mo Yan's performance of rural Chineseness offers a new perspective when reading his literature. Others have joined in the performing of his image of rural Chineseness for domestic and international audiences, specifically the film industry. In 1988, Zhang Yimou, a well-known fifth-generation Chinese film director, directed the film *Red Sorghum*, an unforgettable spectacle of Chinese countryside life. Another film adaption, *Nuan*, which is often overlooked, is an adaptation of Mo Yan's short story 'White Dog and the Swing' (1985), which tells a sad story of a Chinese country woman.

In conclusion, we are invited at the beginning of the twenty-first century to join Mo Yan in the performance of rural Chineseness to inquire into the creation and reformation of Chineseness. Chineseness should no longer be mythologized, orientalized, and approached as unified and unchanging. Instead of being looked at only from the outside, Chineseness, along with its conflicts and agencies, is to be interrogated, criticized, and analysed from inside China and from all perspectives.

By performing a unique rural Chineseness, Mo Yan, instead of 'being silent', as his pen name suggests, speaks eloquently and forcefully on various political and social issues – both through cultural events and in his literary works. In that sense, Mo Yan's pen name itself is part of his performance as a story-teller.

This article was published earlier in *Mo Yan in Context: Nobel Laureate and Global Storyteller*, eds Angelica Duran & Yuhan Huang (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2014), pp. 77–90. Some minor changes have been made here.

27 Mo Yan, 'Nobel Lecture' 2012.

Autobiographical Performances, Theatrical Aesthetics, and the Gaze of the Crowd

The Case of Henriette Widerberg and her 'Memories of an Actress'

Peter Henning

Although Henriette Widerberg (1796–1872) today numbers among Sweden's lesser-known authors, she once counted as its most distinguished opera singer. Her life story is marked by a similar contrast. Widerberg's upbringing was poor, and at an early age she was persuaded to enter show business in order to support her family. Recognized as a talent, the early nineteenth century saw her rise to one of the most celebrated, if also most scandal-ridden, actresses in Stockholm. To great acclaim she headlined stagings of canonical classics such as Mozart's *Magic Flute* and Weber's *The Marksman*, but in the late 1830s – abandoned by her former supporters, quarrelling with her managers, and suffering from a failing voice – Widerberg's career came to an inevitable end. She would eventually earn a living by selling soap, and for a short time she ran a tavern in Stockholm. She died in penury, her memory seemingly erased from the public mind.

What will interest me here, though, is not so much the biography of Widerberg as the autobiography she would write in her later years. It is in many ways a peculiar work that both formally and thematically strays from the conventions of self-writing at the time. Much to the frustration of later theatre historians, the two volumes published as *En skådespelerskas minnen* (1850–1851, 'Memories of an Actress') do not tell us very much about the author's artistic intent or the famous names and places she visited.[1] What they do portray, though, is the hardships of a female performer in a line of business situated firmly within a patriarchal economy of desire, ranging from the lascivious glances of theatre audiences to customs of patronage bordering on overt prostitution.[2]

Although socially conscious in this regard, Widerberg does not provide any deep-

1 Henriette Widerberg, *En skådespelerskas minnen. Sjelfbiografi*, I–II (Gefle: A. P. Landin, 1850–1851).

2 See Ingeborg Nordin Hennel, *Mod och försakelse: Livs- och yrkesbetingelser för Konglig Theaterns skådespelerskor 1813–1863* (Hedemora: Gidlunds, 1997), p. 337.

reaching psychological account of herself. The Swedish scholar Ingeborg Nordin Hennel points to a lack of substance in the self-portrayal; a constant threat of Widerberg falling apart as an individual, becoming 'a stranger both to herself and her readers'.[3] While her memoirs might come off as amateurish, the question of identity at stake has less to do with aesthetic quality than as an aesthetics of performance utilized by Widerberg. In other words, she is always playing roles. In fact, her very way of writing is on a basic level fuelled by her theatrical experience. The two books largely consist of dialogue, and many of the plots are reminiscent of famous librettos from her days at the opera. Knowing, at the time of writing, she would never perform on stage again, literature becomes a dramatic substitute, enabling Widerberg to write her life through role playing and self-enactment. The former star might have sung her last opera in the 1840s, but unquestionably, it is 'Memories of an Actress' that makes for her final appearance on stage.

Performativity must thus be seen as a crucial to Widerberg's work, and in the following I would like to expound on two aspects of this theoretical concept in relation to her writing. On the one hand, I will address the 'theatricality' of the text – how it relates to dramatic discourse and mimics the world of performance. On the other, I will also discuss the perceived impact of the book, the hoped-for *Performanz* to be achieved by the publication of the autobiography. Likening them to the theatre-goers of her heyday, Widerberg demands a response from her reading audience – a longing for recognition that in turn reads as a function of the literary public sphere and its specific incarnation in the Swedish 1850s. In the act of writing lies a hope of transforming the author's life, not in order to gain posthumous glory, but to receive financial and ethical justification in the present.

Before we delve deeper into Widerberg's text, however, it is important to have an idea of the historical context to which her work relates, and particularly that of literary Romanticism. Although Widerberg's autobiographical writing does not connect to the Swedish or German Romantic movement in any direct way, it is important to note the similarities in approach. Additionally, one must also recognize a shared interest in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century popular culture. This overlap is even more apparent when mid-century authors such as Carl Jonas Love Almqvist (1793–1866) began to catch up on developments in Central Europe, turning their interests towards larger audiences, and investigating commercially viable forms in order to make a living out of writing.

3 Ingeborg Nordin Hennel, 'Tonernas härskarinna, lidelsernas slav? Om en skådespelerskas självbiografi från 1800-talets mitt', *Samlaren* (1994), p. 79. If not otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

Literary theatricality between popular and avant-garde

With the burgeoning of European Romanticism, we find a distancing from Classicism in general and its fixed genre categories in particular – a disruption that paved the way for further experimentation at the crossroads of intermediality. As Friedrich Schlegel famously stated in his *Aethenaeum* fragment 116, Romantic poetry not only strives 'to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric'; it also mixes and fuses 'poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature'.[4] In Sweden, Almqvist makes for a good illustration of this imperative, and in his *oeuvre* we find the literary form branched out into theatrical, as well as musical and visual, territory. His novel *Amorina* (1822/1839), described by the author as a 'romantic fugue', '*a whole* of interchanging dramatic and epic form', is one such example.[5]

Unlike Almqvist, Widerberg was not acquainted with the poetological work of Schlegel and the German Romantics. She was not well read, and it has even been debated if she could write herself (her memoirs would then have been dictated).[6] There are, nevertheless, convergences in Almqvist's and Widerberg's theatrical approach to literature, similarities that can be explained in at least two ways.

First of all, one must be aware that mixtures of epic and dramatic form were not exclusive to the avant-garde, but were also an important feature of popular literature at the time. Various dramatic techniques strongly influenced the eighteenth-century European novel – for instance the German *Räuber-Roman* (bandit novel), which had been popularized in Swedish translation around 1800 – meaning that what was theorized in Romantic discourse had already been prepared in more accessible literary forms.

Secondly, a more direct link between Almqvist and Widerberg can be found in their mutual affinity with melodramatic expression. Melodrama has been defined as an aesthetic of excess, characterized, among other things, by exaggerated theatrical gestures, complex plots, and obvious contrasts between good and bad.[7] Always returning to easily recognizable situations, characters, attitudes, and gestures, this style

4 Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, transl. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 175.

5 C. J. L. Almqvist, quoted in Bertil Romberg, '"Ett helt af omväxlande dramatisk och episk form": Om framställningsformen i Amorina och Drottningens juvelsmycke', in idem. & Ulla-Britta Lagerroth (eds), *Perspektiv på Almqvist* (Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1973), p. 119.

6 See Nordin Hennel 1994, p. 81.

7 Peter Brooks has given an influential account of the subject in *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (1976; rev. ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

was particularly well suited to the stage from a commercial perspective.[8] In regard to the melodramatic influence, both Almqvist and Widerberg were indebted to the Stockholm theatrical scene of the 1820s and 1830s. The period in question marked an artistic peak, both for Widerberg and the director of the Royal Dramatic Theatre, Gustaf Lagerbjelke (1777–1837). Influenced by French melodrama, Lagerbjelke developed an expressionistic and visually striking style that also interested Almqvist. One of his more famous novels, *Drottningens juvelsmycke* (1834, *The Queen's Diadem*),[9] has for instance mimicked Lagerbjelke's staging of *Ferdinand Cortez*, an opera by Gaspare Spontini (1774–1851).[10] That Widerberg would make one of her most acclaimed performances as princess Amazily in this production is telling. The way she dramatizes her own life in her autobiography echoes in many ways the emotional style of acting taught under Lagerbjelke.[11]

Unlike a life-writer like Goethe, his *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811–1833) proving to be a lasting influence to this day, autobiography for Widerberg was not about reliving a life in all its historicity. On the contrary, her work is almost exclusively narrated in present tense, being played out in the here and now.[12]

Staging the self

On a general level, literary theatricality can manifest itself on at least three different levels – all of them to be found in Widerberg's work.[13] The most obvious one is thematic, simply meaning that the text in one way or another describes the theatrical

8 This aspect was crucial for Almqvist when aiming at a broader audience. See Nordin Hennel (1994), p. 76, who makes a similar case for Widerberg.

9 Almqvist's Romantic classic has been published in English translation as *The Queen's Diadem*, transl. Yvonne L. Sandstroem (London: Skoob, 1992), and subsequently as *The Queen's Tiara, or, Azouras Lazuli Tintomara*, transl. Paul Britten Austin (London: Arcadia Books, 2001).

10 Ulla-Britta Lagerroth, 'Melodramteatern som kod i Almqvists narrativa dramaturgi: Några reflexioner med utgångspunkt i hans 1840-talsromaner', in Lars Burman (ed.), *Carl Jonas Love Almqvist – diktaren, debattören, drömmaren* (Almqviststudier, 3), (Hedemora: Gidlund, 2001), pp. 35–36.

11 Lagerbjelke's melodramatic aesthetic is discussed more thoroughly by Gösta M. Bergman, *Regi och spelstil under Gustaf Lagerbjelkes tid vid Kungl. teatern: Studier kring några av hans insceneringar* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1946), p. 232.

12 What should be noted though, is the similar emphasis placed on theatrical experience in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*Poetry and Truth*). Initiation into the world of aesthetic representation, as into public life, is for Goethe intimately linked to a number of performances and theatrical metaphors. Even the central dichotomy of 'Dichtung' and 'Wahrheit', a dialectic constitutive to the work itself, manifests itself within a space of performance: namely the young Goethe's attempt to fictionalize and dramatize his life in order to entertain his friends.

13 My taxonomy here builds on Lagerroth 2001, p. 22.

world. Furthermore, as we already have touched upon, theatricalization can also occur when literary devices, analogous to the conventions of dramatic representation, are put to use. This establishes a second level, exemplified by the use of dialogue and stage directions (a repeated 'pause' segmenting the short conversion into an isolated scene) in the passage below:

> Pause.
> – Miss Widerberg, are you enjoying yourself in the countryside?
> – Oh yes!
> – I own a very pretty estate; alas, if I only dared to utter my mind –
> – You should always say what's on your mind, my lord.
> – Are you always allowed to do that?
> – Yes, why not?
> Pause.[14]

Often, though, the thematic and formal levels interlock – exemplified, for instance, in the following scene, where one of Widerberg's admirers is doing his best to seduce the clever heroine:

> – Oh, if you knew –
> – How well the count sings. I've heard that he masters that art. May I have the pleasure of hearing you?
> – As you command. You have these to choose from*: Ferdinand Cortez, Jessonda, Jérusalem, Armide, La dame blanche, The Barber of Seville, The Marriage of Figaro*, etc. Shall we sing something out of the last one? Do you want that, Miss Widerberg. Look here, the duet in the third act between the count and Susanna? Would you allow me?
> – Please do, my lord!
> – 'Crudel! Perché finora farmi languir così? perché crudel farmi languir così' ['Cruel girl! Why until now did you keep me in torment? Why did you keep me in cruel torment so long']. (When singing this, he took my hand and drew it to his lips; and with that, I withdrew it): 'Signor, la donna ognora tempo ha di dir di sì' ['My lord, every lady has her time to say yes'].[15]

14 Widerberg 1851, p. 22: 'Paus. | – Mamsell Widerberg, är ni road af att vara på landet? | – Å-ja! | – Jag eger en mycket vacker egendom; ack, om jag vågade yttra min tanke – | – Man skall alltid säga hvad man tänker, herr grefve. | – Kan man alltid få göra det? | – Ja, hvarför inte? | Paus.'

15 Ibid., p. 20: '– Ack, om ni visste – | – Huru väl grefven sjunger. Jag har hört sägas att man [sic] kan den konsten. Får jag det nöjet höra er? | – Som ni befaller. Ni har här, ser jag, att välja på: Ferdinand Cortez, Jessonda, Jerusalem, Armide, Hvita Frun, Barberaren i Sevilla, Figaros Bröllop, etc. Skola vi sjunga utur den sista? vill ni det, mamsell Widerberg? Se här, duetten i 3:dje akten emellan grefven och Susanna? tillåter ni? | –Var så god herr grefve! | –'Crudel, perche finera farmi languir cosi? perche crudel farmi languir cosi.' (Då han sjöng detta, tog han min hand och förde den till sina läppar; i det jag drog den tillbaka): | 'Signor, ladona ognora tempo hadir cosi".' Note that Widerberg misquotes the Italian (corrected in the English translation above).

The exchange between Widerberg and her devotee is fast paced and witty in the tradition of the comic opera. One could for instance note how the count's first line, an attempt to declare his amorous sympathies, is intercepted by the female lead, quickly changing the subject to matters of singing rather than lovemaking. Browsing through her musical library (coincidentally a selection of Widerberg's most celebrated performances), the resourceful aristocrat just happens to pick a passage from *The Marriage of Figaro*, not only sexually charged, but furthermore an intertextual mirror of the scene at hand. By doubly exposing her autobiographical self in Pierre Beaumarchais's libretto, Widerberg's portrays her admirer in light of Count Almaviva's brutish lust, while she herself comes off as the inventive maid Susanna.

We can here point to an important difference between Widerberg's memoirs and the popular dialogue-based novels previously mentioned. As the latter relied almost entirely on dramatic narration, the only epic elements being short, present-tense stage directions, the author subject would be detached from the text – hidden behind the characters and their doings. Instead of disengaging the narrative instance, though, Widerberg personifies it, enacts it, and pushes it into the textual foreground.

In this regard we can also compare her work to Almqvist's *Amorina*. Even though Almqvist in a theatrical manner avoids lengthy description, letting words and actions speak for themselves, his novel nonetheless indulges in a number of metafictive games only possible in literary representation. Rather than disappearing, the omniscient narrator comments on, and sometimes also disrupts, the mimetic flow. Take the following scene, for example:

> Stockholm, at count Wilhelm of Falkenburg's.
> WILHELM: Herman! Prepare my guns for tomorrow's parade.
> THE VALET: I will do so, my Lord General!
>
> The count and his valet leave in different directions. When we observe count Wilhelm's townhouse and the balcony he has just left, we cannot but delight in the beautiful view over the inner court and garden, which are visible from here. How much it hurts us then, that the motions of the count were marked by impetuousness, most certainly preventing him from enjoying the pretty view? Before leaving the balcony, he sat down to write. We creep up there to steal a glance at his papers. Alas, he has torn them all to pieces! A light summer breeze carries the scraps away and confounds our wish.
>
> Quick – some random pieces have caught on the branches of the cherry trees down there. We would at least like to see if any fragments are legible... [What then follow are William's fragmentary notes][16]

16 C. J. L. Almqvist, *Samlade verk*, XVIII, *Amorina eller Historien om de Fyra*, ed. Bertil Romberg (Stockholm: Svenska Vitterhetssamfundet, 2000), pp. 105–106: '*Nionde Taflan.* | Stockholm, hos grefve Wilhelm af Falkenburg. | *Wilhelm.* | Herman! fäja och ladda mina pistoler till paraden i morgon. | *Kammartjenaren.* | Det skall ske, nådig General! | Grefven och kammartjenaren gå ut åt olika håll. När vi betrakta grefve Wilhelms hus i staden och den balkon han nyss lemnat, kunna vi icke undvika att förtjusas af den vackra utsigt öfver palatsets inre område

While Almqvist's penchant for Romantic irony (and his whole idea of the novel as an operatic *Gesamtkunstwerk*) would have been foreign to Widerberg she extends the basic vocabulary of the dramatized novel in a similar way – although turning it into something very different. 'Autofiction', a term applied to autobiographical narrative that foregrounds its conceptual and/or aestheticized character, would be one way to describe it. Much like in her life on stage, fiction and reality, private and public, becomes notoriously hard to differentiate. As Nordin Hennel relatedly attests, actresses at the time were often identified privately with their theatrical roles – an identity conflict that also forms a recurring theme in Widerberg's own account.[17]

This brings us to a third level of theatricality: namely theatre as a figure, metaphor, or symbol for human life and behaviour (*theatrum mundi*, 'all the world is a stage', for instance). Although Widerberg's '*Memories*' oftentimes roam within the world of theatrical phantasy, we are nonetheless pointed towards the illusory nature of role play. When the identity of a desperate baron, dressed up as a woman to trick his way into Widerberg's chambers, is eventually revealed, the author also comes to reflect upon the deceptive glare of the theatrical mask:

> – The liking that the baron has possibly taken to me when seeing me at the theatre, where makeup, a beautiful costume can make an appearance pleasant, will disappear when you look at me closer, where age is likely to show, where skin is pale, eyes without lustre.[18]

Role playing, then, can in turn be compared to the unpredictable life of the actress, a condition eventually likened to the fleeting character of life in general:

> – Miss Widerberg, are you happy in your current position?
> – Happiness has always been distant from and *never* approaches me.
> – Do not say that! How often does not human destiny change!
> – But on this Earth, where everything alters, everything is changed and transformed, one cannot build one's happiness, one's hope.[19]

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och trädgård, som man har härifrån. Huru smärtar det oss icke då, att i grefvens rörelser en häftighet rådde, som ganska säkert hindrat honom att njuta den sköna utsigten? Innan han lemnat balkonen, satt han och skref. Vi smyga oss ditupp, för att stjäla en blick på hans papper. Ack, han har sönderrifvit alltsammans! En lätt sommarvind flyger bort med lapparne och begabbar vår önskan. | Fort – på grenarne af körsbärsträden dernere hafva några spridda lappar fastnat. Vi vilja åtminstone se efter, om något fragment kan läsas …'

17 Nordin Hennel 1997, p. 326.

18 Widerberg 1851, p. 43: '– Det tycke baron möjligtvis kunnat fatta för mig då ni sett mig på theatern, der smink, en vacker kostym kan göra utseendet behagligt, försvinner då ni ser mig på nära håll, der åldern nog skönjes, der hyn är blek, ögonen utan glans'.

19 Ibid., p. 23: '– Mamsell Widerberg, är ni lycklig uti eder nuvarande ställning? | – Lyckan har alltid varit fjärran ifrån mig och nalkas mig *aldrig*. | – Säg intet det! Huru ofta förändras icke människans öde! | – Men på denna jord, där allt växlar, allt förändras och förvandlas, kan man ej bygga sin sällhet, sitt hopp.'

While unsophisticated in diction, Widerberg displays a self-reflective awareness that is far from naïve, a fact that bears emphasis in regard to earlier accounts of her autobiography.

What we have been discussing so far, though, all pertains to the performance-like character of the text. What I want to propose is that Widerberg's 'Memories' also raise a number of questions regarding the performative nature of the act of publishing the book itself. As we have seen, 'Memories of an Actress' provides ample references, and ultimately grounds itself formally, on a theatrical repertoire that corresponded to the author's career on stage. But equally important is the purpose and ambition of her work.

Widerberg and her public

The story of Widerberg's life begins with a description of her earliest efforts on stage, giving a recital as a 12-year old to provide for her mother and sisters. Mirroring this primal scene of performance, Widerberg at the narrative climax of the second volume again faces an audience. This time though, her gaze is turned towards the presumed readership of her work. Here, much as in the past, economy and artistry are intimately tied together, but in an inversion of her childhood experiences, Widerberg, now a mother herself, justifies her autobiographical project on the grounds of her own daughter's upbringing:

> And I dare hope that you will overlook the errors to be found herein. My intention with this endeavour is founded upon the loving vocation that, through the revenue of this small work, I will be able to give my little daughter the upbringing she has so long lacked. Then, will I have fulfilled my duty as a mother and will therefore be most obliged to you, my gentle reader![20]

Normally, one would expect an apologetic speech of this kind to begin a book – but Widerberg, with a sense for dramaturgy, places it at the end. It thus forms a dramatic finale, preceded by a number of exaggerated, melodramatic declamations: 'removed from every sympathetic embrace and forgotten by my kin; oh, where would I find comfort! … Arriving then in a foreign harbour, where no one understood me; oh where will I find comfort? – in God, who always gives strength to soothe my sorely troubled breast.'[21]

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20 Ibid., p. 83: 'Och vågar jag hoppas att man har öfverseende med de fel som häruti finnas. Min åsigt af detta företag är grundad på det kärleksfulla kallet att genom behållningen af detta lilla arbete kunna lemna min lilla dotter den uppfostran hon så länge saknat. Då har jag uti allt såsom moder uppfyllt min pligt och blifver mine benägne läsare derföre erkänsam!'

21 Ibid., p. 83: 'skild från varje känsligt bröst och de mina mig bortglömde; o, hvar funne jag väl tröst! … Kom så till en fremmad hamn, der ej någon mig förstod; o hvar finner jag väl tröst? – af den Gud, som alltid gifver styrka åt mitt hårdt beklämda bröst.'

The performance not only refers to the author's beginnings as an actress, but also the final years of her career. In particular, we are encouraged to read the passage in the light of a newspaper article, excerpted by Widerberg, describing the exuberant response of the audience to one of her last shows in Sweden – a staging of *The Marriage of Figaro*:

> The curtains goes up; the general silence is turned in an instant into a storm of cheers and applause. But Susanna, cheerful Susanna, about to try on her new hat in front of the mirror, what ails her? Confused, almost sobbing with emotion, she cannot for a long time utter a word. Alas! she had known that the friends of song would miss her; but she was not prepared for *such* an ovation, such compassion, such a manifestation on the part of those from whom she *had* to part, though she did not wish it. … The public, who she had so often delighted with her lovely voice, knew how to convince her of the value they set by her; it was a general outburst of gratitude that said, *'Henriette, you will not, shall not leave us'* … We do not have to go into detail in our account of how Susanna performed her role. It was, as always, her triumph.[22]

As I want to propose, it is precisely this expression of public sympathy that Widerberg attempts to evoke in her textual performance. The voice of the people had previously saved her when she was threatened with dismissal by the theatre direction, and now, transforming the book into an imagined stage, she is once more counting on their support.

For this reason, it was vital that the 'Memories' be published in her lifetime, instead of circulating privately or being published posthumously, as was the convention. Widerberg's intention was for the book to make a difference – to have a performative impact – in the present. Her hopes for wealth and fame were most certainly at stake, but her plea must also be understood as an appeal for recognition and redemption. The autobiography is a scandalous account, often satirically distanced, but nonetheless marked by intimate disclosure. Most importantly, if we are to judge from Widerberg's defensive positioning above, it was a confession that did not sit well with the idea of a mother's duties in nineteenth-century Sweden.

Although neither fame nor fortune awaited Widerberg, her ambition alone tells us something about the notion of literature and its function in the 1850s. To sum up,

22 Ibid., p. 74: 'Ridån går upp; den allmänna tystnaden förbytes i ett ögonblick till de mest brusande bifall och handklappningar. Men Susanna, den glädtiga Susanna, som skall försöka sin nya hatt framför spegeln, hvad felas henne? Förvirrad, nästan snyftande af rörelse, kan hon på länge icke framföra ett ord. Ack! hon visste att sångens vänner skulle sakna henne; men på en *sådan* hyllning, ett sådant deltagande, en sådan opinionsyttring från dem, vid hvilka hon icke vill, men *måste* skiljas, var hon ej beredd … Den allmänhet, som hon ofta förtjust med sin älskliga stämma, visste också betyga henne det värde, den satte derpå; det var ett allmänt utbrott af erkänsla, som sade: *'Henriette, Du vill, Du skall icke lemna oss!'* … Vi behöver icke vara utförliga i vår berättelse huru Susanna gaf sin roll. Det var, såsom alltid, hennes triumf.'

I thus want to expound briefly on this topic, once again turning to Almqvist and his *Amorina* for a comparison.

Literature in the gaze of the crowd and beyond

Written in 1822 but never published, a revised edition of *Amorina* appeared in 1839, reflecting Almqvist's rise to fame in the intervening seventeen years. Not only had he become a recognized name, but he was also a full-time writer dependent on the sale of his books – a fact that the *Amorina* of 1839 clearly mirrors.

In the preface, the fictive editor proposes a distinction between handwritten manuscripts and printed texts. While the manuscript, because of its exclusiveness, is considered mysterious – filled with secrets, haunted by the deceased author's spirit – the act of printing, conversely, is described as a form of exorcism. 'Printed books', states the editor, 'are not nearly as demonic as manuscripts. Printed books resemble confessed, revealed crimes, which lay exposed before the general public, no longer a weight on the chest of the perpetrator.'[23]

The idea that Almqvist conveys is indicative of a historical change in the conception of the written word in relation to the public sphere, formulated in the context of a book market separated both from the representative political system and the semi-public salon culture of the day. In the way Almqvist imagines the soul's serenity as dependent on mass readership, confession is necessarily tied to commerce – something the editor of *Amorina* implicitly makes clear:

> As soon as I find myself in a large collection of books, I believe myself to be in the town square or the market, full of living people; for those books that I see around me have already been seen, or will be seen, by thousands of eyes: there is something public, familiar, and self-evident about it.[24]

As we can see, though, the book was not only framed by commercial interests, but also – perhaps more importantly – within the metaphorical *space* of the marketplace, fixed in the visual trajectory of a crowd in endless flux. In order to theorize this specific optical relationship, we must also take note of the changing cityscape around this time. The example I have picked concerns the architectural dynamics of nineteenth-century Paris, but the theoretic conclusions to be drawn are still highly relevant to our case.

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23 Almqvist 2000, p. iii: 'Tryckta böcker äro på långt när icke så dæmoniska, som manuskripter. Tryckta böcker likna bekända, uppenbarade brott, som ligga afslöjade inför allmänheten, och derföre ej längre tynga gerningsmannens eget bröst.'

24 Ibid.: 'Så snart jag befinner mig midt ibland en stor samling af tryckta böcker, tycker jag mig vara på torget eller på en marknad, full af lefvande menniskor; ty de böcker, jag skådar omkring mig, hafva tusentals ögon redan sett, se, eller skola se: det är någonting offentligt, bekant och solklart.'

In the 1850s and 1860s, Georges Haussmann (1809–1891), prefect of Paris and its environs under Napoleon III (1808–1873), forced through a large number of innovations in urban planning, most famously the great boulevards. As Marshall Berman has noted, Haussmann and Napoleon 'envisioned the new roads as arteries in an urban circulatory system', and by 'blasting a vast network of boulevards through the heart of the old medieval city', they would clear the slums and create social spaces previously unknown in the sprawling but fragmented metropolis.[25]

These Parisian roads created new economic, social, and aesthetic bases, 'bringing enormous numbers of people together' (although simultaneously exposing the misery and poverty previously hidden away). 'At the street level', states Berman, the boulevards 'were lined with small businesses and shops of all kinds, with every corner zoned for restaurants and terraced sidewalk cafes'.[26] Of particular interest in this context is how this development also fashioned a new set of social interrelations:

> What did the boulevards do to the people who came to fill them? ... They could display their love before the boulevard's endless parade of strangers ... They could weave veils of fantasy around the multitude of passers-by: who were these people, where did they come from and where were they going, what did they want, whom did they love? The more they saw of others and showed themselves to others – the more they participated in the 'extended family of eyes' – the richer became their vision of themselves.[27]

As Berman suggests, the architectural infrastructure provided the material conditions for a reciprocal gaze, piercing deep into the world of imagination. The conception of literature in Sweden mid-century (similarly relying on infrastructural developments facilitating the distribution of literature) builds upon a similar logic. As we already have seen, Almqvist's *Amorina* fantasizes about a nameless audience beyond the familiar intimacy of the literary salon – *the* formative paradigm for many of the early Romantics. Yet, 'some kind of sincerity or subjectivity', as Arne Melberg points out, had become a necessary feature of 'good' literature at the time.[28] In the book market of the bourgeoisie public sphere, literature would thus assume a stage-like character, performing the once private in public, thereby endowing the eyes of the crowd with a performative power of their own. If the printed book was conceived as a confession, it relied on the presence of an audience to receive absolution.

In Widerberg's case, we have seen how her textual performances simulated a relationship between actor and audience, producing, in line with Berman's argument, an

25 Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (2nd ed., New York: Penguin, 1988), p. 150.

26 Ibid., p. 151.

27 Ibid., p. 152.

28 Arne Melberg, *Realitet och utopi: Utkast till en dialektisk förståelse av litteraturens roll i det borgerliga samhällets genombrott* (Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1978), p. 54.

enriched vision of herself. Widerberg's text has been criticized for lacking essence and personality, but we must bear in mind that role-playing follows naturally on a theatricalized understanding of literature. The gaze of recognition always also demands a pose or a mask for the crowd.

At the same time, hints of anxiety can be detected in Widberg's relation. Necessarily, private exposure also prompts the spectator to compare intimacies in moral terms. Worrying about the way she will look in the eyes of others, the gaze of the crowd is also shown to have a judgmental function, positing the mass as reviewers not only of her literary talents, but also of her motherly abilities.

One might thus remember what Walter Benjamin wrote about Paris and Haussmann, its visionary *artiste démolisseur*: 'The true goal of Haussmann's projects was to secure the city against civil war. He wanted to make the erection of barricades in Paris impossible for all time.'[29] The extended family of eyes, then, enabling the performance of intimacy in the midst of the public sphere, also exercised a form of social control that appears to have stemmed from the very conditions that saw its inception. The idea of a redemptive gaze is thus a two-sided coin, producing anxiety as well as hopeful anticipation.

At the heart of the individualist project promoted by autobiography, we find inscribed a structure of surveillance and paranoia – in turn pointing straight to the questions raised by the social media a century and a half later. Widerberg, in her mid-fifties, sets up a Facebook account, possibly the first one in Sweden, and paves the way for a literary tradition that is yet to recognize her influence. Please press the 'Like' button.

29 Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, transl. Howard Eiland, Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingston & Harry Zohn (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2006), p. 43.

The Eventness of Thoreau's 'A Plea for Captain Brown'

Jiang Yuxing

The term performativity was first coined by J. L. Austin in the series of lectures he gave at Harvard University in 1955, entitled 'How to Do Things With Words'. He used the term to describe the linguistic practices when 'the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action', thus emphasizing the acting aspect of language.[1] Performativity is also closely related to performance studies, for 'performativity results in performances or manifests itself in the performative nature of acts'.[2] Performance, according to Schechner, ranges from 'human actions', 'the performing arts', and 'everyday life performances' to 'the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles' and 'any action that is framed, enacted, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance'.[3]

Schechner's definition of performance covers not only art performance, but social performance, or 'all activity carried out with a consciousness of itself', such as delivering lectures.[4] Performance usually requires the co-presence of actors and audiences as its precondition, and the happening of the performance, together with its actors and its audiences, constitutes an event. Performativity, therefore, is closely related either to the text as an action, or the happening of an event. As Velten has stated, the concept of performativity 'can relate either to Performance or to *Performanz*, and then it in all cases designates the characteristics of an object or an event'.[5] The term *Performanz* is

1 J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 6.

2 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, transl. Saskya Iris Jain (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 29.

3 Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2nd ed., London: Routledge, 2006), p. 2.

4 Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 4.

5 See Hans Rudolf Velten, 'Performativität. Ältere deutsche Literatur', in Claudia Benthien & Hans Rudolf Velten (eds), *Germanistik als Kulturwissenschaft: Eine Einführung in neue Theoriekonzepte* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2002), p. 221.

created to refer to the effects a performance can have upon its readers or audiences. The object can mean the text itself, so lectures can be both an object and an event. The 'eventness' of a lecture is connected both to the text of the lecture as a performance, an action, and to the cultural and social circumstances that lead to the delivery of the text and its effects upon audiences and readers.

Therefore, performativity holds two levels of meanings: it means the concept of performing, or say acting, with the text doing something; and it emphasizes the concept of effect, of producing some results, with the text having done something. To apply performativity theory to Thoreau's 'A Plea for Captain Brown' means two things: firstly, it means treating the text itself as a performance, an action, an event, and analysing its effects upon its readers; secondly, it means exploring the effect of Thoreau having given the lecture in circumstances as they then stood.

In defence of John Brown –Thoreau's performative approach

On 16 October 1859, John Brown had led a group of eighteen partisans to attack the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in Virginia, expecting to build a 'black phalanx' of freed slaves and so precipitate a slave rebellion on a larger scale.[6] The insurrection turned out to be a failure, leading to Brown's arrest. He was tried for murder and treason, and convicted very soon after, on 2 November.

The Harpers Ferry incident came on the eve of an election, a critical and sensitive moment in the relationship between the Democratic and the Republican parties. It had undermined the sense of security among pro-slavery Democrats, who feared the outbreak of slave insurrections and radical abolitionism and believed that the Republicans had conspired in planning and sponsoring the raid. It also shocked and outraged the Republicans, who feared the possible damage Brown's raid might cause in the upcoming election; it even scared away the abolitionists, who feared the bloody attack might be pinned on their organization. The nationwide attitude towards John Brown's raid was hostile. Only a small group of New England Transcendentalists, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and some radical abolitionists such as Wendell Phillips, stepped forward to defend Brown against the accusations.

Newspapers became the contested terrain for different discourses. The Democratic papers, led by the *Boston Daily Courier*, the *Boston Post,* the *Boston Pilot,* the *New York Herald,* the *Herald of Freedom,* and the *Taunton Gazette* unearthed and republished the events of the Pottawatomie massacre, when Brown was said to have killed five pro-slavery men in May 1856, widely publicizing the massacre and at the same time

6 Nancy L. Rosenblum, 'Introduction', in Henry David Thoreau, *Thoreau: Political Writings*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Beijing: China University of Political Science and Law Press, 1996), p. xxii.

exciting vehement accusations against Brown's raid, trying to prove the Northern Republicans' involvement in it. On 18 November 1859, the *Staunton Republican Vindicator* expressed a typical Southern view, decrying Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry as 'a manifestation of the horrific and wrong-headed doctrines of Black Republicanism'.[7] The Mississippi Senator Jefferson Davis spelled out the loss of confidence in the Republican Party when he said: 'When the Government gets into the hands of the Republican party, the arm of the General Government, we are told, will not be raised for the protection of our slave property ... Then John Brown, and a thousand John Browns, can invade us, and the Government will not protect us.'[8] These public expressions condemned Brown, and intensified the tense relationship between the two political parties.

Facing the Democratic newspapers' accusations, the Republican newspapers, including the *Springfield Daily Republican,* the *Atlas and Daily Bee*, the *Boston Evening Transcript*, and the *Amherst Hampshire and Franklin Express*, rushed to deny any connection with the Harpers Ferry incident. For fear that Brown's raid might lead to their defeat in the forthcoming elections, the Republican newspapers restated their principle concerning the issue of slavery, which was that there should not be extension of slavery to the non-slavery states, but there would be no interference with the institution of slavery where it already existed.

Northern Republican journalists, though occasionally showing some sympathy for Brown's unswerving conviction to the antislavery cause, wasted no time in repudiating his violent attempt at insurrection. Many newspapers described Brown as being mad or insane, especially after the disclosure of details of the Pottawatomie massacre. The Republican newspapers' ambivalent attitudes are reflected in an editorial in the *Boston Daily Evening Traveller* on 3 December 1859:

> ... a man who pursues even a good end by wrong means, inflicts quite as great an injury upon society, as if his object itself was wrong. We have seen this fully illustrated in the religious persecutions of former ages, ... the more earnest and able, the most courageous and the more *pious*, a man is, in pursuing wrong ends, or even *right purposes by wrong means*, the more dangerous does he become to the community, and the more uncharitable and unmerciful towards all who differ from him in opinion.[9]

This kind of attack on Brown's resort to violence was launched not only by the Northern Republicans, but also most Northern pacifist abolitionists, who were committed to

7 David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), p. 359.

8 See *Congressional Globe*, 36th Cong., 1st session, 1859, p. 69.

9 *Boston Daily Evening Traveller*, 3 December 1859, quoted in Michael Meyer, 'Thoreau's Rescue of John Brown from History', *Studies in the American Renaissance* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), pp. 301–316, esp. pp. 307–308.

non-violent moral persuasion, represented by William Lloyd Garrison and the American Anti-Slavery Society. They embraced Brown's antislavery beliefs, but denounced his means. One of their newspapers, *The Liberator*, described Brown's actions as 'a misguided, wild, and apparently insane ... effort'.[10] Garrison said that the American Anti-Slavery Society and its newspapers, including the *Anti-Slavery Standard* and *The Liberator*, have always 'earnestly endeavored to dissuade the slaves and their helpers from this method of vindicating their rights'.[11] Garrison tried to disassociate his group from the Harpers Ferry incident. Making a bad situation worse, John Brown failed to win the support of the backers of his antislavery cause, the Secret Six, most of whom publicly denied any connection with Brown's raid in case that they might be arrested.[12] Brown was basically abandoned and left to his fate.

It was into this situation that New England Transcendentalists, including Thoreau and Emerson, stepped to Brown's defence. As Reynolds claims in his biography of John Brown: 'Had the Transcendentalists not sanctified the arch-Abolitionist John Brown, he may have very well remained an obscure, tangential figure – a forgettable oddball.'[13] After the raid, Thoreau paid close attention to reports, statements, and comments in the newspapers and the public talk of his Concord neighbours. The negative media coverage continued from October 1859 into early 1860s, and the public during this period almost overwhelmingly denounced Brown or accused him of insanity. To reverse the unfavourable discourses in the media and on the street, Thoreau decided to publicize his opinions on John Brown in a series of lectures and essays.

Thoreau's lectures

The first time Thoreau delivered 'A Plea for Captain John Brown' was on Sunday 30 October 1859, in Concord Town Hall to a Concord audience, a mere fortnight after the raid. Thoreau had originally intended to call a meeting in the vestry of Concord church, but was turned down. Instead of giving up, he decided to call the meeting in the Town Hall, and since 'The selectmen would not have the town bell rung, so Thoreau rang it himself.'[14] When local Republicans showed their disapproval of the meeting, they received the reply that 'he was not asking for advice but announcing a

10 Thoreau 1996, p. 145.

11 See *The Liberator*, 18 October 1859.

12 The Secret Six were Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Samuel Gridley Howe, Theodore Parker, Franklin Sanborn, Gerrit Smith, and George Luther Stearns, who secretly funded the raid on Harpers Ferry led by John Brown.

13 Reynolds 2005, p. 215.

14 Robert B. Richardson, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 370.

meeting'.[15] Despite public disapproval, Thoreau steadfastly stuck to his plan of giving the lecture. Emerson noted that a great many people who were initially opposed to Thoreau's ideas were so touched by the force, eloquence, and passion of the lecture that he 'was heard by all respectfully, by many with a sympathy that surprised themselves'.[16]

Thoreau repeated the lecture twice the following week, on 1 and 3 November. The lecture was much praised and well received by large audiences. Henry W. Nevinson said that 'A Plea for Captain John Brown' was 'one of the greatest speeches ever delivered among mankind'.[17] After the deliverance of 'A Plea for Captain John Brown', *The Liberator* reported:

> This exciting theme seemed to have awakened 'the hermit of Concord' from his usual state of philosophic indifference, and he spoke with real enthusiasm for an hour and a half. A very large audience listened ... giving hearty applause to some of the most energetic expressions of the speaker.[18]

To further reverse people's opinion of Brown, on the day of his execution, 2 December, Thoreau, Emerson, and other staunch Brown supporters attended 'Exercises at Town Hall, Concord', on which occasion Thoreau gave a lecture on the 'Martyrdom of John Brown'. Thoreau also wrote 'The Last Days of John Brown' for the commemoration service at Brown's graveside in North Elba, New York, on 4 July 1860, in which Thoreau continued his passionate defence of Brown. In this address, Thoreau talked about some change in attitudes towards John Brown, referring to 'one preacher' and 'an influential class-teacher' who had changed opinion and thought 'John Brown was right'.[19] He also stressed that 'most Northern men, and a few Southern ones were wonderfully stirred by Brown's behavior and words', and recognized him as 'heroic' and 'noble'.[20] He further suggested that the accusation of insanity had disappeared from the newspaper coverage. Thoreau's delivery of 'A Plea for Captain John Brown' had helped in shifting people's negative opinion of John Brown.

The lecture was later included in *Echoes of Harper's Ferry*, a collection of antislavery papers, sermons, poems, and other documents that commemorated John Brown, published in order to raise money for the families of the Harpers Ferry raiders. The volume was published by James Redpath, an antislavery activist, and it sold 33 000 copies

15 Walter Harding, *A Thoreau Handbook* (New York: New York University Press, 1959), p. 66.

16 See Emerson, quoted in Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (I–XIV), Walden Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), I, p. xxii.

17 Henry W. Nevinson, *Essays in Freedom and Rebellion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), p. 113.

18 *The Liberator*, 4 November 1859, quoted in Henry S. Salt, *The Life of Henry David Thoreau* (1890; repr., London: Forgotten Books, 2013), pp. 196–197.

19 Thoreau 1996, p. 164.

20 Ibid., p. 165.

in less than a month, going on to be highly significant for the antislavery movement as a whole.[21] The lecture had been an event, with Thoreau's highly self-conscious performance a key element in the whole process of defending John Brown and bringing audiences round.

The text itself served as a performance, with Thoreau creating an ideal image of Brown so as to shift the nationwide hostility towards him and convince the audiences of the righteousness of Brown's actions. According to F. B. Sanborn, Thoreau met Brown only twice,[22] and his knowledge of Brown was actually quite limited. The first time they met was in March 1857, when both he and Emerson were impressed by what Brown had done to fight slavery. In May 1859, the second time they met, Thoreau heard John Brown speak about the antislavery struggles in Kansas at Concord Town Hall, and he had donated money to Brown's antislavery cause.

Whether or not Thoreau knew about Brown's violent killings has excited some speculation among Thoreau scholars. Gilman Ostrander has argued that 'Brown himself purposely covered up the blackest pages of the Kansas Campaigns when he talked with Emerson and Thoreau in Concord'.[23] Walter Harding insists that if Thoreau had realized that Brown once led a massacre, 'he might never have endorsed him and might have been convinced of his insanity'.[24] Michael Meyer, in 'Thoreau's Rescue of John Brown from History', has suggested that it is possible that Thoreau may have learned of John Brown's part in the Pottawatomie massacre before he gave his lecture, but that he either thought it a fabricated report, or simply ignored it.[25]

While the facts of the case may never be recovered, Mayer indicates an important aspect of the nature of Thoreau's interest, which is that it was directed towards 'an ideal of John Brown' rather than the actual Brown. In his lecture, Thoreau chose to evoke only those aspects that could transform people's hostility into an understanding of the righteousness of resorting to violence in pursuit of a cause, by elevating Brown to the ranks of such heroes as Cromwell, Franklin, and Washington, who achieved greatness by such means.[26]

At the beginning of his lecture, Thoreau expressed his intention to 'correct the tone and the statements of the newspapers, and of my countrymen generally' about Brown's character and actions.[27] He mentioned the evident anger about Brown in media cov-

21 William E. Cain (ed.), *A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 49.

22 F. B. Sanborn, *The Life of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917), p. 285.

23 Harding 1959, p. 66.

24 Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau: A Biography* (rev. ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 418.

25 Meyer 1980, p. 310.

26 Thoreau 1996, pp. 140 and 154.

27 Ibid., p. 137.

erage. In order to contradict these false opinions, Thoreau first established Brown as 'by descent and birth' from New England and belonging to the Puritans.[28] The emphasis on his New England origins and the heritage of Puritanism made Brown into a human being, a counter-image of the cold-blooded killer repeatedly described in the press. Thoreau also accredited Brown with several typically Puritan qualities, such as simplicity, modesty, honesty, piety, and hard work. To understand Thoreau's underlying rhetoric, one has to contextualize his description of Brown against the backdrop of the position of New England in that era.

New England identity

New England held a special position in the creation of American identity after the American War of Independence. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, New Englanders struggled to construct their national identity and intentionally spread their virtues as Puritans, advocating that New England regional culture should be the model for all Americans. Stephanie Kermes writes in *Creating an American Identity: New England, 1789–1825* that 'many New Englanders began to see themselves as better republicans and better Americans than their Southern countrymen', and 'by celebrating themselves as true Americans and true republicans, New England claimed to embody the new nation'.[29]

New Englanders were proud of their regional identity and exerted themselves to project it as an ideal image. They considered themselves to be moral, pious, and representative of all the American virtues, in contrast to the Southerners' immorality, irreligiousness, and lack of virtue. Therefore, in the early nineteenth century, the New England identity represented not only a regional identity, but the Northern identity, and even the American national identity. That is why Thoreau called Brown 'the representative of the North' and 'the most American of us all'.[30] This elevation of Brown's image shows Thoreau's intention of holding him up as a role model for all American citizens in accordance with New England and Puritan virtues, thus encouraging the New England audiences' identification with Brown.

This idealized image was bound up with a Puritan identity, for religion was believed to be 'an essential element of the New England identity' in the early nineteenth century.[31] In sermons and newspapers, local clergy repeatedly emphasized the religious origins of the first New England settlers, and announced that New Englanders were

28 Ibid., p. 138.

29 Stephanie Kermes, *Creating an American Identity: New England, 1789–1825* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 4–5.

30 Thoreau 1996, p. 147.

31 Kermes 2008, p. 170.

God's chosen people. These religious discourses, which played a prominent part in New England life, helped to create a distinct regional identity and added to their sense of superiority. By attributing to Brown the identity of a New Englander and the virtues of Puritanism, Thoreau not only indicated his integrity, but encouraged the New Englanders' sense of superiority to and hostility towards Southern backwardness and immorality, especially as represented in the institution of slavery, which John Brown had committed himself to abolish.

After establishing John Brown among New Englanders and Puritans, Thoreau further praised him as a 'Transcendentalist above all' who put his creed into the deed.[32] Transcendentalism flourished in intellectual circles in New England from 1830s through to the 1850s, with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thoreau the main figures in the movement. One of the core concepts of Transcendentalism is the Oversoul, first outlined by Emerson in his essay 'The Over-Soul' published in *Essays* in 1841. The Oversoul, for the Transcendentalists, means the 'divine spirit or mind that was present in each and every man and in all of nature'.[33]

Transcendentalists believe in the presence of the divine spirit in human beings, which makes it possible to perceive higher truths through a direct relationship with God. If the human soul can be a reflection of God and attain higher truth, it means that all human activity can be viewed as the manifestation of the divine mind – and that human beings can better themselves by self-improvement and society by social reforms. Therefore, many Transcendentalists committed themselves to the cause of education and social reforms such as the antislavery movement: by these lights, it was right of Thoreau to regard Brown as a Transcendentalist.

In the lecture, Thoreau claimed that Brown 'has a spark of divinity in him'.[34] This spark of divinity is what Transcendentalists believe each human soul has within itself: they take it to be true that the divinity within all humans can lead them to the higher truth or the higher law. In Thoreau's eyes, Brown represented one who followed 'a higher law' when he crossed swords with the law and was brave enough to wage war against America itself when he found it on the wrong side. Thoreau states:

> I wish I could say that Brown was the representative of the North. He was a superior man. He did not value his bodily life in comparison with ideal things. He did not recognize unjust human laws, but resisted them as he was bid. For once we are lifted out of the trivialness and dust of politics into the region of truth and manhood. No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature, knowing himself for a man, and the equal of any and all governments. In that sense he was the most American of us all.[35]

32 Thoreau 1996, p. 140.

33 Leslie Perrin Wilson, *Thoreau, Emerson, and Transcendentalism* (Foster City: IDG Books, 2000), p. 5.

34 Thoreau 1996, p. 155.

35 Ibid., p. 147.

Thoreau depicted Brown as a defender of human dignity and the individual's equal status with government, which fitted in with the Transcendentalists' elevation of the individual and their unhesitant disobedience to government policies whenever government forced an immoral situation on the people. Brown's deeds stood for the power of the individual, which coincided with the Transcendentalists' concerns. Thoreau had always admired John Brown for his courage in acting on principle. Emerson had expressed the same sentiment: 'John Brown was an idealist. He believed in ideas to that extent, that he existed to put them all into action. He did not believe in moral suasion; – he believed in putting the thing through.'[36] For both Thoreau and Emerson, John Brown had done what Transcendentalists would like to have done in the antislavery cause, which was to advocate the power of the individual by following a higher truth.

Having labelled John Brown a Transcendentalist, Thoreau went on to construct Brown's image as a saint and martyr. Thoreau's lecture was first delivered on 2 November, three days before Brown was sentenced to death. However, in the lecture, Thoreau was already treating Brown as if he were dead. It seems obvious that Thoreau was well aware of the fact that Brown's martyrdom would excite greater sympathy from the public, who therefore would be more likely to abandon their hostile attitude.

In Thoreau's opinion, Brown's readiness to sacrifice his life to fight slavery made him a spiritual hero whose execution could be compared to the crucifixion of Jesus. In the lecture, Thoreau states: 'Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an Angel of Light.'[37] Emerson, in his speech on 'Courage' on 8 November 1859, also referred to Brown as 'the new saint awaiting his martyrdom, and who, if he shall suffer, will make the gallows glorious like the cross'.[38] The juxtaposition of a saint-like Brown with Christ suggests that for Transcendentalists such as Thoreau and Emerson, Brown had reached 'the point of apotheosis'.[39] His execution was the death of a martyr who willingly gave his life for his beliefs.

John Brown himself well realized the effect his martyrdom would achieve, and said as much in a letter written to the Revd McFarland on 23 November 1859: 'I think I feel as happy as Paul did when he lay in prison. He knew if they killed him, it would greatly

36 Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Speech at a Meeting to Aid John Brown's Family – 18 November 1859', in *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, eds. Len Gougeon & Joel Myerson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 119.

37 Thoreau 1996, p. 156.

38 Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Courage', Boston, 8 Nov. 1859. <http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/John_Brown_%28abolitionist%29>, accessed 25 April 2015.

39 Len Gougeon, 'Thoreau and Reform', in Joel Myerson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 194–214, esp. p. 208.

advance the cause of Christ; that was the reason he rejoiced so. On that same ground "I do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice".[40]

In fashioning himself after Paul the Apostle, Brown thought of his death as a predestined historical event in the antislavery movement. The 'cause of Christ' meant in Brown's case the elimination of slavery. He believed that his martyrdom was ordained by God, and he was performing God's will by fighting against slavery and dying for it. This idea was clearly expressed in the speech Brown gave at his sentencing:

> I believe that to have interfered as I have done – as I have always freely admitted I have done – in behalf of His despised poor, was not wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments – I submit; so let it be done![41]

In this speech, Brown insisted on the righteousness of his antislavery cause by projecting himself as the representation of justice; he also showed his willingness to die for the justice of his cause. By shedding blood and later dying at the hands of government, Brown intended to send the message that 'I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land: will never be purged away; but with Blood.'[42]

The making of a symbol

John Brown, until his execution, still firmly believed that the antislavery cause could only be furthered by resorting to violence. This was yet another aspect that Thoreau endeavoured to rationalize in his lecture. After all, Brown's use of violence as a means to an end, in this case the emancipation of slaves, was the most controversial issue in the media coverage and public opinion. By constructing his image as a Transcendentalist and a martyr, Thoreau justified Brown's objective by drawing people's attention to his spiritual nobility. To counter the negative discourses about Brown, Thoreau had to vindicate his violent means. While Emerson nursed some doubt about Brown's violence, Thoreau did not hesitate to speak out in defence of Brown.

40 See John Brown's letter to Reverend McFarland, 23 November 1859, quoted by John Stauffer & Zoe Trodd, 'Meteor of War: The John Brown Cycle', in Andrew Taylor & Eldrid Herrington (eds), *The Afterlife of John Brown* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 121–144, esp. p. 133.

41 Louis Ruchames (ed.), 'John Brown's Last Speech to the Court, November 2, 1859', in *A John Brown Reader* (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1959), p. 126.

42 Kristen Proehl, 'Transforming the "Madman into a Saint": The Cultural Memory Site of John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry in Antislavery Literature and History', in Taylor & Herrington (eds) 2005, pp. 107–120, esp. p. 107.

In the lecture, Thoreau made it plain that he recognized Brown's right to rescue the slaves by force, and even admitted that this was the quickest way to liberate them. Thoreau, to show he did not prefer the use of violence, said that he himself did 'not wish to kill nor to be killed', but he also conceded that he could 'foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable'.[43] Based on this line of reasoning, Thoreau pleaded for Brown's right to resort to violence in the Harpers Ferry raid.

> I know that the mass of my countrymen think that the only righteous use that can be made of Sharps' rifles and revolvers is to fight duels with them, when we are insulted by nations, or to hunt Indians, or shoot fugitive slaves with them, or the like. I think that for once the Sharps' rifles and the revolvers were employed in a righteous cause.[44]

Thoreau here set the tone for the recognition of Brown's raid as a kind of righteous violence. Throughout the 1850s, there were heated debates among abolitionists about whether the use of violence to eliminate the institution of slavery was justifiable. Thoreau's vindication of its use reverberated among the pacifist abolitionists, and to some extent accelerated the 'ideological transitions of 1850s America' from rejection to gradual acceptance of the use of violence in the cause of antislavery.[45] Thoreau's recasting of Brown, by drawing parallels between the martyrdom of Brown and Christ and through his siding with Brown for using violence for a righteous cause, prepared people to resort to violence when full-scale civil war broke out in 1861.

In treating John Brown as a martyr, Thoreau romanticized Brown's image. John Brown was no longer a real person, but became a symbol, a legend, a myth. This idealized image as a martyr for the freedom and equality of human beings was accepted by the Union troops in the Civil War. Emerson noted in his journal in 1865 that when Civil War broke out, it was 'impossible to keep the name of John Brown out of the war the first to the last'.[46] In his book, Leech claimed that 'I have seen Federal regiments marching on to battle enthusiastically singing "John Brown's body lies a-moldering in the grave, but his soul is marching on"'.[47] *John Brown's Body* was the fighting anthem for the Union Army. In this song, Brown was cast as a symbol of courage and self-sacrifice – the image Thoreau projected in his lecture. When Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on 1 January 1863 and announced the official emancipation of the slaves, Brown's plan to eliminate the institution of slavery finally bore fruit in the form of violence on a larger scale.

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43 Thoreau 1996, p. 153.

44 Ibid.

45 Proehl 2005, p. 114.

46 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, eds. Ronald A. Bosco & Glen Jackson, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), XVI, p. 468.

47 Samuel Vanderslip Leech, *The Raid of John Brown at Harpers Ferry as I Saw It* (Washington, DC, 1909), p. 20.

In literary and cultural discourses, John Brown's image as a model of courage and morality and as a heroic fighter for democracy was also adopted by generations of writers and politicians in their literary works and political speeches. In 1910, Theodore Roosevelt, at the John Brown Memorial Park in Osawatomie, made much of John Brown's significance to American history. Roosevelt stated:

> John Brown stands to us now as representing the men and the generation who rendered the greatest service ever rendered this country. He stood for heroic valor, grim energy, fierce fidelity to high ideals. A great debt is owed to John Brown because he is one of the most striking figures in the mighty struggle which was to keep us forever a free and united nation, which was to secure the continuance of the most tremendous democratic experiment ever tried.[48]

Roosevelt treated John Brown as a war hero who helped shape America into a united, free and democratic country. His name was also constantly referred to during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s as a hero for African Americans. In today's cultural discourses, John Brown is thought of as more of a hero than as a madman. The negative comments were largely forgotten, while the positive image stuck. The vocal support for Brown from Transcendentalists such as Thoreau and Emerson had reversed public opinion, and their speeches and essays served to romanticize John Brown's image, which remains common currency to this day.

Conclusion

In his lecture, Thoreau's discursive construction of Brown's heroic image of martyrdom and his acceptance of Brown's righteous violence influenced changing attitudes towards John Brown in the Civil War years. Brown's image as a symbol of democracy and liberty has been accepted and cited by people ever since, becoming part of the discourses of cultural memory. He is memorialized not as a maniac or a terrorist, but as a hero and martyr. In mediating his personal attitudes towards the Harpers Ferry raid on a textual level, Thoreau offered an interpretation of events that justified Brown's resort to violence, constructed his image as a martyr, and thus achieved the aim of shifting public opinion in his favour. The power of this text in transforming reality was well represented in Thoreau's lectures in defence of John Brown.

48 Quoted in Stauffer & Trodd 2005, p. 138.

The Materiality of Poetry in Athena Farrokhzad's *White Blight*

Evelina Stenbeck

In the summer of 2014, the Swedish poet Athena Farrokhzad hosted a 90-minute-long radio show, *Sommar i P1*.[1] This popular radio show has been aired annually over the summer, hence the name, since 1959. Each day the programme is presented by a new host from a mix of artists, writers, politicians, businesspeople, and other individuals of note, who are given the freedom to talk about topics of their choice – often themselves – for an hour and a half. From the very start, Farrokhzad made clear that her programme would have an overt political stamp by quoting Bertolt Brecht's lines from 'To Those Who Follow in Our Wake':

> What times are these, in which
> A conversation about trees is almost a crime
> For in doing so we maintain our silence about so much wrongdoing![2]

Moving on to Adrienne Rich's intertextual imperative on the issue in the poem 'What Kind of Times Are These' (1995), Farrokhzad started weaving a net of political problems and poetical texts:

> And I won't tell you where it is, so why do I tell you
> anything? Because you still listen, because in times like these
> to have you listen at all, it's necessary
> to talk about trees.[3]

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1 Athena Farrokhzad, *Sommar i P1* [Summer on P1], Sveriges Radio, 21 July 2014, available at <http://t.sr.se/1zIhJxI>.

2 Bertolt Brecht, 'An die Nachgeborenen', *Gesammelte Werke*, IV, *Stücke* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), pp. 722–725: 'Was sind das für Zeiten, wo | Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen ist | Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten einschließt!' Transl. Scott Horton, available at <http://harp.rs/1tzwyij>.

3 Adrienne Cecile Rich, 'What Kind of Times Are These', in *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New, 1950–1984* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), p. 253.

The necessity of talking about trees, highlighted by Brecht and Rich alike, became in Farrokhzad's programme a battle cry when addressing urgent political topics – migration, exploitation, capitalism, racism, fascism, and sexism – from a national as well as an international perspective. The reactions from the listeners were strong. Her show received over 90 complaints and was thus brought before the Swedish Broadcasting Commission, charged with violating the Swedish Radio and Television Act. She was accused of encouraging acts of violence and promoting a communist revolution. She was eventually cleared of all charges.

If nothing else, Farrokhzad's radio programme highlighted that Swedish contemporary poetry has, in the past decade or so, shown a movement towards a *littérature engagée*. Swedish contemporary poetry has also displayed an element of what might best be labelled performative aesthetics (some might call it relational aesthetics).[4] In this essay, I seek to explore this intersection between performativity and politics in Swedish contemporary poetry, and to investigate and explore the relation and the interaction between these two tendencies. Differently put, this essay will attempt to formulate an answer to the question of the ways in which Swedish contemporary poetry makes use of performative strategies to act in a political and/or a literary public sphere.

The main focus will be what I perceive as performative strategies that simulate embodiment as well as the materiality *within the text*. In conjunction with this, this paper also investigates the effects of the formal aspects, including the material language, the material body, and, lastly, the material form of the literary text in a non-textual reality, or the *Performanz* of the poetic text. It is my intention to demonstrate how these elements came together in Farrokhzad's poetic practice to create a space for political action.

Farrokhzad's poetic and political practice

Farrokhzad's literary work is defined by a mix of different forms, genres, and practices. Her poetry, performances, literary criticism, translations, and dramas are characterized by a cacophony of voices and utterances.[5] The collective, as a trope, is foregrounded in her performances as well as constituting an important theme in her work. Farrokhzad is careful to point out the political potential in this kind of poetical crossbreeding.[6]

Vitsvit, or *White Blight* is the first book of her poetry to break with her previous

4 Martin Glas Serup, *Relationel poesi* (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2013).

5 See, for example, Athena Farrokhzad & Tova Gerge, *Manualen* (Hägersten: Eolit, 2008) and *G=T=B=R=G, Ett tunt underlag* (Oslo: Attåt, 2009).

6 Mirjam Jonsson, 'Kollektiv kreativitet', *Fokus*, 10 (2010), <http://www.fokus.se/2010/03/kollektiv-kreativitet/>, accessed 9 March 2015. All translations, unless noted otherwise, are my own.

form of co-writing.[7] *White Blight* portrays a migrant family's experiences of violence, assimilation, and integration when confronted with the white language's social order, or, rather, the hegemony of whiteness.[8] At the centre of this experience is the daughter of the family, who, through the organization of the form of *White Blight,* collects and mediates the family's utterances in the form of lines. This gives the poem a theatrical character and establishes a performance aspect of the stanzas. A line is something supposed to be verbally expressed as well as bodily acted; an embodiment of the written word, at the core of materialization of language. The lines of *White Blight* emerge in a fragmented way, which also contributes to the poetic effect of the text. *White Blight* is also characterized by its eclectic use of other literary, popular, religious, and Marxist texts: The Bible, for example, and texts by the Haitian Marxist writer Jacques Roumain, singer Beyoncé, Frantz Fanon, and Karl Marx. The language and style of *White Blight* is deceptively simple, but at the same time makes use of solemn religious metaphors. Despite a serious subject matter, humorous elements make up a good proportion of the text.

The Swedish title, *Vitsvit*, is a compound word, constructed from the words *vit*, meaning white, and *svit*, meaning suite, sequence, or complication. The voices of each of the family members can be understood as a composition of several voices as in a choir. Each voice has its own story to tell about migration, and gathered together in the text they create a unity in their disparity.

White Blight expresses a constant fight for representation, voice, and resources. Its main expression is represented in the daughter's will to bring together a unified experience of migration in her writing. But, as we will see, the other family members frustrate a unified, collective experience. Her attempt to unify as fractured and diverse a story as migration is therefore a theme in itself, waiting to be questioned and explored in the text. The primacy of narrative and the question of whose narrative is being told have been explicitly addressed by Farrokhzad, who stresses the intertwining of writing and society:

> It is this, that the discourse of revolution or racism is all about; the fight for the narrative. Society is the fight for the narrative of society.[9]

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7 Athena Farrokhzad, *Vitsvit* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 2013), *White Blight*, transl. Jennifer Hayashida (Litchfield: Argos, 2015). I am grateful to Athena Farrokhzad for access to the translation before publication for the purposes of this essay. *Vitsvit* has also been translated into Danish, Romanian, Norwegian, Spanish, and Arabic.

8 Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000).

9 Lina Kalmteg, 'Seriöst, jag skiter i Augustpriset', *Svenska Dagbladet*, 24 November 2013: 'Det är det som diskursen kring revolution eller rasism ytterst handlar om: kampen om hur berättelsen ska skrivas. Samhället är kampen om hur berättelsen om samhället ska skrivas.'

The question of narrative is of course a recurring topic in political contemporary poetry, as is evident, for example, in Audre Lorde's poem 'To the Poet Who Happens to be Black and the Black Poet Who Happens to be a Woman' (1986):

> I cannot recall the words of my first poem
> but I remember the promise
> I made my pen
> never to leave it
> lying
> in somebody else's blood[10]

As the example of Farrokhzad and Lorde illustrates, the experience of violence – physical as well as symbolic – shapes and affects the material body. Subjectivity, like language, has to be enacted and embodied in a story or a poem. Can this type of political poetry make new shared experiences possible? This is a question of poetry's *Performanz*, and one which *White Blight* brings to the political debate in the public sphere. Yet another major theme that *White Blight* highlights is what poetry is able to do with words, making it a form of poetological statement.

Materiality – theoretical points of departure

Farrokhzad, as will be seen, has a material perspective on poetic language. In her work, one finds a mimetic relationship between poem and world; that is, they are fit to interact and to act upon each other. It is this mimetic relationship that means a poetical work can thus influence society and address political issues. On a theoretical level, this chimes with a Marxist perspective on reality. 'Marx transferred the category of subject from idealism to materialism, by insisting on the subject and its actions as one', as Étienne Balibar puts it in *The Philosophy of Marx*.[11] In opposition to an idealist tradition, language, bodies, history, and the like together form material relations. These relations, for example between language and body, are seen as constitutive of the subject and its actions. As expressed in the eleventh of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845): 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.' In this view, the poetic language of *White Blight* evidently makes claims on the transformative power of poetic language; in short, it makes claims on *Performanz* at the level of reality.

The relationship between body and language is of particular interest in *White Blight*, since it is seemingly aligned with Elizabeth Grosz and other corporeal femi-

10 Audre Lorde, 'To the Poet Who Happens to be Black and the Black Poet Who Happens to be a Woman', in *Our Dead Behind Us* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), pp. 6–7.

11 Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 26

nists, who consider the body to be a threshold phenomenon: 'Far from being an inert, passive, noncultural and ahistorical term, the body may be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual and intellectual struggles.'[12] The body is conceived of as a site of inscription, and a performative of identity.[13]

Material language – the process of body-making and subjectivation

In *White Blight,* the relationship between language and material body is captured by the symbol of a mother's breast milk. The symbol has a triangular structure and consists of heritage, language, and history. All these parts in the poem are intimately connected to the material (and maternal) body. The relationship is immediately expressed in the very first lines:

> My family arrived here in a Marxist tradition
>
> My mother immediately filled the house with Santa knick-knacks
> Weighed the pros and cons of the plastic Christmas tree
> as if the problem were hers
>
> During the day she distinguished between long and short vowels
> as if the sounds that came out of her mouth
> could wash the olive oil from her skin
>
> My mother let bleach run through her syntax
> On the other side of punctuation her syllables became whiter
> than a winter in Norrland
>
> My mother built us a future consisting of quantity of life
> In the suburban basement she lined up canned goods
> as if preparing for a war
>
> In the evenings she searched for recipes and peeled potatoes
> As if it were her history inscribed
> in the Jansson's temptation casserole
>
> To think that I sucked at those breasts
> To think that she put her barbarism in my mouth[14]

The mother's response to their migration is central for all the family members. It is the very first situation described in *White Blight* and it occupies the whole first page. It is also the only part of the poem written from an unmediated first-person perspec-

12 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 19.

13 Ibid., p. 23.

14 Farrokhzad 2015, p. 7. The visual and graphical aspects of Farrokhzad's poems are not rendered in this paper, due to technical and copyright reasons.

tive. The rest of the stanzas are written in the form 'My mother/father/brother/uncle/grandmother said'. Only on this first page does the 'I', the daughter, speak without her voice becoming interfoiled with the voices of the other family members.

In *White Blight* it is primarily white language, in this case Swedish, that represents the common picture of 'Swedishness' on a linguistic, cultural, and identity-based level. This in turn is a derivation of the symbolic cluster that a mother tongue consists of. But whiteness also imprints the picture of belonging. In the text, questions of belonging are presented by means of attributes that point to specific places and cultures. They aim to present 'Swedishness', which largely means access to the Swedish language, as a privileged position in a white hegemonic structure.

The setting is immediately given by the word 'here' in the first stanza. The whiteness of the place is alluded to throughout the text ('whiter than a winter in Norrland'), here by referring to the northernmost, most sparsely populated, and coldest region of Sweden ('I was never intended for frost-ridden dawn'), as well as in the cultural attributes of 'the Jansson's temptation casserole'.[15]

That the white language referred to is Swedish is made clear by the mother's attempt to integrate and assimilate into the Swedish society by learning a new, white language: 'My mother let bleach run through her syntax | On the other side of punctuation her syllables became whiter | than a winter in Norrland', and 'During the day she distinguished between long and short vowels | as if the sounds that came out of her mouth | could wash the olive oil from her skin.'[16] The linguistic sound is immediately connected to the body, and in particular to the skin. Linguistic assimilation becomes a way for the mother to integrate the material bodies of herself and her family into the white social order.

If the mother represents a longing for assimilation and belonging through language acquisition, the father has his home in an ideological space, and not in a specific physical location. This is true to a certain extent of the rest of the family as well, as the first stanza makes clear ('My family arrived here in a Marxist tradition'), but it is mainly connected to the father. His dreams and longing for a home lie in an international Marxist or socialist utopia. His expressed wishes are a testament to this fact: 'Bury me where all property has been expropriated.'

All the members of the family are obsessed with the question of interment. The soil as a conventional symbol for home and belonging is frequently used in *White Blight*. As the brother says, 'Some day I want to die in a country | where people can

15 'Jansson's temptation' is a traditional Swedish dish, akin to Dauphinoise potatoes, made with potatoes, onions, pickled sprats, breadcrumbs and cream. It is a standard Christmas dish, but is also eaten on other occasions such as Easter.

16 Farrokhzad 2015, p. 7.

pronounce my name.'[17] The Marxist tradition is international in character, it has no specific place. For this particular family it is evident that it is a tradition that offers an alternate heritage and history to that of place and nation. The Marxist heritage is by nature ideological, political, and social, belonging as it does to a tradition of ideas and practices rather than of national borders. These two very different heritages, the place and the idea (or the spatial and the ideological), frame the daughter's and her family's experiences of migration.

The deictic word 'here' in the first stanza establishes the setting for the reader. He or she is immediately involved in the spatial conflict of place. The place, Sweden, becomes a symbolic stage for the event of the poem, since it accentuates and activates the *Performanz* of the poetry in a non-textual, and thus, political environment. The word 'here' questions the reader. This place is where we start, so how do you intend to act, or, more implicitly, how are you supposed to act, in this specific setting and place? The marking of the setting as Swedish is a way of drawing the reader into what Erika Fischer-Lichte has referred to as the autopoietic feedback loop.[18]

In *White Blight*, the mother represents the complex problem of relocation and translocation between different geographical places. Hence, she develops strategies to deal with this situation that involve reorientation, assimilation, and integration.[19] The father, on the other hand, represents an ideological belonging, as we have seen. In the dialectic movement between these two positions, or strategies for survival in white language, society, and hegemony, the daughter embodies a synthesis of sorts of these two stances. From her position it is possible for her to uncover the internal oppositions of migration. It is from this point, from the literal 'here', that the process of writing starts. The poem itself is a testimony to the daughter's triumph in having transcended a silenced and unrepresented position in Swedish society and language by combining – wielding – both material place and material language.

The fundamental importance of this triumph can be explained by the concept of subjectivation and, set against that, the mimetic potential of language. The process of subjectivation as an idea runs from Hegel to the French existentialists and on to Jacques Lacan and Frantz Fanon.[20] This subjectivation is connected to the fight for voice and representation, and, in the long run, for resources. The daughter's body is not represented in white language. By writing directly against the romantic discourses

17 Ibid., p. 19.

18 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, transl. Saskya Iris Jain (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 38–74.

19 I use mainly Sara Ahmed's theory of whiteness and orientation developed in Ahmed 2000 and in her *Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

20 For a discussion of the concept of subjectivation, see also Erik Erlanson's contribution to this volume on p. 150.

concerning the mother and father, she can emancipate her voice and become a proper subject in the world.[21]

Then there is a firm belief that language, including poetic language, has a mimetic potential. Language can transform reality and vice versa. Thus when reality forms language, it constitutes in *White Blight* a hegemonic practice. In contrast, when language is used in a subversive way, it can transform reality. Language and bodies are thus intertwined in an inseparable relationship that has an inherent transformative potential, of which the *Performanz* of poetry vis-à-vis society is a function.

Maternal heritage – body and language

Breast milk is closely associated with mother tongue in *White Blight*. By changing her language, the mother transmits a new, white language to her daughter. The mother's strategy to assimilate and integrate herself into Swedish society, and thus into white language, into *whiteness*, is something that the daughter cannot refuse. The daughter is even forced to be grateful for her mother's attempts, which makes for a deeply complex relationship between the two of them:

> My mother said: If we meet again we will not let on that we knew each other
> when you were hungry and it was I who carried the milk[22]

This is the fundamental conflict between mother and daughter. Their relationship, from that moment on, bears the stamp of guilt. Theirs is a universal guilt, as true of all mother–daughter relationships as between the mother and her own mother in *White Blight*.

> My mother handed the glass to her mother and said: Now we are even
> Here is the milk back[23]

Within the poem, 'white milk' becomes a symbol for the 'bleached' language that is the mother's legacy to her daughter. The language that the daughter speaks and writes is frequently singled out as a belonging to the mother. For emancipation, the daughter needs her native language, however marked it might be by nationalist violence. The daughter demands her 'mother tongue' back – an act that resembles and alludes to a postcolonial imperative to write back from the colonized countries to the Empire.[24]

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21 I here rely on Frantz Fanon's concept of the political subject and its becomings, as stated in his works *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952) and *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: Éditions Maspero, 1961).

22 Farrokhzad 2015, p. 26.

23 Ibid., p. 24.

24 See, for example, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989).

My mother said: I will reclaim what belongs to me
You will meet death robbed of language
Speechless you came, speechless you will return[25]

The white language is not the daughter's to choose; it is given her, and she cannot refuse it. It even precedes her existence. Maternal language takes a material form, becoming embodied in the daughter's poetical language. This is another way of explaining how the mother's material body conflicts and interacts with the daughter's body, in a chain of events that is similar to how white language acts on all the bodies in the family by dint of the place and traditions described above.

The word 'barbaric' is commonly used as a way of describing the Other as it intrudes in on the known.[26] In *White Blight*, the word has different connotations and is used in a relativizing way; conversely, it connects the negative connotations of the barbaric with the 'civilized' world. Etymologically, 'barbarian' originally described a person who spoke little or poor Greek. Later on it also came to mean someone with poor language skills. By connecting mother tongue ('To think that I sucked at those breasts') to barbary ('To think that she put her barbarism in my mouth'), the poem charges the experience of migration with a double bond.[27] The mother, with her breast milk, represents a corporal, genetic, and emotional heritage; the father represents history and its dialectics, and the constant fight for emancipation. This division can be traced back to the traditional Western dualism of body and mind.[28] In *White Blight*, this dichotomy is expressed and transgressed through the poetic relativization – the deconstruction – of the contrasting concepts of civilization and barbarism.

Civilization, its rise and fall, is linked to the dialectic perception of historical development. The daughter's genesis is described as follows:

My mother said: From the division of cells
from a genetic material
from your father's head
But not from me

My father said: From the clash of civilizations
from a fundamental antagonism
from my tired head
But not from her[29]

25 Farrokhzad 2015, p. 33.
26 Illustrated *par excellence* by Constantin Cavafy's poem 'Waiting for the Barbarians' and J. M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980).
27 Farrokhzad 2015, p. 7.
28 Grosz 1994, pp. 5–24.
29 Farrokhzad 2015, p.17.

The birth of the daughter is here related to the birth of the Greek goddess Pallas Athena. Like Pallas Athena, the daughter Athena –the poet's given name – is born from her father's forehead. The author thereby establishes a mythologically augmented 'autobiographical pact' with the reader.[30] 'From my tired head' connects once again the father with the brain, the intellect, and, of course, reason. The mother, on the other hand, is connected to corporality by the words 'genetic material'. The mother's part in the daughter's birth is here secondary to the father's – mimicking the birth of the mythological Athena. But, more important, the father is also connected to the development of history through the stanzas 'From the clash of civilizations | from a fundamental antagonism'.

For the daughter, the mother's strategy of adopting the white language is deeply abhorrent. Her heritage, conveyed in her mother's breast milk, becomes false. She imbues – literally, through breast milk – white values and traditions, and at the same time, through her corporal experience of racism, she knows that the civilization that gave birth to these values is barbaric. The concept of barbarism is thus transformed and turned upside down. The civilized elements of Swedish culture are barbaric in her experience.[31]

> My mother said: It seems it has never occurred to you
> that it is from your name
> civilization descends[32]

30 See Philippe Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Pact', transl. Katherine M. Leary, in *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 3–30.

31 In 1916, Rosa Luxemburg, writing pseudonymously as Junius, used the expression 'socialism or barbary' in *Die Krise der Sozialdemokratie* (1916) (available in translation at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/index.htm>). A response to the horrors of the First World War, she writes in the Junius pamphlet that 'Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to Socialism or regression into Barbarism.' A return to barbarism means in Luxemburg's situation that 'This World War is a regression into Barbarism. The triumph of Imperialism leads to the annihilation of civilization. At first, this happens sporadically for the duration of a modern war, but then when the period of unlimited wars begins it progresses toward its inevitable consequences. Today, we face the choice exactly as Friedrich Engels foresaw it a generation ago: either the triumph of Imperialism and the collapse of all civilization as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration – a great cemetery. Or the victory of Socialism, that means the conscious active struggle of the International Proletariat against Imperialism and its method of war.' The expression 'socialism or barbary' is thus her way of recognizing that humanity can make the wrong decisions.

In relation to *White Blight*, the mother's choice to integrate and assimilate into the white hegemony is just such a wrong decision. At the same time, the concept of barbary is relativized and alienated. One could claim that there is a third way expressed through the daughter's act of writing the text. This synthesis is not a choice between socialism *or* barbary, but a concept of socialism *and* barbary.

32 Farrokhzad 2015, p. 9.

The allusion in the daughter's name to Athens, the cradle of civilization, is another way of highlighting the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism. This is also a continuation of the formal aspects of the text: the visual resemblance to a theatre script connects *White Blight* intertextually to classical Greek drama. The agora is in many of these plays the place where the action takes place. It is also a picture commonly used today for the origins of democracy, and hence the public sphere: the place where political action takes place.

Material form – the body of the text

Farrokhzad materializes her idea of embodied language in a poetic form not only by drawing upon classical Greek drama, but also by alluding to the tradition of concrete poetry.

The very first reflections on whiteness occur the moment the reader picks up a copy of *White Blight*. The cover is shiny, silvery, like a mirror. When I, as the reader, hold the book, the contours of a face emerge, indistinct, vague, impersonal, as if it is my face, as a white person and a reader, that is reflected in the cover. Yet it is not my face that appears; it is an indeterminate white person's face. My identity is hence reduced to one thing: white. There are of course other faces and readers the cover can mirror, not always white. But for me, the white reflection becomes a reminder of white hegemony and my privileged self. I am the one who sees an unmarked face, its whiteness neutral.[33] My Swedish language and my reflection is a unit; they fit together. The reflection-as-trope manifested in the material cover of the book is repeated in the brother's gaze in *White Blight*:

> My father said: Your brother shaved before his beard started to grow
> Your brother saw the terrorist's face in the mirror
> and wanted a flat iron for Christmas[34]

What Farrokhzad shows is a brother who has internalized a white gaze, with the result that he wants to straighten his hair and remove all signs of a beard in order to look more 'Swedish'. Yet even so, he experiences a gap between him and his reflection. A gap between body and language. The brother has seemingly internalized white violence to the full. When he sees his reflection, he does not see himself; he sees a terrorist. By contrasting these two mirror scenes, the cover creates a tension between the presumed neutral or unmarked reflection and the subject who discovers his or her picture in it and displays it for what it is: a distinctly unneutral and marked reflection.

33 Ruth Frankenberg, 'Mirage of an unmarked whiteness', in Birgit Brander Rasmussen (ed.), *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 73.

34 Farrokhzad 2015, p. 19.

The cover hence creates another effect when reflecting the reader's face. The reader is drawn into the dilemmas of the text and cannot pretend not ignore them. The reader is forced to perform the act of mirroring. How do I relate to whiteness? Or to migration? Which experiences are silenced in my presence? The cover of *White Blight* makes the text immediately political by moving it to a non-textual social context.

The relationship between black and white is also marked in the formal aspects of the text. All the lines consist of black ribbons with white text. The black ribbons make the language white on the material plane, make it visible, make it stand out. The ribbons throw white language into relief. Without the ribbons, the white letters would disappear on the white paper. Or as Farrokhzad put it, when talking about the relationship between white text and black ribbons and human bodies in an interview: 'I think of the blackness as something that surrounds the letters and make them visible. And [I believe] that bodies also can have that function of being "other", the dark ones, the barbary that is demanded in order to make whiteness appear on its own and to become meaningful.'[35]

The ribbons are thus the quintessence of negativity. They can be understood as a lack or a loss. The ribbons also allude to black mourning bands. The emptiness of the missed or absent object can be understood as its negation. In a photographic sense, they can be compared to the negatives of the film. The black ribbons thus point to certain forms of language as something absent but cryptic, yet at the same time all-too present in its openness to development or decryption. Whiteness is once again hegemonic, and the non-white is marked.

In Fanon's diagnosis, the black man's pathology is an inferiority complex. It has its origins in two simultaneous processes: economic repression, and the internalization or epidermization of that inferiority.[36] Once again the body is emphasized as a site for the projection of racialization. The skin is a surface perforated by an inferiority that is created by the white gaze; but it is also a surface that, just like a mask, shows the same thing, never changing. According to Fanon, the inferiority complex manifests itself in a feeling of non-existence or negativity. The result is that the black man lacks an understanding of himself as a universal subject. The process of subjectivation does not occur. Caught in a negative perception of self, no one can find a way of telling their story, let alone demand the suspension of their subordination. The black ribbons of *White Blight* can therefore be understood as negativity, but also as the suspension of the same – since the poem exists. It becomes visible when the black ribbons 'develop' the text on the white page, as if the words were a photographic process.

35 Sara Ullberg, 'Vitt på svart med Athena Farrokhzad', *Göteborgs-Posten*, 7 February 2013: 'Jag tänker på svärtan som något som ringar in bokstäverna och gör dem synliga. Och att kroppar också kan ha den funktionen av att vara "de andra", de mörka, barbariet som krävs för att vitheten ska framträda för sig själv och bli meningsbärande.'

36 Fanon 1952.

Conclusion

The displacement and transition between binaries such as language and material body highlights an important problem in the study of contemporary poetry: the performative aspects of a text-based poem. *White Blight* challenges the traditional literary method of close reading and the hermeneutical focus on meaning and interpretation.

The split between body and language in *White Blight* is explained through a white, hegemonic, normative system. As long as the body is alien to the non-white consciousness, the body cannot perceive itself as a political subject. The internalization of whiteness originates in the body's experiences; it becomes the function of the orientations that ensue whilst meeting the gaze of the other. These are the processes of the inclusion and exclusion of subjects in society. Added to this body-oriented perspective on writing and acting in the public sphere – the agora – is a Marxist, materialist focus on heritage, history, and tradition.

In *White Blight* we find these problems trapped in a dichotomy between body and language, barbarism and civilization, male and female, black and white, where the dualistic separation of body and language is the main reproducer of the establishment *and* the reproduction of its order. To suspend this order, the binaries must be relativized and deconstructed. In *White Blight*, this is found in the gradually changing positions of the father and the mother with respect to the daughter's writing. This is the *Performanz* of the poems. Migration makes place a relative and complex concept, as does language, in particular native language, and cultural identity, which all perform the ensemble of relationships between different migrant subjects and the material body that *White Blight* is investigating.

Performing an Eccentric Public Image

Autobiographical Narrative in Edgar Allan Poe's Detective Tales

Luo Xiaoli

Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) is generally credited with inventing the modern detective story. His three 'tales of ratiocination' – 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841), 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' (1842–1843), and 'The Purloined Letter' (1844) – all feature an amateur sleuth C. Auguste Dupin, who uses his analytic sensibility to solve the seemingly unintelligible mysteries. Even though the three stories were disparaged by Poe himself as inferior to his other imaginative tales, they were an immediate success, establishing a new set of literary conventions and in turn spawning the new literary genre of 'detective fiction'.[1]

Why did the trilogy, which was primarily designed by Poe to entertain a mass readership, come to set the mould for detective fiction? Performativity theory may shed some light. The British philosopher J. L. Austin suggested the concept of the 'performative' in the 1950s. He distinguished constative utterance from performative utterance, arguing that the former makes statement while the latter performs the action it refers to. Later Austin termed all utterances 'speech acts', claiming that 'stating is performing an act'.[2] The American critic J. Hillis Miller, meanwhile, viewed literature as conduct, saying that the acts of writing, speaking, and reading are forms of doing things in the world.[3]

Viewed through the prism of performativity theory, Poe, in writing his stories

1 Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1941), p. 514 quotes Poe to Philip Pendleton Cooke, 9 August 1846, in which he criticizes his Dupin tales, stating that they are not really as ingenious as the readers think, and that they 'owe most of their popularity to being something in a new key'.

2 J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 138.

3 J. Hillis Miller, *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 2.

about Dupin, was actually shaping an autobiographical narrative, and acting out a public persona as Poe-the-author. This essay will analyse how Poe narrated Dupin's detective stories in such a way as to make them autobiographical accounts, and how this literary conduct in turn created his eccentric public image. It was within this process of autobiographical narrative that certain norms for detective fiction were settled – hence the establishment of the new literary genre of detective fiction.

Poe's public persona and autobiography

Ever since the nineteenth century, the 'Edgar Allan Poe' who the public has known was an alienated social outcast of questionable character. This Poe-the-author was recognized for his scathing literary criticism as well as a series of literary turf wars, during which he became famed for his severe judgements and harsh attacks on other writers and editors.[4] In a well-known obituary, Rufus Wilmot Griswold depicted Poe as a gifted loner with 'shrewd and naturally unamiable character', whose repellent cynicism and sneer brought him 'few or no friends'.[5] Griswold's portrait shaped the public's understanding of Poe's public image: an alienated, arrogant genius.

However, the private Poe was in all likelihood nothing like the one the public imagined. According to his contemporaries, the real Poe in private was 'a quiet, patient, industrious, and most gentlemanly person', an 'unobtrusive, thoughtful scholar' and he had 'many kind friends'.[6] Despite this sharp contradiction between the private Poe and the public Poe, it is the latter that is popularly accepted as Poe's personal image. Indeed, it was an image partly constructed by Poe's literary writings. Scholars have repeatedly noted Poe's autobiographical writing style. Scott Peeples comments that 'Poe's writing is always intriguingly autobiographical'.[7] Jonathan H. Hartmann states: 'Psychologically-minded biographers have noticed striking coincidences linking the tales and Poe's life.'[8] Reviewing Poe's life, Harold Bloom proposes that 'Poe's personal image is closely associated with many of the characters and imagery contained in his works: dark, gloomy, half-mad.'[9]

Given Poe's autobiographical writing style, detective Dupin can thus be regarded

4 For the literary wars Poe was engaged in, see in Perry Miller, *The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1973).

5 Rufus Wilmot Griswold, 'Rufus Wilmot Griswold (1849)', in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Bloom's Classic Critical Views: Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), pp. 9–11.

6 Nathaniel Parker Willis, 'Death of Edgar Allan Poe', in ibid., p. 13; George R. Graham, 'The Late Edgar Allan Poe', in ibid., p. 14; Maria Clemm, 'Letter to "Annie"', in ibid., p. 12.

7 Scott Peeples, *The Afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Camden House, 2004), p. 6.

8 Jonathan H. Hartmann, *The Marketing of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 35.

9 Bloom 2008, p. 5.

as Poe's public persona, designed to help construct Poe's public image. To hint at the autobiographical elements in the stories, Poe intentionally endowed Dupin with a background and features that resembled his own. According to the nameless narrator, chevalier C. Auguste Dupin comes from 'an illustrious family, but, by a variety of untoward events, had been reduced to such poverty'.[10] Actually, Poe's paternal grandfather David Poe Sr was 'a prominent member of Richmond society ... and the former deputy quartermaster of Baltimore, as well as a wealthy man'.[11] However, he had disowned his son for choosing the stage as a career. David Poe Jr soon married Poe's mother, but his lack of acting talent trapped the whole family in relative poverty. The father abandoned the family, and shortly after Poe's mother died, leaving young Poe an orphan. He was adopted by a wealthy and respectable Richmond merchant, John Allan, who later came to dislike his foster son and eventually in turn disinherited him. Poe was left in financial straits.

Dupin is notable for his intellectual superiority, while Poe excelled in mathematics when he was a student and always took delight in exercising his skills in solving ciphers.[12] More importantly, Dupin is portrayed in the trilogy as a poet with a rich imagination,[13] while in real life Poe seized every chance to exhibit his passion for poetry as well as his interest in the phrenological feature of ideality.[14]

Apart from family background and physical features, Dupin and Poe also resemble each other in choice of profession. Dupin's detective skills symbolically involve various acts of reading. To investigate the mysteries, he has to read newspapers, read his companion's report of the case, read the crime scene for possible clues, and, crucially, read the mind of the criminal to find the solution. According to Tzvetan Todorov, a detective novel contains two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation.[15] Based on Todorov's analysis, Peter Thoms concludes that 'the investigator

10 Edgar Allan Poe, *Selected Writings*, ed. Edward H. Davidson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), p. 142.

11 Dawn B. Sova, *Critical Companion to Edgar Allan Poe: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* (New York: Facts on File, 2001), p. 3.

12 Brander Matthews, 'Poe and the Detective Story', in Bloom 2008, p. 175.

13 In 'The Purloined Letter', Dupin says to G that he has been 'guilty of certain doggerel' (see Poe 1956, p. 212). As for Dupin's rich imagination, his narrator admits in 'Rue Morgue' that he feels it is enkindled by the 'vivid freshness of his [Dupin's] imagination' (ibid., p. 143); Kevin J. Hayes, *Edgar Allan Poe* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), p. 104 comments that Dupin can locate the purloined letter because he possesses the imagination the police lack. The ideal detective, like the ideal poet, has both reason and imagination.

14 The term 'ideality' was adopted by Poe in his criticism through the 'science' of phrenology. He was once obsessed with phrenology, which took Poe's broad, high, and massive forehead to indicate his ideality. Poe felt proud of his power of imagination, and he was disappointed to discover that his first daguerreotype portrait did not properly display his prominent forehead (see Hayes 2009, p. 95).

15 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, transl. Richard Howard (New York: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 44.

is not only a reader but also a figurative writer seeking possession of a hidden story'.[16] Thus, when Dupin articulates his solution, he is actually narrating the hidden crime story – he is metaphorically composing a detective story. Similarly, the reading public saw Poe-the-author as a literary critic and story writer, whose chief job was to read and review articles and to compose his own stories.

With all these similarities, Poe deliberately set up an autobiographical link between himself and the persona of Dupin. It was through Dupin's detective stories that Poe narrated his autobiography. But why did Poe create such a peculiar figure as Dupin to be his public persona? This needs to be understood within the cultural context of nineteenth-century America, and especially the fierce competition in the publishing industry at the time.

The first half of the nineteenth century saw unparalleled economic growth in America. Improved transportation, a rising population, and industrial innovation accelerated the development of the publishing industry. With numerous books (either written by local writers or pirated from British books) and periodicals contributing to a flourishing reading market, competition was severe. Sales became the primary concern for the publishers. Under the circumstances it is no surprise that they fell back on sensationalism, with its ability to elicit strong emotional responses and boost readership, as evinced by the rise of tabloid journalism in the 1820s and 1830s.[17] Peculiarity, shock, violence, scandal, notoriety, and controversy were the common tactics for capturing attention.

For professional writers, who had no other source of income and lived in poverty, sensationalism offered a better chance to survive in an inhospitable market. However, these writers aroused sensation not only by the use of their aesthetic talent, but also (and more often) by their odd personality. In fact, the 'sensational self' had already been commoditized in the competitive literary market of the nineteenth century, a commodity intended to be consumed and traded for fame and money. It was common practice among professional writers to achieve success 'by drawing attention to themselves, by cultivating sensationalism, scandal, and notoriety – by trafficking, that is, the peculiar and outrageous features of their own personalities'.[18]

Poe himself was in favour of this rhetoric of self-dysfunction. Trapped in constant poverty, he once poignantly complained that 'to be poor is to be despised'.[19] Desperate

16 Peter Thoms, 'Dupin and the Power of Detection', in Kevin J. Hayes (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe* (Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2004), p. 23.

17 David Leverenz, 'Spanking the Master: Mind-Body Crossings in Poe's Sensationalism', in J. Gerald Kennedy (ed.), *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 105.

18 Sandra M. Tomc, 'Poe and His Circle', in Hayes 2004, p. 27.

19 Quoted in Terence Whalen, 'Poe and the American Publishing Industry', in Kennedy (ed.) 2001, p. 75.

poverty and the desire for renown pushed him into 'a calculating, aggressive stance' towards literature and 'towards the mass audience whose "taste" would henceforth be measured by gross acts of purchase'.[20] He knew clearly that 'a work devoid of popular appeal would not just prove unprofitable since it would also very likely fail to achieve publication, it would not even have a chance to reach the refined or fully sympathetic reader'.[21] With the literary market mechanism as it was, Poe followed the fashion of self-exploitation and 'coined his own flaws and deficiencies – his envy, animosity, and alienation – in the production of a public self'.[22] As for his 'tales of ratiocination', Poe's public self is performed through the character C. Auguste Dupin. With various narrative techniques, Poe deliberately depicted Dupin as an arrogant, egoistic, yet alienated deviant.

Narrating eccentric personality

Throughout the three stories, Dupin is engrossed in his competition with G, the head of the Parisian police. As an amateur detective, Dupin must compete with G, a spokesman of police authority, in order to solve and, simultaneously, to narrate each crime story, because it promises not only financial benefit, but also the making of his reputation, both of which Dupin need badly. Actually, Dupin takes every chance to taunt his rival, puzzling, manipulating, and humiliating him, giving ample evidence of arrogance.

Dupin launches his first challenge to G's narrative authority in 'Rue Morgue', when he marches into G's bureau to tell him the circumstances of the two murders. In response, G cannot 'conceal his chagrin', and has to sarcastically emphasize 'the propriety of everyone minding his own business', clearly hoping to elbow Dupin out of the narrative competition.[23] However, Dupin is 'satisfied with having defeated him [G] in his own castle', and he also stresses that G is 'too cunning to be profound', hinting at G's intellectual inferiority.[24]

In the case of 'Marie Rogêt', Dupin's arrogance is even given G's seal of approval when he visits Dupin to consult with him, voluntarily handing the narrative authority to Dupin. This time, in sharp contrast to his former sarcasm, G compliments Dupin, which is unfortunately rebutted by the latter 'as best he could'.[25] Moreover, while G is describing the case, Dupin contemptuously suppresses G's narration with his deliberate silence and ostentatious snooze.

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20 Ibid., p. 69.
21 Ibid., p. 79.
22 Tomc, in Hayes 2004, p. 27.
23 Poe 1956, p. 171.
24 Ibid., p. 171.
25 Edgar Allan Poe, *Poetry and Tales* (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 511.

As for 'The Purloined Letter', Dupin exhibits his arrogance in verbal teasing of G. When visiting Dupin's apartment, G refers to the case paradoxically as both '*very* simple' and 'excessively *odd*'.[26] In return, Dupin sarcastically repeats 'simple and odd' in order to stress G's intellectual inferiority, because 'odd' is the word used by G for everything beyond his comprehension.[27] Other ironies – 'it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault', 'a little *too* plain', 'a little *too* self-evident' – abound in that first visit.[28] Then after G concludes by describing the purloining of the letter, Dupin taunts him as the most 'sagacious agent could ... be desired, or even imagined'.[29] The scorn Dupin pours on G may be not that evident, at least to G himself, but the sensational presentation of the stolen letter spells out Dupin's conceit. By returning the letter, Dupin declares his narrative authority, while G in contrast appears 'absolutely thunder-stricken' and remains 'speechless and motionless'.[30] In exchange for the letter, G not only concedes a financial loss of fifty thousand francs, but also the forfeiture of his narrative ability. Throughout the whole process of detection, Dupin gradually deprives G of narrative power while displaying his character flaw: arrogance.

Another important and indispensible figure in the trilogy is the nameless narrator. Although he appears to be Dupin's companion, who both lives and works on the puzzles together with Dupin, he is actually firmly under Dupin's egoistic thumb, kept there by the latter's analytical superiority. At the start of 'Rue Morgue', the narrator explains that because of Dupin's impoverishment he has invited Dupin to live with him. Though the narrator pays to rent and furnish their lodgings, all of it, as indicated by the narrator, is 'permitted' by Dupin.[31] From the very beginning, Dupin is the dominant party in his relationship with the narrator.

It is especially noteworthy that the conversations between Dupin and the narrator take up much of the three stories. Starting with an elaborate comment on the connection between analytic power and imagination, the narrator develops his narrative to emphasize 'a peculiar analytic ability in Dupin' that he 'could not help remarking and admiring'.[32] The narrator implies his own ordinary intelligence in his admiration of Dupin's 'preternatural' analysis, which is quite beyond his comprehension.[33] As the story proceeds, the narrator is either puzzled by Dupin's questions or startled into 'mute astonishment'.[34] To understand the mysteries, he has to submit to Dupin's narra-

26 Poe 1956, p. 209.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., p. 209.
29 Ibid., p. 211.
30 Ibid., p. 216.
31 Ibid., p. 143.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., p. 140.
34 Ibid., p. 155.

tive authority and await his explanation; however, baffled most of the time by the complicated explanations, the narrator can barely muster more than a few short remarks, which have no profound meaning at all. Rather than being engaged in a conversation, the narrator is reduced by Dupin to a passive listener, while Dupin becomes an egoistic story-teller. Even when Dupin is expounding, he talks as if he were 'in a soliloquy', with a vacant look in his eyes.[35] This arrogant way of talking portrays him as an actor who egoistically makes detecting into a performance and manipulates the narrator into acting as his audience. For the nameless companion, to narrate the detective tale is to faithfully record Dupin's words and actions. He serves not only as a witness to Dupin's deductive sensibility, but as a foil to Dupin's egoism.

Apart from Dupin's egoistic statements, the three tales are also notably composed of various newspaper excerpts. They offer the basis of Dupin's analysis, but also provide him with ammunition in his constant sniping at newspaper editors. In 'Rue Morgue', Dupin criticizes 'the idle opinion' of the press and refutes its views with his own analysis.[36] By solving the Rue Morgue murders, which are considered unsolvable by the press, Dupin undercuts the credibility of the newspaper narrative. A more venomous assault is launched in 'Marie Rogêt'. Newspaper excerpts provide Dupin with crucial clues to his investigation. While reading the reports, he keeps on questioning their credibility. *Le Commercial* is criticized for 'a deficiency of observation', and someone writing in *Le Soleil* is scorned as 'the most illustrious parrot of his race' who merely repeats 'the individual items of the already published opinion'.[37] The paper that comes under the greatest fire is *L'Etoile*. Editorials suggesting that Marie Rogêt is still alive are quoted and analysed carefully by Dupin, who says that the paper has come to this implausible conclusion only to secure it 'a favourable reception with the public'.[38] Dupin judges the articles to convey little more in the way of conclusions than the zeal of their reporters, and snorts that 'L'Etoile has been at great pains merely to gainsay now what it has admitted only a moment before'.[39] In addition to illustrating the editors' folly, Dupin further discredits them by literally dismantling the press narrative and putting together his own collection of newspaper clippings. In correcting the ignorant assertions in the newspapers, Dupin re-examines Marie Rogêt's death and in the end solves the crime.

In terms of narrating a crime story, Dupin treats other newspaper editors in much the same manner. He seldom expresses friendliness, and indulges in verbal attacks on them, taunting them for their 'laughable confusion of thought' and 'headlong

35 Ibid., p. 156.
36 Ibid., p. 155.
37 Poe 1984, pp. 532 and 533.
38 Ibid., p. 521.
39 Ibid., p. 527.

assertions'.[40] He dismantles the editors' narrative and comes up with a very different answer: the conclusion that an officer with a dark complexion committed the murder reveals Dupin's intellectual superiority and at the same time figuratively defeats his narrative rivals. Indeed, he claims to possess a preternatural analytic power beyond anyone else's comprehension. Time and again, he explains solutions to his nameless friend, allowing that 'perhaps you do not comprehend me'.[41] A loner, Dupin chooses to live 'in a retired and desolated portion of the Faubourg St. Germain' in Paris and admits no visitors.[42] His secluded lifestyle hence further illustrates his alienation.

All in all, the detective stories portray Dupin as a persona with odd manners that are indicative of his arrogance, egoism, and alienation. He indulges himself in his competition with G, the nameless narrator, and the capital's newspaper editors, and takes pleasure from verbally insulting their weakness and intellectual inferiority.

The birth of detective fiction

In the footnotes to 'Marie Rogêt', Poe spells out the true identity of the newspapers and editors he refers to as his detective's sources, revealing that the weekly paper *Brother Jonathan* was the inspiration for *L'Etoile*.[43] T. O. Mabbott notes that much of the original Mary Roger's case was reported in one issue of *Brother Jonathan* published on 28 August 1841.[44] The issue featured three editorials written by Weld, the principle editor, who in the tale was named H. Hastings Weld, Esq. Though Poe composed parts of the tale based on Weld's editorials, he refuted Weld's arguments, and, more importantly, hinted in Dupin's analysis that Weld wrote the editorials 'in haste'.[45] Dupin's criticism of the editor of *L'Etoile* reveals Poe's dissatisfaction with Weld. This dissatisfaction can be traced back to the Poe–Weld literary spat in 1841.

The conflict mainly concerned Seba Smith's narrative poem *Powhatan*. Weld had a very high opinion of the poem, describing it as 'an honor to American literature'; while Poe expressed his contempt in a review published in *Graham's Magazine*, proclaiming it to be 'a very *un*common book' and criticizing the poet for being 'so uncom-

40 Ibid., pp. 527 and 545.

41 Ibid., p. 534.

42 Poe 1956, p. 143.

43 The newspapers mentioned in 'Marie Rogêt' include the *New York Mercury*, the *New York Brother Jonathan*, the *New York Journal of Commerce*, the *Philadelphia Saturday Evening Post*, the *New York Commercial Advertiser*, the *New York Express*, the *New York Herald*, the *New York Courier and Inquirer*, the *New York Evening Post*, and the *New York Standard* (see Poe 1984, pp. 513, 514, 517, 518, 523, 535, 536).

44 See Richard Kopley, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Dupin Mysteries*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 54.

45 Poe 1984, p. 527.

monly bad'.[46] In response, Weld announced in the 26 July 1841 issue that the editor of *Graham's Magazine* was a 'MacGrawler'.[47] This brought a personal letter to Weld, in which Poe referred to Weld's recent comments as abuse and said that Weld had said nothing true about him.[48] There are echoes of this in the story when Dupin accuses the editor of *L'Etoile* of insinuating revenge, just because M Beauvais holds an opposite opinion with the editor about the corpse. Dupin stresses that the editor has 'no right to be offended'.[49] According to Richard Kopley's interpretation, Dupin's statement can be rephrased as 'the editor of the *Brother Jonathan* had no right to be offended at Mr Poe's censure of *Powhatan*'.[50]

As a matter of fact, this kind of personal insult was commonly seen in the American literary market in the mid nineteenth century. Though self-exploitation had once been effective in producing celebrity, in the 1840s, with more and more writers discovering and adopting this strategy, self-display gradually lost its effect. Instead, *ad hominem* attacks became increasingly common in the publishing world:

> [T]he overall effect of strategies of self-promotion that involved not only coining one's own eccentricities but publicly harping on the flaws and weaknesses of one's competitors, was to generate competitive tactics that, far from being gentlemanly, were all the more brutal for obviating distinctions between the professional and personal.[51]

By extending personal insults into literary works, the writers engaged in brutal feuds, undercutting one another and ultimately fuelling the book market. Poe's virulent reviews were the product of this mutual debasement. Additionally, nineteenth-century avocational American writers such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow were usually members of the wealthy elite, while those attracted to professional authorship generally came from low-income, marginal social backgrounds. And then there was Poe, who behaved as a loner among the *literati* by picking fights with prestigious writers, with Longfellow being one of those he laid into. Tomc describes Poe's tactic for exposing alienation as follows:

> Positioning himself overtly as an outsider, a sort of arrogant and autonomous literary orphan severed from the implicitly familial organization of what he called 'cliques', Poe launched an assault on the existing literary establishment in a series of reviews.[52]

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46 Kopley 2008, pp. 57 and 58.
47 According to Richard Kopley, a 'MacGrawler' was an epithet of severe opprobrium, meaning an unscrupulous editor (ibid., p. 59).
48 Ibid.
49 Poe 1984, p. 530.
50 Quoted in Kopley 2008, p. 60.
51 Tomc, in Hayes 2004, p. 34.
52 Ibid., p. 29.

Dupin's stance has its similarities with Poe-the-author's. An amateur investigator, Dupin constantly insults the police, the nameless narrator, and the newspaper editors. His alienation suggests Poe's isolation among the *literati*. As we have seen, Poe used various narrative techniques to make implicit allusions to the parallels between Dupin and himself. In narrating Dupin's oddity, Poe at the same time gave an autobiographical account. As a result, Dupin was widely thought to be Poe's stand-in, and the public Poe was widely regarded a peculiar deviant with personality flaws.

Ever since Poe's day, many of the readers of the three detective tales have thus wrongly regarded Poe-the-author as an eccentric loner. Brander Matthews argues that Dupin is endowed 'with certain of his [Poe's] own qualifications and peculiarities'; Julian Symons emphasizes that 'Dupin, ... is an image of Poe himself – aristocratic, arrogant, and apparently omniscient'.[53] Against this, the American theorist Jonathan Culler conceives of literature as performative, holding that literary utterance can be regarded as an act or event, in that it creates the state of affairs to which it refers.[54] In light of Culler's theory, Poe's literary writings – in this case the detective stories – are recognized as the source of his eccentric public persona, shaping in turn the public's collective misperception of Poe as an alienated social outcast of questionable character. Poe's detective writings therefore serve on the one hand as literary works, and on the other as literary conduct that generates a change in reality.

In an effort to narrate Dupin's idiosyncrasies, Poe attempted new patterns of writing. Poe himself had declared in a personal letter to Philip Pendleton Cooke that the detective tales 'owe most of their popularity to being something in a new key'.[55] To highlight Dupin's intellectual superiority, Poe showed his detective solving puzzles by pure deduction; to illustrate Dupin's eccentric personality, Poe had Dupin interact with the police, the narrator, and the newspaper editors, all of whom serve to underscore the detective's intelligence as well as his oddity. Consequently, the great detective, relying on a preternatural analytical superiority, which is indicated in his narrative competition with other rivals, to solve mysteries – to narrate the true actions that have taken place – becomes the distinctive feature of the detective tale. Before Poe, there had been puzzle stories, crime stories, and stories of deduction: Poe's detective tale, with its unique narrative pattern, differed from all preceding stories. Howard Haycraft suggests that the distinguishing element for a detective story is the professional detec-

53 Matthews, in Bloom 2008, p. 175; Julian Symons, *The Tell-tale Heart: The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 222.

54 Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 96.

55 Quoted by Matthews, in Bloom 2008, p. 176.

tion of crime.[56] Julian Symons, too, holds that the originality of Poe's detective tales lies in detection: 'detectives trying to solve puzzles by reason'.[57]

Innovative narrative skills, combined with Poe's public image as an alienated loner created in the narrative, contributed to the popularity of Poe's detective stories. The first, 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', was so well received when it first appeared in the April 1841 issue of *Graham's Magazine* that Poe published his second Dupin tale 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' soon afterwards, in 1842. This time he subtitled the tale 'A Sequel to "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"' in order to promote the new story, suggesting the commercial success of 'Rue Morgue'.[58] The second story also met with such a general positive response that it encouraged Poe to continue by publishing the third and, by his own admission, the best tale, 'The Purloined Letter' in *The Gift for 1845*.[59] In 1845, the three stories were collected in *Tales*, Poe's collection of stories. Only 12 out of a total of 72 were included, but all three of the Dupin stories were selected because the editor was said to 'count on the popularity of the ratiocinative tales'.[60]

Alongside the public appreciation of the ratiocinative tales was the popular belief that Poe was a deviant with eccentric personality. No wonder Griswold's obituary, which blackened Poe's name, was widely accepted by the reading public and deepened the collective misunderstanding of Poe-the-author. Indeed, the monstrous Poe who Griswold described was in line with the public image that Poe had created in his Dupin's stories.

In his lifetime, Poe did not get on well with Griswold. He had attacked a popular anthology of Griswold's, and must have foreseen that there would be some sort of posthumous payback. Nevertheless, Poe chose him as his literary executor, and left Griswold the chance to slander him. According to Hayes, Poe made the choice knowing that 'controversy sells books' in the publishing industry.[61] Griswold duly portrayed Poe as an arrogant social outcast, and this became the lasting public image

56 Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1941), p. 4.

57 Symons 1978, p. 221.

58 In the May issue of *Graham's*, Poe published another tale, *A Descent into the Maelström*. It was reviewed favourably by *Evening Star*, and praised by Poe's lawyer friend as one of his best. In reply to his friend's praise, Poe stated that the narrative was not half so popular as 'Rue Morgue', revealing the popularity of 'Rue Morgue'. See Dwight Thomas & David K. Jackson, *The Poe Log: A Documentary Life of Edgar Allan Poe 1809–1849* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987) <http://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/tplgc06a.htm>, accessed 30 March 2015.

59 In May 1844, Poe wrote to James Russell Lowell that '"The Purloined Letter" ... is perhaps the best of my tales of ratiocination' (Sova 2001, pp. 152–153). A gift book was a beautifully designed and expensive annual, often exchanged between family members and friends. It was popularized in America in the early nineteenth century.

60 Hobson Quinn 1941, p. 466.

61 Hayes 2009, p. 8.

of him. Griswold also claimed that Poe's imaginative writings were based on personal events; an assertion, Hayes comments, that 'gave readers license to understand Poe's stories through his life, his life through his stories'.[62]

Negative publicity, as Poe had assumed, did boost sales of his works. The year after Poe's death, Griswold published two volumes of Poe's writings, with two additional volumes later. Since then Poe's writings have become popular, being frequently reprinted in America, and translated and much published in Europe.

The three detective tales have been widely read and appreciated, and their innovative narrative patterns have inspired countless writers. In the course of numerous imitations, the generic elements of the detective story were recognized and established: a detective demonstrates his analytical superiority over a comparatively slow-witted companion and a bumbling police detective by solving mysteries with an ease that baffles the companion and the police. In this way, the interaction between the main characters as well as the ratiocination-based detection constitute the narrative conventions of detective fiction. Hayes describes how Poe's successors were indebted to Poe's innovations:

> Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is a direct descendant of C. Auguste Dupin, and Dr Watson bears an uncanny resemblance to Poe's narrator. Agatha Christie owes a debt to Poe as well. Hercule Poirot directly descends from Dupin, and Colonel Hastings follows Poe's narrator. Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe and his assistant Archie Goodwin also resemble Dupin and Poe's narrator.[63]

Conan Doyle himself acknowledged Poe's importance:

> Edgar Allan Poe ... was the father of the detective tale, and covered its limits so completely that I fail to see how his followers can find any fresh ground ... the writer is left with only one quality, that of intellectual acuteness, with which to endow his hero ... The problem and its solution must form the theme.[64]

Without doubt, Poe's ratiocinative tales established the norms that would be endlessly followed. And it was this repetition that in turn brought the emergence of a new literary genre – detective fiction.

Poe himself did not think much of his 'tales of ratiocination', and even hinted that they had been overpraised.[65] Perhaps he knew too well that they were a commercial product designed to cater to the book market. However, the moment Poe put his deduction and imagination into words, those words became enacted speech that acted.

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62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., p. 103.
64 Quoted by Matthews, in Bloom 2008, pp. 174–175.
65 Ibid., 176.

The Dupin trilogy, from a performative perspective, is Poe's literature-as-conduct; one that could make autobiographical narrative and construct a public image of an eccentric personality made up of arrogance, egoism, and alienation. In creating his intellectual stand-in, Dupin, Poe invented the detective prototype, which set his tales apart from previous puzzle and mystery stories. It was the originality of his tales that appealed to other writers and inspired them to imitation, creating their own detective fictions. The emergence of detective fiction thus fully illustrates the powerful change that literature can exert on the real world.

Performing Rituals and the Process of Healing through Art

A Graphic Memoir Example

Nina Ernst

In her childhood, from the age of seven up until her teenage years, the Swedish comics creator Malin Biller experienced an incomprehensible personal trauma: being sexually abused by her father. Several years later, these events and their repercussions took shape in her graphic memoir *Om någon vrålar i skogen* (2010, 'If Someone Howls in the Woods'), which won the prize as best Swedish comic album of 2010.[1] In the work, Biller shows how comic art was used in her recovery and the ritual-like activities performed in the process.

In this essay, I attempt to discover new ways of looking at performativity by exploring Biller's graphic memoir. The work will be used as an example of autobiographical comic art in which the concept of performativity, as developed by Richard Schechner, can be applied to explore different aspects of Biller's self. In my research I hold graphic memoirs to be texts representing a performance, and thus, in Velten's definition, as performative. However, in Schechner and Fischer-Lichte's narrower definition, graphic memoirs could otherwise only be performances if adapted for the theatre, for example.[2] The essay assesses how Schechner's ideas about rituals in performance become a crucial instrument applicable to Biller's work about her childhood trauma, and how such rituals can be viewed as survival strategies.

To show and tell events of this kind in images and text means to disclose intimate situations. The elements of performativity function as an important expression in the creative process; they are some of the acts of survival the protagonist undertakes on

1 Malin Biller, *Om någon vrålar i skogen* (Stockholm: Optimal, 2010). It won an Urhunden Prize, which since 1987 have been awarded annually by Svenska Seriefrämjandet (the Swedish Comics Association).

2 See also Hans Rudolf Velten, 'Performativität. Ältere deutsche Literatur', in Claudia Benthien & Hans Rudolf Velten (eds), *Germanistik als Kulturwissenschaft: Eine Einführung in neue Theoriekonzepte* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2002), p. 221.

the road to healing. As such, the performative act is closely related to the creative act. To this end, I begin by discussing Biller's work in relation to some of Schechner's ideas of performance, and to the concept of ritual expressed by Roy A. Rappaport. In addition, Catherine Bell's *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (1997) and Ronald L. Grimes's *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (2014) will be consulted as major sources on ritual-like activities.

Framed actions and varieties of ritual

Approaching Biller's *Om någon vrålar i skogen* with aspects of performativity in mind, it is clear that her use of rituals becomes a central strategy both within the narration and in the visual composition of her work. This coming-of-age story about the protagonist 'Malin' is a graphic narrative about a childhood invaded by sexual abuse. From an early age, the protagonist is sexually assaulted by her father, which forces her to deal with this situation in a number of ways.

As Roy A. Rappaport has pointed out, ritual is a form of structure and tends to 'occur at special places and at times fixed by the clock, calendar, or specified circumstances'.[3] In the case of Biller, the young protagonist develops ritualistic and compulsive behaviours as a way of structuring the chaos surrounding her. This illustrates a typical function of ritual practices, since rituals are sometimes seen as 'collective memories encoded into actions. Rituals also help people (and animals) deal with difficult transitions, ambivalent relationships.'[4] For the child protagonist in Biller's life story, these ritualistic behaviours have a soothing effect, helping her to keep her sanity.

Schechner lists seven functions of performance: to entertain; to make something that is beautiful; to mark or change identity; to make or foster community; to heal; to teach, persuade, or convince; and to deal with the sacred and/or the demonic.[5] The function of performance in Biller's work is manifold. It entertains, heals, marks, and changes identity. It entertains through the conventions of the comic book – hyperbole, metaphor, a humorous approach in the combination of image and text. It deals with a harrowing childhood trauma, but also heals by creating a story of the experience in which the protagonist undergoes a change with the help of art. As is evident, Schechner's functions seem to overlap and interact in Biller's memoir.

The rituals in *Om någon vrålar i skogen* follow a distinct pattern that is specific to the child depicted. The first phase reflects rites linked to religion. The child protago-

3 Roy A. Rappaport in Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2006), p. 53.

4 Ibid., p. 52.

5 Ibid., p. 46.

nist 'Malin' starts to pray. She prays that nothing will happen to her mother, since she fears being left alone with her father. Gradually her rituals become more compulsive until the point when most of the actions in her daily life are ritualized. For example, she must open the door three times before entering a room, and she always sleeps on her back. She avoids eating apples (which she in her biblically coloured belief considers to be the forbidden fruit), and prohibits herself pastimes that give her pleasure, such as listening to pop music. She finds herself having to stare at churches she passes, and restricts her reading solely to the Bible.[6] Recollecting this, the narrator is reminded that 'In the end everything turned into a ritual, even the most basic things', and the panel shows 'Malin' on the toilet, struggling to produce three turds, in a ritualized act of defecation.[7]

Bell points out that rituals and ritual-like activities are pervasive. However, she singles out invariance as one characteristic, 'usually seen in a disciplined set of actions marked by precise repetition and physical control'.[8] Furthermore, she refers to Sigmund Freud's ideas about obsessive-compulsive behaviours, who observed that they bear a similarity to religious rituals, and by extension that both have 'therapeutic value'.[9] Nick Crossley connects healing and corporality when he explores the uses of ritual as being both a way to 'invoke a particular emotional state' or, as I believe is valid in Biller's case, 'to fend off or circumvent a particular emotional state'.[10] The rituals become acts that function to keep anxiety at bay or repress harmful experiences. This applies specifically to the experience of the child protagonist. Crossley argues that rites could be considered as 'body techniques', suggesting that the nature of ritual is always embodied, involving corporeal gestures or movements. He is not the only scholar claiming this, of course. Ronald L. Grimes has expressed this poignantly through the motto 'No body, no ritual'.[11] More importantly, Grimes points out: 'The verb "embody", often expressed in ritual studies, is useful for reminding us that even though we *are* our bodies, we can also be alienated from them. To "embody something" is to incarnate it, suggesting the possibility that people can also be disembodied even though they have, or are, bodies.'[12] This combination of insights and perspectives underpins what follows, as I chart Biller's use of ritual in her graphic memoir.

6 Biller 2010, pp. 51–53.
7 Ibid., p. 52. My translation from the Swedish.
8 Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 150.
9 Ibid., pp. 15 and 150–151.
10 Nick Crossley, 'Ritual, body technique, and (inter)subjectivity', in Kevin Schilbrack (ed.), *Thinking Through Rituals: Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 43.
11 Ronald L. Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 306.
12 Ibid., p. 307.

A second phase in the ritualistic survival strategy used by Biller's protagonist and younger persona is directly and intimately connected to the body. She starts starving herself, causing her body to change dramatically. Her transformation demonstrates several things. To begin with, she is reacting to physical assault through dramatic weight loss. It is as if she wants to escape from her body, or crawl out of her skin; as if the body itself reacts to the abuse, desperate to escape by shrinking to the point of disappearance. She performs her vulnerable self, and as her body alters it is not only a physical change, but an embodied reflection of her inner turmoil. Unconsciously, the protagonist uses her body as something that needs punishment. Later, her body transforms again when she starts binge eating. Such self-induced, self-destructive punishments are not uncommon behaviours among child abuse survivors.[13] Eating disorders as a result of traumatic events are often regarded as attempts to either render the body unattractive, or to perfect it in order to make it more powerful and less vulnerable. It is, inevitably, a way to gain or regain control. Keeping one's body under control means that chaos can be kept at bay.

In her dissertation, *Litterära besvär: Skildringar av sjukdomar i samtida svensk prosa* (2010, 'Literary Ills: Portrayals of Illness in Contemporary Swedish Fiction'), the Swedish scholar Katarina Bernhardsson explores eating disorders as a problem of boundaries.[14] Like Crossley, she also stresses that controlling one's body corresponds to controlling an inner chaos.[15] Establishing a system of rules about one's body has similarities to religious rites and practices. For example, Bernhardsson mentions the historical example of the young women who starved themselves during the medieval era and were called 'holy anorectics'.[16] Reducing the body could be interpreted as a way of distancing oneself from the earthly life and approaching a more godlike grace. To this today, food deprivation is in several cultures and religions regarded as way of obtaining or inducing a divine state.

Unveiling the repressed

When Biller establishes the main events in her memoir, she is driven by corporality as well as repetition, focusing on the physical abuse and repeated victimization. The storyteller narrates her story by visualizing and drawing the body. On one page she depicts her father's sexual abuse in a sequence of thirty-six pictures, showing her

13 Glen Waller, 'Sexual abuse as a factor in eating disorders', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 159 (1991), pp. 664–671.

14 Katarina Bernhardsson, *Litterära besvär: Skildringar av sjukdomar i samtida svensk prosa* (Lund: Ellerströms, 2010).

15 Ibid., p. 186.

16 Ibid., p. 166.

Fig. 1: From Ur någon vrålar i skogen, p. 45. *By kind permission of Malin Biller.*

gradually growing smaller (see Fig. 1). These are contained in one large frame. A tiny open window sits in the right-hand corner. The sequence shows the father's face, mouth, and moustache in extreme close-up, combined with pictures of the exposed girl. The young 'Malin' is depicted as both a subject and an object, which is particularly significant to the subject matter in these panels. It is a way of showing 'Malin's' experience during the abuse. This strategy enables the narrator to distance herself from her own body and past events, which underscores that it happened to her body and not her *self*. Hence the repressive mechanism belongs to the adult narrator, not the protagonist. The perspective oscillates between the narrator and the protagonist. The dark panels express a loss of consciousness or the fact that the event simply has to be shaped with a number of dark panels because it is unfeasible to visualize the horrible – a form of visual aposiopesis.[17]

The repression is represented in the images, in the darkness. The French-Belgian comics theorist Thierry Groensteen writes that this technique also suggests a conscious way of concealing the event from the rest of the world, expressed by the words in the speech bubble at the bottom of the panel, 'Our secret!'.[18] Biller hid her story for many years. It was not until the age of 21 that fragments of memory began to unveil themselves in her consciousness and she was able to remember and verbalize her memories.

What is represented in Fig. 1 is an escape from the afflicted body. In the last panels the protagonist is seen with wings on her back, flying out of the panel, leaving the frame. At the bottom of the page on the right-hand side there is a window, and the following page (Fig. 2) is one panel in which she hovers in space.

A similar panel in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2004) depicts the protagonist floating in space after losing her religious faith. According to the comics theorist Elisabeth El Rafaie, this is an expression of 'an extremely traumatic and disorienting experience'.[19] Biller chooses to show her picture without words, and the girl soars in space with her eyes closed. For her, space becomes a place beyond a reality from which she has had to mentally separate herself. In contrast, Satrapi's character has her arms stretched out as if crucified, eyes wide open. The feeling of being lost, 'lost in space', is obvious in this visualization. For Biller's character, space is a twofold expression – a place where the loss of the self is significant, but, even more so, an imaginary world to which to escape when reality becomes too repellent. She presents the reader with a visualization of an out-of-body experience. It is a kind of soul travel, spiriting her away to a secure refuge where she cannot be reached.

17 Thierry Groensteen, 'The Monstrator, the Recitant, and the Shadow of the Future', *European Comic Art*, 3:1 (2010), pp. 1–21.

18 Biller 2010, p. 45. My translation.

19 Elisabeth El Rafaie, *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 112.

Fig. 2: From Ur någon vrålar i skogen, p. 46.
By kind permission of Malin Biller.

It might be considered paradoxical to use an image of her body to represent something incorporeal, but it is symbolic. Clearly, the physical body of the child is still in the bedroom, and the image of the winged child is a visual sign, signifying embodiment of the mind. The child is drawn as a small cherub-like angel, emphasizing her innocence and perceived connection to a Christian God. Moreover, it draws a contrast between her and the demoniacal father back in the bedroom. In the narrative, Biller works with a specifically conscious composition of dichotomies, which bear a close resemblance to the tropes of the fairy-tale genre in children's literature.

Publishing her work meant a public disclosure of the abuse, and can be considered the final phase of the ritual. Catharsis is achieved in this phase. Finding relief this way is comparable to a public rite of confession. Also, the ritual of creating the graphic memoir offers a means to re-experience the trauma both in images *and* text. The main functions of this ritual are what Schechner calls dealing with the demonic, healing, and marking or changing identity.[20] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson suggest that au-

20 Schechner 2006, p. 52.

tobiographical telling in itself can be interpreted as performative 'because it enacts the "self" it claims has given rise to the "I"'.[21] In her gradual transformation from a powerless victim to the artist who deals with her trauma, Biller develops into a powerful actor. This transformative phase is also emphasized by the physical work of drawing panel after panel, which contributes to the reconstruction of her self, and thus her personal power. The making of the artwork itself frames the childhood trauma and marks the change the protagonist undergoes.

To Schechner, ritual is of fundamental importance in performative actions. When it comes to graphic narratives, another, more literal dimension should be included – the framed work, which is a conventional feature of comics. Schechner mentions rituals as structured, 'framed' instances, meaning events that are repeated. Biller's work is created using about 500 panels, mostly showing the protagonist, the cartoonist's persona. This continuous repetition relates her work aesthetically to Schechner's ideas of ritual.

Writing and drawing about one's own life and experiences means to stage oneself and frame the experiences in panels in which, since this is principally a visual medium, one's cartoon self repeatedly personifies the self. In this repetitive process, the self becomes or is transposed into a body that is distanced from the idea of a real self. It is a self that is staged in panels, and is, as such, a constructed self. It is not an entire transformation, but a transformation into an artist. The phenomenology of the rites/rituals encompasses an entrance into a reality. It is a process that follows a certain scheme, with turning points where the protagonist is able to work through past events by means of comic art. It allows her to come to terms with the past, and shows her development into a comics artist. Art is part of the healing process, but at the same time a factor that fortifies her emergence as an artist.

'Malin' finds this artistic capacity early on, but initially it is merely a survival strategy in which she can find joy and ease the pressure. It provides a respite from a reality she cannot comprehend. The very first step involves compulsive behaviour. The protagonist allows herself the joy of inventing stories, albeit the first line of each story must follow a ritual by always being the same. Furthermore, the art lessons at school represent another activity where the young girl finds a means of expressing herself. This is depicted in a polyscenic panel without the usual framing – implying a world where the usual rules and regulations are unnecessary. The text above the drawings demonstrates a kind of freedom, and indicates a first step towards healing through art, 'The only times I felt completely free was when I was allowed to draw. Then I created a world to float into, a world much more beautiful than reality' (see Fig. 3).[22]

21 Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2nd ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 214.

22 Biller 2010, p. 62. My translation.

Fig. 3: From Ur någon vrålar i skogen, p. 62. *By kind permission of Malin Biller.*

A second step is manifested when 'Malin' stands up for her love of drawing against her father who at one point is trying to diminish her interest and devotion. Biller conveys this literally; as her father belittles his daughter's interests, Biller draws her persona smaller and smaller. The episode simultaneously reflects her father's position of power, her dependence, and his continual diminishment of the daughter by means of abuse. But the panels can be envisaged as a turning point in her development. At first, Biller visually shows how 'Malin' is diminished, by shrinking her to the size of Thumbelina. When she gains strength from her anger, she is gradually magnified and fills most of the panel, telling her father off in bold, capital letters (see Fig. 4 and 5). Here Biller uses the capacity of the comics' medium to materialize feelings symbolically, visually translating how an event was experienced emotionally.

Momentarily 'Malin' has the upper hand, but the same night, her father starts abusing her sexually again, attempting to re-establish his power. Still, this sequence shows the gradual transformation of 'Malin's' self into the cartoonist, an identity which empowers her to rebuild herself.

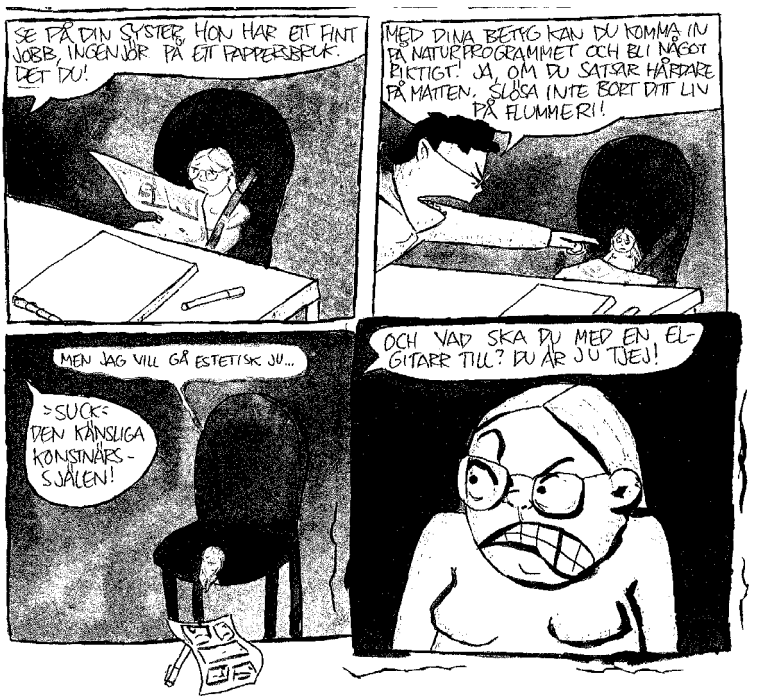

Fig. 4: From Ur någon vrålar i skogen, p. 126. *By kind permission of Malin Biller.*

Fig. 5: From Ur någon vrålar i skogen, p. 127. *By kind permission of Malin Biller.*

Conclusion

When dealing with crises it is well documented that a diversity of survival strategies is employed. Rituals of different kinds aid us in this process. Biller's graphic memoir discloses a childhood trauma. The victim and surviving protagonist deals with her crisis at the time of the events by using rituals. She prays; she restrains her body by starving and binge eating in turns; she develops compulsive behaviours before discovering art as a road to personal redemption. Through art she is able to form a psychological space where she can create comics and feel liberated. Nevertheless, the rituals and compulsive behaviour are not liberating. The creative act of making comics is both an act of free will and a repetitive act, and it could be argued to be ritualistic as well. This act of creativity, however, encompasses more than just gaining control, but also a coming to terms with the past with the help of art.

Biller's graphic memoir *Om någon vrålar i skogen* is produced with a temporal distance to its contents and could be understood as a performative work in its ritualistic construction. In her work Biller shows how she used rituals to control her inner chaos, how some of these transformed into compulsive behaviour, and became starting points for the creative process that had a therapeutic value and effect. The ritual practice works as an important tool becoming a survival act with healing as its final result. It is therapeutic, and the rituals are the means by which she is enabled to tell her story. They function to shape, transform, and order her experience.

The layout of the story follows a similar pattern, too, for the repetitive drawing of both herself and her past experiences are ritualistic and have a healing function, as well as marking and changing her identity.[23]

Biller's performative acts could be said to give birth to a different self. In the end, the protagonist and narrator are merged in time and become, as a meta-narrative device, the cartoonist who has created the graphic memoir we are reading. The performative in Biller's work creates a distance from her life experiences, allowing her to both disclose and cope with them. While professionally recreating her childhood trauma, she also reveals that the child used ritualistic performative strategies as a means of survival. Thus, Biller's performative acts are disclosed on different levels; both within her life story and in its representation.

The graphic approach, like the cartoonist's story, provides a performative aspect. The way the story is framed visually in drawn sequences, the way the protagonist is repeatedly framed in panel after panel, creates a thoroughly built structure. This is common to all graphic memoirs, being a medium-specific convention. The visual method of the comics medium, with repetitive pictures depicting the same cartoon persona in different versions and shapes, simultaneously conveys a highly ritualized perspective.

23 See Schechner 2006, p. 46 for the functions of performance regarding rituals.

This stresses that the rituals lie not only *within* the story, but also in the aesthetic dimension of the text. El Rafaie writes about how corporeality seems to be a common feature in many autobiographical works in our day. 'The centrality of the body in autobiographical comics is perhaps hardly surprising, since the requirement to produce multiple drawn versions of one's self necessarily involves some engagement of the body and body image.'[24] In Biller's memoir, it seems to work particularly well, reflecting the ritualistic dimension of the story.

In Biller's work, rituals function as tools for coping and healing. After filling the panels with her cartoon self, Biller has completed 'the liminal phase of the ritual process'.[25] As we have seen, repetition is central to Biller's graphic memoir, forcing her to distance herself and look at her past from an outside perspective. When she stages her childhood memories and experiences, Biller shows how repetitive actions as a child enabled her to cope with her experiences at that time.

This graphic memoir emphasizes the power of art itself. By turning drawing into a ritualistic practice, Biller performs herself, and her work becomes a testament to her survival, showing how art was the means by which she emerged on the other side.

24 El Rafaie 2012, p. 51.

25 Schechner 2006, p. 66.

Perform to Empower

August Wilson's Public Persona and Social Performances

Chen Xi

At the peak of his career in the mid-1990s, August Wilson (1945–2005) enjoyed a reputation as one of the greatest working American playwrights. His plays, most notably 'The Century Cycle', sometimes called 'The Pittsburgh Cycle' – ten plays each dedicated to depicting the experience of black people during one decade in the twentieth century – were universally hailed by professional and amateur audiences as classics of African American literature, securing Wilson's position in the literary canon. He was richly rewarded by academia and the market, every work in the cycle winning major national awards for drama. Following in the footsteps of Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller, August Wilson became another phenomenal presence on the American stage and a representative figure of the dramatic tradition.

As an African American artist of considerable social influence, August Wilson was committed to promoting African American cultural values. His public appearances and speeches were often loaded with an overt political message that many contemporary writers would usually refrain from. His articulation on racial issues and his outspoken style, combined with an outpouring of personal emotion, sometimes seemed rather bitter and incongruous with the political placidity of the US ethnic landscape in the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike authors who keep their distance from their works, Wilson never forsook his authorial control, designating explicitly the artistic and political connotations of his plays and setting the thematic range for critical interpretations. With successive stagings and publications of his plays, Wilson gained more publicity as a personality, and his words gained weight in the public consciousness.

Contrary to his unanimously acclaimed identity as the distinguished dramatist, however, his views on politics and African American culture are sometimes highly controversial, often labelled by his opponents as 'black nationalism' or 'ethnic separatism'. Summarizing this identity incoherence, the critic Richard Hornby claimed that there was not just one August Wilson:

> Thus, there appear to be two August Wilsons, the separatist lecturer and the integrated artist. No one would listen to the former if it were not for the latter. The lecturer raises important issues, but he is ultimately dead wrong.[1]

It seems that the single person of August Wilson can be divided between two personalities: the unpopular political separatist characterized by 'insecurity and hostility'; and the celebrated playwright with 'utter self-confidence'[2]. How is this incongruity possible? What might be the historical and social reasons behind the surface of this double identity? What influence does it have on the general American public? These are the questions that have triggered this investigation.

Before Hornby's puzzle can be resolved, the research premise, namely, the intricate relationship between authors and literary works, should be considered. One of the basic theoretical tenets of twentieth-century literary studies has involved the dissociation of the author and the author's 'intention' from the interpretation of the work. As a result of this new trend, heralded by William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley and reinforced by Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, the authorial intention in literary ventures seems to have lost its grip on how the work is to be understood; it is the participants in the reading process, who may come from diverse professional, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, that determine the meaning of linguistic symbols in the text. The 'intentional fallacy' advocated by Wimsatt and Beardsley in 1946, originally intended for defence of textual autonomy, is nevertheless seamlessly adapted to a democratization of literary interpretations.

This perspective on meaning production not only alienates the personal author from the production process, it is also capable of creating a 'textual persona' for the writer, independent from the actual person, on the basis of the mere act of reading. In other words, the author, instead of being a master of the textual signification, falls victim to the 'enslavement' of reading (process of signification) on the reader's part. From the act of reading, a signified author, or an image of the author, will arise. The production of meaning can easily be associated with imaginings about the aesthetic position, philosophical purpose, or political agenda of the author in the writing project. In this paper, the signified image, constituted by the imagination of the readers, will be called 'the textual persona' of the author.[3]

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1 Richard Hornby, 'The Two August Wilsons', *Hudson Review*, 2 (2000), p. 292.

2 Ibid., pp. 291–298.

3 The 'textual persona' is similar to the Foucauldian concept of 'Author–Function', which was proposed in his 1969 essay 'What is an Author?', but whereas Foucault emphasizes the autonomy of the discursive structure as the source of meaning, the 'textual persona' here is held to be a product of mainstream critics, whose stance contrasts with Wilson's own. Hence, the tension between 'textual' and 'public' personas stresses the potential agency of the author in the struggle against the fixating power of social discourses.

The notion of 'persona' is etymologically rooted in the tradition of the theatre. Referring originally to a theatrical mask, 'persona' was later applied in dramatic performances to indicate a 'character'. This notion makes it possible to separate an individual being (an actor) from the theatrical/social role (a character) being played. In a philosophical sense, if an actor is an ontological existence on the stage, the persona/character is its epistemological counterpart, the theatrical presence as perceived by the audience. In other words, the meaning in the audience's eyes comes from perception of the dramatic role/character on stage rather than the real person playing the role. If reading literature is viewed as a process of signification, sharing a similar pattern with that of watching a play, the 'textual persona' of the author can be regarded as his or her residual image perceived by the readers from their experience of the text.

In this light, Hornby's observation of two incompatible 'August Wilsons' may be redirected into a discussion of the tension between the two personas of August Wilson – the textual and the public. Whereas the textual persona is mainly derived from the reading of his literary works, Wilson's public persona stems from the public statements he made on a variety of occasions, some of which are so controversial that many critics, including Hornby, find them hard to reconcile with their original impressions.

Performativity and the performance of public persona

The concept 'performativity' throws new light on the study of August Wilson's public persona. Since its coinage by J. L. Austin, performativity has transformed the theoretical discourse almost beyond recognition, blurring the border between actual behaviour and literary creation, and reinvigorating discussions about the relationship between art and reality, literature and society, aesthetics and politics. Performativity also leads to the revolution of 'performance' as a concept – what used to be restricted to the stage is now applicable to a wide range of human activities. Richard Schechner, its American proponent in theatrical studies and practice, confirms that the determining factor in performance is the 'historical and social context, convention, usage, and tradition ... What "is" or "is not" performance does not depend on an event in itself but on how that event is received and placed.'[4] Schechner's vision widens the range of 'performance' as a social concept, and it has transformed the way theatre and performances are studied.

In the broadest sense, the performance of a theatrical text is not confined to the stage. While directors and actors work out the text's signification within the theatre, social performances or extra-theatrical activities, such as advertisements or authori-

4 Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2006), p. 38.

al speeches and interviews, can contribute as much to the production of the textual meaning of literary works. Hence, every text can derive extra significance from related social performances, and every performance is unique, since the context in which meaning emerges from words and actions always varies. The realization and expansion of the content of a performance make it necessary for dramatic performances to be studied alongside their socialization, including the author's social performances, which can be of great value in understanding textual works.

In addition, Judith Butler, in her ground-breaking work on gender and performance, points out the intricate relationship between performance and social identity: as the key issue in *Gender Trouble*, gender is problematized and studied as a social construct. Being an ingredient of human identity, gender has historically been one of the most inert labels in defining a human being, frequently associated with human reproductive biology. However, based on a study of drag performance, Butler takes advantage of the renewed concept of performance, and deconstructs the stability of gender as an identity label. Reversing the assumption that gender is *a priori* and determines human action, Butler argues that 'gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body.'[5] What has been taken for granted as an independent existence for a long history is essentially performative, meaning 'it is real only to the extent that it is performed'.[6] The notion of performativity, thus explicated, revolutionizes the conception of human identity and opens up a wide field of research, offering new perspectives on traditional issues.

If a writer's textual persona is subject to interpretation by readers and critics, the author as a person plays a more active role in the formulation of his public persona, which is constructed on the basis of his social performances. In August Wilson's case, the public persona prevails throughout his career as a dramatist, permeating his social appearances and cultural activities. The theatre-going public, amorphous as it is, looms large in any playwright's consciousness. The public is the audience, the addressees, the critics, the character models, and the ultimate purpose of the artistic enterprise; yet it is also an intricate complex of social relations, harbouring all imaginable possibilities, and, ultimately, an unavoidable and undeniable reality that is essential to any dramatist who envisions a social or political mission for himself/herself.

In this essay, Wilson's public performances, divided into three separate categories, are analysed. This categorization is done by genre, which also roughly corresponds to the chronological development of Wilson's professional and social influence.

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5 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 140, her emphasis.

6 Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', in Sue-Ellen Case (ed.), *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 278.

The first category is the interviews that feature Wilson, which during the early phase of his career were his main vehicle to explain his plays and interact with the public. The second category is Wilson's public speeches and articles as an established black artist, intent on trying to prove the value of black art and black culture – most notably his keynote address, 'The Ground on Which I Stand', delivered at the 1996 biennial conference of the Theater Communications Group. The final category encompasses his live debate with Robert Brustein, his 'longtime nemesis' at New York City's Town Hall in 1997, an event named 'On Cultural Power: The August Wilson/Robert Brustein Discussion', moderated by docu-dramatist and actor Anna Deavere Smith.

Wilson's public performances

In the wake of his debut, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), Wilson gave numerous interviews and answered hundreds of questions from literary scholars, theatrical critics, journalists, and fellow playwrights. The interviews helped popularize him among the general American public. In *Conversations with August Wilson*, published in 2006 following his death the previous year, the editors Jackson Bryer and Mary Hartig compiled seventeen interviews by various scholars in chronological order, spanning from his first stage success to the last-but-one play of 'The Century Cycle'. The book has proved an interesting source for the study of Wilson's public persona.

Among the first impressions Wilson left on the public was as a person 'soft-spoken, pensive, almost meek in manner', as reported by Michael Feingold in 1984, who called him 'an anomaly among playwrights, who are by and large a demonstrative breed'.[7] Wilson was credited for introducing heterogeneous elements from African American culture into the American dramatic tradition, and creating lively and flamboyant characters who speak the genuine vernacular of black people. His plays were called 'treasure houses of street talk, blunt, saucy, and extravagant', contrasting with the writer's 'refined, low-toned speech'.[8] A modest yet extremely gifted writer, mild in temperament and fiercely talented – this was the pleasant image on offer to the public in these interviews.

In the early interviews, Wilson's sincerity and friendliness were also very much to the fore. With interviewers of various backgrounds, Wilson never lost patience at having to tell the story of his life time and again – his family, neighbourhood, education, and self-education in the library, and how he slaked his cultural thirst with everyday street talk and café conversations. He demonstrated loyalty to his social and ethnic

7 Michael Feingold, 'August Wilson's Bottomless Blackness', in Jackson Bryer & Mary Hartig (eds), *Conversations with August Wilson* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), p. 12.

8 Ibid., p. 13.

background, and testified to how this formative cultural environment laid the foundation of his beliefs, his aesthetics, and his literary career. These personal chronicles added considerable charisma to Wilson's public persona: a prototypical self-made artistic talent, observant, independent, responsible, grateful, and, most importantly, original.

Several successful productions of his award-winning plays, especially *Fences* (1985), *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986), and *The Piano Lesson* (1987), saw Wilson's career bloom. With his recognition as a leading playwright of the last two decades of the twentieth century, Wilson became known to the general public and he was able to reach a wider audience. Becoming more and more a public figure in his interviews and interactions with the outside world, Wilson at this stage of his career was (self-) projected as a black artist, committed to promoting black culture and rewriting black history in America.

In 1987, Wilson's public persona became more clearly defined in the many interviews he gave after he had won the Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award for *Fences*. The voice in these interviews was confident, purposeful, and articulate. It was during this period that Wilson began formulating his 'artistic agenda'. For example, in a 1987 interview with Dinah Livingston, Wilson explained the drive for him to write was not so much the injustice done to black people as his devotion to the idea of '"a profound articulation of the black experience" ... ritual of intercourse that can sustain a man once he's left his father's house'.[9] In effect, Wilson projected the impression that his works were devoted to black culture, not to black politics. This quote from James Baldwin would serve as a highlight in many of his later confessions, gradually accepted by the critical circle as an epitome of the Wilsonian voice.

In another influential interview of this period, 'August Wilson: Playwright', hosted by Bill Moyers of Public Affairs Television, Wilson expounded on black culture, black art, and black history, and assessed their value to contemporary African Americans. Words and phrases such as 'nobility', 'African sensibilities', and 'inner strength' became a part of Wilson's diction. Drawing comparisons with other ethnic groups, including the Chinese, Wilson argued that a Renaissance in black culture was necessary before social justice could be done to black people. This 'cultural shift' in Wilson's language also reinforced his recognition of the social commitment a black artist must undertake. From then on, Wilson's public persona was that of a public intellectual, calling on his people to change the social status quo.

Little wonder, then, that in the same interview, instead of remaining at a safe distance from the controversial identities of 'black nationalist' and 'cultural nationalist', Wilson embraced them. His looked back fondly on the 1960s and openly declared that he allied himself with the Black Power movement 'to gain self-determination and

9 Dinah Livingston, 'Cool August: Mr. Wilson's Red-Hot Blues', in Bryer & Hartig (eds) 2006, pp. 38–60, here p. 55.

self-respect and self-defence'.[10] It was also the beginning of his single-minded criticism of certain black artistic ventures which are 'black in skin color only', referring to *The Cosby Show* among others.[11] Wilson continued his message of self-respect and self-determination to the black community – 'there's nothing wrong' and 'the affirmation of the value of oneself' – and these notions were to resound throughout his later plays.[12]

In addition to his persona as a public intellectual, Wilson also attracted interest for his individual conception of playwriting. Not holding back on his artistic methodology and the source of his inspiration, Wilson explained in detail how he worked. This reinforced the public understanding of his originality in both content and form, as in the following 1991 interview in the *New York Times*, entitled 'How to Write a Play Like August Wilson':

> Part of my process is that I assemble all these things and later try to make sense out of them and sort of plug them in to what is my larger artistic agenda ... In terms of influence on my work, I have what I call my four B's: Romare Bearden; Imamu Amiri Baraka, the writer; Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine short-story writer; and the biggest B of all: the blues.[13]

The self-formulated four B's instantly became a key for Wilsonian scholars, laying the formula for academic study of his works. By this time, Wilson the intellectual had been incorporated into the black artistic tradition, adding a historical dimension to his public persona.

In conclusion, the interviews were the major channel through which the early August Wilson engaged the public and produced a public persona: an aspiring African American playwright rooted in 'black culture' and devoted to its celebration. He was modest in temperament and mild in criticism, paying pious tribute to his predecessors in the realm of black art. His preferred topics were mainly the theatre and aesthetics, where he was something of an authority. These interviews were highly informative and of considerable academic value, reinforcing the popular appreciation of his plays, which were considered original as well as being critically acclaimed.

With fame came an increasingly idiosyncratic voice, as Wilson expressed controversial opinions on racial issues that some found hard to stomach. As a dominant voice in American intellectual circles, Wilson became interested in how his plays could change racial realities and influence social progress. All this is on display in an inter-

10 Ibid., p. 57.

11 Bill Moyers, 'August Wilson: Playwright', in ibid., pp. 61–80. *The Cosby Show* was an extremely popular NBC television sitcom in the 1980s, telling stories about a middle-class African American family.

12 Ibid., pp. 70 and 79.

13 August Wilson, 'How to Write a Play Like August Wilson', *New York Times*, 10 March 1991, sec. 2, 5+. <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/10/theater/theaterspecial/03play.html>, accessed 27 July 2014.

view with Bonnie Lyons, where Wilson says that 'all art is political in the sense that it serves the politics of someone. Here in America whites have a particular view of blacks, and I think my plays offer them a different and new way to look at black Americans.'[14] Occasionally still voicing his ideas through interviews, Wilson spent an increasing amount of time writing articles in order to clarify his opinions to the public. In a 2003 article in the *New York Times* entitled 'Aunt Ester's Children', in which he paid tribute to a key figure of transcendental existence in his later plays, Wilson expounded at length on the purpose behind his epic project, 'The Century Cycle':

> I wanted to present the unique particulars of black American culture as the transformation of impulse and sensibility into codes of conduct and response, into cultural rituals that defined and celebrated ourselves as men and women of high purpose. I wanted to place this culture onstage in all its richness and fullness and to demonstrate its ability to sustain us in all areas of human life and endeavor and through profound moments of our history in which the larger society has thought less of us than we have thought of ourselves.[15]

Wilson's devotion to African American culture was unwavering. As is evident from his remarks, the prime mission with his plays was to restore racial pride and cultural dignity to black people in contemporary America. This assertion of artistic orientation by a black playwright was greeted with common assent and respect among the 'politically correct', but its social influence was limited.

Public controversy

What put the public spotlight on Wilson's public persona were the storms that arose over his firmness on racial issues. The first major controversy he was involved in was a consequence of his insistence on having a black director for the film adaption of *Fences* (1985). When Paramount Pictures purchased the film rights in 1987, a $15 million budget and a white director were planned for the film. Wilson responded with determined resistance, regarding it as a manifestation of 'the kind of thorny racial issue that Hollywood, with its long-standing concern for the bottom line, is typically reluctant to address'.[16] In a famous article entitled 'I Want a Black Director', published originally in *Spin* magazine and later excerpted and reprinted in the *New York Times*, Wilson expounded on his view:

14 Bonnie Lyons, 'An Interview with August Wilson', *Contemporary Literature*, 1 (1999), p. 2.

15 August Wilson, 'Aunt Ester's Children', *New York Times*, 23 April 2000 <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9405E6DE1331F930A15757C0A9669C8B63>, accessed 16 July 2014.

16 James Greenberg, 'Did Hollywood Sit on "Fences" over Hiring a Black Director?', *New York Times*, 27 January 1991, Arts and Leisure, sec. 2, p. 13.

> I wanted to hire somebody talented, who understood the play and saw the possibilities of the film, who would approach my work with the same amount of passion and measure of respect with which I approach it, and finally, who shared the same cultural responsibilities of the characters.[17]

His refusal to countenance a white director, as proposed by Paramount Pictures, did considerable harm to Wilson's popularity. His reasoning, that the choice was not based on race but on culture, was 'greeted by blank, vacant stares and the pious shaking of heads'.[18] Instead of being discouraged, he reasserted the urgency with which his plays and social performances were to address racial discrimination in both the film industry and society at large. With his acute linguistic awareness as a writer, Wilson called upon the public to reflect on the social imagination of blackness, which, as he said, quoting from *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, has been associated with endless negative connotations: 'outrageously wicked; a villain; dishonorable; expressing or indicating disgrace, discredit, or guilt'.[19] Wilson said that what riled him was the unsaid yet prevalent belief that a black director would be incapable of accomplishing the film adaptation of the play. In a remark dripping with sarcasm, Wilson suggested that Paramount Pictures should hire 'a violator of public regulations, who was sullen, unqualified, and marked by a malignant influence' as the director, and that a rule should be made to ensure films and directors go hand in hand with ethnicity.[20]

However justified, Wilson's flat refusal to let a white director adapt his play left him open to accusations of reverse racial discrimination, and a national furore ensued. The issue was widely debated in artistic circles and the mainstream cultural media. The controversy over racial issues and policies – historically the problematic theme bar none in modern America – brought Wilson nationwide attention.

All these events accelerated the maturing of Wilson's public persona as an intellectual leader of black resistance against cultural domination by mainstream white society. Apart from his interviews and essays, Wilson was a sought-after speaker among social organizations, and he gave several important speeches expounding on his views, addressing the public in person. On 7 January 1990, invited by the California Afro-American Museum, Wilson reiterated his opinion at Kinsey Auditorium in Exposition Park to a large crowd, criticizing the film industry where 'white people have set themselves up as custodians of our experience'.[21] Unlike his once meek and mild-

17 August Wilson, 'I Want a Black Director', in Alan Nadel (ed.), *May All Your Fences Have Gates* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), p. 200.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., p. 203.

20 Ibid.

21 Ray Loynd, 'Wilson Seeking Black Director for Film Version of His *Fences*', *LA Times*, <http://articles.latimes.com/1990–01–09/entertainment/ca–203_1_august-wilson>, accessed 8 August 2014.

mannered persona, he was now a figure of indignation, enraged by invisible 'cultural imperialists'.

This angry public persona of Wilson's reached its zenith at the 1996 Theater Communications Group National Conference at Princeton University. Invited as the keynote speaker, on 26 June Wilson delivered his (in)famous speech, 'The Ground on Which I Stand', to a large professional audience. It was to be recognized as the most scathing, most political, and most important articulation of Wilson's position on the social significance of aesthetic work. It summarized his artistic, cultural, and political agendas, and homed in on a number of momentous issues facing American society concerning race, including the urgent necessity of establishing an African American cultural identity.

With real feeling, Wilson first celebrated race in the speech as 'the largest, most identifiable and most important part' of identity, and identified America as an 'amalgamation of races'.[22] As 'a product of a shared gene pool', race was 'the organizing principle' for the formation of culture; in Wilson's dictionary, culture represented 'behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought as expressed in a particular community of people'.[23] He went on to expound the meaning of the word 'black', a word not only about race and culture, but also denoting a lesser social condition in economics and privilege. It became more obvious as the speech went on that Wilson was resolute in his ambition to join his forebears – a list including Ed Bullins, Richard Wesley, and Amiri Baraka – as 'warriors on the cultural battlefield' to affirm self-worth, targeting cultural imperialists who dismissed black people as 'deficient ... in humanity'.[24]

A technical issue in current theatre practice that Wilson challenged in his speech was colour-blind casting, a subject on which the playwright was especially vehement, switching to a 'we–you' rhetoric, as if already envisioning an open debate against his 'enemies'. For Wilson, colour-blind casting was 'an aberrant idea', a deprivation of black talent and a denial of black humanity, since cultural assimilation will always tip towards the white who play the 'custodians', denying the value of black art and enslaving black people in the spiritual realm. It was high time, Wilson told his own colleagues, to rally together to explore black life as it is, and to produce original art of their own, protecting cultural property from 'nay-sayers' who did not understand, yet as the final arbiters passed unfavourable judgement.

The last accusation was specifically directed at Robert Brustein, artistic director of the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and a theatre critic for the *New Republic*, the only 'cultural imperialist' mentioned by name in Wilson's

22 August Wilson, 'The Ground on Which I Stand', *Callaloo*, 3 (1997), p. 494.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., p. 496.

speech. Brustein, who seemed unnerved by the recent outpouring of ethnic art, had warned funding agencies in his article 'Unity from Diversity' that aesthetic criteria should not be replaced by sociological criteria. The implication, as Wilson read it, was that minority art was of lesser value, and most of it did not qualify according to the aesthetic standards set by white classics. The conflict between Wilson and Brustein echoed some of the long-standing debates in the field of literary studies on the issue of 'the canon'. For example, is canon based purely on aesthetic variables or mainly on historical and social ones? Or, is art autonomous or wholly subject to economic and political forces?

It was in this storm of conflicting ideas that the third phase of Wilson's public persona was born. Unsurprisingly, his speech elicited a quick and passionate response from Brustein, and the two men started a series of polemic exchanges, published in *American Theater* and the *New Republic* respectively. As fate would have it, the tension between the two men, each blessed with considerable social influence and intellectual importance in American theatrical circles, escalated into the most dramatic form: an open, face-to-face debate sponsored by the Theater Communications Group, held at New York City's Town Hall on 27 January 1997.

The fact that the debate was in public and presented in a most theatrical manner – a confrontation on stage – testifies to the performative nature of intellectual ideas. Plainly, the content of ideas and the manner in which they are presented are intrinsically connected. The event 'sold out the house and led to a Broadway-style, opening-night crush outside the theater'.[25] It attracted an intellectual audience made up of critics, actors, playwrights, directors, producers, and theatre owners, who gathered to witness a head-to-head encounter of two opposite views.

Entering from opposite sides of the stage, August Wilson and Robert Brustein made their 15–20-minute opening remarks consecutively under the same designated topic – 'On Cultural Power'. Brustein took the initiative. In his speech, a well-supported indictment was launched against 'political correctness', 'ideological art', and 'ethnographic fallacy'. His high-flown polemic was rooted in aesthetic ideals, such as 'speak truth to power', the colourlessness of the human soul, and individual diversities. Insisting that art and politics should not mix, Brustein lashed out against the political tenor of Wilson's public statements. Occasionally, Brustein threw in a few subtle and personal attacks on Wilson's own position as a representative of black theatre, and challenged his right to speak for all African Americans, referring to Wilson as a 'tribalist' at the end of his speech.

Wilson in turn grounded his speech on a more tangible context. He began by

25 William Grimes, 'Face-to-Face Encounter On Race in the Theater', *New York Times*, 29 January 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/01/29/theater/face-to-face-encounter-on-race-in-the-theater.html>, accessed 21 July 2014.

pointing out that 65 out of 66 LORT (League of Resident Theatres) theatres were 'white' – testifying to the unequal relationship between white people and black people in contemporary America. The pleasant racial placidity that Americans often indulge in was an illusion, the truth often 'harsh and uncompromising'. Taking his own achievements as an example, Wilson pointed to the possibilities that could derive from the combination of African sensibility with European technology. This led him to argue for greater financial support and opportunities for black artists who had been struggling against existing odds. Wilson's thematic message in the speech was that instead of separation, black artists sought for inclusion and equality in the American mainstream cultural scene.

The discussion, moderated by Anna Deavere Smith, began with a dispute about the racial status quo. Brustein accused his opponent of lingering in the seventeenth century, and of being obsessed with the 'original sin' of the country when black people were slaves. Wilson responded with the indignation of a victim. When the topic shifted to colour-blind casting, Brustein claimed it was for the maximization of an actor's potential, while Wilson stubbornly denounced it as a victimization of young ethnic talent. When asked if he also objected to cross-gender casting, Wilson appeared to be inconsistent for a while. The two moved on to the role of art in society: Brustein eruditely joined Bertolt Brecht in believing that art does not change reality, to which Wilson answered with firm resolve that art changes society through the individual – 'all art is political in the sense that it serves the politics of someone'.[26]

The debate lasted for two and a half hours. It was the grandest stage for August Wilson's public persona and the peak of his social performances. The debate did not ameliorate the racial situation in US; its significance lay not in solving, but in revealing the problems. For this, Wilson made himself unwelcome to some. His public statements were never as well received as his plays. For example, Myles Weber in 'August Wilson Grounded' attacked Wilson's outspoken racial views and his personal relation to white theatres, depicting him as a ridiculous mouthpiece who raked in money from the mainstream audience without a hint of gratitude. The same article went on to denounce Wilson's alignment with African culture as ironic, for 'no such contrarian figure is permitted' in Africa.[27] But Wilson also had his supporters. Not only did the black community applaud him; he also received the support of mainstream white society, from those who understood the value of a different voice and the need for a change in America's race relations.

26 'August Wilson/Robert Brustein Debate' <http://www.theblaze.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/01-Wilson-Brustein-Debate.doc>, accessed 1 April 2014.

27 Myles Weber, 'August Wilson Grounded', *New England Review*, 4 (2003), p. 203.

The *Performanz* of Wilson's public persona

The formation and display of August Wilson's public persona spanned roughly two decades. From his first stage success to his death, Wilson entered and vanished from the public eye at a relatively quick pace. But he managed to leave an impression that is still felt a decade on, not only in a country still troubled by racial conflict, but also among those across the world who understand the importance of the issues he addressed. His significance, in terms of his social contribution, far transcended the boundaries of the dramatic world. In fact, it is Wilson's public persona that stepped off stage and out to the social sphere to address a wider audience in forthright terms. Tracing the development of this public persona in the light of performativity, we discover the centrality of 'stylized repetition' in his social performances, reinforced in the interviews, articles, speeches, and public debates he participated in.

Wilson believed that identity and cultural belonging are a matter of self-definition and environmental influence. Wilson was of German descendent on his father's side, but he rejected the cultural identity represented by his long-absent father and passionately embraced his mother's black culture, which provided the cultural environment of his youth. Believing that all art is political, he sought to use his influence to improve the situation for black people in America. Gradually, as can be seen in his social performances, he came to identify with the role of speaking for the race as a black intellectual, especially as his fame and influence grew with time, representing the black community in their fight for equality and opportunity.

Even though Wilson was firmly upper middle class himself, he was keenly aware of the misery and racial discrimination endured by many black persons every day. Most of his plays were devoted to underclass black people in urban slums, revealing the social gap between colours that white people often neglected. Yet once the texts entered the complex process of production and performance, Wilson's authorial grip on the meaning of the works often gave way to the interpretations of mainstream critics: think only of *Fences*, often compared to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, in which they highlighted the universal themes of family, responsibility, and father-son conflict. In the beginning, Wilson welcomed the opinion. When the interviewer Bill Moyers confided his empathy with the Maxsons in *Fences*, Wilson readily agreed and quoted a painter's saying: 'I try to explore in terms of the life I know best those things which are common to all culture.'[28] Later in his career, he was strongly against such assimilative or universal readings, arguing they estranged the play from black culture. Although *Fences* was a remarkable success and received unanimous acclaim from the critics, Wilson himself downplayed its importance in his artistic project. When asked by Sandra Shannon and Dana Williams, long-time researchers and followers of his

28 Moyers, in Bryer & Hartig (eds), 2006, p. 75.

plays, whether *Fences* was his signature play and what he thought of a possible all-white production, Wilson laughed:

> I want to say here for the record, of the plays that I have written, it is my least favorite play. It's not my signature play ... An all-white production *would* miss the cultural underpinnings, but there is nothing I can do about that. My signature play would be *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Most of the ideas of the other plays are contained in that one play. So, if I had to pick one play as my signature play, that would be it but certainly not *Fences*. *Fences* is the only one that's not an ensemble play. The rest of them are ensembles.[29]

In the face of alternative interpretation of his texts, Wilson's public persona effectively performed the role of expert interpreter and minimized the possibility of a white appropriation of the plays, setting up resistance through his performances in various speeches, interviews, and extra-dramatic publications. These events were both literary and social, of course, and the interaction between literary texts and social happenings poses a question for readers and audiences alike as to how Wilson's textual and public personas could be reconciled. Once this question is analysed in the light of Wilson's public statements, new depths to the plays, especially the culture-specific significance often eclipsed by mainstream interpretations, will emerge, along with a better grasp of the author and his works.

From the perspective of performativity, the tension between Wilson's public performances and the textual meaning can be regarded in a new light. Wilson's insistence on the uniqueness of black culture, and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of authentic cross-cultural understanding, is an effort to construct a controversial persona that keeps society alert to racial realities. He might occasionally have gone to extremes, but he achieved the desired social effect of problematizing the racial equilibrium some Americans took for granted. In this sense, Wilson as a performative persona was not an object of taste or a choice of political views; he was by nature a question, a controversy that challenged the public's knowledge and awareness of the status quo. For the wider audience, his performance as a black intellectual was a moral education.

In sum, August Wilson's social performances had an abiding impact on American society. First of all, he problematized his country's supposed racial equilibrium. It was generally believed that after the Civil Rights movement of the sixties, racial segregation had given way to integration, that black people were included in mainstream society. But Wilson argued otherwise. He pointed out that separation and alienation still dominated the American racial landscape, and that it was a mistake to have only one LORT theatre out of sixty-six devoted to black art. His controversial speeches and opinions, taken with his immense social influence, plunged the American public into

29 Sandra G. Shannon & Dana A. Williams, 'A Conversation with August Wilson', in *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), p. 194.

another re-examination of racial issues and social problems in the right-wing eighties and nineties.

Secondly, he promoted spiritual empowerment of the black community. The staging of underclass black life on Broadway was in itself a proclamation of black pride and a triumph of black culture. Wilson's repeated emphasis on the self-definition of black identity and the autonomy of black culture was in line with his resolve to uphold black pride and empower black people despite a hostile social discourse. He devoted himself to underclass black people and their dignity in his texts, and set up quite a few 'warriors' (whom he stood shoulder to shoulder with in extra-dramatic reality) as ethnic heroes, defending their values and way of life as examples of black cultural identity. In his last plays, a cultural community was created as an organic neighbourhood of black experience. Hill District, Pittsburgh, became an iconic cultural site in American literature, a culturally fertile soil nurturing the imagination of a dignified community.

Thirdly, Wilson's performances celebrated cultural diversity and equality, promoting a redefinition of 'Americanness'. He had the broadest American interests at heart: in order to honour America as a land of freedom and equality and to uphold the American dream as the ideological commonality shared by its people, each race must adhere to preserving and celebrating its own cultural identity. It was in this spirit that he defended and empowered black culture with the utmost faith and devotion.

Performing Selves

Roles in Queen Christina of Sweden's Autobiography

Eva Hættner Aurelius

What kind of action did queen Christina of Sweden perform, when in 1681 she wrote her autobiography? An autobiography in those days was very often a statement addressed to the public, a religious, a political or a personal statement, advocating or defending a position, claiming something, and frequently taking the form of a presentation of the self.[1] Thus, the theory of performativity as considered here, as an action and an event or situation, seems to be well suited to an analysis of Christina's text – an autobiography firstly is an action construing an identity, and secondly is clearly tied to an event or situation, and it thus performs something. Two questions will be asked: what kind of action was the queen performing when writing this text, and what is the eventness of the text, here conceived of as the situation producing it.

The text as action

The text as action is clearly connected to the text as construing Christina's self, and one very striking feature of Christina's construal is her theory of the self. It is obviously not the same as the modern idea of the self.

The birth of the modern self in Western thinking is often dated to the middle of the eighteenth century. This modern self is characterized by at least four qualities: first, it is autonomous, that is, it is ruled or governed by none other than this self; second, it is consistent or coherent, that is, the self I am today is essentially the same self I was yesterday or ten years ago; third, it is rational, it has the capacity of logical thinking,

1 See Eva Hættner Aurelius, *Inför lagen: Kvinnliga svenska självbiografier från Agneta Horn till Fredrika Bremer* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1996), pp. 43–69 and the analyses of the different autobiographies.

this thinking being connected to man's unique gift of using symbols, perhaps most importantly in language and mathematics; and fourth, it is unique – I am an individual, with special gifts, abilities, and character traits.

This modern, Western self, this free, coherent, rational and unique entity, was of course the product of several discourses. The autonomous self is connected to the discourse of economics and politics, enhancing or advocating the person's freedom to choose; the consistent self is connected to the discourse of law, which is concerned with the responsibilities of a person, thus being able to judge a person for something he or she did ten years ago; the rational self is of course connected to the discourse of philosophy and science, always referring to the universals in man's consciousness when arguing for something; and, lastly, the unique self is connected to the discourse of aesthetics, enhancing originality and creativity in man, preferably the artist. Of course these discourses are, in an intricate way, interlaced and dependent on one another, but that complexity is not my subject.

It is also often said that this modern self, as soon as it was born, began to crumble. It suffices to read Jean Jacques Rousseau's famous *Confessions* (written 1765–1770, posthumously published 1781, 1788) to see this. Rousseau underscores the primacy of the emotional, not the rational, in the self; he also emphasizes the disconnectedness in his personality; and he relates several experiences of being subject to forces in himself which he cannot master – thus experiencing what both Augustine in the fourth century in his *Confessiones* understood and, later, Sigmund Freud stressed: mankind is not master in his or her own house. And, naturally enough, one of the vital discourses in our time is the post-modern criticism of this self. One need only think of Lacan, Foucault, Bourdieu, Baudrillard, and for that matter, Judith Butler, all of whom found the theory of structuralism central, perceiving the self, or more pertinently the subject, as essentially produced by structures, scripts, models, discourses.

Christina was born 1626, the sole heir to the throne of Sweden, which in those days was one of Europe's great powers. It is said that she mastered five languages – Latin, Swedish, German, French, and Italian – and that she was well read in philosophy, literature, and political science. She became one of Europe's learned ladies, one of the *feminae illustres*, illustrious women. She abdicated from the throne in 1654, and then converted from the Lutheran faith to Roman Catholicism. Her abdication and conversion made her the object of a slew of libellous pamphlets, and she was nothing if not a major European figure in her day. Her autobiography was written in 1681, when she was 54 years old and living in Rome, as she had done since 1655.

To the modern mind it seems clear that Christina should be considered a modern self. Her life seems to us a perfect example of the actions of an autonomous, consistent, rational, and unique person. But her text shows something different. Consider her account of the events surrounding the death of her father, Gustavus Adolphus, in 1632:

> The dowager queen played her role of mourning perfectly. She was inconsolable, but her grief was genuine. Thereby she surpassed what sorrowful women usually exhibit in similar circumstances in order to convince their audience that they are suffering undying pain.[2]

This she wrote about her mother's grief and despair, seen at the burial ceremonies for her father. What I want to call attention to is the metaphor Christina has used here: man is an actor on the stage of life or of history. It is this metaphor I will take as my vantage point in reading the autobiography.

A present-day reader can misunderstand this metaphor, tempted to believe that Christina, construing her mother as a perfect actress, intended to criticize her for being inauthentic. But for Christina and her age this metaphor – usually called *theatrum mundi* – was an expression of an important thought about man, human existence and history. It is an ancient metaphor, with roots in classical antiquity. Christina had surely encountered the thought through the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, who gave the metaphor its classical form and meaning. In his *Meditations,* from the third century, he wrote:

> Constantly consider how all things such as they now are, in time past also were; and consider that they will be the same again. And place before thy eyes entire dramas and stages of the same form, whatever thou hast learned from thy experience or from older history; for example, the whole court of Hadrian, and the whole court of Antoninus, and the whole court of Philip, Alexander, Croesus; for all those were such dramas as we see now, only with different actors.[3]

We know that Christina enjoyed reading Marcus Aurelius. The *theatrum mundi* metaphor was taken up again during the Renaissance, and in the hands of the Renaissance poets, for example Shakespeare and Calderón, its inherent force was developed with great originality. It was also used in other contexts than the merely literary: in the French bishop and historian Jacques Bénigne Bossuet's *Discours sur l'Histoire universelle pour expliquer la suite de la Religion et les changemens des Empires* (1681) he perceives history as a 'grand spectacle'. Likewise he displays world history as 'a great performance' – to the point where he plays the role of a *Marktschreier* or barker, the message of his narrative pose being 'come and see this great play, this performance': 'I want to show you a great performance. You will be able to see all the preceding centuries develop before your very eyes in only a few hours, so to speak.'[4] God's cre-

2 Christina's autobiography, 'La Vie de la Reine Christine faite par Élle-même, dediée à Dieu', in Johan Arckenholtz, *Mémoires concernant Christine, reine de Suède, pour servir d'éclaircissement à l'histoire de son règne et principalement de sa vie privée*, III (Amsterdam, 1759), pp. 1–6.

3 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations,* transl. George Long, <http://classics.mit.edu/Antoninus/meditations.10.ten.html>.

4 Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, *Discours sur l'Histoire universelle a Monseigneur le Dauphin: Pour expliquer la suite de la Religion & les changemens des Empires* (Paris, 1681), p. 4.

ation of the universe is called 'un grand spectacle', and this clearly illustrates that the seventeenth century did not consider it demeaning to speak of human beings as actors on the stage of life or of history.[5]

Christina had not only read Marcus Aurelius; she also enthusiastically read Bossuet's *Discours.* Her personal copy of this work contains a great many marginal annotations in the queen's hand, mostly agreeing with what the bishop said. She probably read him in the year the book was published, namely 1681. That was also the year Christina turned to the composition of her autobiography.

If Christina adhered to this view of man, existence, and history – that man plays his role with varying degrees of success on the stage of life and history – one can ask which roles she played, and which constructions of self can one detect in her autobiography. In order to find these constructions, I have consulted the literary genres the queen used in her autobiography and the models (or scripts) for the self which can be tied to these different genres. Interestingly, Christina was completely aware of the existence of this mechanism: in her autobiography she writes about how as a child she had educated and moulded herself after the pattern of the classical authors:

> My plan was to give myself an entirely Spartan or Roman upbringing such as I had read about in eminent authors and I made a decision to shape myself according to the model of these great originals, and believed that I through this would make myself worthy of my fortune and my lineage and conquer the weakness of my sex.[6]

This also points to what seventeenth-century man thought of history: this was (hi)stories, many stories about different actions and different persons, mainly thought of as *exempla*, or people to imitate and actions to learn something from. These stories were seldom thought of as a unity, or as one coherent, singular developing process, leading to a unique, autonomous, and consistent self. And the theory of pre-existing scripts to imitate surely fitted well with the theatre metaphor. Human beings construed themselves according to different cultural patterns, to models or to scripts, while people interpreted other people through the lens that literature, including history, provided. The thought of an authentic self, to be realized through a process of acculturation, was foreign to these people.

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5 Ibid., p. 7.

6 From manuscript copies of Christina's autobiography in the Azzolino collection in the Swedish National Archives (Riksarkivet), Stockholm (hereafter RA), catalogued as Azzolino 430. There are a number of versions of this autobiography, of which the Arckenholtz edition is one. The variants in the Azzolino collection in some cases clearly differ from the Arckenholtz variant, often in very interesting ways, particularly concerning gender issues. For a more extensive survey of the manuscripts, see 'Texterna till L'Histoire de la Reine Christine: Tendenser i ändringarna', in Aurelius 1996, pp. 132–146. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

The event which most clearly is described with the *theatrum mundi* metaphor is the funeral of her father, Gustavus Adolphus. Christina writes as follows when she describes how the news of her father's death reached Sweden – and note her use of the present tense, for she is showing us something now, in the moment of reading, with no gap in time and horizon, for the performance is always the same and only the actors are different: 'It is finally time for us to leave Germany, which was the first scene of this tragic drama. We must set out and cross the sea to Sweden. There we will observe the sorrow which the news aroused.'[7] Her intention is not to show us a false spectacle, but to let us understand the great tragedy of the situation: 'Almost, at that very moment [as her father's corpse arrived], the queen arrived. She was received according to the customary forms. Tears and weeping began anew at the sight of this sorrowful spectacle ['a ce triste spectacle'].[8]

Christina perceives the queen as an actor in a tragedy, and it is clear throughout the text that her mother plays this role and none other. But Christina's constructions of her selves are clearly and obviously multifaceted. Here I will focus on *two* constructions stemming from, firstly, the classical biography of the hero and, secondly, the hagiography of the female saint.

The first model was probably Plutarch's exceptionally influential collection of biographies of great men written in the first century AD.[9] If one compares Plutarch's depiction of Alexander the Great with Christina's picture of herself, it is immediately obvious that both texts describe in detail the birth of their main characters, and that this birth is made auspicious in several ways. Through omens and prophecies, and through predictions, which do *not* come true. This latter point was especially important: those children who *defy* prophecies are so great that prophets cannot read the signs correctly. In both texts we can read that the time for a great person's birth is predetermined. Christina's well-known account that she was born with a 'cope' or caul over her pelvis, and that they initially identified her sex incorrectly should certainly not be suspected as being inauthentic. Nevertheless, these details clearly belong to the genre of the classical biography of the hero. In this tradition, one was tremendously observant of incidents connected with the conception and birth of great personages. Christina, in other words, is narrating the story of the birth of a great figure. Plutarch treats Alexander's temperament extensively: it was hot and dry. For this reason Alexander drank a great deal, according to Plutarch. In several places Christina mentions her hot blood, her hot and violent nature, her inward burning heat, and also tells us that she as a child drank rainwater, even though her mother had forbidden her to do

7 Arckenholtz 1759.

8 Ibid.

9 For example, Plutarch, *Vitae: The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans: The Dryden Translation* (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952).

so, and Christina was even punished for it. However, the fact that she is a woman has prevented her from excesses, among them drunkenness. Both Alexander and Christina were, in other words, ardent people; like Alexander, Christina passionately loves honour; like Alexander, she also has a strong inclination to love. However, both know how to control their passions: Alexander in his ways, Christina by mobilizing her femininity and her pride, and through her striving for honour.

Christina is obviously construing herself according to the script of the hero in the classical biography. A third element in this construction is the account of the young child's inherent dignity at ceremonies of state. In Alexander's case it is the account of the boy's poise and wisdom when he received ambassadors from Persia – the great enemy of Macedonia and Greece – while in Christina's case it is an account of the extraordinarily dignified behaviour she exhibited as an 8 year old, when receiving ambassadors from Russia, the arch-enemy of Sweden. She writes: 'From the throne I gave the Russians marks of preference such as custom required, and with such haughty and majestic demeanour, that instead of appearing apprehensive I gave all the ambassadors that feeling which people experience when they approach the greatest of all.'[10] She also relates other, similar incidents. One of them describes how royally she received the acclamation of the Estates of Parliament after her father's death, at only 6 years old already a true queen of Sweden: 'It was You, o Lord, who acted so that a whole nation wondered at a small child and was amazed of the magnificent way I already at this first occasion knew to behave like a queen.'[11]

A fourth element should be mentioned. It is said, both of Alexander and Christina, that they were exceptionally well educated from an early age. Alexander was taught by Aristotle, and Christina tells us that she was given the best education a prince could receive, adding that she thirsted after reading and learning – using precisely the same metaphors that are used in Plutarch's text about Alexander's 'violent thirst and desire for learning'. Christina also tells us that she was especially concerned that her mother would try to prevent her, for, she writes: 'I had such insatiable desire for learning.'[12]

However, both Alexander and Christina have been portrayed as very moderate, indeed almost ascetic, in relation to food. Christina makes much of her lack of interest in food. And, one may ask, why notice such a trivial trait, unless it has a connection to a script? This is plausibly an attribute which is important to underline by means of the classical biography of the hero. One aspect of the heroic biography of Plutarch's type is that of accounting for the subject's less attractive traits: Alexander was choleric, excessively desirous of honour, violent, and of a quick temper. Christina admits to all these indulgences, with the exception of wine.

10 Arckenholtz 1759.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.

The eventness of the text

What compels Christina to construe herself as an Alexander, as a heroine? What is the situation that motivates her to write this text? To be able to answer these questions, her situation must be reckoned with, a situation with two facets. The first concerns the complicated question of Christina's masculinity and aversion to marriage; the second concerns Christina's reputation in her own time, and the rumours about her circulating in libellous pamphlets, rumours above all concerning her sexual identity, her perceived masculinity.

The first question can be answered by actualizing the model, the script, Christina used when she described herself as in the first place, masculine; in the second, alienated from women and female behaviour; and in the third place, disgusted by sexuality.

That Christina in her autobiography in many ways wants to assert her masculinity – masculinity in the sense of the socially gendered man – is well known. The most familiar account on this subject is that of her birth. As we have seen, at birth Christina's gender was identified incorrectly at first, as she was hairy and had a strong, harsh cry. About her social gender, I strongly believe that Christina was not – if we are to believe what she herself says – forced by her environment to become a man. Her father's educational programme was that she should be brought up as a prince in all respects except of matters concerning the female sex's virtue and modesty. We must understand that this meant that Christina should be made a woman in terms of her gender and sexual identity.

She reports how attempts were made to make her into a woman, but that she herself resisted this, refusing to behave in a manner that signals femininity. She relates in detail her aversion to feminine occupations and forms of behaviour associated with femininity. Her own programme of acculturation – to become a young Spartan – almost certainly went beyond her father's programme. She says this about it:

> and I insisted [on forming myself according to the Spartan model] in spite of the fact that the entire world opposed the fact that I was so stubborn and had such strange lifestyle, but finally they had to have patience with me and let me be. They did not let me sit to horse until I was 12 years old, which cost me tears of frustration since I longed desperately for and had a strong inclination towards this occupation, but as soon as I was 12 there was no way of hindering me. My strongest passion was love of honour, but I also loved with a burning and violent passion all that was beautiful and worthy of delighting or being used by a young prince, whose noble inclinations You, Lord, have given me.[13]

I have not been able to find such models or scripts for women in the literature of the age, and one can therefore ask how her contemporaries viewed Christina's masculine

13 RA, Azzolino 430.

behaviour and dress. Generally it is true of the age that rules for female behaviour were harsher and more extensive than ours, and that one was hardly able to distinguish between social and sexual gender. One indication of how harsh these rules were, how closely tied the social and sexual genders were, is how one treated women who dressed as men. Rudolf M. Dekker and Lotte C. van de Pol, in a study of 199 female transvestites in the Netherlands between 1550 and 1839, have been able to demonstrate how this age judged women who disguised themselves as men:[14] it was punishable by law, even if the reasons for cross-dressing sometimes were quite reasonable and had nothing to do with sexual identity.

Dekker and van de Pol have also clarified the women's motives for cross-dressing. It was primarily poverty that caused women to dress up as soldiers or sailors. Other reasons could be that it was easier to travel. There were also romantic and patriotic motives, with women wanting to follow their family or lovers, or wanting to defend their country. An interesting, though unusual, motive for women to dress as men was in order to underline their virginity and their indifference to sexuality. This connection is very marked in the hagiographical literature: there exists a host of legends about female saints who have dressed as men in order to avoid marriage. I will return to this genre. A less common motive was the criminal one. There were, finally, women who dressed as men because they considered themselves as men in a sexual sense. This latter reason is probably, along with poverty, one of the main reasons. Women dressing as men for this reason points to the strong links between social and sexual gender.

This is probably the aspect of Christina's behaviour – her dressing in a masculine fashion, though not as a man – which created the greatest stir among her contemporaries. Christina's peers often pointed out that she dressed in an unfeminine manner; in a masculine, rather than feminine fashion. In her memoirs, Madame de Motteville has given us several accounts of Christina's appearance, accounts which stem from Christina's visit to France in 1656. One of the most telling descriptions is the following, and one can observe that Motteville had already heard of Christina's peculiar way of dressing, but that she nevertheless was surprised:

> I was among those who stood closest to the two royal persons, and even if one had provided me with careful descriptions of the Queen of Sweden so I could imagine her in my fantasy, I must confess that her appearance nevertheless surprised me. ... she had paid so little attention to her skin that it had lost all its whiteness. She appeared to me first as a shameless Egyptian who by mere accident had not become all too suntanned. ... Her shirt was a man's shirt. She had a collar which was fastened under her throat with only one needle and which left the entire back open and the upper part of the hunting jacket, which was cut more deeply than what is usual for such a shirt, was nowhere covered by this collar. The shirt hung down be-

14 Rudolf M. Dekker & Lotte C. van de Pol, *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

> neath this half-jacket as it would on a man and she showed at the sleeves and hands as much fabric as men allow to be seen, as they neither have shirts nor half-sleeves. … Her shoes were entirely like men's shoes and were not displeasing.[15]

It seems clear that both Christina and her environment viewed her manner of dressing and behaviour as an infraction of the social norm – apparently no exceptions were made for female rulers. But she also described herself in her autobiography as a manly woman, despising female behaviour and women, and that she was foreign to marriage.

The reason for this is probably that Christina wanted to underline her virginity, her chastity: simply put, she wanted to play the role of a female saint. In her autobiography, she makes extensive use of the connection between masculine women and chastity which was common in her days, and which to a large extent had its origin in hagiographical literature. This is the second literary genre, scripts, for Christina's self.

Hagiography, especially the lives of female saints, demonstrates several significant similarities with Christina's construction of herself. Firstly, hagiography can be regarded as a variant of the heroine story – the main characters, the saints, are exceptional human beings; they carry out fantastic deeds and change the course of history. Christina clearly saw herself as a kind of heroine, as one of the great actors of history. Her abdication and conversion was in her mind, and there are many signs of this in her writings that portent a great deed, a sacrifice for her people and for the honour of God. Secondly, lives of female saints often have the rejection of marriage as a central theme. The paradigmatic legends about Thekla and Catherine, which had already taken their form in the days of the early Church, were tremendously popular in medieval Europe, and thus became a pattern both for literary imitations and for imitations in reality. These legends have the rejection of marriage as the initial complication. It is the expressed and unbendable resistance of the saint towards marriage and sexuality which sets the ball rolling.

Christina herself points to her unbendable and unswerving rejection of marriage as the thing that initiates the course of events, with first her abdication and then her conversion: 'I would undoubtedly have married had I discovered in myself the least weakness, but having experienced through Your Grace the strength You have given me to reject even the most legitimate pleasures, I have followed the natural aversion I had for marriage.'[16] Following the hagiographical script, there was, in other words, nothing strange about letting resistance to marriage appear as *primus motor*.

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15 Françoise Bertaut de Motteville, *Mémoires de Madame de Motteville (1615–1666)* [vol. XXIV of *Nouvelle Collection des mémoires relatifs a l'histoire de France depuis le XIIIe siècle jusqu'à la fin du XVIIIe siècle*], eds Joseph François Michaud & Jean Joseph François Poujoulat (Paris, 1881), p. 451.

16 RA, Azzolino 430.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the legends of the female saints often contain the motif of a woman disguised as a man. The original legend in this case, the tale of St Pelagia the Penitent, has served as script for a host of saints' lives which adopt the same motif (the legends of Margaret of Antioch, Marina the Monk, Margareta Reparata, Euphrosyne, and Eugenia, to name the earliest).[17] As a common denominator, these saints often faced serious accusations of having seduced a nun and made her pregnant, or of licentiousness. Only after their death was it revealed that they were women. This motif, the masculine behaviour, and the accusations of licentiousness, have strong parallels in Christina's autobiography. She tells us that she behaved in a masculine fashion, that she almost dressed as a man, and that she had been unjustly accused of licentiousness.

To sum up, the legend of a female saint was a tale of a heroine, often a story of a woman who refused to marry, who marked her disgust or aversion to sexuality, who dressed as a man as a token of her chastity, and who was unjustly suspected of licentiousness. Christina and her Roman Catholic environment were well acquainted with this tradition – Christina's collection of manuscripts contains about fifty volumes of the collected lives of saints.

It seems highly plausible that Christina above all wanted to underline her chastity when she construed herself as masculine. This construction stands in sharp contrast to her expressed and often emphasized contempt for female behaviour and for women. This is stated most clearly in the accounts of how much she disliked female pursuits. In writing about her mother and her paternal aunt, Catherine of the Palatinate-Zweibrücken (1584–1638), Christina says this about women in general:

> Their clothes, adornments and behaviour were insufferable to me. I never wore a wig or mask. I did not care about my skin or my waist or the rest of my body, and except for the propriety and decency of my sex, I despised all the behaviour of my sex. I could not suffer long clothes. ... I felt such an unconquerable aversion for everything that women speak of and do.[18]

And about being brought up to femininity she says, among other things:

> Children of my age and state of both sexes were assembled, and the whole of the court, in order to play with me. ... My games consisted of running, jumping, dancing, etc. But I could not suffer dolls, and I had to use all of my reason not to hate an honourable man when he gave me a magnificent gift of that type. My dolls were tin soldiers by which I learned military processes. These pieces formed a small army which one could arrange on a table in battle order, complete with artillery.[19]

17 For female saints, see Birte Carlé, *Jomfrue-fortællingen: Et bidrag til genrehistorien* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1985); idem., *Skøger og jomfruer i den kristne fortællekunst: den skandinaviske tradition og dens rødder i middelhavslandene* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1991).

18 RA, Azzolino 430.

19 Ibid.

This theme works first and foremost as a supplement to her preference for what is male, because it serves to underline her chastity. Femininity is, both by Christina and her contemporaries, unambiguously associated with a lack of control, an inability to 'curb the wild animals', to use Christina's expression, meaning the passions, among them sexual desire. The aversion of the author Christina to women can therefore be understood as yet another way of demonstrating her own virginity, her chastity.

Why then did she have to underscore her virginity? This question actualizes the eventness of the autobiography: Christina's situation as a political entity in Europe after her abdication. She certainly did not withdraw from politics after her abdication, and her situation was not an easy one, sometimes downright precarious. She made an attempt in 1654–1655, when she was living in Brussels, to mediate between France (Cardinal Mazarin) and Spain (the Great Condé and the Fronde), but she failed. She also tried in 1656 to become queen of Naples, but failed in that too, and went on to instigate in 1657 the execution of her own courtier, the marquis Monaldeschi, for having betrayed her plans, as she saw it. This execution, which was not preceded by a trial, was a great scandal in Europe. She was thus from 1654 onwards, mainly on account of these actions, the target of endless libels. These pamphlets were spread across Europe during the years after her abdication right up to her death in 1686. The printed libel was, as Robert Darnton has shown, a forceful political weapon, particularly in France since the sixteenth century, and it was often of a pornographic nature, accusing the target in question of sexual abuses, abnormalities, and the like.[20]

There are four known libellous pamphlets about Christina, and they were all originally printed during her years in Brussels. The pamphlets, as Curt Weibull has shown, were probably instigated by Cardinal Mazarin, in order to make Christina's attempts to mediate between France and Spain impossible.[21] The pamphlets were reprinted several times during Christina's lifetime, and must have played an important role in promoting a very soiled picture of the queen, especially in France.[22]

These pamphlets make for very disgusting reading, as they concentrate with a somewhat peculiar energy on sexual matters. Christina is accused of sexual looseness, of sexual abnormity, of bawdry, and moreover, these pamphlets claim, that she had undergone an abortion, and that she was a homosexual. She dresses as a man, she swears, and she lacks the modesty of a woman. Even her body is abnormal, claims the 'Lettre

20 Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995).

21 Curt Weibull, *Drottning Christina: Studier och forskningar* (4th ed. Stockholm: Natur & Kultur, 1966), pp. 124–132.

22 The four pamphlets were 'Copie D'une Lettre escritte De Bruxelles à la Haye, Touchant La Reyne De Suede'; 'Lettre ou Recit Veritable Du Sejour de Christine Reine de Suede à Rome'; 'Le Genie De la Reyne Christine de Suède'; 'Brieve Relation', all of which have been printed variously, often together with other 'documents' concerning Christina's actions, for example in Pierre du Marteau, *Histoire de la Vie de la Reyne Christine de Suede* (Cologne, 1668).

ou Recit Veritable Du Sejour de Christine Reine de Suede a Rome', of which I will quote a small portion:

> But to return to her breasts, they have a square and oblong shape... her nipples are dry and long. Her arms have the same deviation [the original has 'devation'] as her cushions, and they are covered by a Spanish skin. The left arm protrudes very forcefully, and thus shapes between the two shoulders such a great area, so that a diligent person could run there for the public good, such as Curtius rode on his horse. ... Her belly has spaces, and those are signs of a ground well trained for pleasure. Her navel is higher than in ordinary women, the lower part of the bone of shame is sharp as the cliffs of la Grande Chartreuse. This [bone] is covered with a forest which the sun cannot penetrate neither lengthwise nor crosswise. At the edge of this [bone] there is a cypress of an extraordinary size, and it rises at every occasion, in spite of the doctors' efforts to knock it down. It borders on an abyss which has the same shape as piazza Navona: this comparison is not inadequate, because in the midst of both there is the same adornment, that is an obelisk, whose hieroglyphs you cannot explain. But allow me not to devote myself to these female graces, for fearing as other persons being involved in this abyss. Two big thighs, rather long and porphyry-coloured, support this building, and on them two short legs have been fastened, and all this rests on two mobile, big and flat feet. ... Her whole body is hairy.[23]

These kinds of accusations were known to Christina; many of her formulations in her autobiography confirms this, among them those where she acknowledges some of the accusations – her unfeminine behaviour and her habit of swearing, for example. But she had to defend herself. In particular she wanted to defend herself at the bar of posterity – evidenced by the fact that she was very much occupied during her later years in writing historical accounts.[24] Above all she wanted to defend herself against the accusation of being sexually loose, of being homosexual. This is why she underscores her virginity with the help of the parallels with the hagiographical women, the female saints – she dresses like a man, she rejects marriage, she detests female behaviour.

In this hagiographical script and in the Alexander script, Christina had found two constructions of the self which obviously gave her roles on the stage of life and history: the heroine and the saint, sacrificing herself for her people and for God. This construal of herself is the action of the text, this is what the text performs, and, and it is truly also a performance, an enactment of roles. Christina's theory of the self is obviously not the theory of the modern self. Her theory displays significant similarities with the postmodern theory of the self: this is a construction, a product of structures, patterns, scripts, models. It is a performance.[25]

23 'Lettre ou Recit Veritable', in Marteau 1668; for a more detailed account of this pamphlet, see Eva Hættner Aurelius, 'Hur smädar man en mäktig kvinna?', in Birthe Sjöberg et al. (eds), *Italienska förbindelser: En vänbok till Bengt Lewan* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1997), pp. 25–38.

24 See 'Från reträtten till det stora offret', in Aurelius 1996, pp. 113–188, for a more detailed account of Christina's situation and the writing of her autobiography.

25 See, for example, Judith Butler's well-known theory of gender as a performance, in 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', in

The eventness of the text is Christina's situation, her facing a European audience, both her contemporaries and posterity. This audience, this public, was the harshest of judges, and it had already been furnished with a powerful and very sordid picture of her. With a skilful move she turns the accusations around, acknowledging her masculinity, her aversion to marriage, her dislike of female behaviour, and placing these within the framework of the hagiographical script.

Christina acted as a shrewd politician, and her text certainly performed something, did something. It construed a self that defended her and made her a heroine, a virgin saint.

Sue-Ellen Case (ed.), *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

III.
CHANGING REALITY (*PERFORMANZ*)

From Oral History Performance to Political Apology Performance

A Case Study of Wang Youqin and Song Binbin

Dan Hansong

Oral history, an interdisciplinary field of increasing influence since the Second World War, began with a democratic impulse to 'hand the mike to the people', to those who have neither 'paper' nor 'voice'. Its rise is not only a result of tape recording technologies and the Internet, but as a response to certain traumatic events in human history, such as the Holocaust. Oral history has been changing our traditional way of understanding the so-called 'historical truth', because it replaces the evidentiary and objective 'facts' with narrative truth, which is 'broken, shattered, even astructural, but powerful beyond control'.[1] Simply put, as far as historical inquiry is concerned, it is a turn from fact to memory. Historiography, when produced orally, becomes a verbal art, and more importantly, a performance that involves the interviewees who narrate an event they allegedly bear witness to, and the oral historian who watches and records. The performance of oral history can be described, as Richard Bauman puts it, not so much as 'the narrated event' (what is *told* of the past) as 'the narrating event' (the *telling* of it in the present).[2]

As a formalized speech act, political apology probably is best aligned with J. L. Austin's notion of 'the performative' – his notion of the performative being just one of several permutations of this concept – since it is uttered by an individual apologizer to the public, and its efficacy is conditioned by a set of pragmatic rules. Since the power of oral history hinges on memory recall and narrative transmission, which are in turn expected to evoke social change, political apology is usually deemed as a pivotal step in

1 Della Pollock, 'Moving Histories: Performance and Oral History', in Tracy C. Davis (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 126.

2 Richard Bauman, 'Verbal Art as Performance' [1974], quoted in ibid., p. 120.

the direction of social transformation. Former President Bill Clinton's famous apology for the Rwandan genocide is a case in point.[3]

However, making a political apology is not as easy as saying 'I am sorry' in daily life. Usually, when politicians, celebrities, or representatives of a certain group issue a formal statement of apology, it may be categorized as a *non-apology* apology, which many distrust or even dismiss merely as a political gesture, for it fails to admit guilt and assume responsibility. In spite of its appropriateness, such an apology is still believed to be a 'hollow' act. Bill Clinton's apology for the Lewinsky scandal serves as just another salient example.

This essay addresses the problematic correlation of oral history and political apology within the reference frame of performance, by looking at a case study of Wang Youqin, an oral historian of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) in China, and Song Binbin, an iconic former Red Guard, who recently stepped forward to apologize for the death of a school vice-principal named Bian Zhongyun in August 1966. My argument is that, whereas narrating and documenting the Cultural Revolution from the perspective of the peripheral non-elite recalls their memories from oblivion and saves them from censorship, Wang Youqin's oral history project walks a tightrope between 'the banality of evil' and moral self-righteousness.

Considering the blurred line between perpetrator and victim in this nationwide turmoil, an oral history of the Cultural Revolution is more often than not a warehouse of unreliable narratives from 'the silent majority'. Yet, Wang's imbalance lies in her antagonistic treatment of Song Binbin's apology. This essay examines how Wang's logic of oral history works against the implicit value judgement she apparently wishes to shore up. As a point of departure, this case study addresses more general questions concerning performance studies. For instance: How does 'the narrating event' (here, the oral history performance) *confound* rather than *confirm* our assumptions about 'the narrated event' (the Cultural Revolution)? Speaking of political apology for a historical event that defies factual and moral demarcation, is it ontologically possible to claim the distinction between *serious* and *non-serious* performatives? If oral history renders the eventness of history inevitably unreadable and unintelligible, how can political apology retain its performative energy and work changes upon a community that shares collective memories of a traumatic event that still lingers like a ghost? These questions are admittedly tough, and it is beyond my scope here to try to answer all of them. Instead, this essay is intended to address the issues, hoping to bring the dialectics of oral history performance and political performance to light.

3 'Text of Clinton's Rwanda Speech', CBS News, 25 March 1998 <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/text-of-clintons-rwanda-speech>, accessed 11 April 2015.

Wang Youqin and her book of victims

Wang Youqin, now a senior lecturer of Chinese at the University of Chicago, has been engaged in a painstaking task since the early 1980s. She has single-handedly interviewed more than 1 000 witnesses, visited 25 provinces in China, identified 659 victims killed during the Cultural Revolution, edited a life-story collection, and electronically published her book for free on a memorial website she launched and maintained for years.[4] For Wang Youqin, the book, *Wenge shounan zhe* ('Victims of the Cultural Revolution'), as well as the memorial website, are not the end products of her herculean task.[5] Rather, by inviting more eyewitnesses to share their own stories about those killed, she wished to make it the start for joint efforts to battle the nation's systematic amnesia, to restore society's collective memories about the horrific ten years of the Cultural Revolution.

According to Chen Yongfa, there were more than 1.72 million men and women who died as victims of the Cultural Revolution, a ten-year movement that Mao Zedong launched to purge political dissidents and to ensure his grip on the Communist regime.[6] This illustrates that Wang's book, containing the stories of 659 victims, only records a fraction of the actual victims of this event. Still, Yu Ying-shih, an eminent Chinese American professor who recently retired from Princeton University, praised Wang's project highly, saying that she 'single-handedly redeemed 659 dead people from historical oblivion, as if raising ghosts from the underworld'.[7] Roderick MacFarquhar made a similar remark in a preface to Wang's book: 'All the details about the Cultural Revolution have been increasingly lost in our memory. Yet, Wang Youqin strived to retrieve and preserve them. She is a walking database. Alone, she resists the forgetfulness of hundreds of millions of people.'[8]

Yu Ying-shih defines Wang's work as oral history, though he attributes the origin of her method to the traditions of ancient Chinese historiography, rather than the modern discipline that came into its own in the 1960s and 1970s. The use of oral materials goes back to the classical Greek historians (such as Herodotus and Thucydides). In ancient China, oral record was an integral part of history when written records were scarce or unavailable; Yu points out that the Chinese word '*wen xian*'

4 For the memorial website, see <http://www.chinese-memorial.org>, accessed 11 April 2015.

5 Hereafter, all citations (including page numbers) from this book are based on the electronic version available at the memorial website.

6 Chen Yongfa, *Zhongguo gongchan geming qishi nian* ('The Seventy Years of China's Communist Revolution') (Taipei: Linking Press, 2001), p. 846.

7 Yu Ying-Shih, 'Preface', in Wang Youqin, *Victims of the Cultural Revolution: An Investigative Account of Persecution, Imprisonment and Murder* (Hong Kong: Open Magazine Publishing, 2004), p. 15.

8 Roderick MacFarquhar, 'Preface', in ibid., p. 21.

(historical philology) denotes a combination of '*wen*' (written documents) and '*xian*' (oral sources).[9] However, Wang Youqin's work is not completely modelled on the pattern of ancient Chinese historians. Her oral history is *modern* in that it has a radically democratic impulse to narrate history from the bottom up, to reinterpret the Cultural Revolution from the perspective of ordinary people. The 9/11 oral history project run by the Columbia Center for Oral History Archives (CCOHA), and the USC-based website 'IWitness' which provides nearly 1 300 life histories, testimonies of survivors, and witnesses to the Holocaust and other genocides, are two classic examples of oral history in our time.

Wang's book thus oscillates between the ancient tradition and the modern model of oral history. On one hand, unlike modern oral history practitioners, Wang's method is eclectic in nature. She incorporates as diverse a range of sources as possible, the oral accounts of witnesses and survivors being only a part of her writing. She prefers to fuse testimonies with other manuscript resources and formal documentation into a single piece of life story. These oral records are edited, abridged, tailored, collaged, and embedded in each victim's entry, standing side by side with official documents, newspaper clippings, pamphlets, memoirs, scholarly books, and other written records that can shed light on this traumatic event. In addition, like ancient Chinese historians, Wang is always ready to add asides to her bio-sketches – some partial or partisan comment on the event or the subject. Neutrality, a professional criterion deemed essential to modern oral historians, seems to be optional for Wang. In the type of oral history Allan Nevins pioneered at Columbia University, 'the interviewer was envisioned as a neutral, objective collector of other people's reminiscences ... and the interviewee's responses were rendered as an uninterrupted narrative'.[10] Admittedly, contemporary oral historians came to realize their role as that of an active agent in the process, whereas Wang's intervention in the interview is so blatant that she risks 'distortion of [her] interviews by intruding [her] own cultural assumptions and political perspectives'.[11]

On the other hand, Wang's attitude towards these subjects is always horizontal – non-hierarchical – not vertical. By sorting the dead in alphabetic order, she symbolically flattens out the differences between the unprivileged (such as a worker who drowned herself after her home was stormed by the Red Guards) and the privileged (such as Liu Shaoqi, who used to be the second most powerful man in Beijing). It is worth nothing that in China there were some oral historians working on the Cultural Revolution, but they usually chose to interview the elites, those who were at the centre of the stage during the event.[12] Not only does Wang treat her non-elite interviewees

9 Wang 2004, p. 15.

10 Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 28.

11 Ibid.

12 For an interesting survey of the development of oral history writing about the Cultural Revo-

and victims in an egalitarian manner, she also allows for an inclusiveness that inevitably leads to narrative repetition, something which is characteristic of the modern electronic archive of oral history, but was inconceivable for the ancients. In other words, a majority of the life stories are remarkably homogeneous in terms of structure and rhetoric, repeatedly narrating the magnitude and commonality of this national tragedy as it befell individuals. Those repetitive narratives, however, are not redundant and useless, for they are *constative* as well as *performative* in nature. As Homi Bhabha famously puts it, in its repetitions, culture is 'almost the same but not quite'.[13]

One of the main reasons that Wang turns to mosaic sources, in a form of collage technique, and ultimately to generic ambiguity was that it was usually difficult to obtain sufficient information about her subjects. This meant that she had to piece together fragmented clues, and, if necessary, use speculation to fill in the gaps.

Li Jingpo, a middle school caretaker, is a case in point. Li was beaten to death by the Red Guards in August 1966. Wang cannot ascertain the date, but according to an eyewitness she learned that there was heavy rain when Li was tortured. Wang checked the weather reports for Beijing that year and found that a downfall was recorded on 22 August 1966. She then concluded that Li's death might have taken place on that day or the day after.[14]

A chilling fact that Wang reiterates in her book is that from the very beginning of the Revolution, systematic efforts were made by the authorities to keep the atrocities off the record. According to her investigation, some interviewees told her that it was 'an unwritten law' at the time that no bones or ashes of the persecuted should be kept after cremation.[15] Even when the Cultural Revolution was officially halted in 1977, the government still discouraged the victims' family members from suing the perpetrators. For the last twenty-five years, serious scholarship about the Cultural Revolution has been scarce in mainland China. The first volume of Roderick MacFarqhuar's authoritative study, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, was translated into Chinese in 1989 and not reprinted hereafter, while the second volume has never found its way to Chinese readers. Any coverage of this event in the media is strictly censored – if not totally banned – by the Propaganda Department.[16]

Another reason is subtler, and more important to my argument. Many perpetrators in the early period of the Cultural Revolution were later purged and victimized when Mao Zedong called for new campaigns, and newer rebels took the upper hand. That

lution after the 1980s, see Xin Xiaoqun, '*Koushushi he wenge yanjiu*' ('Oral History and the Cultural Revolution Studies'), *Contemporary China Studies*, 2:93 (2006).

13 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 122.

14 Wang 2004, p. 309

15 Ibid., pp. 271, 520 and 687.

16 Of course, Wang Youqin's book is forbidden in her own country, and access to her memorial website from mainland China has been blocked since 2003.

said, this political rampage does not have the kind of moral absoluteness that defines a genocide. Mob mentality was so pervasive at the time that in most cases it was almost impossible to distinguish intentional evil-doers from a blind mob. Those charged with being fanatic or cruel in the movement could blame Mao and the Gang of Four of instigation or misinformation. Also, it is not unreasonable to explain some immoral behaviour as self-protection, for if you bluntly refused to join in the 'witch-hunt', you would probably become the next target. Unlike bearing testimony to Auschwitz or 9/11, one cannot find an 'SS' or an 'al-Qaeda' to be responsible for the havoc, which was indeed implemented by the masses.

The moral indeterminacy of the Cultural Revolution places oral historians such as Wang in an awkward situation: witnesses are 'censored' not only by the government, but also by their pricking conscience. Even when there is no conflict of interest, the narrators have other concerns about telling truths or half-truths, because their accounts are likely to expose those who are still alive and close by, and they are reluctant 'to spoil the peace' in their local community.[17] As a compromise, Wang had to agree to anonymity in all the interviews,[18] which made the collected stories even more unreliable and capricious.[19] More importantly, since these interviews usually took place years after the incidents, the informants' memories cannot remain the same over time even if they struggle to be 'objective'. The gerontologist Robert Butler has postulated that 'all people, as they grow older and perceive that they are approaching death, undergo a mental process of life review accounting for depression and despair in some, and for candour, serenity, and wisdom in others'.[20]

Accepting subjectivity as inherent and unavoidable in oral history means that 'the narrating event' itself is performative. The fact that these testimonies are biased, volatile, incomplete, or spurious is a testimony to the Cultural Revolution's lasting influence on people's memory and mind. The worth of Wang Youqin's project is perhaps not in solid new facts about an historical event. What matters here is the performativity of her book. By adding an ever wider range of voices to the historiography, she allows for a therapeutic telling by the traumatized from the margins of history. At the same time, her book is performative in terms of passing memories down to the next generation. To push this rationale further, the best oral history projects are those that 'cast their nets wide, recording as many different participants in events or members

17 Wang 2004, p. 321.

18 Ibid., p. 10.

19 I investigated an anecdote in the book that concerned a man who tortured his teachers in the 1960s and later joined the faculty of the Department of English at Nanjing University. This ex-Red Guard died in 1999 of unknown causes, and Wang said it was karma at work. However, there was no record of this man in our department.

20 Robert Butler, quoted in Ritchie 2003, p. 31.

of a community as possible'.[21] Interviewers should take the witness's credibility into consideration, but such a consideration must not disqualify a witness from giving testimony, particularly when the testimony is from direct participants.

Song Binbin and her belated apology

The case of Song Binbin exemplifies the problems of oral history as conducted by Wang Youqin. As the student leader of an elite girls' school in Beijing, Song became a household name when Mao famously met her at the Tiananmen Rostrum, showing his support for hundreds of thousands of Red Guards parading on the Square. Mao allegedly joked about her name and suggested, 'Why genteel? You should have a military bearing.'[22] By renaming Song Binbin Song Yaowu, Mao, as Wang believes, sent an unequivocal message to the Red Guards, inciting them to resort to, and to escalate, their campus violence against educators in August 1966.[23]

Bian Zhongyun was to be the first of a thousand teachers to be beaten to death that summer by the Red Guards, who were literally Song's teenage classmates. Bian's death signalled the river of blood to come, and became a landmark event in the Cultural Revolution. Actually, it was the death of Bian that urged Wang, who was a seventh grader then and on the spot when Bian was tortured, to start her oral history project. Another symbolic coincidence was that Bian's husband was a professional historian himself. He bought a camera the day after Bian's death, and took a picture of her bruised and battered body, a picture that bears witness to the atrocity of Mao's student riots.[24] To keep evidence for a future investigation, Bian's husband also wrote a memorandum about his talk with Song Binbin, who was the leader of the Red Guards at the school. Given Wang's feelings for her alma mater, and thanks to Bian's husband, who over the decades resolutely strived to bring the perpetrators to justice, in Wang's book the entry on Bian Zhongyun would be the most detailed and the best researched. If seeking the nation's true mourning of millions of victims, Bian's case seems to be a perfect point of departure.

However, Wang's 'performance', intent on introducing more voices from the silent majority in order to start a dialogue about the Cultural Revolution, was shaken when Song then joined in by co-witnessing Bian's case. It should be noted that Song's fate

21 Ibid., p. 24.

22 In Chinese, *binbin* means 'being gentle and scholarly'; *yaowu*, 'being a tough hard-liner'.

23 Mao's famous meeting with Song Binbin took place on 18 August 1966, almost two weeks after Bian Zhongyun's death. According to Wang's investigation, Mao must have learned of Bian's tragedy by then, because Mao's daughter was a student in Bian's class and Mao's wife was acquainted with her.

24 Wang 2004, p. 29.

was quickly inverted after 1966, when her father (Song Renqiong, a senior member of the Politburo) was attacked by other rebel factions. Song Binbin, dropping to the bottom of the social ladder, remained largely silent and inactive for most of the Cultural Revolution. After the student riots had peaked, she was sent to the countryside to work with the peasants, like so many other students in the big cities. She left China in the late seventies, living in the US for more than two decades, and remaining silent on Wang's book project, in which Song is one of the few identified Red Guards held responsible for Bian's death. Another interesting detail is that she renamed herself Song Yan, forsaking her original name as well as the name, Song Yaowu, given to her by Mao.

Unlike Wang Youqin, Song had been painfully aware of her complex performance of identity. In a 2003 documentary, co-produced by Carma Hinton – a Beijing-born American and a former Red Guard herself in the sixties – Song appeared publicly for the first time. During the interview, a performance of sorts, she kept her face hidden. She pleaded not guilty to Wang's charge. She provided her own version of the story, explaining that she was in the meeting room when other Red Guards were torturing Bian. In January 2014, Song Binbin, along with other former Red Guards, visited their alma mater and bowed to the statue of Bian on campus. In an alumnæ reunion party, Song read a 1 500-word statement, apologizing for her role in the Cultural Revolution and for her wrong-doings and those of other Red Guards. Though she admitted that she 'was responsible for the death of Bian', Song described her main fault as 'failing to stop students' violence against Bian and other school administrators' on 5 August 1966.[25] She said she 'did try to stop them, twice, yet without success'. Song also said that she and other alumnæ had started investigating the 5 August incident on their own.

'Breaking silence' is usually what oral history is expected to achieve. Song's apology immediately made Chinese news headlines in January 2014. Yet, this long overdue apology, like many other public apologies, was dismissed by Wang Youqin and Bian's husband as 'insincere efforts where the apologizer is simply read as someone who "lies" and inevitably has ulterior motives'.[26] On 27 January 2014, Bian's husband issued a strongly worded statement to refute Song's public apology. Not only did he charge the Red Guards with 'murdering' his wife, but he also stipulated that unless the truth of the 'August 5 Incident' came to light, he would refuse to 'accept the hypocritical apologies made by the Red Guards'.[27] Wang took a similar negative line.[28] Inclusive

25 Transcript of Song's apology on 12 January 2014, <http://politics.caijing.com.cn/2014–01–13/113810571.html>, accessed 11 April 2015.

26 Norielyn Romano, '"What Was Done Cannot Be Undone": Present-Day Apologies of Political Leaders for Transgressions of a Nation's Past', *Kroeber Anthropological Society*, 101:1 (2012), p. 79.

27 Wang Jingyao (Bian's husband), '*Guanyu Song Binbin he Liu Jin xuwei daoqian de shengming*' ('A Statement on Song Binbin and Liu Jin's Hypocritical Apology'), <http://www.21ccom.net/articles/lsjd/lsjj/article_201401309987O.html>, accessed 11 April 2015.

28 For Wang Youqin's comment on Song's apology, <http://www.rfa.org/mandarin/zhuanlan/

as Wang's project of co-witnessing is, she refused to bestow equal trust in Song's testimony. Instead, Wang dismissed her performance as a shameless self-apology with the purpose of whitewashing the history of the Red Guards.

Why then did Song's political apology prove to be so ineffective? A plausible answer is that political apologies are usually snubbed as a form of a non-apology apology, because 'statements that use the word "sorry" but do not express responsibility for wrong-doing may be meaningful expressions of regret, but such statements can also be used to elicit forgiveness without acknowledging fault'.[29] Such a non-apology apology, legally speaking, suggests no *liability* on the part of the apologizers. For Wang Youqin and Bian's husband, Song Binbin's public apology was, if not deceptive, far from being enough, and it was devoid of value because it failed to meet 'an injured party's expectation of or need for an apology'.[30]

The performative paradox of political apology

J. L. Austin famously distinguished between illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts. The performative utterance of saying 'I'm sorry' or 'I apologize' would have the illocutionary force of an apology if the utterance consists of, as Austin puts it, 'happiness'.[31] However, this illocutionary act cannot necessarily guarantee the fact that the apology was accepted. That is to say, when an apology is happily made, what Austin calls 'uptake' has been secured, but the perlocutionary force or effect of this apology is still uncertain.

The effect might include two kinds of possibility: either it mollifies the offended party, or it aggravates it further. In the case of Song Binbin, it can be assumed beyond reasonable doubt that her performative utterance of 'I apologize' was a willing locutionary act, but it failed to achieve a *positive* perlocutionary effect, that is, making the apology acceptable to Bian's family. Instead, there was a *negative* perlocutionary effect – the anger of Bian's husband.

It is worth noting that Austin's notion of apology is probably simpler than political apologies in public life, particularly when it comes to issues such as the Cultural Revolution. There is a 'paradox' in the nature of the apology process, namely, 'the fact that an apology is remarkably complex and yet simple and straightforward at the same

xinlingzhilyu/wengebeiwanglu/mind–0227201414521 5.html>, accessed 11 April 2015.

29 Aaron Lazare, *On Apology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 99.

30 Barbara Benoliel, 'Apologies in Mediation: Who's Sorry Now?', *Canadian Arbitration & Mediation Journal*, 17 (2008), p. 27.

31 J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 47.

time'.[32] It is 'simple and straightforward', because if 'the offender acknowledges responsibility for an offense or grievance and expresses regret or remorse to the second party, the aggrieved', this apology will be a performative act with illocutionary force.[33] In this sense, Song Binbin has played her part. Whether her apology was accepted by Bian's husband or not, it cannot nullify Song's utterance. Nevertheless, it is also a 'remarkably complex' utterance, because saying 'I apologize' is not the entirety of an effective apology, which entails a *constative* explanation of the veiled past and a specific description of the offender's responsibility. 'Taking one's responsibility' in an apology should be further broken down into two issues: what I *actually* did in the past; and, accordingly, what *kind* of responsibility I am willing to take. Since Song Binbin denied having played a leading role in the violence against Bian Zhongyun on 5 August 1966, the responsibility she assumed is based on 'I'm too weak to stop the perpetrators' rather than 'I'm one of the perpetrators'.

Such a 'paradox' of an apology becomes yet more paradoxical in the case in question, because it concerns not only modern China's convoluted politics, which are still sensitive and cannot be spoken of, but also an inscrutable conundrum of history and morality. Firstly, iconic as Song Binbin was, she was in no way *authorized* to deliver a political apology on behalf of the Red Guards. Unlike a politician apologizing to a group for some wrong-doing committed in the name of a state, Song would be reluctant to represent all Red Guards, an infamous group, to make a political apology. She said in Carma Hinton's documentary that a widely popular article published in 1966 under her new name, Song Yaowu, was actually written by others.[34] In her own narrative she was no more than a faceless cog in the machine, and a persona incidentally ordained and mystified by Mao's Cultural Revolution. In her public apology, which was not meant to be too political, Song was 'not concerned with deceiving the public with faulty facts; rather, [she was] more concerned with leaving the spectators with a certain impression of her'.[35] In other words, she wanted the public to leave behind the demonic imagery associated with Song Yaowu. She was no more and no less than Song Binbin, a former middle-school student caught up in a dramatic moment of history.

Secondly, it is also crucial to factor the audience into our apology analysis – those who once acted like Song in the Cultural Revolution, who once suffered like Bian and her husband, and who have no share in the collective memory because of the generation gap. Other 'offended' parties who are not the direct addressees of Song's apology might be mollified when learning of the news that some famous ex-Red Guards have

32 Lazare 2005, p. 23.

33 Ibid., p. 22.

34 'I Pinned Red Armband on Chairman Mao's Arm', *Guang Ming Daily*, 20 August 1966, republished the next day in the prestigious *People's Daily*, since when 'Song Yaowu' has become synonymous with the Red Guards and their rebellion.

35 Romano 2012, p. 80.

expressed their regret. Similarly, Song might set an example for other Red Guard perpetrators, who have kept their wrong-doings secret ever since. Her apology could even put hundreds of thousands of ex-Red Guards to shame, and stimulate the coming out of further testimonies and confessions. The younger generation might also be drawn into passing on cultural memory. Such perlocutionary effects do not work on any particular offended person or group, and Austin did not discuss them in his studies, but they are in all likelihood profoundly healthy for a larger community in the long run.

Finally, while an apology is an act of recognition, it is a recognition that cannot be vicarious or relayed on the apologizer's part. The death of Bian Zhongyun, whose death became an emblem of a national calamity, has been under scrutiny since Wang Youqin's oral history project became widely known in China. Much contradictory evidence and counter-evidence has now emerged, leaving the vice-principal's tragic death an example of 'the Rashomon effect'.[36] Wang's book, owing to its generic ambiguity, exemplifies the epistemological impossibility of finding an absolute 'historical truth' for these terrible years, including the truth about Bian's death. Heart attack? Manslaughter? Murder? The verdict should have been made by a court and a jury, which would have followed procedural justice in deciding on Song Binbin's culpability. Without a trial, witnesses' or survivors' reports should not and cannot be used to ascertain a person's role in this incident. Sometimes, even a criminal court has its limits in reaching the real facts. Bernhard Schlink's post-holocaust novel *The Reader* can shed some light on our discussion here. Hanna Schmitz, the former guard at Auschwitz, was charged with war crimes after a survivor's memoir became widely known. She eventually took full responsibility, despite there being evidence unknown to the court proving otherwise. I am not suggesting a facile analogy between Hanna Schmitz and Song Binbin; rather, given the epistemological slipperiness of oral history, it is probably too much to ask Song Binbin to make her apology based on the recognition of others. After all, as Paul Celan says in a famous poem: 'Nobody bears witness for the witness.'[37]

Of course, this essay is not intended to settle the long dispute between Wang Youqin and her adversary, Song Binbin. Nor do I believe that it is possible to put an end to this controversy. What I would contend is that when an oral history performance concerning an event as convoluted as the Cultural Revolution becomes a forceful speech act in the community, this performance could also bring about a *counter-force*, a power that not only casts self-reflexive doubt on the legitimacy of history itself, but also questions the kind of social transformation (such as political apologies) it wishes to realize in the first place. The more testimonies dug out by historians, the more diffi-

36 The Rashomon effect refers to real-world situations which prompt multiple but conflicting eye-witness accounts of an event. The phrase is derived from Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon* (1950), which features contradictory interpretations by various people of a rape and murder.

37 Paul Celan, 'Aschenglorie', in *Breathturn*, transl. Pierre Joris (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1995), p. 179.

cult to grasp the past and judge the issues of culpability. If so, the long-awaited action on memorial and mourning would be stranded, due to the lack of social and political consensus.

The mutually compromising tendency between oral history and social reform has been wonderfully dramatized by an American playwright, Anna Deavere Smith. In her prize-winning plays *Fires in the Mirror* (1992) and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1994), she stages a series of oral history interviews as dramatic performances, each actor impersonating a witness to the Crown Heights riot and the Los Angeles riots respectively. By differentiating between the witnesses by colour, faith, class, age, and gender, Smith distances the audience in the theatre from two race riots that opened up a tremendous rift in society. Here, the task of an oral history performance (in the theatre) was neither to cure the pain of trauma nor to secure a consensus. The artist, by laying bare the unreliability eyewitnesses to an extreme event, calls for action – not in order to settle a dispute or to heal old wounds, but to secure future reconciliation and empathy. Her dramas constitute a stage performance that bear witness to the limits of performative public utterances.

What we can further learn from the case of Wang Youqin and Song Binbin might be an insight into performative studies *per se*. The so-called performative turn is said to be 'acknowledging how individual behaviour derives from collective, even unconscious, influences and is manifest as observable behaviour, both overt and quotidian, individual and collective'.[38] Similar to the cultural turn, which emphasizes culture's formative effect on human identity, performative studies, be they concerned with anthological rituals or limited to a theatrical environment, tend to sustain value-free neutrality. However, for Derrida and Paul de Man, 'the paradigm of lawful and rule-obeying speech act as defined by Austin and Searle' is impossible in real life, because 'the context of a performance utterance can never be "saturated"'.[39] The duality of fiction and fact inherent in some kinds of performance (such as Wang's interviewing and Song's double identity) makes it a risky move either to exclude all value judgements or to side with absolute moralism.

It is arguably so that the narrator 'speaks because this agent is already the recipient of narratives in which he or she has been inserted as a political subject' and he 'writes himself into an oral history because the narrator has already been written and subjected to powerful inscriptions'.[40] Wang Youqin is in one way at fault when she chooses a double standard in her use of oral historical resources, sentimentalizing some witnesses' testimonies without prudent fact-checking, but maintaining a frankly antagonis-

38 Tracy C. Davis, 'Introduction', in idem. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 1.

39 J. Hillis Miller, *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 6 and 10.

40 Pollock 2008, p. 123.

tic stance towards other witnesses' accounts, such as Song Binbin's in Carma Hinton's documentary, where Binbin portrayed herself as an unfree agent of historical circumstance.

The dilemma of Song Binbin's political apology is actually the dilemma of performance, which on the one hand counts on its reiterability to exert positive social effects on communities, yet on the other hand cannot escape the conditioning of other social parameters. Criteria such as 'false or true' and 'sincere or insincere' are applied to the public's reception of such apologies, though they should have been taken as other performances, which prioritize narrative truth rather than value judgement. When facing the metaphysical court discussed in Karl Jasper's *The Question of German Guilt*, each Chinese, living or dead, should be somewhat responsible for the political culture that bred the Cultural Revolution. Thus the horrifying details of the catastrophe should be recalled, not for the purpose of judging the question of Song Binbin's guilt, but for building an ethical consensus that similar events should never happen again in the future.[41] The present studies on performance would be more vigorous and instructive, if we were to include moral irregularities and uncertainties in our conception of performance.

41 Xu Ben, *Ren yi shenme liyou lai jiyi* ('For What Reason Can Men Recall') (Jilin: Jilin Publishing Group, 2008), pp. 282–284.

Lyric and Subjection

On the Passionate Reading of Helen Vendler and the *Performanz* of Lyric Poetry

Erik Erlanson

The present essay examines a persistent idea about what lyric poetry does – its *Performanz*. Throughout the history of Western thought and literature, poetry has been either condemned or celebrated for its capacity to move and form, to shake and disturb its readers. Plato's hostility towards poetry when he excluded it from his ideal republic is but one example of the former. The reason why poetry has no place in the art of governing is that it has no relation to truth, and that it hides this lack from its listeners with the beauty of rhyme and rhythm. Examples of the latter include Lucretius, who put this poetic function to work in his *On the Nature of Things*. He uses the beauty of poetry to convert his reader to a true life.[1] Among poets of the last two centuries, there are examples of both hostility against and hospitality towards such a *Performanz*. John Keats, who welcomed it, coined a phrase that turned this it into a commonplace: 'Soul-making.'[2] And T. S. Eliot, equally famously, conceived of the social function of poetry as being to form and cultivate the sensibility of the nation. In his view, the *Performanz* of poetry is a forming and stretching of the minds and sensibilities of a nation by means of introducing new experiences or new ways of conceiving of and expressing experiences already present.[3] This essay investigates how and under what conditions this particular *Performanz* of poetry takes place in Romantic and post-Romantic poetry through an analysis of the American literary critic Helen Vendler's theory of the lyric, using the framework of Judith Butler's theory of subjection.

1 See Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 140–191 for a disquisition on Lucretius' use of poetry for therapeutic reasons.

2 John Keats, 'Letter 123 to George and Georgiana Keats 14 Feb.–3 May', in *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 334–335.

3 T. S. Eliot, 'On the Social Function of Poetry', in *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Noonday Press, 1961), p. 12.

In American scholarship on twentieth-century poetry, the *Performanz* of poetry has been the subject of an ongoing dispute.[4] This quarrel may be emblematically represented by the positions of Vendler and Marjorie Perloff. The former is associated with what has been called the forces of reaction and the latter with those of progress. Vendler argues for the preservation and continuation of the Keatsian conception of poetry as soul- or self-making, while Perloff dismisses this notion as obsolete. According to Perloff, changes in the literary institution (the growing number of creative writing programmes, for example) along with technological innovations in the media have made Vendler's conception of the poetry's *Performanz* a poetic function of the past.[5] Instead, Perloff embraces the utopian ideal proposed by Language poetry, a literary community where readers and writers act on equal terms to create meaning. From the perspective of performativity theory, however, there is reason to return to the (never abandoned) Keatsian conception of the poetic function. In particular Judith Butler's development of Althusser's and Foucault's theories of subject formation makes it worthwhile revisiting poetry's propensity for disturbing, shaking, and forming subjects of desire.

One point of departure is important to keep in mind: Butler constructs her theory from a post-liberatory historical condition; that is to say, from a historical situation where the liberation of man has to be reframed due to the disclosure of the subject's attachment to subordination:

> Underscoring the painful realization that 'liberation' from external authorities does not suffice to initiate a subject into freedom, [Michel] Foucault draws upon [Friedrich] Nietzsche and, in particular, upon the self-incarcerating movement that structures modern forms of reflexivity. The limits to liberation are to be understood not merely as self-imposed but, more fundamentally, as the precondition of the subject's very formation. A certain structuring attachment to subjection becomes the condition of moral subjectivation.[6]

Imperative for Butler's line of thought is the understanding that the subject can only be on the condition that it subordinates itself. And the concept of *subjection*, translated from the French *assujettissement*, encompasses this double movement by which a subject is constituted. On the one hand, it signifies the process of becoming subordinate to power, on the other, the process of becoming a subject. Thus, the subject's existence is dependent on the very power to which it is subordinated. This dependency results in a subject who desires its own subordination, for no other reason than that it is a condi-

4 Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry: O'Hara, Bishop, Ashbery & Merrill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 1–29.

5 Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 29–53.

6 Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 33.

tion for its existence.[7] It cannot escape the power to which it is subjected, because that would result in its annihilation. Thus, the subject is complicit in its own subjection.

This stance complicates any classical liberal-humanist account of the subject as autonomous – the modern self is not sovereign, is not master of its own domain. But it also complicates any emancipatory project that is only directed at external authorities, no matter how oppressive – on the other side of such a project awaits only annihilation.

Not only negative conclusions follow from this post-liberatory condition. The fact that the subject is complicit in its own subjection is not to say that the subject cannot be otherwise. One can be subjected to a different order. The processes of subjection are not only a violation; they are also enabling. The subject exceeds the constraints under which it is formed. This is due to the fact that successful subjection is dependent not only on the subject's attachment to its own subordination, but also on the exclusion and repression of other possible desires and modes of being. Any process of subjection thus produces an outside that simultaneously haunts and conditions its success.[8] In Butler's account, the subject is neither fully determined by power nor fully determining of power, but exceeds the conditions to which it is bound.[9] The dream of a poetic practice as an illustration and example of an activity that is all capacity and no constraint – as Ron Silliman, speaking in the name of Language poetry, would have it – or as a wilful, active, and productive use of our organs – as Novalis would have it – is impossible from such a perspective.[10] After the disclosure of the subject's attachment to subordination, one can no longer imagine an agency without constraints.

Passionate reading

The opening lines of John Keats's *Endymion* (1818) testify to an experience of reading and writing through which the set of relations that constitute subjectivity is rearranged and transformed. Keats begins his poem with a tribute to beauty:

7 Ibid., pp. 1–10.

8 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), p. 83.

9 Ibid., p. 17.

10 See Oren Izenberg, *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 152–153 for a discussion of Ron Silliman and the Language poets; see Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*, transl. Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) for a genealogical account of how artistic and poetic practice came to signify an activity of absolute freedom, for a discussion of Novalis, see pp. 68–93 in particular.

A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.[11]

A thing of beauty – what poetry brings into being – appears in these lines as something otherworldly. It is not subject to time, and has therefore the capacity to provide a shelter for the living. However, a couple of lines ahead, the poet relates how the experience of those otherworldly things of beauty invades this world, here and now:

Nor do we merely feel these essences
For one short hour; no, even as the trees
That whisper round a temple become soon
Dear as the temple's self, so does the moon,
The passion poesy, glories infinite,
Haunt us till they become a cheering light
Unto our souls, and bound to us so fast,
That, whether there be shine, or gloom o'ercast,
They always must be with us, or we die.[12]

These lines relate an event where the formative power of poetry, of language, is at work. In the first quotation, Keats describes the experience of a thing of beauty as an initiation into another realm of being. Once there, the reader or writer undergoing the experience finds relief. He or she can rest there for a moment in a 'sleep | Full of sweet dreams'. But once returned, the reader's mode of attachment to the world is transformed. It is now ever mediated through the 'passion poesy'; indeed haunted, even produced by it. Keats does not say what form that other mode of attachment takes, but it is transformed. Poetry, in Keats, shapes and forms the sensibility of the subject who enacts it.

In Keats's composition the poetic event has an element of mysticism, even aestheticism. The event is, it seems, conditioned by the existence of a second being that belongs to the realm of art and poetry. What is the structure of the poetic experience to which the poem testifies? Bracketing the elements of mysticism and aestheticism, it is possible to abstract the following structure: the reader is compelled to enter another realm of being, the passage there being an act of writing and reading. The reader rests there for some time, and returns transformed. Seen through the framework of Butler's

11 John Keats, *Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 65.

12 Ibid.

work on subjection, it has a similar structure to that of the process of subjection. It is also the basic structure of Helen Vendler's theory of the lyric, to which I will now turn.

For many years now, Vendler has been the foremost American poetry critic. As editor of the *Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry* (1985) and author of the standard textbook on poetry, *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology* (2010), she stands for what can be described as the contemporary canonical *idée reçue* of poetry. Her conception of the lyric is deliberately not as theoretically elaborate as that formulated by the likes of Perloff. No social or technological changes need to be accounted for. As the introduction to her monograph on Shakespeare's sonnets shows, Vendler is convinced that the historical conditions for reading and writing lyric poetry have not changed significantly since the Renaissance. The function of poetry is still essentially the same: 'mimesis of the mind in solitary speech'.[13]

What is this mimesis of the mind? How does such a poetic function work? And what is at stake when it is enacted? First of all, the mimesis of poetry is formal. Its relation to reality does not establish itself through a semantic or a referential linguistic function, but in the poem's structure and form:

> The true 'actors' in lyric are words, not 'dramatic personas'; and the drama of any lyric is constituted by the successive entrances of new sets of words, or new stylistic arrangements (grammatical, syntactical, phonetic) which are visibly in conflict with previous arrangements used with reference to the 'same' situation.[14]

It is in these formal structures that the mimesis takes place, and they alone constitute the drama of lyric poetry. The dramatic element in poetry is neither dependent on the actions of a lyric persona, nor on the subject matter of the poem in question. Instead, it is the imagery, the shifting modes of discourse, the choice of this sequence of words rather than the other, which mimic the movements and changes of mind. As a consequence, Vendler's interest lies not in the meaning expressed by a particular lyric. She freely admits that the meanings of the various sonnets of Shakespeare, for example, are often rather banal. One of them could say 'I have insomnia because I am far away from you', or 'Even though nature wishes to prolong your life, Time will eventually demand that she render you to death'.[15] Vendler cannot conceive of any reason why such banalities should be subject to critical scrutiny. What the lyric offers its readers is not wisdom or meaning, but a script that mimes a mind in solitary speech.

In her monograph on Keats's odes, Vendler elaborates on her practice of reading. She introduces her practice via Paul Valéry's proposition that when a 'poem compels

13 Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 2.

14 Ibid., p. 3.

15 Ibid., p. 13.

one to read it with passion, the reader feels he is *momentarily its author*, and *that is how he knows the poem is beautiful*'.[16] Vendler's comment on this proposition needs to be quoted at some length:

> Although Valéry adds that this practice may appear 'naive and presumptuous,' he defends himself as the composing author of the emerging lines. For better or worse, I read under the same compulsion to 'feel along the line' with the composing hand; in fact, I know no greater help to understanding a poem than writing it out in longhand with the illusion that one is composing it – deciding on this word rather than another, this arrangement of its masses rather than another, this prolonging, this digression, this cluster of senses, this closure.[17]

To note in this passage, is the compulsion to which Vendler testifies. It is as mysterious as the haunting presence of the 'passion Poesy' in Keats's *Endymion*. What is at work in this haunting? What causes the reader of a poem to sink into the second realm of being? Why does Keats's odes compel a passionate reading?

The compulsion, in Vendler's account, depends on the possibility of recognition that the voice of another mind is like one's own. And Vendler willingly admits to that: 'It is indispensable, then, if we are to be made to want to enter the lyric script that the voice offered for our use be "believable" to us, resembling a "real voice" coming from a "real mind" like our own.'[18] There seems to be no place for difference in her theory of the lyric. What Vendler assumes, in both senses of the word, is what Paul de Man has spent most of his career trying to deconstruct. In his account, the lyric is only that: 'the instance of represented voice'.[19] And this instance is problematic for de Man because it depends on the exclusion of the force of extreme materiality, of language power, a force on which it nevertheless depends for its existence. In order for the lyric to be the voice of a subject (or a mind in Vendler's terms), it must deny and hide this dependency. And that is precisely what Vendler's theory does: it denies the materiality that conditions it. Her scene of reading and writing is an idealized one, but, whether she admits to it or not, the scene is of necessity invaded by the forces of materiality that are denied. Nevertheless, the denial is a necessary condition for poetry to perform the function she imagines.

The second part of this condition, recognition, is the critical point of her theory. The lyric, in order for it to be an occasion for the compulsive reading Vendler enacts with Keats's odes, must offer a voice that resembles 'ours' – and vice versa, the reader's mind must resemble the one in the poem. If we take a step away and, as with Keats's

16 Valéry, quoted in Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1983), p. 3.

17 Ibid.

18 Vendler 1997, p. 18.

19 Paul de Man, 'Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric', in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 261.

Endymion, formalize the experience of reading that Vendler conceptualizes, what structure can be abstracted? A reader of a poem is compelled, according to Vendler, to perform it as his or her own, and to enact the formal structures of the poem as if they were the movements of the own mind. The elementary condition for this to work is the reader's specular recognition of himself or herself in the poem's formal structures. The reader must recognize that the mind in solitary speech is like his own.

What happens during this experience? Is there not something about it, in its dependency on recognition, that is reminiscent of an Althusserian interpellation? In his philosophical fiction, it is a policeman who hails a person on the street. When this person turns around, he is at once subordinated to the law and becomes a subject.[20] The structure of Vendler's passionate lyric reading is essentially the same. A poem is beautiful when one is interpellated by it. But where the law would call out a name, the lyric calls in a different way. It calls, in Vendler's terms, with its formal structure, providing a script for the reader to enact a certain view of the world and a certain sensibility; to occupy, in Butler's terms, the site of the subject.

Thus, for instance, the lines of Keats's 'Ode to Psyche' – provided that the reader is able to recognize himself or herself in the mind that is speaking – should function as a kind of interpellation, calling for the reader to identify himself or herself with the sensibility and movements of the mind for which the poem is but a script:

> Oh goddess! hear these tuneless numbers, wrung
> By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,
> And pardon that thy secrets should be sung
> Even into thine own soft-conched ear:
> Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see
> The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?
> I wander'd in the forest thoughtlessly,
> And, on the sudden, fainting with surprise,
> Saw two fair creatures couched side by side
> In deepest grass, beneath the whisp'ring roof
> Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran
> A brooklet scarce, espied:
> 'Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,
> Blue silver-white, and budded Tyrian,
> They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass;
> Their arms embraced, and their pinions too;
> Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu,
> As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber,

20 Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)', in *On Ideology* (1970; London: Verso, 2008), p. 48.

And ready still past kisses to outnumber
At tender eye-dawn of aurorean love:
The winged boy I knew;
But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?
His Psyche true!

O latest born and loveliest vision far
Of all Olympus faded hierarchy!
Fairer than Phoebe's sapphire-region'd star,
Or Vesper, amorous glow-worm of the sky;
Fairer than these, though not temple thou hast none,
Nor altar heap'd with flowers;
Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan
Upon the midnight hours;
No voice, no lute, no pipe no incense sweet
From Chain-swung censer teeming;
No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat
Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.[21]

The change of diction, for instance, from the first to the second stanza is one such instance where a formal mimesis of the mind takes place. If one recognizes the movements – the mind of which the lines are a mimesis – to be a 'real' mind, the voice speaking to be a voice 'resembling' one's own, it functions as a kind of Foucauldian *regulative ideal*, or rather, to be a ritual or process of subjection to which a certain regulative ideal owes its efficacy. It could, in other words, easily be dismissed as a mechanistic ritual productive of sensibility and self-awareness through which the state of things reproduces itself. The reader is compelled to participate and enact *as his own* the sensibility and self-awareness of which the poem is a formal mimesis.

Juxtaposed with Althusser's theory of subject formation, Vendler's conception of the function of lyric poetry appears to be one example of what Althusser calls *rituals of ideological recognition*. That is to say, one of those rituals that function to guarantee that there are concrete subjects of a certain sensibility (and thereby the reproduction of the modes of production).[22] The last qualification with respect to Althusser's account, that the lyric guarantees that 'we' are subjects of a certain sensibility, is important. In Vendler's passionate lyric reading, identity is not at stake, sensibility is.

If we conceive of the lyric as a ritual of ideological recognition among others that constitute social life, then the mystical element in Keats's celebration of the 'passion Poesy' and its haunting influence on life disappears. That passion, like a handshake or any other social ritual, owes its efficacy to repetition. In other words, the lyric provides

21 Keats 1982, p. 276.
22 Althusser 2008, pp. 46ff.

a scripted mind and a sensibility of a certain style and rhythm. The reader, in Butler's terminology, *cites* this stylized sensibility, and through repeated citation constitutes him- or herself as a subject of this particular sensibility. Whether it appears to be or becomes the sensibility of one's own is insignificant; the result is the same.

To clarify what is at stake in such a conception of the lyric and its *Performanz*, one may compare it with two other ways of conceptualizing the lyric and how it acts on the recipient's subjectivity: on the one hand, we have Theodor W. Adorno's focus on the disruptive, shocking effect of the modern artwork; on the other, we have Susan Stewart, who argues that the lyric is a transcultural form and the origin of subjectivity. One function of art that Adorno presents in his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) is that the modern artwork (or the poem) produces a disruption in the beholder's (reader's) identity. For him, what the artwork does to its recipient is by no means edifying. On the contrary, the shock aroused by 'important works ... is the moment in which recipients forget themselves and disappear into the work; it is the moment of being shaken [von Erschütterung]'.[23] And this forgetting of oneself takes shape, Adorno continues, 'in the fraction of an instant'. It is a singular experience outside of historical time, and it is dependent on the artwork's shocking effect for it to work. In this sense, Adorno's conception of the transformative power of the work of art is similar to Erika Fischer-Lichte's.[24] For them, it is necessary to conceive of the art event as something other than what is ordinarily happening. The *Performanz* of the lyric when it functions as a process of subjection does not depend on shock; on the contrary its effect depends on repetition and recognition or identification. There is no structural difference between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic.

The second comparison, Susan Stewart's idea of the lyric as the origin of subjectivity, is similarly instructive. In *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (2002), Stewart presents a convincing argument for one of the (transcultural and transhistorical) tasks of lyric poetry: to be the creation of intelligible expressions of individuality.[25] Thus, not only to be the expression of an individual, but actually a forming of one's individuality in relation to others (making oneself intelligible). Lyric poetry is, in other words, the emergence of subjectivity. It is not a disruption of everyday life, as Adorno (or Fischer-Lichte) would have it; it is what makes everyday life possible. Stewart presents lyric poetry as something specific and radically separate from social reality, and for that very reason it is of fundamental importance for it. Vendler's passionate reading, interpreted

23 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, transl. Robert Hullot-Kentor ([1970] London: Continuum, 1999), p. 244.

24 See Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, transl. Saskya Iris Jain (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 11–24.

25 Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 54.

through the framework of Butler's theories on subjection, removes lyric from such an elevated position. Lyric poetry is thereby seen as one among many other instances in which, and through which, the subject recognizes and constitutes itself as a subject of a certain sensibility with certain desires.

On the limits of recognition

What happens then if we take into account Butler's development of Althusser's concept of interpellation? In her *Bodies that Matter* (2011), Butler notes that interpellation functions as a performative speech act, and that the recognition on which its success depends is haunted by the possibility of misrecognition. The identification with, say, a norm is haunted by the exclusion and repression of other possible identifications.[26] This differs from Althusser's account on one decisive point: he conceives of the interpellation as a unilateral act, an act performed by the law on its subjects. Butler, on the other hand, emphasizes the subject's complicity in its own subjection.[27] To her mind, the subject is accountable for its own subjection, and the success of the interpellative call is dependent on a certain degree on the willingness of the subject to be subjected.

As we have seen, Butler's theory of subjection is based on a post-liberatory standpoint; she complicates the concept of interpellation further by noting that interpellation as a speech act is no simple performative that creates only that which it refers to, for it always 'creates more than it ever meant to, signifying in excess of any intended referent'.[28] A successful subjection, then, is dependent on the possibility that it can also go wrong to such an extent that it creates such a possibility itself.

Thus, any ritual of sensibility and self-awareness, such as lyric poetry, simultaneously produces (*i*) a mode of attachment to oneself and others and (*ii*) a set of possibilities excluded from the projected mode of attachment. The ritual's very efficiency depends on these exclusions, which constitute an outside that simultaneously haunts and conditions the forming of a subject. The heterosexual matrix, for instance, is dependent on what it does *not* allow: homosexuality, transsexuality, and so on. These may appear as a threat to the heterosexual matrix, but they are simultaneously what conditions it. No heterosexuality is without its others. A subject of heterosexual desire constitutes itself through what it is not. Thus, although subjection is a process whereby power is exercised on bodies – indeed, where bodies and desires are marked and produced – it is by no means a mechanistic or deterministic process. An archetypical Romantic poet such as Keats may in this case provide the occasion for something unforeseen to hap-

26 Butler 1997, p. 82.
27 Ibid., p. 83.
28 Ibid., p. 82.

pen, no matter how conventional the Romantic sensibility he represents has become (if indeed it ever has become conventional). The process of subjection may always go wrong and produce something else than intended.

Before concluding, there is reason to call attention to a misreading of Foucault in Butler's work. In his late work, Foucault coins a second theoretical concept, complementary to the aforementioned *assujettissement* (subjection), in order to describe the various ways in which one constitutes oneself as a subject, namely *subjectivation* (subjectivation). Foucault defines this second concept as 'the process by which one obtains the constitution of a subject, or more exactly, of a subjectivity, which is obviously only one of the given possibilities for organizing self-consciousness'.[29] Butler does not account for the difference between them, as she is under the impression that *subjectivation* is a translation into English of *assujettissement*.[30] As Mark G. E. Kelly notes, this is not the case. While both terms signify the process by which one becomes a subject, *subjectivation* involves a more active stance from the constituted subject: 'Subjectivation, in contrast to subjection, only refers to our constitution as subjects in one sense, namely the active one, even if this constitution is not possible in practice without also being constituted as a passive subject.'[31] True, Butler does not ignore the active part of the subject in its own constitution, but the distinction between subjection and subjectivation is important, and worthwhile keeping in mind when approaching the historical conditions for writing poetry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This distinction provides the possibility to distinguish between processes of subjection and, by extension, between poetic practices, where the part of the subject in its own formation is more passive or more active.

Where should one look, in the history of Western poetry, for critical acts of resistance that may or may not serve as examples? One way would be to seek out events where voices, or forms of subjectivity, previously unrecognized as lyric, or recognized only as lyric of an inferior degree, demand to be recognized as proper lyric.

A literary event that took place in the 1920s in Paris is an illustrative case in point, namely the correspondence between the French actor and writer Antonin Artaud and Jacques Rivière, the editor-in-chief of the most influential literary magazine in France at that time, *La Nouvelle Revue Française.* In the spring of 1923, Artaud sent a collection of poems to Rivière. The editor responded with a polite refusal. The poems could not be published since they failed to live up to the high literary standards of the magazine. Yet Rivière found them interesting enough to invite Artaud over for a meeting at his office. A few weeks after this meeting Artaud wrote Rivière a letter where he

29 Michel Foucault, cited in Mark G. E. Kelly, *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 87.

30 Kelly 2009, p. 88; for examples of Butler's use of the term, see Butler 1997, pp. 11 and 83.

31 Kelly 2009, p. 88.

explained that he was not interested in discussing whether his poems lived up to the standards of the magazine, but whether or not Rivière judged them to be literary or not. He wanted to discuss their 'absolute admissibility', their 'literary existence'.[32]

Artaud is not asking for a judgement on his poems' aesthetic qualities. He recognizes that they do not live up to the formal level and purity of material required by the magazine. Artaud presents his poems because he wants to know whether what he wrote may be acknowledged as literary. He asks whether the mind presented in the form and structure of his poems is *recognizable*? Is it possible to recognize it and grant it literary existence? Does it count in the literary republic? Artaud continues:

> It is very important for me that the few manifestations of *spiritual* existence which I was able to give myself be not considered inexistent through the fault of the blots and unacceptable expressions scattered throughout them. ... I admit that a review like the *Nouvelle Revue Française* requires a certain formal level and a great purity of substance, but without this, is the body of my thought so confused and its general beauty rendered so ineffectual by the impurities and indecisions scattered through it, that it doesn't succeed *literarily* in existing?[33]

The stakes for Artaud are high. He questions whether he has the right or not to think in prose or verse. And the question is repeated against the backdrop of his, as Artaud himself viewed it at the time, aberrant mind and sensibility. Rivière, being a representative for the man of taste, is a man who has the authority to pass judgement on which minds may be counted literary. His judgement is negative throughout the correspondence. He keeps on encouraging Artaud that he is capable of writing 'normal' poems; he need only be patient and his mind will reach the necessary degree of maturity. Today, few would doubt Artaud's writings' right to literary existence.

Another, perhaps more interesting way today would be to seek out practices or poetic techniques where a poem functions as a script for a desire or form of consciousness on the borders of recognizability.[34] In such poems, the script it offered the reader would be just barely recognizable, yet unmistakably a voice, a mind in solitary speech. The American poet John Ashbery's work in the 1960s may serve as example. Here are the first two stanzas of a total of fifty that constitute his poem 'Fragment', first published in 1966:

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32 Antonin Artaud, 'Correspondence with Jacques Rivière', transl. John Ashbery, in John Ashbery, *Collected French Translations,* eds Eugene Richie & Rosanne Wassermanp (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2014), p. 575, e-book; for the French original, see Antonin Artaud, 'Correspondance avec Jacques Rivière', in idem. *Œuvres completes,* I (1976; Paris: Gallimard, 1984), pp. 21–38.

33 Artaud 2014, p. 576.

34 Compare Judith Butler, 'Bodies and Power Revisited', in Dianna Taylor & Karen Vintges (eds), *Feminism and the Final Foucault* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 193.

The last block is closed in April. You
See the intrusions clouding over her face
As in the memory given you of older
Permissiveness which dies in the
Falling back toward recondite ends,
The sympathy of yellow flowers.
Never mentioned in the signs of the oblong day
The saw-toothed flames and point of other
Space not given, and yet not withdrawn
And never yet imagined: a moment's commandment.

These last weeks teasing into providential
Reality: that your face, the only real beginning,
Beyond the gray of overcoat, that this first
Salutation plummet also to the end of friendship
With self alone. And in doing so open out
New passages of being among the correctness
Of familiar patterns. The stance to you
Is a fiction, to me a whole. I find
New options, white feathers, in a word what
You draw in around you to the protecting bone.[35]

Ashbery's technique here, as in the bulk of his poetry, produces a poem that sounds lyrical, but is spoken by a voice that at once resembles the voice of anyone and of no one. There seem to be a logic, a mind at work, that orders the sequence of words, but it is not accessible to the reader. In the first stanza, for instance, one could note that the line 'The sympathy of yellow flowers' is introduced as if it were a simple simile to clarify the obscure preceding phrase. But the clarification never comes. The enjambments in both stanzas are another example of how Ashbery creates the effect of a voice asking to be heard, but remains uncomprehended. Each individual line seems to make sense, or at least promises a sense that is to come. The enjambment between the last two stanzas is exemplary. After 'in a word what' a clarification might be expected. But as the phrase continues on the following line, the clarification, to borrow a phrase of Ashbery's 'dies in the | Falling back toward recondite ends'.

Keeping in mind the distinction between subjection and subjectivation, one may, by way of conclusion, note that Ashbery's poetry is an example of a lyric that lingers on the borders of recognizability and that demands an active part of the subject for its *Performanz* to be actualized. For his poems to function as lyric poetry proper – for them to function as processes of subjectivation and not merely as mysterious constructions – the subject must actively work on itself. A poem such as 'Fragment' resists

35 John Ashbery, 'Fragment', in *Collected Poems 1956–1987* (New York: Library of America, 2008), p. 229. The poem was first published in *Poetry Magazine*, 5 (1966).

recognition as a 'mimesis of a mind in solitary speech' that resembles the reader's, while at the same time demanding to be recognized as such. And this dialectic between resistance to and demand for recognition has two consequences: (*i*) it is difficult to cite the sensibility and movements of mind for which his lyric offers a script (it demands active work by the subject on itself); (*ii*) it opens a space where a form of subjectivity yet to be recognized (be it by the poet or the reader) can materialize.

From the Performative to the Normative

Root-seeking Narrative in *A Dictionary of Maqiao*

Jiang Ningkang

For contemporary literary critics inside China, Han Shaogong's contributions to 'root-seeking literature' (*xungen wenxue*) have remained a controversial topic, especially in the assessment of his cultural criticism of the orthodox discourse based on Confucianism. It is true that since the publication of his early novel *Returning* (*Gui qu lai*, 1985), Han has demonstrated a critical attitude towards the 'dried up' Confucian tradition, while maintaining a strong passion for the revival of Chu culture in southern China. It seems that root-seeking writers, Han Shaogong in particular, have cultivated a decentered consciousness in their preference for local unorthodox traditions, in which they hope to rediscover hidden resources for reconstructing a national identity and spirit.

As a representative of root-seeking literature, Han Shaogong published the famous novel *A Dictionary of Maqiao* in the late 1990s, a novel that relates the history of a rural society in Hunan, a southern province of China, by elaborating on surviving local expressions and idiom that formulate a performative force of language, linking the past with the present.[1] In this novel, the narrator tries to decode southern norms and cultural identity by displaying the vicissitudes of a remote village, in which southern values are vividly narrated and performed in the local popular speech which has shaped the mind of villagers for generations. By resorting to this narrative strategy, the novel becomes a good example of the performative narration of norms and events, and thus offers the reader a deeper understanding of Chinese culture from a literary perspective.

When interviewed by a reporter in 1987, Han Shaogong claimed that Chu culture had remained influential in some marginal, rural societies as 'a kind of unorthodox

1 Maqiao (马桥) – the name of a fictive village in the southern part of China. *A Dictionary of Maqiao* has been translated into English by Julia Lovell (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). *Yazhou Zhoukan* (*Asian Weekly*) selected it as one of the top hundred Chinese novels published in the twentieth century.

and unconventional culture' to 'provide conventional culture with nourishment'.[2] Indeed, his interpretation of Chinese culture implies the critical rationale embodied in root-seeking literature, with Han and his peers trying to re-evaluate official discourses through an in-depth exploration of local norms and customs.

A leading figure of root-seeking literature in the mid-1980s, Han Shaogong was born in Changsha City, Hunan, in 1953. He graduated from a local high school in 1968 and was soon sent to the countryside as an 'educated youth' for six years' re-education through hard labour, living and working alongside local farmers. In 1978, Han was admitted to Hunan Normal University to study Chinese literature, where he embarked on his literary career. His own experiences of living and working in a remote village provided him with a better understanding of the local farmers and their customs, which were to be the themes of many of his novels. Han's preference for writing about the rural life in the 1980s and 1990s also had another reason: he believed the cultural roots of the Chinese nation to be embedded in the rural margins because 'the rural is the past of the urban and the museum of national culture'.[3] Han demonstrated his critical and creative talents in narrating local Chu culture in several root-seeking novels written from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s. Among these novels, *A Dictionary of Maqiao* (马桥词典》, 1996) was an experiment with a new narrative format in contemporary Chinese literature: a collection of local expressions and jargon giving actual commentary in order to relate the modern history of rural society in Hunan. In the preface, Han announced that *A Dictionary of Maqiao* was written in an innovative genre, employing the dictionary as a new form of narrative structure in order to decode local norms and customs.

In the novel, structured around more than one hundred Maqiao terms, the narrator starts by recalling his early experiences of living and working in the village and then elaborates on some typical southern expressions, such as 'huafen' (话分, speech authority), 'manzi' (蛮子, barbarians), 'yunjie' (晕街, feeling giddy in city-centre streets), 'yibian' (夷边, alien places), 'mengpo' (梦婆, a female fortune teller), 'sha' (煞, awesome), and 'xiaoge' (小哥, a younger brother). The local words are used in order to display the local norms and conventions of a remote village, which has survived long term historical change. The narrator's annotations gradually lead the reader into an ever closer scrutiny of how language has exerted a peculiar and performative force in shaping local culture and the villagers' mentality. In a fictive, marginal village, the villagers find that countryside language becomes a site where they can naturally formulate their special way of observing and representing the world inside and outside

2 Han Shaogong, 'Dui meiguo *huaqiao ribao* jizhe tiwen de dafu' ('Replies to the questions by the reporter from *Overseas Chinese Daily* in America'). *Zhongshan*, 5 (*The Purple Mountain*, 1987), p. 273.

3 Han Shaogong, 'Wenxue de gen' ('Roots of Literature',), *Zuojia* (*Writers*) 4 (1985), p. 3.

the village. In so doing, the villagers make their language a home where their souls can rest and be refreshed, a location that could be viewed as the living embodiment of Martin Heidegger's statement that 'Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins in ihrer Behausung wohnt der Mensch' ('Language is the house of the truth of Being)'.[4]

Language and norms

Assuming the role of the compiler of local vocabulary, the narrator shares the richness of local norms and customs while making great efforts in his fresh interpretations to search for the roots of Chinese national culture beyond the orthodox discourse. In talking of root-seeking literature, Han once said: 'The rural is the past of the urban, and the museum of national culture, but traditional culture crystallized in rural life does not belong to the established one.'[5] Due to this assessment of national and local cultures, Han chooses to probe the philological domain in his hunt for the hidden yet vigorous tradition in marginal areas. *A Dictionary of Maqiao* proves to be a vivid example in this regard. By displaying a panoramic picture of Maqiao's past and present, the novel reveals that the normative customs performed by the villagers go hand in hand with their use of long-lived, everyday idiom, which channel the performative force of language that has reshaped the minds of villagers. By creating a special genre of literature that 'calls for a performative account of norm and event' in Jonathan Culler's words,[6] Han's novel records the performative practices of local villagers in Maqiao. The daily speech of the villagers becomes the matrix for creating and maintaining southern rural norms, which identify the local society as the 'marginal' in comparison with the civilized centre in urban areas. More importantly, however, Han's initial aim is to acknowledge the marginal culture as the fountain that will revitalize a central culture fraught with archaisms and official clichés.

In *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, Han Shaogong creates a narrator based on his own personal experiences years ago as an interpreter of 115 entries in the dictionary, and each entry tells an interesting story concerning local vernacular formulated as local history, especially in the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). These fragmentary, yet culturally coherent, anecdotes are vividly narrated, gradually disclosing a general picture of Maqiao life and society. In the story of 'yunjie' (feeling giddy in city-centre streets), for example, the narrator relates an interesting anecdote concerning the village Party chief, Benyi, who one day visits Changle Town, the county town, and walks

4 Martin Heidegger, *Cunzai zhuyi zhexue* (*Philosophy of Existentialism*), transl. He Lin (Beijing: Commercial Press, 1963), p. 87.

5 Han 1985, p. 3.

6 Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 107.

down the street looking for a restaurant. While Benyi is wandering around the small town, he bumps into a young woman but misjudges her polite attitude as a flirtatious gesture, and he pats her on the bottom by way of reply. The woman, irritated, scolds him for his harassment as the 'shameless' behaviour of 'a hick'.[7] This incident leaves Benyi permanently uneasy whenever he visits a town or a city because he always senses hostility from city dwellers in the streets. The irony lies in the narrator's plain yet dramatic narrative of Benyi's encounter with a modern pattern of life outside Maqiao, which has long been regarded by the villagers as a corrupt and decadent way of life.

Richard Schechner asserts that performances include 'human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts (theatre, dance and music), and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles'.[8] In this sense, the practice of uttering the word 'yunjie' can be regarded as the enactment of linguistically coded social performances in a rural community, in which the word reflects the ignorance of local villagers, whose bias against urban culture might remain too strong to be eliminated in a short time. In fact, this story reveals a deep cultural fissure in Chinese society as a result of the enduring social prejudice against alien or modern cultures, a conservative mentality that has been continuously strengthened by the sheer resilience of performative acts and rural norms in a society like Maqiao.

The use of the term 'kexue' (science) provides another example of the blindness in the villagers' defiance of urban and modern life. A much-esteemed old man, Grandpa Luo enjoys the respect due his age and his knowledge of the world, but often uses the term 'kexue' to condemn urban people for their laziness in taking the bus instead of walking, and for watching TV every evening instead of working in their yards. According to Grandpa Luo, watching TV or taking the bus violates the local norm of a hard-working and austere life, because these lazy urban acts imply a sense of immorality. Performed in the villagers' daily life, therefore, the utterance of such terms as 'yunjie' and 'kexue' not only express mixed feeling – self-mockery and blind arrogance – but also indicate the real mechanism of how Maqiao norms and habits are formulated by villagers' performance of daily vocabulary.

In the story of 'xiaoge' (a younger brother), the narrator tells us that the term is used by villagers to identify any young woman. It is not used for men. This oppositional employment of a gendered title implies a self-consciousness of masculine suppression as women in Maqiao have to accept the position of subordination and obedience to men, losing in the process their sense of subjectivity in the performative practices of language. The narrator interprets the term 'xiaoge' through detailed observation of

7 Han Shaogong, *A Dictionary of Maqiao* (Beijing: People Press, 1996), p. 169.

8 Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2nd ed, London: Routledge, 2006), p. 2.

local women's habits in daily life. The women in Maqiao want to use male titles like 'xiaoge' in order to 'hide their feminine features in masculine clothing, and even never ask for sick leave from heavy labour during their period of menstruation'.[9] When the narrator realizes that the misuse of gender titles is a result of the long tradition of female obedience towards male power in local society, he feels very sorrowful for the women who have not yet been liberated from masculine dominance, even though they have lived in a new society, the People's Republic of China, for more than twenty years.

To further understand the full meaning of 'xiaoge' in terms of gender, Judith Butler's thinking is helpful here, as she underscores the painful realization that

> 'liberation' from external authorities does not suffice to initiate a subject into freedom. ... The limits to liberation are to be understood not merely as self-imposed but, more fundamentally, as the precondition of the subject's very formation. A certain attachment to subjection becomes the condition of moral subjectivation.[10]

Butler's words explain the loss of subject consciousness, which also implies the loss of gender identity and female dignity. The loss of subject consciousness seems to be the main reason why Maqiao women have to perform as men in speech and action.

In a similar vein, 'sha' (awesome) is a negative term that in the minds of local villagers implies the loss or even defiance of female subjectivity, since it is used to denote a modern or fashionable woman, especially a woman who refuses to conform to the habit of covering herself physically, such as wearing a man's cap to hide her long hair. If a woman fails to follow the local norm she will most probably encounter implicit insults from illiterate villagers, using derogatory words like 'sha'. In the Maqiao context, therefore, the term 'sha' reflects and at the same time performatively reinforces a collective mentality of gender discrimination, 'a kind of symbolic castration' in Kristeva's term, that Maqiao villagers, both men and women, have taken for granted for so long.[11] Thus Maqiao everyday language is revealed as a symbolic system of repression, cultivating the psychological pattern of local thinking and behaving.

Narrated from a first-personal point of view, the novel's stories and anecdotes are highly interesting and even ironic in a sense. In fact, they also remind the reader of an embarrassing situation for the root-seeking writers, where once they used to yearn for the roots of Chinese culture in southern marginal areas, thinking they would make it possible to recast a new national spirit. So far they have found more illusion than illumination. For the root-seeking writers like Han Shaogong, the question has remained

9 Han 1996, pp. 30–31.

10 Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 33.

11 Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 1991), p. 6.

unanswered as to where they can find the 'original' cultural roots that will revitalize a new national identity. In fact, the root-seeking narrative in *A Dictionary of Maqiao* reveals the negative side of the cultural roots as exemplified in anecdotes as 'xiaoge' and 'sha'. It is obvious that the root-seeking writers have barely fulfilled the task of finding a satisfactory solution to this issue.

In commenting on the issue of gender identity, Butler has pointed out that the human subject has a thoroughly historicized notion of time and place, which should depend upon constitution of social and political practices and discourses.[12] Her idea of historically constructed identity helps explain Han's narrative strategy, and reminds us that reinterpreting the local vernacular might be an intelligent way of reconstructing cultural norms for the purpose of disabusing people of the myth of the grand narrative. Viewed from a critical perspective, however, *A Dictionary of Maqiao* can be read as a thoughtful model of a root-criticizing rather than as a root-seeking narrative. As the writer of the novel, Han might have become disappointed at his discovery of the outdated culture performed by Maqiao villagers, yet he should take some solace from the fact that his root-seeking narrative has provided us with a serious criticism of the local norms and customs in Maqiao. This evaluation of Han's root-seeking narrative comes from an understanding of his critical stance in the literary treatment of the exotic, living local norms and customs in his later years of root-seeking writing.

Unlike Han's early writing about root-seeking literature, *A Dictionary of Maqiao* underpins a growing critical awareness of local culture as he shifted from root-seeker to root-critic in the late 1990s. The change of his critical position helps him maintain his intellectual responsibility as the social conscience that many root-seeking writers have claimed. In fact, the novel considered here proves to be the outcome of his consistent efforts to take this responsibility, while the innovative techniques such as the narrative form of a dictionary demonstrate his creative energy and enthusiasm in writing root-seeking literature. By arranging the narrative structure and the development of the plot in the form of a dictionary, Han seeks answers to the question of why villagers could bear living by those norms for so long without realizing the need to abandon them for a fresh and more advanced way of life.

In terms of literary innovation, Han's narrative strategy reflects an initial consideration of the relationship between discursive practices and the formation of customs and norms, this being an idea that is much better equipped than others to decode the secrets of Chinese culture and national identity, past and present. Peter Digeser is right to think highly of this way of narrating norms and identity through the performative, as he states that our identity is not found in some grand narrative but in our active per-

12 Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', in Sue-Ellen Case (ed.), *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 272.

formances and discourses in a social context.[13] In the marginal context that is Maqiao, those expressions – 'yunjie' and 'xiaoge'– used by the villagers play an important role in maintaining a rural cultural identity, as Han's annotations lead readers into a meticulous examination of how the local language exerts a performative force, which represents the characteristics of Maqiao villagers living in a marginal area, alienated from the urban and modern centre for so long. As the novel illustrates, Maqiao language not only represents events, but also has a great impact on Maqiao lifestyles and norms, regulating the relationship between social conventions and individual acts. It is thus tempting for us to imagine that social conventions are like the scenery or background, against which human beings decide how to act and speak.

Performing local culture

Jonathan Culler believes that theories of the performative offer better accounts of the entanglement of norm and action, whether presenting conventions as the condition of possibility of events, as in J. L. Austin, or else, as in Butler, seeing action as obligatory repetition, which may nevertheless deviate from or enhance the norms through daily performative practices.[14] The story of 'Mengpo' (a female fortune teller) is a good example of showing the entanglement of norm and action in a Maqiao village. The term 'mengpo' used to refer to a woman with mental disease resulting from an unexpected disaster of losing family members, but in Maqiao this term has dramatically become the title of a powerful woman possessing the 'magic' power of fortune-telling. After the death of her son in a tragic accident, Mengpo suddenly finds herself able to tell fortunes, and she can make prophetic statements concerning her clients' fortunes or misfortunes. It is this magic power that changes the local norm of gender discrimination: Mengpo now has the power to make the local males obey her orders, even including the village Party chief Benyi, who has to treat Mengpo respectfully despite his power over the villagers. This anecdote is an interesting case that emphasizes the potential of performative activity in shaping the villagers' minds. With the frequent practice of performative activities such as Benyi's 'yunjie' and Mengpo's fortune-telling, the practitioners of the Maqiao language would like to accept the changed identities or norms, consciously or unconsciously, although the names of these identities have not changed much.

It is vividly depicted in the novel how Maqiao villagers have become performers of local traditions that entail controlling norms and customs. The fact that even local women themselves accept misogynic language reveals the degree to which human na-

13 Peter Digeser, 'Performativity Trouble: Postmodern Feminism and Essential Subjects'. *Political Research Quarterly,* 47 (1994), p. 656.

14 Culler 1997, pp. 106–107.

ture and human subjects, especially women, have been subjugated to linguistic hegemony in a remote, agrarian, marginal setting. As the narrator repeatedly mentions, the repressive customs may have diminished, but a linguistic remnant still lingers on local villagers' minds when they perform these customs through linguistic and social practices. In this sense, there is a shaping power of language, as Marvin Carlson is thoughtful enough to remind us of when considering Victor Turner's anthropological views in the following words: 'The language of drama and performance gave him a way of thinking and talking about people as actors, who creatively play, improvise, interpret and re-present roles.'[15] Accordingly, the Maqiao villagers can be viewed as 'actors', who play roles in their performative acts shaping and upholding the outdated norms of the local community.

The local jargon 'huafen' (speech authority) is another example that reveals the conservativeness of the villagers. 'Huafen' represents a sort of cultural capital possessed by powerful people by means of political authority, and hence their dominant control of others. In Maqiao, those possessing 'huafen' demonstrate an unquestionable influence on local villagers through their discursive practices – decreeing what shall be or passing judgments by displaying 'huafen' power. As a 'huafen' holder, Benyi exerts a hegemonic control over the villagers' minds. The poor villagers always act as followers and defenders of Benyi's authority, even though he often uses the wrong words or inappropriate jargon in the local community. One of Benyi's habitual sayings: 'one sentence is worth ten thousand sentences', is an ironic reflection on the 'unthinking mass', in Kant's term. Han's narrative alerts us of the collective habitus of subordination to authority within and beyond Chinese tradition. From the perspective of modernity and progress, it is clear that this tradition of blindly following 'huafen' authority will prevent the people from obtaining the consciousness of subjectivity and becoming enlightened in their long journey towards modernization and democracy.

Han's profound criticism of the villagers' inertia in blindly following authority is in fact the main theme of the novel, while his special narrative techniques add to the impact of this criticism. In the novel, the narrator tries to call the reader's attention to the nature of local discursive suppression: consider the annotation for the term 'huafen', which states that 'the concept of individual does not exist there, as each person is just a collective individual'.[16] Han's interpretation of this term contains a criticism of Confucian doctrines that overemphasize collective values rather than individual initiative in an agrarian society, in which a collective individual must follow the norms buttressed by political authority. This collective identity, Han illustrates, will gradually eliminate an individual's self-confidence and sense of reason, with 'incomplete' subjectivity as a consequence. In this cultural context, therefore, Maqiao vocabulary and discourse practiced by local villagers formulate a Lacanian 'network' that always pre-exists us

15 Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 187.
16 Han 1996, p. 180.

and manipulates our language behaviour.[17] Influenced by the discursive manipulation for ages, each individual in Maqiao has to be obedient to this network in order to be recognized as an in-group member of the local community.

By exploring the course of the mental journey from the performative to the normative, Han Shaogong brings an awareness that it is very difficult for an individual with self-consciousness and subjectivity to utter freely personal *parole* without considering a repressive and powerful *langue*, or cultural tradition. In a sense, *A Dictionary of Maqiao* proved to be a historical document that records the local norms and customs, positive or negative, that have become deeply rooted in the villagers' psychological structure. In the process of tracing the roots of Maqiao culture, Han touches on the sophisticated and complex issue of re-evaluating and revitalizing the national identity and spirit. This has been a very complicated task for modern Chinese scholars ever since Lu Xun embarked on the mission in the early 1920s.[18] Lu Xun expressed criticism of Chinese national characteristics as containing a sense of enslavement, and according to him, especially a state of spiritual inertia and paralysis. Han Shaogong seems to adopt the same critical stance and seeks to remedy this cultural 'disease' through fiction writing. By reinterpreting southern rural norms and customs in *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, Han's root-seeking writing really reflects what T. S. Eliot once famously conceived of as the social function of literature, a function that forms and cultivates the sensibility of the nation and its culture in poetic creation.[19] Han's early experiences of living and working as a farmer in a remote village for six years must have enriched his knowledge of local rural culture and history since he himself also used to speak in the same idiom as the villagers of his fictive Maqiao. Doubtless, Han's personal life as an educated youth sent to the countryside cultivated a sense of attachment to the villagers, whose fate he shared for years. At same time, he had not cut all emotional ties with the urban and modern culture familiar to him since he was a child. The real problem occurred when he wrote the novel in 1996, because his mixed feelings of love and resentment left him in two minds about his identification with the Maqiao people and their way of speaking and thinking. He wants to explain the reason why the locals could maintain an obviously backward worldview despite a fast changing society in the outside world. The term 'yibian' (alien places) is a typical expression of this kind.

The villagers prefer using an antiquated metaphor with a hint of hyperbole to describe all outsiders, whose cultural norms are different from that of the Maqiao people. In the minds of the Maqiao villagers, 'yibian' means a barbarian borderland, a civilization significantly more primitive than Maqiao society, past or present. Probably the

17 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 134.

18 Lu Xun (1881–1936) is often seen as a representative of national spirit and regarded as the most prominent writer in modern Chinese literature, with novels such as *The Diary of a Madman* (1918) and *The True Story of Ah Q* (1921).

19 T. S. Eliot, 'On the Social Function of Poetry', in *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Noonday Press, 1961).

villagers have reason to be proud of their life and traditions since the local community has a long history that can be traced back to 700 BCE, the Spring–Autumn period when the Luo Kingdom prospered along the Luo River. Since that time, the villagers have lived alongside the Luo River for many generations. Local history has left them with a rich memory of their glorious past, and a sense of an illusive future embedded in the local collective memory. Because of this ancient heritage, the villagers conceive of their community as the centre of the world, even though their rich past cannot save them from living a poor life at present. In the novel, the term 'yibian' thus also implies a sense of local-centred mentality, a local complex that alludes to a psychological obstacle to the adoption of any advanced ideas or modern ways of life from the outside world.

With his root-criticizing literary format, Han discovers that the villagers love modern and fashionable things when they visit cities or towns, yet they dislike the way of life and speech that outsiders employ, because the new ways make them feel uncomfortable and alienated from the modern world. As illustrated by stories such as 'Yunjie' and 'Yibian' in the novel, there is often a sense of alienation in the Maqiao villagers' encounters with other cultures or norms. Much like T. S. Eliot's ideas on how literary writing relates to national mentality, Han's thoughtful interpretations of local vernacular in fact reveal that the deep-lying root of Sino-centrism is found in such remote, marginal places as Maqiao. This aspect of thematic thinking is embedded in the plots of the novel. Han reminds his readers of how difficult it is to rid the nation of its cultural malaise or rural conservativeness in the performative act of using the terms 'yibian' and 'yunjie' in a Maqiao context.

Locating the margin

In *How to Do Things with Words*, J. L. Austin suggested that the performative is a speech act that should not be judged on whether it is true or false, but on whether or not it actually occurs.[20] Austin's idea is helpful in understanding *A Dictionary of Maqiao*. Han Shaogong introduces a new form of narration in order to capture what happens when local language is used in the village community. The narrative strategy the author employs to penetrate the farthest levels of Chinese society reveals how deeply and stubbornly the cultural roots of the Chinese nation are in the soil of its vast land. Exemplified in the root-seeking narrative of Maqiao history and culture, the process of culturally transforming people's habitus from the performative to the normative is also a process of formulating the collective unconsciousness – or the 'imagined community', to use Benedict Anderson's term – of a nation with a long history. Han's narrative underscores that the elimination of past backwardness and the realization of

20 Erin Striff, 'Introduction: Locating Performance Studies', in idem. (ed.), *Performance Studies* (London: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 1–13, esp. p. 6.

future modernization will remain the toughest challenge facing the Chinese people.

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, therefore, the literary reworking of Chinese history and culture has become a seemingly permanent theme that many famous writers have employed in their works. Like his early novelettes *Ba Ba Ba* (*Dad Dad Dad*, 1985) and *Nü Nü Nü* (*Women Women Women*, 1986), Han's *A Dictionary of Maqiao* continues his literary exploration of the cultural roots of the Chinese nation. Han is indeed the first writer who has tried diverse artistic innovations and new narrative strategies to further explore the secret of the Chinese people and their history. *A Dictionary of Maqiao* is rightly viewed as a cultural novel that should occupy a prominent position in contemporary Chinese literature, although some critics have recently begun to neglect this literary contribution.

Root-seeking literature is correct to re-evaluate the orthodox culture based on Confucianism, which used to be representative of the official ideology in pre-modern China. This programmatic feature was previously considered as a noble attempt to revitalize national identity and spirit. However, the real outcome of the search for roots might prove to be problematic, since root-seeking narratives have not found appropriately progressive sources from the marginal and unorthodox cultures as reflected in such novels as *A Dictionary of Maqiao*. When quoting Edward Said's 'The Politics of Knowledge' (1991), David Richter tries to warn us that in literature, as in politics, 'marginality and homelessness are not to be gloried in; and they are to be brought to an end'.[21] This warning is a suitable reminder for root-seeking writers that marginality does not necessarily mean the possibility of social and historical progress. Han's root-seeking narrative in *A Dictionary of Maqiao* has demonstrated that the location of marginal culture might become a hindrance to the revitalization of China's national spirit in order to modernize the nation.

With its new form of narrative, Han's novel contributed considerably to the accomplishment of contemporary Chinese literature, because his creative writing about marginal people and local norms has largely enriched our understanding of Chinese culture, both central and marginal. It is very appropriate to quote Jonathan Culler's remarks here as he states: 'The notion of literature as performative contributes to a defence of literature: literature is not frivolous pseudo-statements but takes its place among the acts of language that transform the world.'[22] *A Dictionary of Maqiao* is indeed not a frivolous experiment in narrative innovation, but a serious attempt to identify the real problems of Chinese national culture and even some of the solutions in a contemporary context.

21 David H. Richter, *Falling into Theory* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2000), p. 131.

22 Culler 1997, p. 96.

Speech Acts and Ethics in *King Lear*

Lin Yi

In the Shakespearean canon, *King Lear* has been regarded as a unique and enigmatic work. Coleridge judged it to be 'the only serious performance of Shakespeare ... derived from the assumption of a gross improbability'. However, he went on to assert that despite its improbability, the play remains 'intelligible' and 'appropriate.'[1] Later British critics L. C. Knights and Edmund Blunden express much the same ambivalent feeling for the play: on the one hand, many dialogues in the play are 'ridiculous', yet on the other, those speeches seem to harbour some cryptic purpose beyond their literal meanings, endowing the play with a logic of its own.[2] It seems a large part of the play's mystery comes from the question of language. Why, as Coleridge implied, must the king force his daughters to 'speak', when he has already divided his land into three parts beforehand? How shall we understand the long 'mad talk' among the deranged Lear, the Fool, and pseudo-mad Edgar? And above all, what to think of the essence of language throughout the play, in which truth-telling and lies, cryptic communications and verbal misunderstandings, abuses and rejections of language are so often intertwined? The present essay intends to interpret these mysteries through the lens of contemporary philosophies of language, especially speech-act theory and Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of the 'Saying' and the 'Said.'

When J. L. Austin first introduced performative utterances and contrasted them with constative ones, he opened up the opportunity for language to (occasionally) set aside its referential function, and introduced a more active, dynamic aspect of language. Whilst the constative *describes* the outside world, the performative *changes* the

1 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. R. A. Foakes (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 95.

2 See Lionel Charles Knights, '*King Lear*', in *Some Shakespearean Themes: And an Approach to 'Hamlet'* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), pp. 74–109; and Edmund Blunden, 'Shakespeare's Significances', in *The Mind's Eye: Essays* (London: J. Cape, 1934), pp. 195–215.

world. A performative utterance brings out the event it designates instead of acknowledging some objective 'fact' or 'essence.' Language, in its performative function, is thus no longer secondary, nor can it be subdued to easy truth-values according to some given knowledge. Rather, it is embedded in actual circumstances in a complicated way, and its efficacy depends on the intention of the speaker, the response of the addressee, the conventions of a specific speech act, etc. Applying speech-act theory to an analysis of *King Lear* can therefore shed a new light on the characters' notoriously befuddling use of language. In those cases, the true-false judgement ceases to be the only criterion for appropriate speech.

In the past decade, analyses of *King Lear* using speech-act theory have emerged. However, the former studies often exclude the arguments of Derrida and those coming after him.[3] By confining the concept of speech acts to the sphere of linguistics and to Austin's idea, those studies manage to pin down clearly what functions the utterances in the play have. Their all-too-confident conclusions, however, fail to do justice to the play, because utterances from *King Lear* are not ordinary language in Austin's sense. To analyse those utterances *as if* they took place in real and settled scenes neglects the fact that literary language is both serious and non-serious, both ordinary and unordinary. The critic Kiernan Ryan complains that dominant trends in the criticism of *King Lear* often 'attempt to evade the enigma at the heart of the play'.[4] In order to preserve the play's artistic enigma and its inexhaustible potential for interpretation, the deconstructionists' arguments should not be shunned. For them, literature's performative function can never be pinned down, and it is exactly in this uncertainty that the liberating spirit of performative language is best epitomized.

Emmanuel Levinas's opinions on language and ethics, on the other hand, are closely related to the deconstructionists' ideas of the speech act. For Levinas, true ethics do not consist of *static* moral doctrines, but establish a face-to-face relationship with the Other, in which the complacent and self-assured ego is interrupted and confronted by the ultimate alterity of the Other. Levinasian ethics are rather a *movement*, a ceaseless effort to approach the Other. Levinas regards language as the 'primary vehicle' for ethical intersubjective exposure.[5] He divides language into two aspects: the Saying and the

3 David Schalkwyk, *Speech and Performance in Shakespeare's Sonnets and Plays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) touches on how Lear and Cordelia's dialogues create their interior selves; Ulrich Busse, 'An Inventory of Directives in Shakespeare's *King Lear*', in Andreas H. Jucker (ed.), *Speech Acts in the History of English* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2008), analyses the changing styles of Lear's directives (also called manipulative speech acts), and reveals how Lear's mental state is transformed accordingly. The former analysis is in the framework of Austin's ordinary language philosophy, the latter in pragmaphilology.

4 Kiernan Ryan, 'King Lear', in Richard Dutton & Jean E. Howard (eds), *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), I, p. 376.

5 Adam Zachary Newton, *Narrative Ethics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 10.

Said. Whilst the Said is the thematized, comprehensible content of an utterance, the Saying refers to the action of signifying itself. The Saying cannot be fully grasped; it is 'beyond the order of meaning to indicate proximity to the other.'[6]

Critics have elaborated on the affinities between the Saying and the performative: 'Saying is performative, while the Said is constative. In other words, Saying is ethical while the Said is ontological.'[7] Levinas's ideas greatly support the deconstructionists' propositions: if language's ethical dimension lies in the performative enactment rather than the constative description, then performativity should come before truth-telling, the literary before the ordinary, and multifarious layers of interpretation before fixed meanings.

Combining the arguments of speech-act theory and Levinas's philosophy of ethics, this essay explores *King Lear*'s performative enactment on three diversified layers. Firstly, on the layer of the characters' language, the play reveals that the performative function of language is indispensable in every utterance. Secondly, on an allegorical layer, the play can be appreciated as a parable of the ethics of performative language. Thirdly, on the layer of fictional narrative, the play explores the efficacy of 'non-serious' literary rhetoric in bringing things and events into being.

The speech that launched a thousand ships: unavoidably performative

It has been generally agreed that the 'love trial' is one of the most controversial scenes in *King Lear*. When Lear asks about his daughters' love for him, Cordelia refuses to obey her father as her elder sisters do:

> LEAR: ... what can you say to draw
> A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.
> CORDELIA: Nothing, my lord.
> LEAR: Nothing?
> CORDELIA: Nothing.
> LEAR: Nothing will come of nothing: speak again. (1.1.87–92)[8]

Lear retorts Cordelia's statement of saying 'nothing' about her love by using the same word: '*nothing* will come of *nothing*'. The second 'nothing' bears the same meaning as

6 Robert Hughes, *Ethics, Aesthetics, and the Beyond of Language* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2010), p. 130.

7 Frederick Young, 'Levinas and Criticism: Ethics in the Impossibility of Criticism', in Julian Wolfreys (ed.), *Introducing Criticism at the 21st Century* (Qingdao: China Ocean University Press, 2006), p. 245.

8 All quotations from *King Lear* are from W. J. Craig's edition of Shakespeare's *Complete Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

Cordelia's, which is 'to say nothing'. Whilst the first one means to have or to get nothing, implying that if Cordelia is to 'draw' a land for herself, or if she wants her father to *do* something for her benefit – both are acts – she must answer her father with another act: to speak, to give her father a public expression of love.

Here the audience is given their first glimpse of the performative function of human speech. Indeed, it can be said that Cordelia's defiant answer (or lack of an answer) causes the king's rage. It can also be said that Cordelia's speech triggers the battle between France and Britain, for how can the war start if there is no misunderstanding between the father and the daughter in the first place? In this sense, Cordelia does commit an offence by speaking inappropriately: the speech that (paradoxically) refuses to give a speech.

Insisting 'my love's more richer than my tongue', Cordelia seems more honest and laudable than her treacherous sisters. However, her attitude towards language is rendered highly problematic by the play. It is not her distrust of language that fails her – since almost all the characters in the play find language inadequate to convey their emotions – but that she treats language as purely constative, and ignores the fact that language can also be performative.

A constative utterance, in Austin's definition, functions solely to describe a pre-existent state, so that it should be judged as true or false, whereas a performative utterance functions to act (to testify, promise, confirm, etc.). A performative utterance cannot be judged as true or false. Yet according to whether it fulfils the action it designates, it can be judged as 'felicitous' or 'infelicitous'. Cordelia, treating her answer as totally constative, regards 'being true' the only norm for her speech, but ironically, her 'honest' reply results in disaster. Her elder sisters, in contrast, realize that catering to their father's bidding is an act they must dutifully perform: it is a public acknowledgement of their father's power and a gesture to pledge allegiance to the king. That Goneril and Regan later betray their words makes their speeches infelicitous, and they are punished for that; nonetheless their speeches perform well (at least for a moment). Like Cordelia, the two elder sisters claim that language fails to represent their true feelings ('I love you more than words can wield the matter' 1.1.57), yet because they believe in language's performative function, they would never reject language as Cordelia does.

Perhaps Cordelia is not entirely to blame. After all, it is the king himself who asks his daughters to *describe* how much they love him; his request seems to demand a typical constative reply. However, according to the deconstructionists, the constative and performative functions of language cannot be divided so clearly. '*Any* utterance can be an implicit performative. ... Constative utterances also perform actions – actions of stating, affirming and so on. They are, it turns out, a type of performative.'[9] In this per-

9 Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 95–96.

spective, we might see that Cordelia is a bit too naïve to take the king's words at face value. Derrida argues that the phrase 'I love you' – 'Je t'aime' – is no less performative than it is constative: '"Je t'aime" is not a description, it is a production of an event by means of which, claiming not to lie ... I tend to affect the other, to touch the other, literally or not, to give the other or to promise the other the love that I speak to him or her.'[10] Performative language brings into being the things it names, and in this sense Lear is justified in thinking that Cordelia does not love him, since she does not say she loves him. We are not in love (a pre-existing emotional state) until we say we are, and it is even more so in a king's ritualistic court, where each utterance is supposed to swear an oath or to take up a duty.

Exploring yet a step further, however, one cannot but doubt whether Cordelia is really ignorant of language's performative function. As David Schalkwyk points out, if Cordelia is determined to 'love and be silent' (1.1.63–64), she should keep silent rather than saying 'nothing'.[11] And later, the smallest urging from the king triggers a full, eloquent speech from Cordelia:

> CORDELIA: Good my lord,
> You have begot me, bred me, lov'd me. I
> Return those duties back as are right fit,
> Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
> Why have my sisters husbands if they say
> They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,
> That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
> Half my love with him, half my care and duty:
> Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
> To love my father all. (1.1.97–106)

One possible interpretation of Cordelia's reply is that, again, regarding truth-telling as language's only function, she gives a devastating speech to reveal the false logic in her sisters' answers. In so doing, Cordelia overturns the ritualistic convention of pledging allegiance at court, and strangles speech acts. However, if she is not so utterly ignorant of language's performative power and its unavoidable backlash, her long speech could also be a self-conscious speech act, although what she 'does' with her speech is radically different from her sisters' and from her father's original intention. At first, the circumstances call for public statements of loyalty, and Cordelia's speech turns it into an occasion for establishing private intimacy. In this possible interpretation, it is Lear's biased attitude towards speech acts that should be blamed. Lear is egotistical and domineering in language use; he worships only *his* intention in a speech and de-

10 Quoted in J. Hillis Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 137.

11 Schalkwyk 2002, p. 112.

nies any alternative understanding on the part of his hearers. In the deconstructionists' account of a speech act, however, the hubris of the initial speaker represented by Lear is but fallacious: 'The category of intention ... will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance.'[12] Lear's bossiness over language makes him ignorant of the shift of context, which eventually causes injustice and his own downfall.

What prevents the reader from choosing one interpretation over the other as *the* correct one is that there is in fact no way to pin down either Lear's or Cordelia's intention. The whole opening scene of *King Lear*, with its fairy-tale-like atmosphere, deliberately omits all accounts of the motives behind Lear's question, and thus defies our attempts to re-establish the original circumstances. Coleridge even maintains that Lear does not have any specific intention at all: the question is merely the whim of an old man, and 'the trial is but a trick'.[13] Likewise, Cordelia's behaviour in the scene is unfathomable. However, the play does not dismiss either speaker's intention as irrelevant. As is pointed out by Derrida, 'the category of intention will not disappear, it will have its place'.[14] In *King Lear* the speaker's intention actually has a crucial (although not all-important) place. One's intention might not be carried out successfully to the communicative situation, yet basic sincerity, an earnest effort of trying to mean what one says, is a prerequisite for language use. In the play, the elder sisters and Gloucester's bastard son Edmund are negative examples – they flaunt this principle and deliberately deceive their addressees. Accordingly, they are depicted as the chief villains, and get the worst punishment, without any pity from the author.

It is pure irony that when duping his father into abandoning his legitimate brother, Edmund uses the same wording as Cordelia's: 'Nothing, my lord' (1.2.32). Whereas Cordelia's 'nothing' does mean she is unable to put her love into words, Edmund's is the opposite. He actually has *something* to show, and he uses language to lure his father into the trap. Another ironic parallel is created by Cordelia's sisters. After proclaiming her (dishonest) love for the king, Regan on another occasion asks Edmund whether he loves her or her elder sister Goneril:

> REGAN: Now sweet lord,
> You know the goodness I intend upon you:
> Tell me, but truly, but then speak the truth,
> Do you not love my sister? (5.1.6–9)

12 Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, transl. Samuel Weber & Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 18.

13 Coleridge 1989, p. 95

14 Derrida 1988, p.18

Being untrue to her father, Regan nonetheless requires Edmund to be true (honest) to her.[15] However, wishing a language abuser to reveal his heart through language is futile. Among the three who treat language as 'the riddle' (5.1.39), basic human trust and human relationships become unthinkable, and the consequences the play prepares for them are murder and death.

Thus the main characters' use of language is often problematic, if not absolutely unacceptable. Yet one character, the Earl of Kent, is a happy exception who stands as a model language user in the play. Kent extols Cordelia's honesty, and, like Cordelia, he values basic constative truth-telling: 'I can keep honest counsel, … mar a curious tale in telling it, and deliver a plain message bluntly …' (1.4.34–36). However, Kent is also aware that language must be used flexibly so as to fulfil its performative task. When he implores Regan's husband Cornwall to trust him, Kent is willing to relinquish the literal 'bluntness' of his speech in order to win him over. In reaction to Cornwall's cynical views on language, Kent readjusts his style of talking to show that it is his sincere intention for communication that matters most. In Kent's utterances, language's constative and performative functions are combined. It might be for this reason that Coleridge praises Kent as 'the nearest to perfect goodness of all Shakespeare's characters'.[16] It might not be too wrong for us to assume that Kent epitomizes Shakespeare's concept of ideal language use in everyday life, one that is ready to acknowledge what is unavoidably performative, yet does not abuse it or distort it to serve selfish ends.

'Look with thine ears', or, the face of the Saying other

Kent's flexible speech strategy, although pragmatically unimpeachable, cannot fully solve Cordelia's predicament. Indeed, if Cordelia were required only to convey the fact that she is determined to serve her father, there would be no problem for her to follow her sisters' over-sentimental way of speaking and to dutifully support her father. However, as Cordelia senses by instinct, there is something more to it. David Schalkwyk points out that Cordelia is forced to reply in such a cold way, because she is 'deprived of' the rhetoric whereby she can express her immense love, since 'that rhetoric is already part of her sisters' declarations'.[17] Lear's question is a very tricky one for his youngest daughter, because the answer she gives is expected *both* to accord with convention *and* to differ. It is apparently too difficult for a young girl to measure the degree of deviation.

15 There are at least two distinct meanings of the word 'true': being in accordance with the facts, and having honest intentions. The former lies in the domain of the constative, whilst the latter in the performative. This is yet one more example of the inseparability of the constative and the performative.

16 Coleridge 1989, p. 99.

17 Schalkwyk 2002, p. 112.

The 'something more' that prevents Cordelia from merely repeating her sisters' statements comes from the dual nature of her father's interrogation. When Lear asks 'which of you shall we say doth love us most?' (1.1.53), it immediately harbours two dimensions. Firstly, in a practical dimension, it enacts a concrete performance of pledging allegiance. In this situation, the question has clear purposes and requires a settled, ritualistic reply, something like the 'I do' in a wedding ceremony. However, since Lear inquires about 'love' – a most private and unique aspect of human feelings – the question is endowed with a metaphysical or ethical dimension. According to the logic of this dimension, one's expression of love must strive to be unique, so as to testify to the addressee's own uniqueness and irreplaceability. To state 'I love you' in one's own special way thus becomes a gesture of recognizing the Other's uniqueness, of acknowledging that he or she is separated from all the rest, separated from one's solipsist ego. In this sense, the declaration of love begs to enter the realm of the ever-changing, ever-enriching 'Saying', indicating the face-to-face encounter between the interlocutors in Levinas's ethics.

Levinas uses the face as a metaphor for 'the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*'.[18] When one is reminded of the radical otherness of the Other, which overflows all one's assumptions and comprehension, it is the mysterious 'face', with its appealing nakedness and directness, that opens up the ethical relationship between the 'I' and the Other. As is pointed out by Levinas, 'the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised'.[19] Since the face refuses to be contained or be fully comprehended, what it speaks strives to escape the finitude of the Said – the graspable referential meaning of an utterance – and to enter the Saying – the 'site of surplus, of the unforeseen, of self-exposure'.[20] The face is thus performative.

In the practical dimension, Kent's language strategy proves sufficient, yet in the ethical dimension, Cordelia's shocking reply is preferable. It could be *moral* to follow her elder sisters' statements, yet giving an unexpected and unique answer is *ethical*; the former option is content to be a predictable Said, whilst the latter is unforeseeable, struggling to remain Saying. One can well imagine that Cordelia replies 'nothing' not with a detached reticence, but rather with a confused eagerness: I want to obey you and express my love, but my feeling is nothing that a settled claim can adequately convey.

Throughout *King Lear*, these two dimensions of language use coexist, calling for the reader to treat it not just as a realistic life story, but as an allegory of language's

18 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, transl. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 50.

19 Ibid., p. 198.

20 Newton 1997, p. 3.

transcendental ethics as well. In fact, the character who is most deeply mired in the ethical appeal of language is not Cordelia, but the play's eponymous hero. The main plot of the play can be interpreted as a record of how an overpowering subjectivity, such as Lear's, is transformed into an ethical one through the performative enactment of Saying.

It has been pointed out that the Saying, once spoken, is at the risk of being congealed into the Said. Nonetheless, 'there remains a trace of the Saying inscribed in every element of the Said', which relies on an ethical subject to be set free.[21] Accordingly, Cordelia's speech can become a full Saying only if her father recognizes its radical otherness, and through it Cordelia's unique subjectivity. However, Lear at the beginning has no such ethical sensibility. Lear's overbearing attitude towards language, along with his sovereign status, makes him an embodiment of self-assured and overpowering subjectivity, blind to the exposure of the Other's face. Thus when hearing Cordelia's reply, Lear fails to recognize it as a limitless statement of love. Instead, he reduces it to its mere literal meaning – 'nothing'.

In the Levinasian vocabulary, love, along with hospitality and fraternity, is employed to indicate a welcome heart for the revelation of the face, a willingness of self-exposure shown by the Saying addressed to the Other as well as by recognizing the Other's Saying. 'The Saying is my exposure – corporeal, sensible – to the Other, my inability to refuse the Other's approach.'[22] Hence if Lear is to enact the ethical import – the latent Saying – in his enquiry about love, he must subject himself to his addressees' reactions, ready to be surprised by and to accept each daughter's unique answer. However, in rejecting the unexpected answer, Lear in fact turns away from the face of the Other in Cordelia, and denies her as a unique Other and an equal human subject. Stanley Cavell maintains that, despite his professed eagerness for love, Lear is actually avoiding love.[23] Forbidding Cordelia's free expression, and in the meantime trying to muffle Kent's mouth, Lear's 'fore-vouched affection fall into taint' (1.1.223–224). The expulsion of Cordelia and Kent symbolizes the expulsion of love, as well as the expulsion of ethical human relations.

The abdication marks the beginning of Lear's disillusionment with maintaining an overpowering subjectivity, which is manifest in his thwarted intention to elicit obedient responses in language. Goneril takes revenge on her father by deciding 'I will not speak with him' (1.3.9) and by inciting her steward to do the same, driving Lear to cry out 'I think the world's asleep' (1.4.52). When Lear arrives at Regan's door, his second daughter also defies his command to see her and ignores his insistence that someone

21 Hughes 2010, p. 129.

22 Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 7.

23 Stanley Cavell, 'The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear', in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), pp. 287–294.

must 'fetch me a better answer' (2.4.91). The storm scene and Lear's futile curses also witness to his collapsing control of language. Losing the power to elicit prompt answers, deprived of his usual ways of venting his rage, Lear's subjective state is now symbolized by a destitute old man, homeless, vulnerable, at the mercy of the Other's power, echoing the state of his youngest daughter in the first scene. However, sloughing off earthly privilege, Lear's utterances now start to transform into an effort of maintaining the Saying, where 'the subject speaking it is exposed to the other, is not reduced to the objectification of the theme stated'.[24] The most extreme case of this kind of language use is Lear's 'mad talk' in the wilderness.

Ready to be affected by the Other, Lear steps out of his narcissistic ego in his deepest destitution. In the stormy night, when the whole of nature seems hostile to him, Lear in turn expresses hospitality for the wretched and shows his regret at having been too self-centred:

> LEAR: O, I have ta'en
> Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp;
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
> And show the heavens more just. (3.4.32–36)

Immediately after, when the deranged Lear, accompanied by the Fool, meets Mad Tom (Edgar in disguise), Lear also shows acknowledgement, even respect, for Edgar/Tom. Despite Gloucester's protest – 'What! hath your Grace no better company?' (3.4.146) – Lear welcomes Edgar to share his hovel and insists on talking with him: 'First let me talk with this philosopher' (3.4.158). The three of them talk nonsensically, liberating themselves from the tyranny of language's referential meanings. Yet in the performative realm of the Saying, they manage to sympathize with one another's sufferings. Later, when Lear (still in madness) calls out to Edgar 'Give the word!', Edgar improvises a crazy code ('Sweet marjoram') and is accepted ('Pass').[25] Their cryptic conversation marks the formation of a 'for-the-other' subjectivity in Lear, and shows that an ethical language use should primarily point to an infinite responsiveness rather than any specific meaning. The following plot witnesses Cordelia's return – the return of love. And Lear's last utterance asserts that he finally recognizes the face of the Other in Cordelia: 'Look on her [Cordelia]; look, her lips, | Look there, look there!' (5.3.312). Lear has now truly *seen* Cordelia, with surprise and astonishment and repentance.

It should be noted that the 'seeing' in the play is different from its ordinary sense. As is pointed out by Richard Meek, there is 'a continual emphasis upon "seeing" in

24 From Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, quoted in Hughes 2010, p. 128, transl. Robert Hughes.

25 *King Lear* 4.6.95–96.

King Lear', which might lead us to correlate visuality to the recognition of the face of the Other.[26] However, a closer analysis reveals that it is often the failure of eyesight that induces the arrival of the face. Lear, for example, mistreats Cordelia when he is sane and strong, despite Kent's warning 'See better, Lear' (1.1.159). Not until when he (in madness) is unable to make sure of Cordelia's presence, Lear begins to feel her kindness. An even more illustrative example is Gloucester, who reunites with his good son Edgar after his eyes are gouged out. To explain this, one must dig deeper into the concept of the face.

As previously stated, in Levinasian ethics, 'the face' does not represent an actual face, but rather a situation that 'opens up the ethical relation with the Other'.[27] In order to maintain the Other's absolute transcendence and foreignness, the face must remain 'essentially enigmatic and invisible', since visibility usually indicates a full grasp of its object.[28] Levinas insists on the ethical priority of the aural over the visual. For him, the face 'speaks' rather than 'appears'.[29] Hence language/Saying will be to the fore, ethically speaking. Allegorically, the play reveals a similar idea, which is most manifest in the character of Gloucester.

When he still has eyes, Gloucester is preoccupied with 'seeing is believing', and ironically, he is fooled for his credulity.[30] The loss of eyesight symbolizes Gloucester's loss of confidence in fully comprehending the world, much like Lear's loss of sanity:

> LEAR: ... No eyes in your head, nor no money in your purse? ... yet you see how this world goes.
> GLOUCESTER: I see it feelingly.
> LEAR: What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears ... (4.6.149–154)

Blind and disoriented, Gloucester is more capable of 'feeling' the Other in his painful exposure to the world. After he changes his visual mode of understanding ('I stumbled when I saw', 4.1.19) to an aural mode ('I have heard more since', 4.1.35), Gloucester begins to take heed of Edgar's obscure talking and recognizes from it his son's sufferings.

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26 Richard Meek, *Narrating the Visual in Shakespeare* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 117–146.

27 Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 144.

28 Megan Craig, 'The Infinite in Person: Levinas and Dickinson', in Jed Deppman et al. (eds), *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 211.

29 Ibid., p. 217.

30 Gloucester insists on seeing his bastard son's forged letter incriminating Edgar, and is taken in by it. The problem here is that what Gloucester 'sees' is also language; however, as Gloucester is overconfident in what he reads *literally* – that is, in the Said – he still falls into the self-assured, visual mode of understanding. The aural mode, on the other hand, is based on the recognition of the Saying.

It is the Saying from Edgar that allows Gloucester to make amends with his wronged son, even before he realizes it.

It wouldn't be make-believe if you believed in me: efficacy in fictional narrative

One problem unresolved in this analysis, as we have seen, is that fictional narrative is not entirely the same as real-life utterances. Language in literary works is fundamentally make-believe. Consequentially, literary utterances are regarded by some as 'imitations of real-life speech acts'.[31] Hence they cannot be efficacious like ordinary utterances: 'by violating the usual conditions of a valid speech act, [literary utterances] imitate such utterances in a "non-felicitous" kind of way'.[32] However, had the play's fictional narrative been regarded as merely a non-serious parody of actual speech acts, the performative enactments in *King Lear* would be greatly diminished, and this is hardly the true experience of the audience. How can the play's story become more than a never-to-be-realized statement, better than those wild lies told by Lear's two dishonest daughters or Edmund the treacherous bastard? *King Lear* in fact faces up to these challenges to fictionality and highlights the constructive power of fictional narrative through its characters' yarn-spinning. One of the most outstanding examples is Edgar in the famous Cliffs of Dover scene.

For a long while Edgar disguises himself as Poor Tom, a mad beggar. In the play, Edgar's disguise is shown as having worked, and, in contrast with his evil brother's scheme, it is plausible. Firstly, there is a great sincerity in Tom's 'faked' identity. Being persecuted and robbed of his former title, the young man is nameless ('Know, my name is lost' 5.3.123) and is in need of help ('Do poor Tom some charity', 'Tom's a-cold' 3.4.59, 82), so perhaps Poor Tom is the identity that fits his true essence. Secondly, for a time he indeed stops being Edgar in front of Gloucester and Lear, but is merely Tom, since he acts dutifully in this new role, and his words, although blatant lies, do persuade Gloucester to act on them. In order to dissuade his father from suicide, Edgar/Tom cheats blind Gloucester into believing that he has been led to the edge of the Cliffs of Dover. And having survived 'jumping off', Gloucester finally abandons the idea of killing himself. The whole event is a rhetorical trick, yet for Gloucester at least it is real enough to change his life. In this scene, even Edgar himself is so haunted by the vividness of his own lies that he comes to suspect his father might actually die from falling to the ground:

31 Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 129.

32 Ibid., where Eagleton is commenting on Richard Ohmann's views on speech-act theory, whose negative attitude towards literary utterances is representative of a group of speech-act theorists.

EDGAR: And yet I know not how conceit may rob
The treasury of life, when life itself
Yields to the theft; had he been where he thought,
By this had thought been past. Alive or dead?
Ho, you, sir! friend! Hear you, sir! speak!
Thus might he pass indeed; yet he revives. (4.6.43–48)

It turns out that Gloucester is not really dead. Yet it can also be understood that Gloucester has indeed died and later is resurrected ('revives'), since after experiencing the ritualistic 'falling' and 'rising', he is a renewed man who stops thinking about destroying himself. In this instance, the rhetoric in literature 'is not just a false constative but also a species of felicitous performative ... Like a lie, however, it is dangerous because it makes things happen, to bring about some form of what it names.'[33]

William H. Matchett reminds us that the above scene is generally referred to as the 'Dover Cliff' scene, despite the fact that Dover is 'precisely where Edgar has *not* taken his father.' Matchett continues by pointing out that Edgar's poetic description 'is so convincing that, in naming the cliff, we continue to be taken in by the trick'.[34] In this scene, the play indicates that there is a peculiar type of sincerity in dramatic works that urges the narrator (Edgar in this case) and the audience alike to take fictionality seriously. According to this positive attitude towards literary speech acts, fictional narrative can also have a palpable impact on reality.

Another obvious case that reveals the possibility of sincerity in fiction is that of Kent. Much like Edgar faking Poor Tom, Kent disguises himself as a humble fellow in order to serve Lear after being expelled. That the supposedly most honest servant in the play should be telling lies in front of his master brings no sense of disharmony, because what Kent invents in his answer contains sincerity in deception, so that he can behave as his usual self as he continues to serve the king in disguise.

Edgar's empty description and Kent's inventive answers both self-referentially point to the act of literary invention. As is implied by Richard Meek, Edgar's vivid description of the cliff seduces the audience 'to be taken in by the trick [of language]' along with blind Gloucester.[35] In order to sympathize with Gloucester, the audience must join in the literary make-believe and strive to bring into being the cliff in their mind's eye, despite its material absence. In his replies, meanwhile, Kent impresses audiences by his sincerity and deception by turns. Not one line from Kent can be regarded as an absolute lie, yet it is not the truth either. This ambivalent sense of truth-in-lie is consonant with the general effect of fictional narrative.

33 Miller 2001, p. 35.

34 William H. Matchett, 'Some Dramatic Techniques in King Lear', in Philip C. McGuire & David A. Samuelson, *Shakespeare: The Theatrical Dimension* (New York: AMS, 1979), pp. 185–208.

35 Meek 2009, p. 124.

Terry Eagleton in *The Event of Literature* comments that from the standpoint of a (positive) speech act: 'It is exactly [the] autonomous or self-referential quality that lends fiction its peculiar force.'[36] Like performatives as a whole, fictional narrative brings a world of its own into existence when it has little factual support from outside itself. Hence fictional narrative 'refers to reality in the act of referring to itself'.[37] In the play, Lear's speech on human life most obviously shows how literary discourse reaches out to reality in the very act of pointing to its own fictionality. When Lear tries to console Gloucester in his madness, he invokes the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi*:

> LEAR: ... Thou must be patient; we came crying hither.
> Thou know'st the first time that we smell the air
> We waul and cry. I will preach to thee: mark.
> GLOUCESTER: Alack! alack the day!
> LEAR: When we are born, we cry that we are come
> To this great stage of fools. (4.6.183–188)

Lear is speaking to Gloucester onstage; however, in speaking about human destiny, he is also addressing the outer reality. The statement 'We came crying hither' indicates both that 'all of us came into to the world' and that 'we characters came into being in the play'. The dual indications appeal to the audience to acknowledge the parallel world constructed by the play, along with its characters as parallel to the people in the real world. In this sense, the play as a whole is performative not just in Austin's sense, but in Levinas' sense as well, since it calls for ethical responses that any autonomous entity deserves. A. N. Newton claims that the most precious thing *King Lear* offers us is not its static moral lesson, but the ethical 'confrontation' with the characters' otherness, as well as the play's own inexhaustible mysteries.[38]

Conclusion

Theodore Weiss once complained of the play's elusiveness: '*King Lear*, like Lear himself, gaily fleeing, trailing wild flowers and a mad lilt of syllables, refuses to be caught.'[39] Weiss is right in admitting that the play, like the Levinasian Other, emits an infinite Saying that forever bids its recipients to respond to it. Perhaps a suitable way to analyse the play's incessant speech acts is to acknowledge their multi-layered functions

36 Eagleton 2012, p. 138.
37 Ibid.
38 Newton 1997, p. 66.
39 Theodore Weiss, 'As the Wind Sits: The Poetics of *King Lear*', in Lawrence Danson (ed.), *On 'King Lear'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 64.

without imposing a definite interpretation on them. And that is the way this essay tries to follow.

On the most literal level, whatever the characters' attitudes towards language are – Cordelia's dismissiveness, Lear's high-handedness, Edmund's opportunism, Kent's and Edgar's flexibility – their speeches are inevitably performative, either latently or obviously. A keen awareness of language's performative function, accompanied by a sincere intention, can lead to appropriate/moral use of language. Otherwise, language, rejected or abused, will have its revenge by causing misunderstandings or disabling human communication.

The obvious fairy-tale flavour and the parable-like storyline of the play points to the discussion of a more transcendental layer of language use. Language most fundamentally signifies one's human inclinations to respond to the Other, to approach and take responsibility for the Other. Thus language's ethical import fundamentally lies in the Saying – the performative dimension – rather than the Said – the constative one.

Finally, the play as a whole becomes a fictional speech act, which is both similar to and distinct from ordinary speech acts. Adopting a self-referential gesture in its plot design, *King Lear* explores the power of fictional narrative to bring events into being. Moreover, in constantly inviting the audience into its act of make-believe, the play calls for a serious and ethical response from audiences and critics alike. The understanding of Shakespeare's masterpiece is inexhaustible, and later interpreters must humbly take heed of the play's mysterious call rather than muffle it.

Performing the 'New Woman'

A Study of Shen Xiling's 1935 Film *Chuanjia nü*

Rebecka Eriksson

In this essay I will look at the performance aspects of a commonly recurring theme in the Chinese mainstream cinema of the thirties, that of the 'New Woman'. I will first look briefly at this tendency in a more general sense and then study one particular work in greater detail. The film that I have chosen for closer study is Shen Xiling's (1904–1940) *Chuanjia nü* ('The Boatman's Daughter') produced by the Mingxing Film Company in Shanghai in 1935.[1] My study will mainly relate to concepts such as the New Woman and 'modernity' concerning how modern women were portrayed by the May Fourth and the New Culture movement intellectuals, as well as the nature of the performance of these characters, and the *Performanz* of one scene in particular. It is my intention to illustrate how the New Woman could be imagined, written, and performed on screen during this period.

The impact of the New Culture movement

The years between the bombing of Shanghai in 1932 and the full-scale invasion of China by Japan in 1937 are popularly referred to as the first golden age of Chinese cinema. This period, for several reasons, constituted a politically tumultuous and culturally significant chapter of modern Chinese history – not least the emancipation of women and an on-going debate over their changing role in society. During this time, an increasing internationalization of the cultural sphere spawned a myriad of modern ideas and ideals, influencing every aspect of the literary and artistic scene. To discuss

1 Shanghai-based Mingxing yingpian gongsi was one of the three largest film production companies in the 1930s. The company produced both light-hearted entertainment and more didactic, socially conscious films.

the topic of the New Woman and its performative aspects, it is necessary to first have an understanding of the historical situation in which these characters were conceived.

The modernizations of the 1920s and 1930s can be traced back to the late Qing dynasty (1644–1912), when social unrest, primarily the Opium Wars, the Taiping Rebellion, and the first Sino–Japanese War, brought an increasing realization of the necessity of reform. The last period of Qing rule had seen a number of political, cultural, educational, and social reforms instigated by the imperial regime, with varying degrees of success. This included the Tongzhi Restorations (*c.* 1860–1874), named after the Tongzhi Emperor (1856–1875), as well as the failed Hundred Days' Reform of 1898. The latter was an attempt by the Guangxu Emperor (1871–1908) to modernize the educational and military systems and create a basis for democracy. This effort was shut down by a *coup d'état*, presumably led by the Dowager Empress Cixi (1835–1908). In the end, these imperial reforms proved largely unsuccessful, and it was instead the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912 that would usher in a major period of political and social change.

The revolution of 1911–1912 created the Republic of China, with the leader of the Republican Party, Sun Yat-sen, as its first president. However, Sun Yat-sen soon conceded power to general Yuan Shikai, who in turn proclaimed himself Emperor of the Chinese Empire in 1915. This started the period commonly known as the Warlord Era. With a failing government, China's cultural and intellectual life nevertheless flourished.

As a testament to this, the May Fourth movement, initially an anti-imperialist movement created in 1919 as a protest against the Treaty of Versailles (and primarily the weak response of the Chinese government to the surrender of territories in Shandong to Japan), became a cultural 'revolution' of sorts. In the broader definition of May Fourth as a cultural and linguistic revolution or a period of Enlightenment, it is often referred to as the New Culture movement.[2]

The New Woman

Within the New Culture movement, attempts were made to figure out how the social role of women was to be defined in 'modern' China. Lu Xun (1881–1936), one of the most influential writers and intellectuals of the twentieth century, in a 1923 lecture famously asked 'what happens after Nora leaves?' – a question that in many ways set

2 The May Fourth Movement and New Culture Movement have been called a revolution or an enlightenment by a number of Chinese and foreign observers, for example in Very Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

the tone for the debate about women's emancipation in literature, cinema, and art for the following years.[3] Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* had reached the Chinese *literati* and created a stir, much as it had done in Europe some decades earlier. In his lecture, Lu Xun questioned whether Chinese society was ready for women to imitate Ibsen's Nora and assume new social roles, arguing that most professions open to women (such as hostesses and prostitutes) still made them reliant on the attention of men and offered little or no 'real' independence. It was all good and well to dream of emancipation, but the issue of financial independence still posed a major obstacle.[4] The notion of other occupations being open to women was ostensibly something that not even one of society's finest and most progressive minds could yet imagine.

Lu Xun's derisive lecture (and the negativity of many other commentators) in no way prevented the debate about modern woman and her role. As a testament to this, it is easy to establish that the concept of the New Woman became a dominant trope in Chinese post-May Fourth literature and cinema. The two prevalent words used to describe this character are *xin nüxing* (新女性) and *modeng nüxing* (摩登女性), which can be translated as 'new' and 'modern' woman, respectively. There are positive as well as negative aspects related to these terms, which I will attempt to define more closely.

In the wake of the New Culture movement, literature, cinema, and art strived to achieve an increasingly didactic function. Cinema in particular, as a medium with an unprecedented potential to reach large numbers, became a powerful tool in the attempt to define 'modern' identity. Female characters in particular would often be portrayed either idealistically, encouraging imitation and identification, or as cautionary examples.

Despite great disparity between different groups and individuals in the New Culture movement (as well as between different branches of 'new' culture) what almost all of them had in common was the critique of Confucian tradition as well as an adherence to the demands for a more didactic use of literature and art. This didacticism resulted in several cinematic expressions, one of which was the recurring focus on

3 Lu Xun, 'Nuola zou hou zenyang?' ('What Will Happen after Nora Leaves?') in *Lu Xun yanjiang quanji* (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2007), p. 7.

4 Ibid. Lu Xun says: 梦是好的；否则，钱是要紧的。钱这个字很难听，或者要被高尚的君子们所非笑，但我总觉得人们的议论是不但昨天和今天，即使饭前和饭后，也往往有些差别。凡承认饭需钱买，而以说钱为卑鄙者，倘能按一按他的胃，那里面怕总还有鱼肉没有消化完，须得饿他一天之后，再来听他发议论。 'It is good to dream; however, money is a necessity. "Money" is an ugly word, one that refined gentlemen are wont to scoff at. But I believe that people's view on this might change, not just from one day to another but from before a meal and after it. If someone acknowledges that food requires money, and in turn calls money something contemptible, they are sure on closer inspection to have some undigested fish or pork in their stomach, and it would be best to wait until they have gone hungry for a day and see if that will have changed their view.' Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

women's issues that returned to Lu Xun's question: What *were* they supposed to do in modern society? What was their *role* to be? Questions like these, and their 'answers', through the representation of female characters on screen, contributed to creating and defining the New Woman trope.

When the term New Woman is used on screen this is primarily in reference to a socially conscious working-class character who is affected, but never corrupted, by the 'destructive' modernization of society.[5] A New Woman in the 'positive' sense is one who has adapted the aspects of modernity considered useful, that is to say a woman who shoulders the responsibility to her country and rejects the traditional ideal of female passivity. This character knows better than to fall for the shallow aspects of modernization – often portrayed through the adaption of 'Western' fashion and customs. Conversely, there are a number of examples where 'modern' is used as a derogatory term describing female characters.[6] The word *modeng*, a direct translation of the English, suggests an affinity for foreign trends and these characters subsequently are often 'shallowly' modern, but ultimately indifferent to social issues.

The New Woman as a modern ideal

The ideas that these characters represent can primarily be derived from the New Culture movement's literary and artistic ideals. As a cultural, intellectual, and political undertaking, the New Culture movement claimed to challenge traditional patriarchal (and predominantly Confucian) structures, as well as promoting women's liberation. It is, however, essential to bear in mind that the May Fourth movement as well as the New Culture movement were largely dominated by male intellectuals, whose insight into the plight of women in a rapidly changing twentieth-century China often left much to be desired.

One way in which this issue has been exemplified is through the frequent use of women's struggles as a metaphor for the (male) artist's own struggle – often the effort to develop artistic expression combined with a wish to escape the oppression of traditional culture and notions of 'good' literature and art. One example of this is how the highly influential writer, intellectual, and New Culture movement leader Hu Shi (1891–1962) used the foot-binding tradition women in China had been subjected to

5 For example in titles such as Cai Chusheng's *Xin nüxing* ('New Women') from 1934.

6 For example, in Shi Dongshan's *Qingnian jinxing qu* ('Youth on the March'), (in reference to the protagonist, uttered by a character who wants to question her morality), and in the ambitious project *Nü'er jing* ('The Women's Classic') by various directors (in reference to a woman who is considered shallow). The term is also used in the title of Bu Wancang's *San ge modeng nüxing* ('Three Modern Women'), where the meaning is somewhat more ambiguous. Note that the word is not derogatory *per se*, but is used as such (as an insult or otherwise) in these examples.

for generations as a metaphor for his style of writing veering towards the vernacular. Rey Chow in *Women and Chinese Modernity* suggests that the propensity of Chinese male intellectuals to identify with oppressed women stems from a desire to make sense of their own harrowing encounter with modernity (and/or the West).[7] Similarly, one could argue that the extensive representation of the New Woman on the silver screen in the 1930s had less to do with female emancipation and more to do with a heavily male-dominated film industry's use of the character as a symbol of their own perceived marginalization.[8] In comparison, if we look at similar attempts to portray a modern *male* protagonist, there is a much greater focus on individualism and breaking free from convention.[9]

Concerning the didactic use of the New Woman character in relation to modern, post-New Culture movement ideals, there are several films that can exemplify this tendency, prominent among them Bu Wancang's (1903–1974) *San ge modeng nüxing* ('Three Modern Women') from 1933, in which a male protagonist is set to choose between three incarnations of the New Woman who all desire him. One of them is a progressive working-class girl who fits nicely into the positive definition of a 'new', but not too 'modern' (*modeng*) woman, and whose ultimate function in the narrative is to act as a catalyst for the protagonist's social awakening. The protagonist, having encountered and assessed these three representations, concludes that truly modern women are the ones who are 'most independent, most rational, most courageous, and most concerned about the public welfare'.[10] *San ge modeng nüxing* is one of many films where the ideals of the New Culture movement evidently defined how women ought to act in order to be considered 'modern' (in either a positive or derogatory sense).

Another common narrative aspect of the New Woman trope is the 'punishment' of female characters who challenge traditional values. This is one aspect where the depiction of 'modern' men and women on screen during this period repeatedly diverge, and where the New Woman sets herself apart (as either a moral or a cautionary example).

Why is it then that the New Woman was punished for achieving, or attempting to achieve, a 'modern' ideal? In many cases, women characters existed on film on the condition that their actions remained exclusively selfless and that they remained sexually innocent. Female characters who adhered to the 'shallow' aspects of modernity,

7 Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 1991), chapter 4.

8 This is discussed in ibid., and in my thesis, Rebecka Eriksson, *Changing the Colours of the World: Modernism and Modernity in Chinese Drama and Film, 1919–1937* (Lund: Media-Tryck, 2014), chapter 3.

9 See, for example, *San ge modeng nüxing*, *Qingnian jinxing qu*, and Sun Yu's 1931 *Ye meigui* ('Wild Rose').

10 Translated in Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 263.

adapting modern fashion and ideals, were usually the ones who were also portrayed as overtly sexual (and therefore immoral). Characters that fell within the 'positive' spectrum of the New Woman trope, but failed to remain sexually 'pure', were more often than not punished, either with a loss of autonomy or even with death. This loss of virtue was frequently depicted as being forced upon the character, through rape or other forms of direct or suggested sexual violence. Remarkably, this view of sexual morals lends itself easily to a comparison with the ideals of the traditional Confucian patriarchy that the New Culture movements strove to oppose.

In the midst of this, there were examples of films where the New Woman trope was called into question or revaluated. This was done through characters or narratives that went against the trope or, as in the following example, by highlighting the circumstances of women trapped in-between two oppressive forces: the traditional (primarily Confucian) hierarchy and the 'modern' ideal dictated by, in this case, male intellectuals.

Chuanjia nü

One significant example of this is Shen Xiling's 1935 film *Chuanjia nü*. In my view, this film questions the trope by emphasizing its performance aspects – the 'act' in which the protagonist is transformed into an ideal 'modern' woman. This is primarily made clear through one scene late in the narrative where the protagonist is forcefully directed to act the part of an attractive, modern woman as a group of young men see it. Through this account, the film reinforces the idea that the modern ideal for women was a concept 'directed' by a certain group of people and 'acted' by another.

This protagonist, the working-class girl A Ling, played by the actress Xu Lai (1909–1973), can be placed in the category of a new (working-class, outspoken), but not too *modeng* (shallow, sexually provocative), woman. The film follows a fairly typical narrative of a Mingxing studio production of the time. Most of the characters are recognizable, bordering on stereotypes. The plot centres around A Ling, who works with her father transporting people by ferry in Hangzhou. One day she catches the eye of a wealthy young man from Shanghai, who later brings his friends out to the countryside to look at the 'pretty working girl'. The men gawk at her and take pictures, acting like sightseers by objectifying her to the point of dehumanization. She ignores them, and rejects their demands that she join them. But the leader of the group, an artist looking for a model, is persistent, and eventually hires a thug to bring her to them. The thug confronts A Ling's father, and ends up hurting him so badly that he is unable to continue working. Faced with destitution, A Ling is forced to accept the modelling job.

When she eventually allows the artist to paint her, she is placed in an elaborate art

deco setting, reclining on a couch and dressed in a close-fitting dress. The artist begins A Ling's transformation by applying makeup to her face while she sits passively like a doll. Meanwhile, his friends are acting as audience, commenting on A Ling's appearance by calling her 'pretty' and 'beautiful', while her expression becomes increasingly miserable. The men keep laughing despite her tears, and physically 'sculpt' her into the shapes they want to see by arranging and rearranging her limbs.

As if to highlight the foreignness of the scene, Schubert's *Ave Maria* is heard in the background throughout the first minutes, later exchanged for a more upbeat jazz tune. Close-ups of A Ling's face, tears streaming down her cheeks, are intercut with images showing the men laughing and drinking cocktails. The shot finally lingers on A Ling, standing with her arms stretched out in the shape the artist has forced her into, while the voices of the men can be heard discussing whether or not she should 'take her clothes off'. Upon hearing the words 'naked picture', she instinctively draws her arms around her body, only to quickly return to her pose for fear of being admonished. Eventually, A Ling loses her composure and breaks down crying, before falling to the floor. She is reminded by the men that they have already paid her, and she is forced to get up. This time, her expression is impassive and resigned.

In the scene immediately following her modelling session, A Ling is shown wearing lavish clothes and jewellery, reluctantly socializing with the artist and his friends. Her face remains as emotionless as it was at the end of the previous scene. When one of her friends from the village finds her in the city, she is almost catatonic. The modelling scene has, in a sense, successfully transformed her into a perfectly passive and malleable puppet; like a twisted inversion of Pygmalion, the artist has turned a human being into a lifeless doll, and made her forget herself. This is highlighted by the way her friend shakes her and repeats her name: 'A Ling, do you know who you are?' More than being forced to act out an ideal, the outcome of the scene shows that she has been dehumanized and robbed of her identity.

The importance of identity and an emphasis on individualism is a returning plot point in literature and film during this period. A great influence here was Hu Shi, who together with Lu Xun and other writers pursued the theme in fiction and essays, entertaining the idea that the individual needed to develop a strong sense of 'self' before being of use to society. Hu Shi's theories of individualism had considerable impact on Chinese culture in the early twentieth century, resulting in a multitude of literary and cinematic works that highlighted the importance of cultivating the individual 'self'. In this vein, being forced to create a false 'self' in the manner of A Ling and other New Woman characters could be seen as a hindrance to individual development.

One might argue that the New Woman trope worked more against women than for them, being so far removed from the actual social issues that they faced. The 'foreignness' of the modelling scene, underscored by the music and the fact that the men

seem to be insensible to A Ling's reactions, emphasizes this removal and underlines the constructed nature of the ideal. Until that scene, the narrative of the film could have been described as realistic, albeit stereotypical. The modelling scene, however, and A Ling's confused state of mind thereafter, border on surrealism. What is ultimately depicted is not only her transformation into the men's New Woman fantasy, but a nightmarish erasure of her 'self' to the point where she forgets her name and where she comes from.

More than just a turning point in the narrative, the modelling scene in *Chuanjia nü* can serve as an illustration of the New Woman trope from a larger perspective. The 'makeover' of a country girl arriving in the big city is a plot point that is repeated in film after film in the thirties. Examples can be found in the prominent director and writer Sun Yu's (1900–1990) *Ye meigui* ('Wild Rose') (1931) and *Tianming* ('Daybreak') (1933), two films depicting scenarios in which a New Woman fails to survive in the modern world. The protagonist of *Ye meigui* attempts to meet the demands of her bourgeois lover's family, but ends up rejecting both modern, urban life as well as her native countryside for the nationalist cause. In *Tianming*, a young woman is dressed up in modern attire after having been forced into prostitution. Initially portrayed as an innocent country girl, she is forcefully transformed (through threats, violence, and rape) into someone who is regarded as 'modern' as well as sexually provocative.

These films and *Chuanjia nü* share a common emphasis on the New Woman as a concept that is 'created', performed through the choices or actions of the characters in question or forced upon them by second parties.

Conclusion

The ideal of the New Woman was meant to contest traditional views on femininity and a notion of the ideal woman derived from Confucian mores. In many cases it resulted in the creation of a trope character that was just as restrictive. The attributes of the New Woman were to a great extent created by male intellectuals and acted out in didactic films that took a narrow view of morality, an aspect that made these attributes performative rather than expressive.

Many post-May Fourth films and works of literature set out to define the attributes of modern or New Woman, reinforcing the same image over and over – creating an 'identity' in the process of depicting it. Despite a large number of female protagonists and a stated desire on the part of some filmmakers to tell 'women's stories', many films from this period fail to give narrative authority to female characters, and resort to stereotypical ideals, whether traditional or modern. With this in mind, a scene such as the modelling session in *Chuanjia nü,* which can be considered to question this process from a meta-perspective, is all the more telling.

The scene touches upon several aspects of performance. The actress Xu Lai was obviously performing the character A Ling, and A Ling in turn was performing the artist's ideal of a model. Most interesting, perhaps, is the framing of A Ling's performance and its implications for the real-world aspects of associating this identity with an ideal for women. The stage-like framing of the scene, with A Ling placed on a small platform facing the camera and the group of men seated below her, reinforces the impression of a theatrical performance. It also underlines the fact that there are two sets of 'audiences' – the film's audience is seated just behind the on-screen audience, after all. The film's audience naturally have the advantage of being able to see A Ling's performance as well as that of the on-screen audience, and are in a sense invited to assess the two.

What makes this interesting is the nature of the scene in question – its staging and its function in the narrative. By emphasizing the creation of an artistic model (and the way in which this affects the individual), the scene forces viewers to confront their own gaze, looking at A Ling from the same perspective as the men who objectify and abuse her. Through this pointed portrait of 'modern' artists, the scene could also be read as a criticism of the creation of the New Woman in contemporary cinema.

The *Performanz* of the scene can thus be interpreted from the viewpoint of the audience in the film, and from that of the audience watching the film. The staging within the film shows A Ling transformed into an ideal, and simultaneously being stripped of her personality and identity. The audience watching the film is forced by the camera to adopt the same viewpoint as the audience in the film (the group of young men), taking part in their objectification of A Ling. In this way, the function of these performances becomes to respectively create and criticize this image of an 'ideal' woman.

Performing Animal Rights and Environmental Protection in Farley Mowat's *Never Cry Wolf*

Yuan Xia

On the flyleaf of his book *Performativity*, James Loxley poses several questions: 'Do our writings and our utterances reflect or describe our world, or do they intervene in it? Do they, perhaps, help to make it? If so, how? Within what limits, and with what implications?' Despite many debates about the idea of performativity, these questions remain important in understanding the performative function of writing/literature – 'how words might do things in and to the world'.[1] Jacques Derrida notices the close relationship between performative language and literature: 'The possibility of using words to make something happen as opposed to merely naming, describing, or referring to something makes literature possible, and vice versa.'[2] Writers, as producers of words and language, play a key role in the act of performance: the way to put things into words is actually doing or performing things, because the words written and then printed on pages leave traces behind, and have effects on the readers. J. Hillis Miller, in his *Literature as Conduct*, claims that putting things in words is 'speech that acts'.[3] Miller goes on to single out three forms of 'literature as conduct': the author's act of writing as a doing; the narrators' and characters' speech acts in a work of fiction as a form of doing things with words; and the readers' doing things through the acts of teaching, criticism, or informal comment.[4]

According to Miller, 'conduct' can be used both as a noun and a verb. In the former case, 'literature as conduct' refers 'to the way writing literature is a form of conduct, or to the representation of conduct within literary fictions', while in the latter, it refers 'to

1 James Loxley, *Performativity* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 3.

2 J. Hillis Miller, *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 171.

3 Ibid., p. 2.

4 Ibid.

the way literature may conduct its readers to believe or to behave in new ways'.[5] While the essence of *Literature as Conduct* is to transform the reading training into cognitive belief – readers are expected to take some action after they have finished the book – Miller clarifies that the core of literature is its value and contribution to society. It does not simply reflect the world, but actually has the power to make the world.

In the literary world, Canadian writer Farley McGill Mowat (1921–2014) is a representative figure, who, by putting things into words, influences and transforms the world. Writing, in Mowat's words, 'is my function – it's the only function I've got that really works'.[6] Mowat's 'function' is his unique way of using literature as a 'conduit' through which he advocates his environmental causes. As a 'socialist and environmentalist', he calls attention in his works to the relationship between human beings, animals, and nature.[7] By the time of his death on 6 May 2014, Mowat had published more than 50 works, including documentary writing, children's literature, environmental works, and memoirs. His works have been translated into 52 languages and have thus gained an enormous popularity both at home and abroad.

Never Cry Wolf, Mowat's most acclaimed work, was published in 1963 and has sold over a million copies. A first-person narrative of the author's research into the nature of the Arctic wolf, the book is typical of Mowat's concern with animal rights and environmental protection. Owing to its worldwide popularity and great social impact, *Never Cry Wolf* was adapted into a popular film of the same name in 1983.

The success of the book is a clear manifestation of literature's performative function: from the background of writing this book to the controversy around it after it was published, *Never Cry Wolf* uses language to make something happen.

The written word as a tool of environmental advocacy

For thousands of years, the narratives about wolves have been mostly negative, making the animal a symbol of greed, cruelty, and horror. Wolf-grandmother stories exist in no fewer than 15 versions around the world. 'The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing' and 'The Boy Who Cried Wolf' in Aesop's *Fables* are enduring bedtime stories, used by generations of parents to warn their children of the cunning and greedy wolves. In the Bible, Jesus says in Matthew 7:15, 'Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's cloth-

5 Ibid.

6 Captain Paul Watson, 'Farley Mowat Writes to Live and Lives to Write', *Sea Shepherd Conversation Society*, 3 November 2008, <http://www.seashepherd.fr/news-and-media/editorial–081103–1.html>.

7 John Green, 'Farley Mowat: Writer, socialist and environmentalist', *People's World*, 23 May, 2014, <http://www.peoplesworld.org/farley-mowat-writer-socialist-and-environmentalist/>.

ing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.'[8] Due to the many negative stories about wolves, derogatory expressions abound in English – 'as cruel as a wolf', 'throw somebody to the wolves' – showing their evil and destructive force.

These narratives, through continuous repetition, have sustained an enduring and highly negative image of wolves, perhaps best summarized in 'the big bad wolf'. Generation after generation, people have passed on stories about rapacious and savage beasts, seldom trying to establish the authenticity of these stories. The narrator/Farley Mowat in *Never Cry Wolf* shared many of these beliefs when he was assigned a field project by the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) to study the relationship between Arctic wolves and the dwindling caribou population in the Canadian north. He had recently graduated with a degree in biology and held the same kind of bias against *Canis lupus* as others at the time. The wolves were thought to be the cause of the tremendous drop in the population of caribou: it was estimated that Canada's caribou population in 1940 had been approximately three million, while in the late 1940s the number had fallen to as few as 670. The population collapse alarmed the CWS, which hoped that Mowat would bring back evidence to support the claims of trappers and traders that the wolves were killers of the caribou as well as constituting a threat to humans.

With impractical equipment provided by the CWS and with weapons to defend himself, Mowat arrived in the Barren Lands and lived there for about six months. During this period, he observed the Arctic wolves carefully: their behaviour, their eating and living habits, their family life and social life, and so on. When he first set foot on the tundra plains, Mowat was a full-blown 'wolf-fearing urbanite': terrified by the sound of howling from the surrounding areas, he cowered under his canvas canoe, only to find a team of amiable huskies led by a young Inuit.[9] Later on, Mowat had several close encounters with the wolves, and discovered that they displayed 'none of their reputed savagery'.[10] On one occasion, he came face to face with an adult wolf, who leapt in the air and ran away with great speed, as if more frightened of Mowat than Mowat was of him. On another occasion, while he tried to watch the wolves through binoculars, Mowat discovered that the male and female wolf were twenty yards behind him, observing him with quiet curiosity. He reported:

> Inescapably, the realization was being borne in upon my preconditioned mind that the centuries-old and universally accepted human concept of wolf character was a palpable lie.

8 *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Toronto: Canadian Bible Society, 1984), p. 685.

9 Brian Johnson, 'Ecology, Allegory, and Indigeneity in the Wolf Stories of Roberts, Seton, and Mowat', in Janice Fiamengo (ed.), *Other Selves: Animals in the Canadian Literary Imagination* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2007), pp. 333–351, here p. 336.

10 T. D. MacLulich, 'The Alien Role: Farley Mowat's Northern Pastorals', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 2 (1977), pp. 226–238, <http://journals.hil.unb.ca/index.php/scl/article/view/7868/8925>.

> On three separate occasions in less than a week I had been completely at the mercy of these 'savage killers'; but far from attempting to tear me limb from limb, they had displayed a restraint verging on contempt, even when I invaded their home and appeared to be posing a direct threat to the young pups.[11]

As a result, he made his decision to 'go open-minded into the lupine world, and learn to see and know the wolves, not for what they were supposed to be, but for what they actually were'.[12]

Mowat gradually immersed himself in the life of the wolves. He set up his tent closer to them and adopted some wolf behaviour, living like a pseudo-wolf in the Arctic region: learning how to fish like a wolf, taking wolf naps, eating mice (creating a recipe for mice in cream, 'souris à la crême'), and marking the boundaries of his territory by urinating on stones and clumps of moss. The culmination of his 'going wolf' was depicted in the chapter in which the naked narrator joined a pack of wolves in playfully chasing the caribou herd.[13] In Mowat's observations, the killing of the caribou by the wolves was done quickly and cleanly, causing them little pain. And contrary to the usual misconception, wolves never killed more than they could use. Having examined some wolf-killed caribou, Mowat found out that 'few consisted of anything except bones, ligaments, hair and offal', and 'what little remained of most of these carcasses showed evidence of disease or serious debility'.[14] In short, everything pointed to the fact that the wolves ate only the weaker members of the caribou band, and thus kept the herd strong.

Over his days with the wolves, Mowat cultivated an affection for them. His initial fear and even hatred of them gave way to respect. He found that the wolves were almost humanlike creatures, who had affectionate interactions with one another: they spoke to one another in a range of sounds; they played, hugged, and babysat; they visited relatives or friends. When the time came for him to say goodbye to what he called the Wolf House Bay pack, Mowat felt the urge to speak the hidden truth: that humans were the real killers of the caribou. The Inuit trapper Mike once told Mowat that he himself killed two or three hundred caribou each year, all strong and fat. Since there were altogether eighteen hundred trappers in the Canadian North, a conservative estimate put the number of caribou killed at 112 000. However, when they were polled by the government for information about the rapid decline in the size of the caribou herd, 'to a man, the trappers and traders denied that they killed more than one or two caribou a year; and to a man they had insisted that wolves slaughtered the deer in

11 Farley Mowat, *Never Cry Wolf* (New York: Dell, 1963), pp. 56–57.
12 Ibid., p. 57.
13 Johnson 2007, p. 337.
14 Mowat 1963, p. 146.

untold thousands'.[15] Moreover, the number did not even include the caribou killed by 'rich trophy hunters up from the United States':

> The pilot of the safari aircraft, therefore, had only to choose a lake with a large band of caribou on it and, by circling for a while at low altitude, bunch all the deer into one tight and milling mob. Then the aircraft landed ... Through open doors and windows of the aircraft the hunters could maintain a steady fire until they had killed enough deer to ensure a number of good trophies from which the finest might be selected.[16]

Mowat's conclusion was that the caribou had been sacrificed to the economic interests of the Canadian government, while the wolves were made scapegoats. They were unanimously held to blame for the rapid depopulation of the caribou species. It is not surprising that the narrator's report sent to the government on the real relationship between the wolves and caribou fell on deaf ears. The wolves continued to be killed on a large scale by poison, traps, and other methods, including being shot from aircraft, and all these efforts were sanctioned by the authorities.

As a responsible writer, Mowat refused to cater to the official statement about the 'wolf–caribou–predator–prey relationship'.[17] Well aware of the power of literature to evoke sympathy for environmental protection and species preservation, he wrote a report in the form of the book called *Never Cry Wolf*, which became his 'literary howl'.[18] He had originally intended to write 'a spoof about scientists and bureaucrats', yet soon became fascinated with the lupine world.[19] Through illustrative anecdotes, Mowat recounted his experience of wolf behaviour and advocated his views about nature: 'all parts of nature are in a delicate interrelationship ... any breaking of this balance threatened the entire fabric of the planet'.[20]

Mowat's act of writing was something that could 'impart a tangible environmental message'.[21] As he remarked in the preface, 'it may be that there is still time to prevent mankind from committing yet another in the long list of his crimes against nature'.[22] In the epilogue, he uses an impersonal tone to relate how the Predator Control Officers employed by the Canadian Wildlife Service placed poison outside the Wolf House

15 Ibid., p. 92.
16 Ibid., p. 143.
17 James King, *The Life of Farley Mowat* (South Royalton, Vt.: Steerforth Press, 2002), p. 198.
18 Karen Jones, *Wolf Mountains: A History of Wolves Along the Great Divide* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2002), p. 135.
19 King 2002, p. 198.
20 Ibid., p. 206.
21 Karen Jones, 'Writing the Wolf: Canine Tales and North American Environmental-Literary Tradition', *Environment & History*, 2 (2011), pp. 201–228, here p. 216.
22 The preface appeared in the Toronto edition of *Never Cry Wolf*, published in 1979 (see Jones 2011, p. 216).

Bay den the summer after he left. The last line of *Never Cry Wolf* is brief and laconic: 'it is not known what results were obtained'.[23]

On the whole, the book is a subversion of the stereotypical images of the wolf, and functions as the author's speech act: to raise public consciousness by 'using the written word as a tool of environmental advocacy' and to instil an individual sense of responsibility towards the natural world.[24] The sociologist Ulrich Beck noted the role of the story-teller in promoting public awareness about nature: 'only if nature is brought into people's everyday images, into the stories they tell, can its beauty and its suffering be seen and focused on'.[25] Mowat, by writing *Never Cry Wolf*, thus participated by alerting the public to the suffering of the animals and the looming global environmental crisis.

Wolves, the central performers

In her essay 'Writing the Wolf', Karen Jones deems Mowat's retreat into the North American wilderness as 'a spiritual journey':

> In Mowat's wilderness sojourn, the wolf signified an erudite guide to nature, a totem animal that drew the biologist away from rationalist dictates and Euro-American prejudice and towards a more empathic, reverential, and indigenous perception of the land.[26]

Judged in this light, the wolves represent 'the central performer' in Mowat's journey into the wilderness, with great influence on the narrator's epiphany.[27] Performer or not, true stories of wolves had been ignored for ages, because in the human–wolf relationship, wolves have the marginalized part, with no voice of their own. Although some previous wolf stories, such as Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, are narrated from the wolves' vantage point, they mostly express extreme individualism and Darwinism in the exploration of the laws of nature, paying little attention to the preservation issues concerning these wild animals. Natural selection, severe competition, and the survival of the fittest are the common themes of the wolf literature in the late nineteenth century, when a desperate survival instinct was the core of the capitalist philosophy of existence.

From the 1920s and 1930s on, with the development of ecological science, people began to show concern for the healthy relationship between humans and the natural world, and how to 'link their new vision of nature and wildlife with the real animals in

23 Mowat 1963, p. 176.
24 Jones 2011, p. 221.
25 Ulrich Beck, 'Politics in Risk Society', in *Ecological Enlightenment: Essays on the Politics of the Risk Society*, transl. Mark Ritter (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995), pp. 1–18, here p. 14.
26 Jones 2011, p. 214.
27 Ibid., p. 206.

a real, evolving ecological setting' became an issue of great significance.[28] *Canis lupus* re-entered people's field of vision as an indispensable part of ecosystem. Some wildlife biologists tried to liberate the species from the category of hated vermin, situating them as 'an important ecological agent' in the North American wilderness.[29] The pioneer environmental and wildlife researchers Paul Errington, Aldo Leopold, and Adolph Murie believed that the existence of *Canis lupus* was vital to the health of the biotic communities. Meanwhile, the 1950s saw the emergence of the discussions about the family dynamics, community groups and gender norms. It was in this context that a new genre of North American wolf literature appeared in the 1960s. In contrast to London's wolf individualists, the wolves of *Never Cry Wolf* were the embodiment of ecological integrity, community organization, and the dynamics of nuclear family.

The Northern wilderness depicted in *Never Cry Wolf* was a world where all animals lived harmoniously, before white people set foot there. The wolves lived on good terms with the Inuit, sharing the natural resources with them. As a keystone species, the wolves kept the ecosystem of the tundra plains in dynamic equilibrium. Without them, their prey would grow overabundant, or pass on weak genes. Caribou was only a part of their diet. In addition to consuming large quantities of mice, wolves ate ground squirrels and fish as well. And they killed only to eat, which ensured the perpetuation of the other species. Because of a shortage of homesteads and hunting territory, wolves of breeding age would delay starting families: some adult wolves would remain celibate for years before a homestead was available. They even adopted a mysterious 'built-in birth-control mechanism' to avoid ecological crisis caused by overpopulation: 'When food species are abundant (or the wolf population is scanty), bitches give birth to large litters ... But if the wolves are too numerous, or food is scarce, the number of pups in a litter may fall to as few as one or two.'[30] It seemed to be an instinct to maintain the biotic health in their homeland.

While comparing London's and Mowat's wolf stories, Karen Jones emphasized the focus on 'biotic community and social structure' in *Never Cry Wolf*, regarding the work as 'a powerful ecological narrative that prioritized interaction and community over competition and struggle':

> Buck's sled team operated according to a coercive hierarchy where the strong dominated the weak, whereas the Canadian pack living in the 'Wolf House Bay' worked as a cohesive unit. The wolves in *Call of the Wild* fought to the death, while the animals in *Never Cry Wolf* caroused, learned and hunted together.[31]

28 Ralph Lutts, *The Nature Fakers: Wildlife, Science, and Sentiment* (Golden, Col.: Fulcrum, 1990), p. 174.

29 Jones 2011, p. 213.

30 Mowat 1963, p. 131.

31 Jones 2011, p. 215.

In *Never Cry Wolf*, mutual respect, modesty, and restraint seemed to be virtues that kept the peace among the wolf pack. Despite the fact that each wolf family lived in its own territory, neighbours got along well with one another. Some of the families would cross territories just to visit. And when food was scarce during the winter, the boundary of these territories disappeared and wolves from different families helped one another. In Mowat's world of the wolves, there were no 'orphans' as human beings used the term.[32] The motherless pups would soon be adopted by a new family, whose members showed affection to them. Furthermore, the pack of wolves employed a systematic way of hunting caribou. Predation, in Mowat's words, was 'not a ferocious contest but a mutual engagement'.[33] The cooperative spirit demonstrated by the wolves was beneficial to the existence and reproduction of the species, which in turn contributed to the natural balance of the Barren Lands.

As a part of the community, family plays an important role in establishing a harmonious environment. Just like human beings, the wolves in *Never Cry Wolf* have a highly evolved family life similar to the nuclear family which was the prevalent family structure in North America in the 1950s and 1960s. A nuclear family, often called the traditional family, consists of a mother, father, and their biological or adoptive descendants. The nuclear family can be a nurturing environment, because family members behave according to their particular social status and roles: husband and wife support each other economically and emotionally, parents raise children and spend time with them. In sum, the nuclear family is good for the development of a stable society.

The wolf family Mowat lived nearby and observed carefully was a typical nuclear family, even conforming to the 'till death us do part' ideal.[34] George, an 'eminently regal beast', was an ideal father 'every son longs to acknowledge as his own'.[35] His wife, Angeline, elegant, passionate, and sometimes devilish when in a bad mood, 'hardly looked like the epitome of motherhood; yet there could have been no better mother anywhere'.[36] George and Angeline never quarrelled, and were extremely affectionate with each other. They had a clear division of labour. When the pups were small, George went out to hunt for food, while Angeline stayed at home to take care of the children. As time went by, George and Angeline went hunting together, leaving the children with Uncle Albert, a dependable pup sitter in the family. When it was time for the pups to learn how to hunt for themselves, the couple did not hesitate to teach them hunting techniques.

As he grew attuned to their daily round of family life, Mowat found it more and more difficult to keep an impersonal attitude towards the wolves. 'No matter how hard

32 Mowat 1963, p. 105.
33 Jones 2011, p. 216.
34 Mowat 1963, p. 67.
35 Ibid., p. 66.
36 Ibid.

I tried to regard them with scientific objectivity, I could not resist the impact of their individual personalities.'[37]

Angeline is a character Mowat showed great concern for. The dedication in *Never Cry Wolf* reads: 'For Angeline – the Angel!' Mowat confessed that he was deeply fond of her, 'and still live in hopes that I can somewhere find a human female who embodies all her virtues'.[38] Angeline epitomizes the ideal female of the day: beautiful, tender, and devoted to her family. She is in every way a backbone of the nuclear family and serves as a symbol of positive gender identity. Were it not for the intrusion of the white men and modern industry, the Canadian North would remain a landscape of harmony rather than strife. The wolves' philosophy of existence – to respect the natural law so as to comply with nature – is what humans should think deeply about.

In *Never Cry Wolf*, the speech acts uttered by the narrator (Mowat) and the other characters (the wolves) are a form of doing things with words (or as far as the wolves are concerned at least, with sounds and other forms of communication). The narrator's identification with and anthropological projection onto the wolves is symptomatic of his concern with popularizing wolf ecology and preservation. The wolves, with their particular behaviour and sometimes their own 'language', howl out for a better world in which they can be treated more equally and fairly. As Mowat noted: 'Eventually the wolf took the book right out of my hands so that it became a plea for understanding, and preservation, of an extraordinarily highly evolved and attractive animal.'[39]

Literature as event, or, who was speaking for the wolves?

In his classification of speech acts, John R. Searle writes that 'we express our feelings and attitudes and we bring about changes through our utterance'.[40] Mowat, through the utterances of the narrator and characters in *Never Cry Wolf*, intends to educate his readers about wolves in order to appeal to them to halt the wholesale slaughter of the species. The publication of the book elicited a strong response from the readers, whose reading, commenting, and criticism became a doing that 'may do other things in its turn'. As J. Hillis Miller says, 'reading a literary work confers a responsibility on the reader to make an accounting of his or her act of reading. Such an accounting entails a performative as well as a constative dimension.'[41] As far as *Never Cry Wolf* was concerned, the readers' responses were quite controversial. The debate centred mostly

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., p. 67.

39 This quotation appears in the 1979 edition of *Never Cry Wolf* (see Jones 2011, p. 214).

40 John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 29.

41 Miller 2005, p. 3.

on the book's reliability: whether it was a work of fact or fiction, and whether it was a work of science or sentiment.

Just after the publication of the book, the *Toronto Globe and Mail* published a review entitled 'To the Rescue of the Wolf', which commended *Never Cry Wolf* as a 'splendid and satisfying book', and suggested that the wolves owed 'Mowat a debt of gratitude for rescuing their reputation'.[42] The work was considered as 'a bridge between ... historic North American nature writing and modern environmental literature', its author being ranked among environmentalists such as Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson.[43] Together with Carson, a great admirer of the book, Mowat became known as 'one of the truly great crusaders defending the integrity of the planet against all kinds of government and corporate interests'.[44] Readers were impressed by Mowat's 'intuitive engagement with nature and accessible, ecologically informed narrative'.[45] Mowat's field study of the Arctic wolves won him credibility as a speaker on their behalf.

However, the Wildlife Federation of Canada rejected Mowat's report as 'semi-fictional', and based on falsehood. The scientific community criticized the book's failure to 'offer a valid biological exposition' on the wolves.[46] The wolf expert L. David Mech, who had researched wolves since 1958 in many countries, stated that in all of his own studies 'he had never encountered a wolf pack that regularly subsisted on small prey', as related in *Never Cry Wolf*.[47] C. H. D. Clarke of the Canadian Wildlife Service described Mowat as 'a wonderful raconteur, posing as a scientist'.[48] The biologist A. W. F. Banfield concluded in his draft review: 'It is certain that not since Little Red Riding Hood has a story been written that will influence the attitude of so many towards these animals. I hope that the readers of *Never Cry Wolf* will realize that both stories have about the same factual content.'[49] Banfield's words acknowledged the popularity of the book, but at the same time denied its authenticity. Wildlife Service employees sarcastically called Mowat 'hardly knowit'.[50] Even thirty years after the publication of the book, *Saturday Night*, a Canadian magazine, published a cover article which belittled Mowat's early Arctic adventures, with a portrait depicting him as Pinocchio. These accusations by the scientific world were quite similar to the comments made

42 William French, 'To the Rescue of the Wolf', *Globe & Mail*, 9 November 1963, p. 17.
43 Karen Jones, *'Never Cry Wolf*: Science, Sentiment, and the Literary Rehabilitation of *Canis Lupus', Canadian Historical Review,* 1 (2003), pp. 65–93, here p. 86.
44 King 2002, p. 203.
45 Jones 2011, p. 216.
46 Jones 2003, p. 74.
47 Warner Shedd, *Owls Aren't Wise and Bats Aren't Blind: A Naturalist Debunks Our Favorite Fallacies About Wildlife* (New York: Crown, 2000), p. 336.
48 Jones 2003, p. 74.
49 Ibid., p. 80.
50 Jones 2011, p. 218.

by the Canadian Department of Agriculture to 'discredit' Rachel Carson:[51] 'Many of the statements in the book were inaccurate, and many of the conclusions drawn were based on emotion rather than sound scientific logic.'[52] For the scientific elite, *Never Cry Wolf* and *Silent Spring* could at best be considered 'science fiction'.[53]

What was it that brought the wrath of the scientific world down upon Mowat? First and foremost, he questioned and jeopardized the authority of the Canadian Wildlife Service on lupine behaviour. For many years, people had relied on government authorities and scientists for knowledge about wolves. *Never Cry Wolf* was an eye-opener, opening up a new lupine world for people from different backgrounds. As it steadily gained popularity as a satire on scientific investigation and a credible source on wolf preservation, the influence of the CWS declined beyond recovery. *Never Cry Wolf* embodied to some degree a threat to 'the status of traditional institutions as bastions of environmental authority'.[54]

Then there was the contest between science and sentiment as 'competing rationales of environmental authority'.[55] While some commentators stated the importance of sentiment over science as a method of understanding environmental realities, others believed that for fiction, entertainment, and sentiment were of paramount importance, while for science, rational objectivity was its ultimate goal. *Never Cry Wolf* was considered to be 'fantastical and fanciful', and the truth of the work 'was relegated to the ranks of enjoyable whimsy'.[56] According to officials of the CWS, Mowat had conducted fieldwork in the tundra plains for a total of just ninety hours, so most of his observations regarding wolf habits and relationships were fabricated. It was true the federal government had administered the killing of wolves in Canada's national parks in the early twentieth century (the estimated number of the wolves killed was some 16 000), but Mowat had ignored the fact that wolf-killing activities had ceased by the 1960s in these areas. The CWS considered its policy of wolf control to be based on sound research: it was viewed as a way to mitigate caribou decline. Its officials feared that Mowat's portrayal of the wolves as a species with 'angelic traits' would do them 'a disservice', rousing a 'misinformed cadre of wolf lovers' who, for instance, repeatedly claimed that wolves fed exclusively on small rodents.[57]

In the face of these controversies, a number of people spoke up in defence of the book. Jack McClelland, head of the publishing house McClelland & Stewart, wrote in a letter to the *Edmonton Journal*: 'Mowat is first and foremost a writer. As such he

51 Jones 2003, p. 87.
52 Quoted in Frank Graham Jr, *Since Silent Spring* (New York: Fawcett World Library, 1970), p. 14.
53 Jones 2003, p. 87.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., p. 78.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., p.76.

has felt it his primary concern to write well and write truth … In his view, facts are important only as they relate to truth, and in themselves meaningless.'[58] Thomas Dunlap argued in Mowat's favour, pointing out that *Never Cry Wolf* was 'a fable based on a spiritual experience', and that 'Mowat is overwhelmed by a sense of his own failure to reach the moral level of the wolves and to enter their world. Beneath that is anger and contempt for those who destroy nature.'[59] The biographer James King insisted that Mowat had done more to raise awareness about the wolves than anyone else by poking fun at humans, who considered themselves to be the masters of nature: 'Rather than thinking in decades or centuries, modern human society has tended to seize upon short-term exploitation of nature.'[60]

Despite a heated debate in the academic world, *Never Cry Wolf* has been highly influential in changing the general public's perception of wolves and other predators. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, a campaign for the protection of the wolves was run in opposition to the government authorities. Many people responded to Mowat's call and wrote letters to the CWS. Some expressed heartfelt admiration for the book and praised its preservation stance. One letter stated that *Never Cry Wolf* was an 'interesting and educational' book that 'completely changed my opinions about wolves'.[61] Others seemed particularly anxious about the portrayal of state policy, urging the government to intervene and stop the merciless killing of wolves: 'What is the present policy on the preservation of the wolf? I do hope it is a more humane and sensible policy one [sic] than had been employed in the 1950s.'[62] Letter writers even instructed Government officials to use *Never Cry Wolf* as an educational tool: 'I respectfully suggest that you make it required reading for every member of your Service – and for that reason I have sent you a copy!'[63]

For one thing, these letters directed attention to the fate of the wolves in a threatening environment. They reflected people's increasing concern about animal welfare. Along with contemporaneous works by Christopher Stone and Peter Singer, *Never Cry Wolf* was to witness the emergence of an animal liberation movement that has flourished ever since. Karen Jones proclaimed that the work was 'an important chapter in the history of Canadian environmentalism':

58 Jack McClelland to D. L. MacDougall, *Edmonton Journal*, 21 February 1964 (see King 2002, p. 202).

59 King 2002, p. 202.

60 Ibid., pp. 205–206.

61 Letter from Priscilla Ewry, Tucson, to CWS, 11 August 1969 (see Jones 2003, p. 80).

62 Letter from Lorna Robertson, Kamloops, to CWS, 20 November 1969 (see Jones 2003, p. 81).

63 Letter from Raymond Bock, Medical Square, Arizona, to CWS, 18 October 1967 (see Jones 2003, p. 81).

> The deluge of letters ... testifies to the growing significance of literature as a protest medium. Modern Canadians roused to defend a species that their predecessors sought to eradicate. By the 1960s the wolf had made the transition from the beast of waste and desolation (in the words of Theodore Roosevelt) to a conservationist cause célèbre. ... *Never Cry Wolf* played a key role in fostering that change.[64]

Here Karen Jones refers to 'literature as a protest medium', which is similar to Jacques Derrida's and J. Hillis Miller's concept about the performative function of language and literature. The controversy over *Never Cry Wolf* 'highlighted a contest for authenticity in wildlife matters between the scientist and the storyteller: 'Who did speak for the wolf?'[65] Mowat's affectionate portrayals in the book fostered an emotional engagement between the readers and the Arctic wolves. The readers' different responses, whether positive or negative, turned this piece of literature into an event. Put simply, literature acquired its power through its interpretation and dissemination by readers.

As with Mowat's other books, *Never Cry Wolf,* as we have seen, was translated into many languages, winning a great many converts to the lupine cause across the world. The book's pro-wolf message became influential, leading to popular reactions against wolf-extermination efforts at home and abroad. Due to its influence, many wolf-advocacy organizations came into being, such as the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Association (1963). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, British Columbia and the Yukon launched a series of campaigns to prevent government wolf control programmes. When a Russian translation of the book was published in the former Soviet Union, the Soviet authorities gave orders to ban the slaughter of wolves. As time went by, *Never Cry Wolf* was no longer considered 'a single-issue campaign' for the protection and preservation of the wolves.[66] Its impact went far beyond that on wider environmental issues – the campaign against hunting of whales and seals, overpopulation, chemical pollution, and so on.

Conclusion

The success and popularity of *Never Cry Wolf* cannot be simply ascribed to its language, style, or intriguing plot. There is no arguing that the book was published at the right time, just as environmental issues were on the rise. A discourse on animal rights was emerging, which partly characterized the environmental movement in the 1960s, with its stress on pollution, overpopulation, global warming, and the dangers of nuclear power. The tragic fate of the Arctic wolves was linked to wider environmental

64 Jones 2003, p. 68.
65 Jones 2011, p. 218.
66 Jones 2003, p. 84.

realities, such as the destruction of delicate ecosystems and the near extinction of native peoples. Mowat's text, with its focus on the Others, won it a place in Canadian environmental history and the global environmental movement.

The Second World War was a trigger for modern mankind's growing expectations or hopes for an ideal life. As a veteran of the Great War, Mowat knew only too well about the thorough brutality of modern *Homo sapiens*: 'the only living thing that could deliberately bring down a world in senseless slaughter'.[67] In the decade after the Second World War, people were trying to settle down to peaceful and stable lives. The Wolf House Bay pack in *Never Cry Wolf* represented a harmonious community, more concerned with interaction and cooperation than competition and conflict. People who were fond of the book were able to project their own emphasis on community, harmony, and the role of family against encroaching industrialization and mechanization.

Originally intended as an official report, *Never Cry Wolf* was a new way of writing the wolf ecology discourse, and certainly quite different from what the professional wildlife community did. The book was written to interest the public and call for citizen-led action. Natural resource issues were no longer the exclusive field of study of the scholarly community, but instead open to public scrutiny. Mowat employed literary skills such as light-hearted humour and playful irony to portray human-lupine encounters, to mock the inflexibility of the government bureaucrats, and to warn of the impending environmental crisis. In face of the criticism from the scientific world, Mowat claimed that he was writing in 'a grey void between fact and fiction', meaning he would neither adopt the purely factual approach, nor write mere fiction.[68] In his own words, he was writing 'subjective non-fiction', following his own heart.[69] The important thing was to present a good story to 'foster emotional connectivity' between the readers and the environmental issues,[70] so that the public, motivated by the book, might take action to strive for environmental justice.

67 Farley Mowat, *The People of the Deer* (London: Michael Joseph, 1952), p. 16.

68 Ken McGoogan, 'Our Own Ancient Mariner', *Literary Review of Canada*, May 2011, <http://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2011/05/our-own-ancient-mariner/>.

69 Greg Quill, 'Farley Mowat's legacy: Our supreme storyteller', *Books Columnist*, 11 May 2012, <http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2012/05/11/farley_mowats_legacy_our_supreme_storyteller.html>.

70 Jones 2003, p. 89.

Performing an Individual Voice

Gao Xingjian and *Bus Stop*

Li Shuling

Gao Xingjian was born in a well-to-do family in 1940 and grew up in a relatively liberal and free atmosphere. While studying French at the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute in 1957–1962, he became acquainted with Western literature and culture, especially modern drama. It was at this time he developed the desire to write. However, in 1966 the Cultural Revolution silenced him, and all intellectual voices, for the following ten years. Gao resumed his dream of writing only after he was called back from the countryside to Beijing in 1975. Before going into self-exile in France in 1987, Gao wrote nine experimental plays and earned national fame as a pioneering and avant-garde artist. As a transnational writer in exile, Gao has written another nine plays, two long novels, and numerous essays, which have been translated into many languages and won him the Nobel Prize in 2000 for their 'universal validity, bitter insights and linguistic ingenuity'.[1]

Gao is a writer who searches for individual freedom, uniqueness, and independence. In his Nobel speech, he declared that what he wanted to do was to 'speak as one writer in the voice of an individual'.[2] Lamenting the routinely servile status of Chinese literature, he insisted that literature 'can only be the voice of the individual'.[3] Literature, according to Gao, should be free of the yoke of politics, economy, and ideology: 'It is only by being an unwaveringly solitary individual without attachment to some political group or movement that the writer is able to win a thoroughgoing freedom.'[4] Several characters in his works are carriers of this and similar ideas. Silent Man in *Bus*

1 'Nobel Prize for Literature 2000-Press Release', Nobelprize.org (2014), http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2000/press.html>, accessed 21 November 2014.

2 Gao Xingjian, 'The Case for Literature', in *Cold Literature: Selected Works by Gao Xingjian*, transl. Gilbert C. F. Fong & Mabel Lee (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2005), p. 55.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 49.

Stop, Man in *The Other Shore* and Huineng in *Snow in August* are all alienated loners. The protagonists of *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible* seek self-fulfilment and self-salvation by exiling themselves in the wilderness or in foreign countries.

Written in 1981, *Bus Stop* was the first work Gao wrote for the theatre after the Cultural Revolution, and it is his most controversial play to date. Soon after its premiere in July 1983, *Bus Stop* became the target of literary and political criticism, it was censured as 'the most pernicious play since the establishment of the People's Republic of China'.[5] The criticism led to a ban after eleven public performances.[6] Some critics argued that it was absurd in style and existentialist in thought, and that it was a copy of *Waiting for Godot* in both form and content.[7] Its theme was 'to doubt anything in existence, to choose one's own route, believing self-choice and self-struggle'.[8] The critics condemned the play as a rebellious political attack on socialism and the Communist Party leadership. Harassed by officials, Gao escaped to the wild forests of south-west China and walked the Yangtze River valley for half a year. Politically, this event can be regarded as an inevitable consequence of the campaign against 'spiritual pollution'.[9] However, it is a worthwhile exercise to re-evaluate the play and the debate it caused from today's perspectives.

In this essay, I shall reread the play in the light of the theory of performativity. Regarding literature as action and event, I will focus on the eventness of the play, especially on the text as an action, and the *Performanz* that it results in.

Bus Stop as a literary text can be analysed as individual actions in at least two di-

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5 Xiao Xue, 'Zui youhai de wenxue chuangzuo: diyiwei huo nuojiang de zhongwen zuojia Gao Xingjian' ('The Most Pernicious Literature: the First Chinese Nobel Winner Gao Xingjian'), *Cinema World*, 11 (2012), pp. 26–27.

6 Accounts vary as to how many performances there were. In his 'Jing Hua Ye Tan' ('Night Talk in Beijing'), in *In Search of a Modern Form of Dramatic Representation* (Beijing: Chinese Drama Press, 1988), Gao said that the play was staged more than ten times in public, and another two times for officials in government publicity and media departments. He then confirmed that it was thirteen times altogether. Therefore, the number of its public performances must have been eleven.

7 Tang Yin, Du Gao & Zheng Bonong, 'Chezhan sanren tan' ('Three Critics Talking about *Bus Stop*'), *Xiju Bao* ('The Drama Journal'), 3 (1984), pp. 3–7; Chen Shouzhu, 'Tan huangdan xiju de shuailuo jiqi zai woguo de yingxiang' ('The Decline of the Theatre of the Absurd and its Influence in our Country'), *Shehui kexue pinglun* ('Review of Social Science'), 11 (1985), pp. 34–38.

8 Tang Yin, Du Gao & Zheng Bonong 1984, p. 6.

9 A campaign to eliminate 'spiritual pollution' was launched in the autumn of 1983 by Communist Party leaders. It targeted new literature and Western influences in art and everyday life, as Bonnie S. McDougall & Kam Louie point out: 'Among the chief targets in literature were humanism, alienation and modernism, in works by Bei Dao, Dai Houying and Jia Pingwa', *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 337.

mensions: the characters' actions in the text, and the action performed by Gao as a playwright in writing the work. Firstly, the play creates an imaginary world in which a group of people from all walks of life wait at a bus stop. I would argue that the seven characters who have waited until they become old have declared their individual needs, aspirations, and rights by talking, while Silent Man has performed his individualist identity by remaining silent. Secondly, the play itself could be interpreted as Gao's unique testimony to the absurdity of life as he experienced it during the Cultural Revolution. On both levels, the play performs an individual voice at the grassroots level, and functions as a counter-discourse to the grand discourse of the Cultural Revolution and socialist collectivism in the 1980s. At the same time, the staging of *Bus Stop* and the discussion it stimulated was a public event which has had an abiding influence on its audience and Chinese theatre.

Talk as action when pursuing individual rights

Defined as a lyrical comedy of life by its author, *Bus Stop* is a play about a group of people who are waiting to catch a bus from the countryside to the city. Their purposes are specific and realistic. They queue, shove one another, and quarrel as they wait. However, every bus speeds past without stopping, regardless of their yells, waves, and curses. Time flies and they suddenly find that they have waited for one year, two years, and then ten years. They begin to complain, blaming the bus company. Checking the bus stop sign again, they learn that the bus stop was discontinued long before. Their lives have been wasted in waiting.

Among them is Silent Man who arrives at the bus stop early and reads books while the others talk nonsense. He thinks, judges, and decides resolutely to walk to the city by himself after three buses pass them. After sheltering from the rain under a plastic sheet for a while, the seven characters decide to walk to the city too. Just at this moment, Director Ma, one of the characters in the play, shouts: 'Hey, wait, wait for me! I have to tie my shoelace.'[10] The play stops abruptly, and it remains unclear whether they reach the city or not. The plot unfolds at a bus stop that is shaped like an asymmetrical cross. Gao explains that 'it has symbolic meaning, signifying perhaps a crossroad or an intersection on the way of life or one station in the lives of the characters'.[11]

Two different kinds of people are depicted in the play: the seven characters who hold together, talking and waiting, and Silent Man who keeps to himself and then leaves. They represent opposite attitudes and choices in life. Critics often compare *Bus*

10 Gao Xingjian, *Bus Stop*, transl. Shiao-ling Yu, in Xiaomei Chen (ed.), *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 802.

11 Gao Xingjian, *Selected Drama of Gao Xingjian* (Beijing: Qunzhong Press, 1985), p. 85.

Stop to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. They argue that the uniqueness of both plays lies in the treatment of the subject of waiting, and that the seven characters have done nothing because they are still at the bus stop at the end of the play.[12] Others have pointed out that *Bus Stop* is different from *Waiting for Godot* in many respects. For example, the characters in *Bus Stop* have a strong belief in the future, most of the language they speak is rational, coherent, and meaningful, and they have the will to take action.[13]

It is worth noting that what angered Chinese officials in the 1980s was not the seven characters' waiting – a rather obvious metaphor in itself – but what they say at the bus stop. Just as J. L. Austin discovers, language is both constative and performative. Performatives do not describe; they perform the action they designate, for 'stating is performing an act'.[14] If we analyse the dialogues, soliloquies, and speeches in the light of the theory of performativity, we will find that they have done something by talking.

As the play unfolds, the seven characters have declared their personal needs and wishes by telling one another their reasons for going to the city. From their talk, we know that all of them live in the countryside, which is poor, culturally isolated, and educationally backward. They agree that they have no personal opportunities at home. Therefore, they are eager to go to the city to satisfy their personal needs and realize their dreams. Old Man, though in his sixties, is determined to go to the Cultural Palace in the city to play chess with Li Mosheng, the national chess champion, in order to prove his talent, because for him it is 'the matter of the spirit' and 'what life is all about'.[15] A man in his thirties, nicknamed Glasses, always practises his English while he waits for the bus, since it is his last chance to attend an examination required for admittance to university. For him the journey to the city represents a way to change his fate. Twenty-eight-year-old Girl loves beauty and envies city girls who can wear dresses and high heels. Full of hopeful dreams, she is going to the city for a blind date with a young man. Her single purpose is to get close to him and be loved. The character Carpenter makes fine hardwood furniture. His reason for going to the city is not to make a living, but to teach his craft, which has been handed down to him from his ancestors, otherwise it will die out. Compared to these characters, Mother's, Hothead's, and Director Ma's business seems trivial. Mother's family lives in the city, so she has to go there every Saturday to wash clothes and cook for her husband and child. This life of separation cannot be changed because of her lack of social connections. Lacking a

12 Kwok-kan Tam, 'Drama of Paradox: Waiting as Form and Motif in *The Bus Stop* and *Waiting for Godot*', in idem. (ed.), *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2001), pp. 43–66.

13 Su Ren Quah, *Gao Xingjian and Transcultural Chinese Theatre* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), pp. 61–69.

14 J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 138.

15 Gao 2010, p. 789.

good education, Hothead has no specific goals or aspirations in life. He just wants to have a taste of yogurt and walk the city streets like city dwellers do. Director Ma, the only official in the group, has limited power which comes from selling goods that are in short supply in his town, but he still wishes to have a dinner in the Tongqing restaurant in the city, and he makes plain his aspirations to higher social rank.

According to the theory of performativity, the function of a speech act embraces three dimensions: locution, the semantic and referential functions of language; illocution, the kind of act one was accomplishing or attempting to accomplish in saying the words; and perlocution, the effect one produces by issuing the utterance.[16] In this sense, the locution of the *Bus Stop* characters' utterances is their specific reasons for going to the city. The illocutionary act they perform is to declare their different personal needs and to articulate the individual voice of ordinary rural people. What they pursue here are not collective benefits or national interests, but basic human rights as individuals, such as family happiness, success, respect and identity. This emphasis on 'I' rather than 'we' was a revolutionary act in the 1980s, when individual needs and values were repressed by a collectivist ideology of class, Party, and country. Therefore, one possible perlocution of their utterances is to challenge the dominant collectivist discourse.

This consciousness of individual needs and rights is further evident when the characters discuss the irresponsibility of the bus company, the gulf between rural and urban life, and the unfairness of the fate that awaits them. In these people's eyes, the city is a paradise-like place where they can fulfil their dreams, a place that can give meaning and significance to their lives. Their sole hope is to catch a bus that will take them there. At the beginning, all of them trust the bus company in spite of their complaints about crowding, disorganization, and poor service. What is strange is that three buses pass them without stopping. When Glasses looks at his watch, he is shocked to find that one year has passed. The watches of Old Man and Director Ma have already stopped. Director Ma suggests going home; Hothead insists on walking to the city, which Glasses challenges, worried that a bus might come along just after they set off. Trapped in the dilemma of 'stay or go', they continue their discussion at the bus stop until ten years have gone. Many buses drive past, but none stops to take them to the city. Old Man will never make it to his chess game, Girl grows old without marrying, Glasses has missed his chance of entering university, even Mother's simple need to see her husband and child will never be satisfied. They realize that they have been cheated by the bus company and discarded by life. In despair, they begin to question the current social system and their status as ordinary customers and citizens.

One thing they do in words is to defend their legal rights as customers. When Old Man arrives at the bus stop, he says to Silent Man:

16 James Loxley, *Performativity* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 18.

> It's just like waiting for the bus. When you stand in line according to the rules, there are always some who don't go by the rules. They push to the front, wave to the driver, and the door opens for them. They're the 'preferred passengers with connections'. God! How I hate that term! By the time you try to get on, the door is slammed shut again. That's how they 'serve the passengers'![17]

Semantically, his words describe something that is unfair about public transport. Contrary to their slogan, the bus company does not serve all its passengers, but only those with special connections. Rejected by drivers, some ordinary passengers are stripped of the legal rights they should enjoy as customers. Performatively, Old Man has stated his doubt about the bus company's principles and his realization of the inequality of ordinary customers – the first voice articulated by the powerless side in the binary opposition of the bus company versus the passengers. His assertion of his legal rights is echoed by Director Ma:

> Yes, I must go to the city to lodge a complaint with the bus company. I'll find their manager and ask him whom their buses are for – for their own convenience or to serve the passengers? They should take full responsibility for abusing the passengers. I'm going to bring a lawsuit against them and ask them to pay for our lost years and health.[18]

He then asks his fellow passengers to write down the time and the name of the bus stop in order to put his words into action. What matters here is not whether he will indeed sue the bus company or not, but the action he takes in face of unfair treatment. His announcement that he will sue is an action taken to protect his own legal rights. At the same time, his attitude and words have awakened the other passengers' awareness of their legal rights. Before his declaration, the other passengers, such as Master and Hothead, still cling to the illusion that they will reach the city by bus, insisting that 'it can't be just a trick'.[19] They are dependent on as well as obedient to the powerful bus company. With Ma's encouragement, it dawns on them that they have been fooled by the company and have the right to get an explanation and compensation. The binary opposition of the bus company–passengers, if not being subverted, has at least been challenged when all of them stop trusting the bus company and decide to walk to the city.

The other thing the characters do with words is asking for equality as citizens. When their hope of going to the city evaporates, the characters variously express their regret, confusion, and anger. Old Man states that if he had lived in the city like Li Mosheng, he could become a chess champion too. Girl cries that if she lived in the city, she would dare to wear floral dresses. Then city girls could not flaunt themselves

17 Gao 2010, p. 770.
18 Ibid., p. 798.
19 Ibid., p. 785.

and humiliate her. Glasses would have learned English and become a student. What they say reveals another binary opposition: city versus countryside. Here city is superior, representing opportunity, modernity, and advanced education, while rural area is inferior, signifying poverty, underdevelopment, and a generally low level of education. They cannot benefit from the same social resources as people in the city, and lose every chance of self-development and self-fulfilment just by living in the countryside.

Their reservations become all the greater when Old Man tells the group his epitaph: 'Buried here is an unrepentant chess fan, who has no other talents except having played chess all his life. He always yearned for an opportunity to go to the Cultural Palace in the city to show off a little. He waited and waited, grew old and decrepit, and finally collapsed on the road to the city.'[20] The fate of Old Man is that of the group and all rural people. They yearn for equal opportunities that never come. Therefore, they wonder, 'Why is it that only city folks get to walk on city streets? Am I not a human being like anyone else?'[21]

The locution of the question is to ask whether they are as other humans, yet the act it performs is to demand equal rights, since it is self-evident that all are created equal; therefore, its function is not to raise a question, but to perform an act. It can be interpreted as their declaration of equality. What they say here is constative, representing the unfair treatment they suffer as country people, and the cruel reality caused by the imbalance between rural and urban areas. At the same time, their words are performative too. By raising their marginal voices, they announce that country people are equal citizens, who should have equal opportunity to pursue personal happiness and self-development. The tragedy of Old Man is not the fault of any one person, but of the social system. More people would die on the road to the city, in the same way as Old Man, if the government were not to change its current policy on urban and rural development. The questions they ask, together with the statements they make, are in fact their initiatives to defend their human rights as marginalized country people.

Silence as a strategy when performing an individualist identity

The most powerful individual action in the text is performed by Silent Man through his silence and body language. Although having voiced their individual rights in their speeches, the seven characters remain indecisive. Sometimes they depend on authority (like the bus company). Sometimes they follow others' opinions (if you go, I'll go). When they are on the horns of a dilemma, they even chance all on the toss of a coin (heads we go, tails we wait). Forming a group and acting together, they are not brave

20 Ibid., p. 798.
21 Ibid., p. 782.

enough to choose their own way. In sharp contrast the lone figure of Silent Man, standing out from the group, is an independent thinker as well as a determined doer. He neither relies on 'higher power' nor follows the masses, but trusts his own judgement and pursues his dreams alone. I argue that his silence is a strategic language with which he performs his individualist identity.

Silence sets him apart from the noisy masses and gives him the perspective of a distant, level-headed observer on social affairs. When Old Man complains about various social evils, Silent Man just smiles and nods his head, showing that he knows these absurd phenomena and agrees with him. But he never joins Old Man in grumbling. When Hothead quarrels and almost fights with Old Man, Silent Man steps in to protect Old Man by making a show of his strength to Hothead; when he sees Hothead slap Glasses, Silent Man again interferes and separates them. Without saying a word, he takes a neutral position and successfully resolves people's conflicts. He does not complain like Old Man, and he does not allow unjust things to happen in front of him. His cold observation and independent judgement on society come from deliberately keeping his distance from the group. Silence is the act he performs in all the debates, arguments, and quarrels of the other passengers, which empowers him to maintain his status as a disengaged loner. Paying no attention to the quibbles of the other characters, he takes every opportunity to focus on reading books. What he cares about most is time, knowledge, and his own business.

The silence of Silent Man embodies the spirit of self-autonomy, self-pursuit, and self-fulfilment. As the third bus drives past without stopping, he 'paces back and forth in agitation' and looks at the other passengers with a melancholy expression. After hesitating for a while, he 'walks off with long strides, not even turning his head'.[22] In silence he leaves the noisy group behind, and begins to walk to the city on his own. Accompanying his steps is the sound of soft music that 'expresses a painful yet determined search'.[23] This musical motif, which is designated by the playwright the 'music of the Silent Man', appears nine times throughout the play after he leaves the group behind. The stage directions indicate that the music is 'barely discernible' at first, yet it becomes 'audible, clear' and 'fast, taunting', developing into 'a humorous grand march' by the end of the play. This music is always heard whenever the seven passengers want to leave, but give up. Therefore, it is 'a kind of spirit that exists in everyone's heart as an internal statement' at the beginning, but evolves into 'a music image' later.[24]

Quah believes that the music is transformed into the alter ego of Silent Man.[25] In this sense, Silent Man in fact never disappears from the play. His optimistic action of

22 Ibid., p. 778.
23 Ibid., p. 779.
24 Gao 1988, p. 167.
25 Su Ren Quah 2004, p. 68.

setting off on his own represents the theme that Gao proposes, that 'the future belongs to people who go forward without hesitation and useless talk'.[26] We do not know what Silent Man is searching for, because he never utters a word about himself throughout the entire play. However, since he is waiting for a bus like the other passengers, his object must be similar to theirs: to go to the city to realize his dreams. The group fails to notice his departure until a year has passed. When they realize it, they are envious of his wise decision because they believe that 'he must be in the city by now',[27] which implies that he has fulfilled his personal achievements, and that they can't.

His persistent silence angers the seven speaking characters. Their response to his departure is ridiculous. When Hothead shouts 'Hey, where's that guy? Did he sneak away?' the group suddenly becomes very excited.[28] Hothead blames Silent Man for leaving without telling them. Glasses suspects that he got on a bus because he used privilege. When Girl assures the group that Silent Man has walked to the city, the others begin to blame her for not telling them earlier. Director Ma even becomes nervous, because he suspects that Silent Man might be an official who comes from the city to investigate bribery. Old Man claims that Silent Man is 'really a conniving sort'.[29] In a word, they all regard Silent Man as a dangerous other, even though he has done nothing wrong to them.

The character of Silent Man offended some critics and officials in the 1980s too. They accused Silent Man of being 'an individualist who isolates himself from the masses'.[30] As such, he constituted an image of protest who 'does not believe the bus, the route, the driver or the masses but insists on his own free choice'.[31] Xi Yan even asked: 'Why can't he break his "silence" for a while to tell the masses truth and lead them to go with him if he has got revelation that the bus will not come?'[32] In the post-Cultural Revolution era, individualism was criticized as a selfish, bourgeois notion, a poison from the Western capitalist world: 'All forms of individualism were bitterly opposed and an intricate psychology was developed to inculcate a new tradition of self-sacrifice which would empower the party-led collective against the individual.'[33] According to collectivist principles, Silent Man should be a member of the masses or a hero to lead

26 Qu Liuyi, 'Ping huaju *Chezhan* jiqi piping' ('On the Play *Bus Stop* and the Criticism of It'), *Wenyi Bao* ('Journal of Literature and Art'), 7(1984), pp. 29–33.

27 Gao 2010, p. 783.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Tang Yin, Du Gao & Zheng Bonong 1984, p. 4.

31 Ibid.

32 Xi Yan, 'Pingjia zuopin de yiju shi shenme?' ('What are the Criteria for Assessing Literary Works?'), *Wenyi Bao* ('Journal of Literature and Art'), 8 (1984), pp. 14–19.

33 Mabel Lee, 'Gao Xingjian on the Issue of Literary Creation for the Modern Writer', in Tam 2001, pp. 21–41.

the masses. Whatever he chooses, he must say and do the same thing as the others. A different, individual voice is forbidden and to be oneself is ideologically wrong.

However, silence has been used by Silent Man as a strategy to maintain a disengaged position. On the one hand, he refuses to be integrated into the masses, which can sweep away the fragile individual voice easily. On the other hand, he resists becoming a so-called revolutionary hero, which has been the sole fate of Chinese intellectuals since the New Culture Revolution in the 1910s. What is ironic is that this silence becomes the strongest voice of the individualist. In keeping silent, he performs his identity as a free, unique, and independent individual who refuses to be subjugated by the collectivist ideology that dominated China at that time.

Individual testimony and resistance

J. Hillis Miller claims that putting things in words constitutes speech that acts, and the author's act of writing is a doing that takes the form of putting things in a given way. Literature, according to him, is act and conduct. It is able to affect what we do and think by bearing witness to what happened in the past. As a way of doing things with words, it also does something that may do other things in its turn.[34] The question I would like to explore is what act Gao performs by writing *Bus Stop*? Or in other words, what does *Bus Stop* do to reality?

Gao once said that the idea of the play came to him in 1977, inspired by his experiences of waiting for buses in Beijing.[35] It begins with a realistic scene of 'a group of people with their small specific wishes', and then moves to an absurd situation when they wait for ten years without any personal achievement.[36] With its ambiguity and absurdity, *Bus Stop* can be 'allegorized at many levels, thus yielding various, even contradictory, interpretations'.[37] However, one thing that many critics agree on is that the play is an insightful reflection on the decade-long Cultural Revolution, an artistic abstraction of this crisis. The wasting of ten years of life on waiting is the real story of Gao Xingjian and the entire generation who survived the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution constitutes the historical and psychological backdrop of the play.

Bus Stop can be read as Gao's unique testimony to the Cultural Revolution from the perspective of its individual victims. Gao, unlike many other writers of the post-Cultural Revolution period, who have expressed public outrage at the political oppression and narrated the heroic struggle against the Gang of Four, is more concerned

34 J. Hillis Miller, *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 2.

35 Gao 1988, p. 166.

36 Ibid., p. 127.

37 Tam 2001, p. 61.

with 'the most basic condition of freedom for the contemporary individual'.[38] Gao participated in 'revolutionary' activities and suffered from the extreme suppression of intellectual freedom during the Cultural Revolution. Once a leader of a Red Guards brigade, he was later 'sent down' to the countryside for his 're-education'. Isolated and lonely in the countryside, he continued to read and write. However, this was a time when any kind of writing risked counter-revolutionary charges, often leading to interrogation, confinement, and torture by the Red Guards. To write, even in secret, was to risk one's life. Gao had to wrap his manuscripts in plastic and bury them in the earth floor to escape detection. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, he had to burn more than thirty kilograms of manuscripts, including ten plays and numerous short stories, poems, and essays. Having witnessed so much violence and chaos, he developed an antipathy towards the masses and mass movements, which gradually led him to realize the dark side of collectivism and the significance of individual rights.[39] The seven characters' call for individual rights as well as Silent Man's individualist stance can be understood as Gao's reactions to this national disaster.

The individualist stance of Silent Man can be interpreted as Gao's resistance to the social and political engagement that was so tumultuous during the Cultural Revolution that almost all aspects of everyday life became politicized. Just as Ma Shoupeng had suggested, and Gao in turn confirmed, there is a shadow of Gao himself in the image of Silent Man.[40] If, as I would suggest, Silent Man performs his individualist identity by keeping silent and taking action voluntarily, and if his feeling of alienation from the masses and being solitary is the projection of Gao's idea, then *Bus Stop* can be regarded as Gao's speech act to declare his separation from the masses and determination to pursue total freedom as an individual writer.

What happened during the Cultural Revolution shaped Gao's attitude towards life and art. Since then, he has always strived to remain distant from grand narrative in order to search for his own 'soul mountain' and self-salvation in solitude.[41] Such resistance has become his permanent literary stance. He claims to be a writer 'without

38 The Gang of Four (四人帮) were a political faction composed of four Chinese Communist Party officials. They came to prominence during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and were later charged with a series of treasonous crimes. Their leading figure was Mao Zedong's last wife, Jiang Qing. The other members were Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen; Julia Lovell, 'On Gao Xingjian and the post-Nobel Prize debates and twentieth-century China's Nobel complex', in *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China's Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), pp. 163–183.

39 Gao 2005, p. 9.

40 Gao 1988, p. 166.

41 'Soul Mountain' (*Lingshan*, 灵山,) is both the title of Gao Xingjian's long autobiographical novel published in 1990 and the name of a sacred and elusive mountain in the novel.

isms'.[42] He further claims to immerse himself fully in 'cold literature' – that is, to write by himself and only for himself, free from any outside force or pressure, and opposing 'any type of politics forced upon the individual in the name of abstract collectives such as the people, the race, or the nation'.[43]

Bus Stop also demonstrates how far people were distorted by ten long years of political upheaval. Just as Mabel Lee points out, Gao's 'single-minded pursuit of these goals for the individual was a fierce reaction to the insidious yet gross distortions of human thinking and behaviour he had witnessed'.[44] Silent Man, in order to be safe in this chaotic world, has to keep his mouth shut and isolate himself from other people. His seemingly voluntary silence is in fact the result of terror and repression, symbolizing the aphasia of a whole generation. It also reflects the tension and distance between ordinary people. A sense of alienation is constantly present throughout the play. Besides the stubborn silence of Silent Man, the other characters' distortion is also there, embodied in their ridiculous behaviour. They are selfish, suspicious, and aggressive. They complain about, look down on, and attack one another, constantly busy with futile quarrels, fights, and regrets. They put their faith in the bus company at first, and then depend on others when the bus company abandons them. When they grow old and lose all hope of catching a bus, they are unable to decide between waiting and going. With the loss of autonomy and self-confidence, their life is reduced to chaos and depression, while as a group they are hostile to the innocent Silent Man and keep an eye on him. Whether they go alone, painfully, or wait for ten years in the dark, all the characters have been twisted by the Cultural Revolution.

The staging of *Bus Stop* extends this testimony and resistance to the public, exerting its transformative power on the audience. Gao adopted a number of innovative dramatic techniques to break the fourth wall and blur the boundaries between actor and spectator. The first run was in the banqueting hall of the Beijing People's Art Theatre, with the audience on three sides. The actors talked casually with the audience as they walked to the centre of the stage to start their performance. They sometimes invited the audience to participate in their performance by striking up a dialogue with them. For example, when Old Man shouted at the audience and asked whether they were waiting to catch a bus back to the countryside, the audience's position was changed from spectators to characters in the play. At the end of the play, all the actors broke character and addressed the audience directly. Girl said, 'why are they not going? ... can

42 In his essay 'Without -isms', *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia*, 27 & 28 (1995–1996) and the collection of essays with the same name, *Without Isms* (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books, 1996), Gao repeatedly expresses his search for total freedom as an individual writer, refusing to be committed to any political group.

43 'Author's Preface to *Without Isms*', in Gao, 1996, p. 4.

44 Mabel Lee, 'Translating Gao', an appendix to Gao Xingjian, *One Man's Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002).

we really go if we want to? ... then tell them to go quickly', shifting her role from a character in the play to one of the spectators.[45] She not only questioned why the characters were waiting, but also the real-life situation by getting the audience involved. The actor played three roles at this moment: the actor herself, Girl in the story, and a spectator.

The bodily co-presence of actors and audience and the reversal of their roles create a feedback loop, as Erika Fischer-Lichte writes, as well as a transient theatrical community, which breaks the traditional subject–object gap in the theatre and transcends the boundaries of fiction and reality.[46] In this way, each live performance became an event, stimulating its audience to reflect on their similar experiences in the Cultural Revolution with critical eyes and transforming their attitudes towards social reality.

As the first modernist-absurdist play in China, *Bus Stop* is Gao's act of resistance to the socialist realism which has dominated Chinese theatre since the 1940s. Influenced by European innovators such as Brecht, Meyerhold, and Artaud, Gao welcomed Western modernist theatrical ideas and introduced such theatrical devices as the alienation effect, poor theatre, and absurdity to Chinese readers and theatre-goers. From a Chinese perspective, *Bus Stop* was an experiment with new theatrical forms and devices. For this reason alone, the staging of the play prompted a heated debate in the 1980s on whether Chinese literature had anything to learn from Western modernism or not. Organized by the editorial committee of *Xiju Bao* ('Drama Journal'), three critics, Tang Yin, Du Gao, and Zheng Bonong, published an essay 'Three Critics Talking about *Bus Stop*' in 1984, triggering an attack aimed at the play, which was echoed and supported by their fellow critics Xi Yan and Chen Shouzhu. The other side of the debate consisted of a few famous critics such as Qu Liuyi, Wu Zuguang and Tong Daoming, who published their essays in *Wenyi Bao* ('Journal of Literature and Art'), *Zhuomu Niao* ('Woodpecker'), and *Shehui kexue pinglun* ('Review of Drama and Social Science'). The debate was intense, and lasted almost three years.

Taking *Bus Stop* as a 'bad model' which blindly imitated Western modernist arts, the Tang side maintained that Western modernist techniques represented a bourgeois, idealistic, and egoistic world view, which was morally negative and potentially subversive, and concluded that it was politically wrong and dangerous to use Western modernism to replace socialist realism. They even warned Chinese writers not to be misguided by Western modernist art and to rid themselves of its negative influence on Chinese literature and arts.[47] This absolute negation of Western modernism was countered by Wu Zuguang and Du Qingyuan. Reviewing the history of spoken drama, the Chinese name for Western drama, Wu asked: 'What's wrong with learning from this

45 Gao 2010, p. 799.

46 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, transl. Saskya Iris Jain (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 42–59.

47 Tang Yin, Du Gao & Zheng Bonong 1984, p. 7.

or that Western school since the whole of spoken drama was transplanted from the West?'[48] Asserting that literature and art should not be bound by ideology, Wu said that 'what we learn from outside is not too much but too little'.[49] Du contested the idea that it was beneficial for contemporary dramatists to look at other cultures and broaden their horizons of art, from which they can absorb new cultural nutrition.[50]

Gradually, the debate went beyond the play *per se* and developed into a confrontation between Chinese socialist realism and Western modernism. Performatively, it rectified the ambiguous attitude towards Western culture and participated in the reconstruction of Chinese modern theatre after the Cultural Revolution. Xiaomei Chen correctly points out that *Bus Stop* 'represents one of Gao's early, most successful efforts at introducing Western modernist theatre and thereby breaking away from the rather monolithic mode of realist theatre that had dominated the Chinese stage since Ibsen was imported at the turn of the twentieth century'.[51] Since then, all kinds of modernist theatrical forms have been imported and applied in Chinese theatre. In this sense, Gao has changed the history of Chinese modern theatre permanently with *Bus Stop*.

In conclusion, what *Bus Stop* performs is an individual voice in opposition to the collective voice, which becomes a recurring motif in Gao Xingjian's later works. *Bus Stop* is Gao's cold, rational reflection on the social reality of China during and after the Cultural Revolution, as well as his unique insight into the existential human dilemma.

As a semi-realistic and semi-absurd play, *Bus Stop* can be historicized and analysed as a subversive act by individualists in the 1980s on the one hand. In the play, marginalized people from rural areas are empowered to express their individual needs, pursuits, and rights, which challenge the government's grand discourse and subvert a few binary oppositions such as society–individual, city–country, and collectivism–individualism. Gao, as a playwright, managed to articulate his individual voice in the art of theatre and on the stage of politics by writing the play.

On the other hand, the play can be appreciated beyond its original historical and social settings as a modernist allegory. Glasses' groan – 'Go or wait? Wait or go? That is the question of our existence' – is an echo of Hamlet's eternal question 'To be or not to be'.[52] The different reactions of Silent Man and the seven characters reflect a common dilemma that people confront in daily life.

An ongoing search for identity, a sense of alienation, disillusionment, and absur-

48 Wu Zuguang, 'Gao Xingjian xijuji xu' ('Foreword to Selected Drama of Gao Xingjian'), *Zhuo Muniao* ('Woodpecker'), 1 (1985), pp. 40–43.

49 Ibid.

50 Du Qingyuan, 'Buxiang huaju que shi xiju' ('Unlike "Spoken" Drama but is "Real" Drama'), in Xu Guorong (ed.), *Studies on Gao Xingjian's Drama* (Beijing: China Theatre Press, 1989), pp. 89–94.

51 Chen 2010, p. 28.

52 Gao 2010, p. 785.

dity are almost universal topics in post-war world literature. Such universal concerns can arouse interest and empathy across the world. And this is likely one of the reasons why *Bus Stop* has been translated into several languages and staged in many countries, including Sweden, Germany, Italy, Russia, and Denmark. Gao Xingjian has performed his individual voice on the international stage too.

IV.
BEYOND EVENTNESS

'I am always wanting to collaborate with some one'

The Performative Poetics of Gertrude Stein and its Reception as Collaboration

Solveig Daugaard

In *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Erika Fischer-Lichte suggests that art has moved away from modernism's cultivation of individual art forms, pure and distinct, in the direction of an open field where the various art forms approach one another more and more. In all of the arts, a crossing over between media and genres has taken place. Fischer-Lichte dates this shift to around 1960, and by calling it 'the performative turn' she stresses the transformation of the conception of the cultural product as object or text into the cultural product as event. By adapting the terminology of performativity and performance theory she sets out to investigate the participatory aspect in what appears to be a more broadly conceived concept of art.

The dissolution of boundaries in the arts, repeatedly proclaimed and observed by artists, art critics, scholars of art, and philosophers, can indeed be defined as a performative turn. Be it in art, music, literature, or theatre, the creative process tends to be realized in and as performance. Instead of creating works of art, artists increasingly produce events, which involve not just themselves but also observers, listeners, and spectators.[1] With the notion of a 'performative turn', Fischer-Lichte is referring both to the general tendency of a blurring of the boundaries between all the arts, as addressed in multiple aesthetic disciplines, and specifically to the rise of a new stage genre, the live performance, that began to take shape in the 1960s. Both phenomena call for the work of art to be conceived of as an action or event instead of as a static artefact. In the following I wish to argue that this performative approach is highly relevant to the study of literature, not least the literature that we encounter in print.

For some reason, literature and the institutions of the literary field have been slower in addressing this 'dissolution of boundaries' than the visual and performative arts.

1 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, transl. Saskya Iris Jain (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 22.

For instance, the acknowledgement of conceptual forms of practice in literature has only recently begun to gain momentum, even though conceptual artists have been using literary practices since the early avant-garde.[2] For this reason, a turn towards studies of performativity, such as Fischer-Lichte's, seems more than relevant to literary scholarship.[3]

However, even as Fischer-Lichte initially seems to include the medium of literature in her performative turn, the omission of the category of 'readers' in the final sentence of the passage quoted above reveals that only in very particular cases does her understanding of a performative aesthetics apply to literary works. Clearly, she does not consider the reader of literary texts a candidate for serious audience involvement, nor a satisfactory participant in the realization of an artwork operating on the same level as that of a spectator and listener present at a live event.

The feedback loop and theatregoers' nerves

There are obvious differences between attending a live performance and reading a book, and many of these emanate from what Fischer-Lichte identifies as the *autopoietic feedback loop*, a quality that she stresses as a constitutive element in her concept of performance. The feedback loop is her term for the element of unpredictability that is part of any theatrical situation, where the audience has the potential to affect or interfere in the staged action. Using descriptions of performances and theatrical productions from the 1960s to the early 2000s, Fischer-Lichte shows that if this potential is rarely realized in traditional theatre, the rise of the performance genre has magnified its impact and increased the participatory quality of the performative artwork, and thus its unpredictability: 'Through their actions and behaviour, the actors and spectators constitute elements of the feedback loop, which in turn generates the performance itself.'[4] Due to this exchange, the performance genre can inhabit a position between a work of art and a social event, and it thus exhibits a transformative power of real

2 Literary scholarship has been inclined to try to isolate the 'strictly literary' from the conceptual or performative instead of conceiving of the writers as working in an expanded field, as is generally recognized in the visual arts, after it was famously introduced by Rosalind Krauss in 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *October* (1979). This consensus has been challenged in recent years.

3 Several Danish studies have applied the performativity angle to the study of literature in recent years, including Louise Zeuthen, *De virkelige halvfjerdsere: krop, køn og performativitet hos Suzanne Brøgger og Kirsten Thorup* (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 2008); Laura Luise Schultz, *Mellem tekst og teater* (diss., University of Copenhagen, 2008); Jon Helt Haarder, *Performativ biografisme* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2014).

4 Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 50.

social significance, able to transcend the modernist idea of the autonomous artwork. In her analysis, Fischer-Lichte posits the physical and temporal co-presence of artists/performers and spectators in a live situation as the crucial condition for the feedback loop to function properly, and thus makes this particular type of situation an ontological precondition of the aesthetics of performativity.

Contrary to this claim, the American poet and playwright Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) in her lecture 'Plays' seems to reject the existence of any such community based on the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators in traditional theatre: 'The thing that is fundamental about plays is that the scene as depicted on the stage is ... in syncopated time in relation to the emotion of anybody in the audience.'[5] Because the audience has no control over what is happening on stage (you cannot go back and review passed scenes or check who is who, for instance), the spectator is unable to follow the play emotionally, and thus becomes excluded from any sense of community:

> This that the thing seen and the thing felt about the thing seen not going on at the same tempo is what makes the being at the theatre something that makes anybody nervous.[6]

Stein's criticism of traditional theatre is in line with much experimental theatre and the performance art scene, but her attitude towards the issue of bodily co-presence is nothing like Fischer-Lichte's, as Stein empowers the silent reader of a book over a member of an audience in the theatre. She conducts a minute comparison between the encountering of an exciting scene in real life, in reading a book and in seeing it on stage. When reading a book, Stein claims, the reader is able to control the process:

> in the exciting story you so to speak have control of it ... it is not as it is on the stage a thing over which you have no real control. You can with an exciting story find out the end and so begin over again ... but the stage is different, it is not real and yet it is not within your control as the memory of an exciting thing is or the reading of an exciting book.[7]

Obviously, a radical avant-garde playwright like Stein would not settle for this reading experience of which the reader has full control. Reading stories is merely 'soothing' she also claims.[8] But according to Stein, the feedback loop has no positive effect on the experience of the spectator, who is unable to interact or even keep up emotionally with what happens on stage. A reader, on the contrary, has the ability to shape her own reading process. If this reader, in Stein's opinion, is confronted with writing lively enough to keep the excitement up, the empowerment of the silent reader becomes

5 Gertrude Stein, *Writings 1932–1946* (New York: Library of America, 1998), pp. 244–269, here p. 244.
6 Ibid., p. 245.
7 Ibid., p. 247.
8 Stein 1998, 'Portraits and Repetition', pp. 287–312, here p. 297.

even stronger. In the following, I will attempt to show how Stein worked to open up a collaborative space for the reader in her writing.

The performative aesthetics of Gertrude Stein and stage performance

Stein did not dismiss the stage. On the contrary, she launched a radical attack on fourth wall theatre, involving a deconstruction of basic elements such as plot, character, dialogue, and the illusion of a 1:1 relation between text and staging. Her thoughts and practice have gained increased influence on experimental theatre and performance since the 1960s.

In 'Plays', Stein suggests that a play could be conceived 'like a landscape', and her own plays work actively with the presence of the theatre space and its physical effects and a performative and autopoietic language, by fronting material aspects like sound and sight to make the words act as equal parts of the performance on the same reality plane as all other parts. The bodily presence of the actors is crucial, but has no precedence over the presence of mediating effects such as props, lighting, music, curtains, and even the velvet, gold, and glitter of the auditorium. What Stein demonstrates in her plays is that it is impossible to maintain traditional theatre studies' distinction between an objective and static text and a staging that is performative and ephemeral. In her performative poetics, the two dimensions are constantly intertwined, and she worked to integrate this material, theatrical poetics into the core of her writing in all genres, making her approach to language genuinely performative.

The aspect of performative poetics in the Stein's works has been well documented in recent years. Sarah Bay-Cheng's *Mama Dada* uncovers the avant-garde poetics in Stein's dramatic works, and its strong ties to the avant-garde theatre and film scene of early twentieth-century Europe, as well as its profound influence on the American theatrical avant-garde of the 1960s through to the 1980s.[9] W. B. Worthen has used Stein's plays to reclaim the place of the text in modern experimental theatre, seeking to reintegrate written drama into the study of theatre, and thus toning down the gap established by some lines of performance studies (after Artaud) where the text has been more or less dismissed.[10] Others have investigated the performative qualities of Stein's poetics in general – hence Laura Schultz shows how Stein's poetics can be described as performative, because it is based on a sense of play in all language. By playing with words and generic expectations, Stein sets language in motion and treats a text like a

9 Sarah Bay-Cheng, *Mama Dada: Gertrude Stein's Avant-Garde Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

10 See W. B. Worthen, *Print and the Poetics of Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

performance.[11] Schulz places Stein's notion of play somewhere between the text and the performance, where the staged play is not a realization of the text, but her aim is to chart the importance of Stein's poetics to recent theatrical trends and the extent to which the performative approach to language is at the core of all Stein's writing, not just her plays.

Since the performative qualities of Stein's plays are well accounted for, and because my primary concern is literary scholarship's passage into the expanded field of the 'performative turn', I will leave the plays for the present in order to focus on a book of poetry, the notorious *Tender Buttons* (1914). It fits my purpose well, since it was one of the most 'book-like' works in Stein's *oeuvre*, being one of her few early works to be printed and published as an individual book not so very long after its composition.[12] Moreover, it is known as a work of 'literary still-lives', focused as it is on an apparently passive, and to the immediate eye not very performative, subject matter: 'Objects', 'Food', and 'Rooms', as the book's three sections are titled. But, zooming in on a few points from Stein's seminal work, I will demonstrate the performative quality of her poetics, and the way in which the active collaboration of the reader is inscribed in the text. Finally, I will turn to African American poet Harryette Mullen (b. 1953), who took up Stein's implicit invitation to collaborate, as she wrote two books of poetry, *Trimmings* (1991) and *S*PeRM**K*T* (1992), picking up where *Tender Buttons* had left off almost eighty years earlier, and taking Stein's poetry to a place it would never otherwise have gone. By addressing Mullen's collaborative appropriation of Stein, I wish to stress how the performative qualities of Stein's poetics that evidently has been of major importance to experimental theatre, are also taken up in her poetic reception, even in works that operate within a 'traditional' medium such as a book of poetry.

Before I turn to an exploration of Stein's performative poetics and the collaborative potential of poetry in print, however, more on the concept of performativity and the feedback loop. Like many studies of the performative, Fischer-Lichte's draws on two major theoretical traditions, one from linguistics, and the other originating in theatre studies and the social sciences.[13] But even if she bases part of her argument on the linguistic concept of performativity, she also privileges the 'liveness' of the performance situation over the performative power of language. In this respect, she appears to be

11 Laura Luise Schultz, 'A combination and not a contradiction', in Rune Gade & Anne Jerslev (eds), *Performative Realism: Interdisciplinary Studies in Art and Media* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2005), p. 237.

12 For most of her career, Stein struggled to get her work published. *Tender Buttons* was published in New York by the small press Claire Marie in 1914. According to editor Seth Perlow's 'Note on the Text', Stein had written the text in 1912. See Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons. The Corrected Centennial Edition* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2014), pp. 89–97, here p. 89.

13 For an account of the theoretical history of performance theory, see the introduction to the present volume.

shaped by the essentialist conception of the art forms taken from modernism, even if this is exactly the conception she claims to be breaking free from in her 'performative turn'. She establishes a privileged relationship between live theatre and performativity, while at the same time trying to separate the two things ontologically, to which end she sets up a dichotomy between 'theatre' as discursive and 'performance' as the quality of escaping discursivity. As she thus stresses the non-discursive quality of the performative, she misses out on the equivocal potential of the concept: a theoretical approach that would also cover the connection and exchange between the material and the discursive, between language and act, between artefact and event.[14]

Fischer-Lichte's aesthetics of the performative make an important contribution that is not developed in a strictly linguistic understanding of the concept of performativity – above all, her description of the work's status as an event refiguring the subject–object relationship in the opening of an interactive dimension. This is why it is not sufficient to hold on to the linguistic line of thought when studying experimental literature that exhibits performative strategies and operates in an expanded field between the arts. Instead, the aesthetics of the performative needs to be disconnected from the limited set of situations envisaged by Fischer-Lichte, and opened up to include other situations as well, such as the reading of literature in print.

What is presence?

Philip Auslander has made the crucial point vis á vis performance studies' idealization of the live situation, that the concept of 'liveness' is inseparable from the idea of technical mediation, as it was the rise of radio, television, and other media that made thinking about liveness possible.[15] Fischer-Lichte acknowledges Auslander's point about the conceptualization of liveness, but she does not address its implications for her own privileging of bodily co-presence in the feedback loop.[16]

Auslander develops the unstable relationship between performing and documenting, presence and mediation, and shows how notorious performance works by Chris Burden and Yves Klein cannot be bound to an initial performance situation with the co-presence of performer and audience, as they were carefully constructed for (photographic) documentation directed at a future audience, not primarily as live theatrical situations.[17] In a similar vein, an alternative line of performative aesthetics has devel-

14 In this, I follow a series of scholars who have criticized performance theory from this angle; see, for example, Schultz 2008, p. 61

15 Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

16 Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 65.

17 Philip Auslander, 'The Performativity of Performance Documenation', *PAJ*, 84 (2006), pp. 1–10 considers Burden's *Shoot piece*, which is also an important reference for Fischer-Lichte (2008, p. 90).

oped that does not adhere to Fischer-Lichte's dismissal of a concept of the artwork, but instead suggests a performative work concept conceived as a relational occurrence that remains open, and is thus not reducible to a physical artefact independent of its reception and production, nor yet a purely ephemeral event that excludes any remaining material traces.[18]

The destabilizing of the relationship between performance and documentation has implications for the opening up of a performative event in time, which is crucial if one is to address the collaborative situation established in a delayed poetic reception, as in the case of Gertrude Stein or Harryette Mullen.

While I would not dispute that the autopoietic feedback loop exists and that some live performances do make strong claims on audiences to get actively involved, I do object to the aesthetics of the performative being linked to just one specific medial situation. Confronted with a line of experimental artworks that challenge the boundaries between performance and archive, it seems less likely that the specific qualities of the art of the 'performative turn' are tied exclusively to the theatrical situation, and more likely that the transformative powers of the aesthetics of performance stem from the ability to transcend the boundaries between different media, recognizing the full impact of language and other material expressions on social reality. Thus I would suggest that some published literary texts are equally capable of eliciting a collaboration from their readers as a live performance act upon its audience. The claim to participate in a performative actualization of the text is effectuated once the reader responds to it, and thus, even if the temporal structure of its interactivity is different from that of a live performance, it is no less interactive.

Stein and the relational art of the present

The precedence of 'liveness' inherent in the aesthetics of the performative can be seen as a radicalization of high modernism's embrace of 'the New', and Gertrude Stein in her day was no less preoccupied with 'presentness' than performance theory is today. 'The business of Art', she claims, 'is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present.'[19] She further develops what the business of poetry is: to make a linguistic recreation of everything that is in this actual present. As all things are alive and moving, so the poetic recreation has to render this present quality, and cannot just use a thing's standard name out of

18 Amelia Jones, 'Presence in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation', *Art Journal*, 56:4 (1997), pp. 11–18; and Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

19 Stein 1998, p. 251.

habit. What Stein wants from poetry is a use of words that is 'on the move' or even 'mistaken' as their meaning and function change with the context, or may remain open even when context is provided.

> I ... felt in me the need of making it be a thing that could be named without using its name. After all one had known its name anything's name for so long, and so the name was not new but the thing being alive was always new.[20]

Performativity in the linguistic sense of the word is the ability of language to perform acts. This performative quality of language is one of Stein's ideals in her poetics of presence, where a name has to do something to the thing it is naming, otherwise it 'does no good'. By breaking with a number of the most basic principles of the correct use of the English language, Stein inscribes an open-ended space for infinite mistakes and alternatives in *Tender Buttons*, and thus makes an enforced claim on the reader to invest actively in the text, to participate in the recreation in his or her own present.

Like Auslander, Stein's conception of presence in art is strictly relational, but not as literal as the one implied by the feedback loop. The clear-cut opposition of presence and discursiveness that Fischer-Lichte postulates is transgressed in Stein's work, as she ascribes to language both a concrete materiality and the ability to perform actual operations in the present, and thus to point out into the world.

The performativity of reading in *Tender Buttons*

In Stein studies, there is an endless debate about how to read *Tender Buttons*. All sorts of paths have been suggested, from as a lesbian love manual to as an investigation of botanical processes.[21] My primary concern here, however, is the way the book works – the intermingling of the material and discursive aspects of its language, conceiving of the page in spatial terms, and disrupting a linear reading process. Stein's suggestion of the work's genre, 'literary still lives', applies a painterly genre to a work of literature, and thus addresses the performative field where the boundaries between the arts are blurred.

The book's second section, 'Food', opens with a list of foodstuffs that reads like an eccentric shopping list, and both is and is not a table of section's contents. The elements in the list reappear as titles of the poems, but not consistently: some are skipped, some repeated, and some are deferred (like 'Orange', which is twice repeated, then inflected into its plural form, and finally deferred into the enigmatic 'Orange In'). Individual words are exchanged between texts like physical objects. The poem 'Eggs', for

20 Ibid., 'Poetry and Grammar' pp. 313–336, here p. 330.

21 See Juliana Spahr, 'Afterword', in Stein 2014, pp. 112–114.

instance, contains no eggs, but its neighbour 'Milk' does. The egg also reappears in the first 'Orange' poem, where, along with 'orange' and 'oyster', it participates in a physical rhyming process, all of them foods with a hard shell that needs to be broken or peeled off to reveal the edible part, a soft, wet interior.

> ORANGE
> Why is a feel oyster an egg stir. Why is it orange centre. A show at tick and loosen loosen it so to speak sat.
> It was an extra leaker with a see spoon, it was an extra licker with a see spoon.

The pattern formed by foods that are physically similar, but at the same time completely different, on a structural level resembles the patterning of acoustic rhyme, creating phonetic connections between words that are similar but semantically disparate. The point is that here the materiality of the words, the concrete play of sound and sight, does not stand in the way of the materiality of the objects to which they refer. On the contrary there seems to be an exchange or metonymic proximity between the materiality of words and the materiality of the objects, as Stein attempts to treat both in the same way. All of their physical, sensual qualities are ever present. The object can do semiotic work. It can signify, metaphorically pointing to other things or concepts, producing new meaning. The foods can even 'rhyme' and form various patterns, like the eggs, oranges, and oysters, and correspondingly words can be chopped into pieces like food ingredients. The words in this way materialize on the page as found objects, appropriated into an assemblage.

In *Tender Buttons*, Stein plays with the semiotic potential in our material surroundings and the material potential in our linguistic environment. So far I have tried not to draw this potential in any specific direction. In this approach, I am aligning with the string of Stein-reception shaped by early Language poetry. But contrary to this trend, I believe that the performative strength of *Tender Buttons*, the aesthetic and social effects of the work, stems from the fact that when you are reading, engaging in its jumps and cuts, and trying to make your way through the book, you are inevitably recontextualizing this semiotic potential and thus constantly establishing new versions of the work.

When we read *Tender Buttons,* we find the textual elements move about the pages through repetitions, patterns, and reoccurrences. The linear progression of the book is suspended because reading progressively does not pay off; you are inclined to read in another way. In this way, Stein's performativity goes beyond the limits of Austinian linguistics to enter the aesthetics of the performative. She is not just presenting her reader with words that do things; she is also opening up an interactive dimension in her text.

When considering the performativity of Stein's texts it becomes clear that the distinction between page and stage is not necessarily an ontological difference – the par-

ticipatory element identified in performance theatre is equally present in Stein's poetic works. If we take the point from Fischer-Lichte that performativity is essentially a transformation in the subject–object relationship – a way of conceiving of the relationship between an artwork and its audience – then evidently Stein is applying this relationship to her writing on the page.

'I am always wanting to collaborate with some one', Gertrude Stein wrote in *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937), and then went on to list a whole series of planned collaborations that came to nothing. It is not primarily for her collaborations that she is known for posterity, either. On the contrary, she is known as a self-acclaimed genius, insisting upon a unique position in modernist writing, and terminating several friendships in the course of abandoned collaborations. Some she did follow through on, but, as Tirza True Latimer remarks, to take Stein's claim about her collaborative aspirations seriously is 'to see that in the collaborative arena ... she left the door open for artists to continue working with her; indeed, she invited them to do so'.[22] What is interesting here is that collaborations with Stein are still very much happening. Artists across a wide range of fields take her open poetics as an invitation to join in. If we import the logic of Auslander's criticism of performance theory's ontology of presence, we should be able to acknowledge that these collaborations are just as real and as performative as the live interactions between, say, Marina Abramovich and her audience in *Lips of Thomas*.

If we abandon the dismissal of the discursive and the absolute precedence of the ephemeral, we can imagine through the reading and rewriting of poetry the emergence of communities that are dispersed in time and space, but may prove as socially significant as the short-lived communities of live performance established by the feedback loop.

Harryette Mullen and the impact of colour on perception

A strong current in the readings of *Tender Buttons* is exhibiting the work's deconstruction of poetic stereotypes of gender and femininity. In this context I have, in my personal reading of the work, enjoyed Stein's disturbance of colour codes in the language of the feminine, but for many years I read the book's play upon colours of yellow, brown and black as playing out conventional household virtues against erotic and scatological themes. I never considered that Stein's investigation of colours in *Tender Buttons* exhibited a general concern with the impact of colour on perception that could even include questions of race.

In her essay 'If Lilies are Lily White' Harryette Mullen states:

22 Tirza True Latimer, 'Mother of Us All', in Wanda M. Corn & Tirza True Latimer (eds), *Seeing Gertrude Stein: Five Stories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 291.

> *Tender Buttons* remains an extraordinary source of creative energy for my poetry and me. Two of my books *Trimmings* and *S*PeRM**RK*T*, began as responses to *Tender Buttons*. I feel free to claim Gertrude as a literary foreparent, even though I am not sure she would want to claim me as an heir.[23]

In *Trimmings*, Harryette Mullen starts from *Tender Buttons* in a reflection of the racialization of the language of the feminine. Zooming in on female wardrobe and commercial beauty ideals, Mullen shows how racially biased colour codes permeate the English language. Her technique in *Trimmings* and its successor *S*PeRM**K*T* has been described as 'signifyin(g) upon *Tender Buttons*', as she takes word material from Stein that she recycles and transforms, along with samplings from a variety of other sources.[24] In Mullen's own words, she is writing out the ironic relationship she as a black woman has with the 'pink and white femininity' she finds all over the English poetic tradition.[25] Thus Mullen takes the words of Stein's 'A Petticoat'

> A PETTICOAT
> A light white, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm.[26]

and recycles them one by one, setting up a relationship between Stein's 'button' and Manet's scandalous painting *Olympia* – using the ambiguous Steinian language, with its disgraceful ink spot disturbing the charming 'pink and whiteness' of the scene, to display how the liberated sexuality of the reclining nude feeds upon the repressed and shapeless black servant consigned to the background of Manet's painting, dressed in an unbecoming pink dress.

> A light white disgraceful sugar looks pink, wears an air, pale compared to shadow standing by. To plump recliner, naked truth lies. Behind her shadow wears her color, arms full of flowers. A rosy charm is pink, And she is ink. The mistress wears no petticoat or leaves. The other in shadow, a large pink dress.[27]

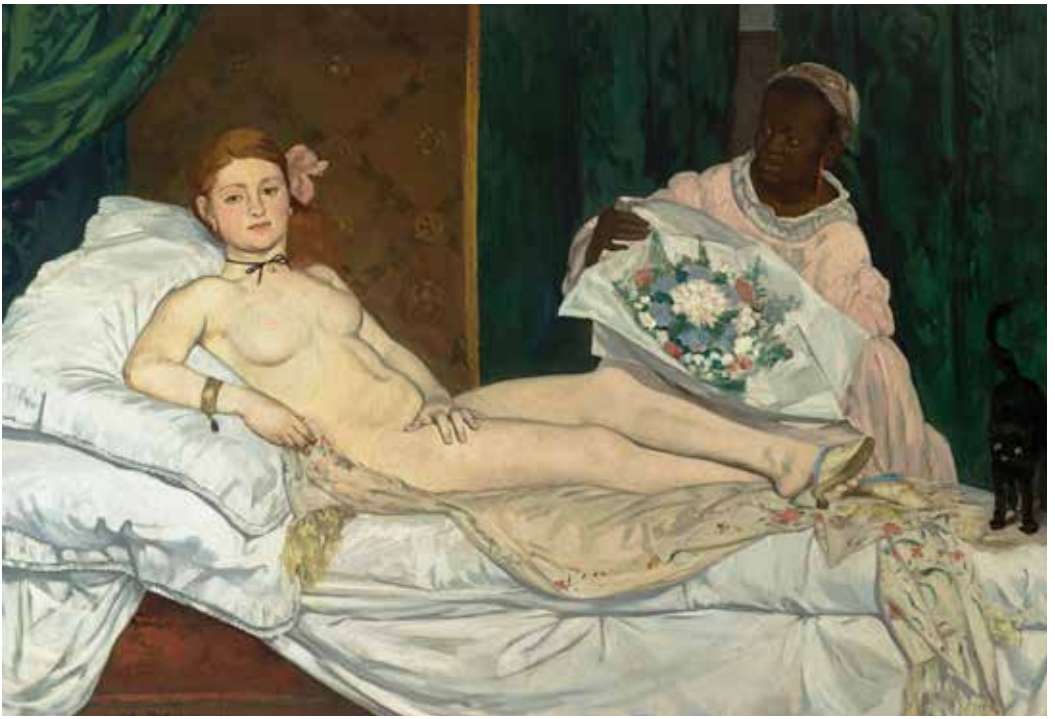
23 Harryette Mullen, *The Cracks Between What We Are and What We Are Supposed to Be* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012), pp. 20–29, here p. 26.

24 Elizabeth Frost, 'Signifyin(g) on Stein: The Revisionist Poetics of Harryette Mullen and Leslie Scalapino', *Postmodern Culture* 5:3 (1995). The concept of 'signifyin(g)' is based on the postcolonial concept developed by Henry Louis Gates.

25 Harryette Mullen, 'Off the top', afterword, *Trimmings* (New York: Tender Buttons Press, 1991), no pagination.

26 Stein 2014, p. 24.

27 Harryette Mullen, *Trimmings* (New York: Tender Buttons Press, 1991), no pagination.



Edouard Manet (1832–1883), L'Olympia. *Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: © Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Patrice Schmidt.*

By appropriating Stein's language and recontextualizing it in an investigation of colonial power at work, Mullen is setting the scene for a discussion of racialized language and the impact colour has on perception in Stein's work.

Read through the first section of *Tender Buttons*, 'Objects', which with its hats, umbrellas, and petticoats is the primary source of linguistic raw material for *Trimmings*, and matters of colour turn out to be ubiquitous. The word 'colour' (or derivations of it) occurs more than thirty times in the sparse amount of text in the section. Most dominant colours are the red, pink, and white of feminine sexuality so often pointed out, but also black, yellow, grey, and brown occur frequently. Fully 38 of the 58 prose poems in 'Objects' deal with colour or complexion in a direct way – especially dealing with the effects of mixing colours, and the differences that occur from changes of colour: from light to dark, due to dirt or dust or to the proper cooking or mending of things, or from dark to light due to cleaning, rubbing, polishing.

In her reworking of 'Objects', Mullen shows a strong sensibility for the colour track

of *Tender Buttons*. She picks up on how Stein parodies the conventional couplings of whiteness, cleanliness, purity, and femininity and her concern with the effects of colour. What Mullen does in *Trimmings*, as well as in later works, is to centre on the black figures in Stein's work, both the central, explicit ones and the more marginal figures, and recontextualize them in her own political and poetical project, giving them a pointedness and power they did not exhibit before her interference.

Mullen is not out to establish Stein as a postcolonial freedom fighter *avant la lettre*. Stein was nothing if not a product of her time: her upper-class, bourgeois background, her display of racialized language and stereotypes at work in her writing.[28] But in her work, Mullen is pointing out that while Stein challenges some of the cultural valorizations of colour, in her radical use of language she comprehensively disturbs and disrupts fixed origins, thus pointing out the discursiveness and the arbitrariness of gendered and racial categories – she does not deny the bodily consequences of these discursive patterns. As Mullen continues in her essay about *Tender Buttons* and Stein's novella 'Melanchta':[29]

> When I encounter in this charmingly disarming text [*Tender Buttons*] a perplexing catalogue of unlikely items that includes 'a white bird, a colored mine, a mixed orange, a dog', I examine it with the critical consciousness of America's 'others' confronted with signs that once decreed, 'No Jews, dogs, or niggers allowed.' My ancestors on the black side were corralled together with Gertrude Stein and Rin Tin Tin by the peculiar heterogeneity of this public prohibition. I can certainly imagine Gertrude laughing at its absurdity as she purchased her one-way ticket to Paris; and if I can imagine that, I suppose I can imagine myself laughing at every absurdity I find in 'Melanchta'. So I imagine myself laughing – in sunshine or rain.[30]

Stein does not articulate a coherent criticism of racialization in *Tender Buttons*, but colour, race, origins, and the possibilities or limitations of these factors are all crucial matters in the book. And, as Mullen hints here, they mattered for Stein herself, as she clearly had her own experiences of marginality that put her on the margins of the gentile, heterosexual, male milieu of literary geniuses in which she wanted to participate. Notably, Stein did not aspire to be an important 'female writer', a 'Jewish writer', or a 'lesbian writer', she wanted to be a 'writer' – preferably the only writer worth mentioning. Her practice remains relevant to any writer concerned with identity politics, because she refused to take the place assigned to her by these discourses. By insisting,

28 Aldon Nielsen, *Reading Race: White American Poets and Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990); see also Tirza Latimer's discussion of the visual artist Glen Ligon's work 'Negro sunshine' in Corn & Latimer 2011.

29 Mullen 2012, pp. 20–29. 'Melanchta' is Stein's controversial so-called 'negro-story' – originally published in *Three Lives* in 1909. It is a long novella set in a black neighbourhood and displaying a number of the racial stereotypes of its time, but also challenging them.

30 Ibid., p. 27

as she did, on her position as a male genius in her biographical performance and in meditations and lectures, she made visible the invisible maleness, heterosexuality, and whiteness of the category of literary genius.

In another essay Harryette Mullen describes the reader community she is trying to build in her own poetry, fusing the experimental avant-garde poetics that has been reserved for male, white, European eyes with the folk culture of African American communities, commercial and popular culture, and the poetic traditions of Black America. Mullen sees herself as a reader Stein did not imagine, but whom she never the less left a space for, as Stein herself, with her experimentalism and investment in marginality, was a writer hardly imaginable in her own day. In a similar way, Mullen creates a position that was difficult to imagine in the experimental poetry community of the early 1990s in the US, where she first took on her *Tender Buttons*-collaboration, and is equally concerned about her own future readership: 'I try to leave room for the unknown readers I can only imagine.'[31]

Elizabeth Frost and others have addressed how parts of the important Stein reception by members of the Language poetry movement has been adamantly stressing the level of abstraction of Stein's work. Frost discusses the male dominance of early Language writing,[32] and in critical work by Charles Bernstein she identifies the claim that Stein is undoing the signifying function of language.[33] The point there is that the image of Stein's writing as abstract or decontextualized, working primarily to break down the process of signification, puts Stein in the narrow category of 'experimental poet', as is implied in much early discourse of the Language movement, without being addressed directly.[34] But this inclusion of Stein in 'experimental poetry' comes at

31 Mullen 2012, 'Imagining the Unimagined Reader: Writing to the Unborn and Including the Excluded', pp. 3–8, here p. 8

32 In the movement's 1984 anthology, *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, there is a section with appreciations of *Tender Buttons*, all by male representatives of Language writing, focusing on Stein's immense significance for the movement's linguistic experiments. Frost suggests that female poets such as Susan Howe and Harryette Mullen 'that share common ground with Language writing', handle Stein's influence differently, going beyond the strictly formal linguistic perspective to include 'social experiences of language, sexuality, and the body'. See Elizabeth A. Frost, *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2003), p. 139.

33 With reference to *A Poetics* (1992) (Frost 2003, pp. 140–141). It should be noted that Bernstein's position on Stein and issues of identity are elsewhere more complex than Frost's account reveals. Bernstein's essay 'Stein's Identity', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 42:3 (1996), pp. 485–488, does not deny Stein's investment in marginality, but he reads them more playfully than I would suggest.

34 In other words, early essays by Ron Silliman have been criticized for establishing a white, male, heterosexual position of 'experimental poetry', negating the capitalist world order represented in lyrical poetry, while writers from minority backgrounds were more concerned with making their bodily experience heard. In later work Silliman attempts to modify this, for 'By demon-

the cost of dealing with important parts of her work, for example her preoccupation with colour, race, and origin (nationality). In her collaborative Stein reception, Harryette Mullen challenges this abstracted version of Stein, reclaiming a Stein who has a body, investments, and limitations, and, furthermore, the divide between experimental writing and writing by minority writers that incidentally was cultivated by some of the same poets.

When Harryette Mullen picks up on *Tender Buttons*, she reopens Stein's work for new collaborations and stresses the political and performative potential of Stein's experiments, while putting them to use in her own situation as marginalized. Mullen pushes Stein's language back onto an awareness of the social meaning of identity, as well as the complex relationships in American culture between race, sexuality, and economic privilege, setting up new poetical and political relations across time.

Decisive for Mullen's recirculation of *Tender Buttons* was the book's availability at the time she was writing. It was its material form as a book, its scandalous appearance in 1914 to a reception of immediate ridicule, which made it possible for Stein herself to revitalize *Tender Buttons* late in life, in autobiographies and lectures. That has kept the debate on how to read the work ongoing for a hundred years. The power of the silent reader to put a book down and pick it up again at a later point, to slowly synchronize his or her own time to the words on the page, also made *Tender Buttons* available to the Language poets. And the strong, decontextualized reception of Stein's work launched by them helped prompt Harryette Mullen to respond to it in her own way, creating an unlikely poetic community across the twentieth century. Just as Stein calls in on Mullen's poetry, providing her with the tools for linguistic subversion (as in the Petticoat poems), so Mullen visits Stein's poetry, forever transforming my own reading of the colour track in *Tender Buttons* and making Stein useful to me in new ways. The feedback loop of performativity is functioning well, however extended it may be in time and place.

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strating traditional WMH subject positions (such as protagonist, voice, I, point of reflexivity) inhabited by other subjects – women, homosexuals, people of color – such writing explodes the fictions of the universal' (Scalapino & Silliman, 'What/Person: An Exchange', *Poetics Journal* 9 (1991), pp. 51–68). But as Amy Moorman Robbins, 'Harryette Mullen's Sleeping with the Dictionary and Race in Language/Writing', *Contemporary Literature*, 51:2 (2010), p. 341–370, points out, in doing so Silliman re-marginalizes the work of his others through his support of the old distinction between 'writing that explodes the very notion of the self and writing that, in a belated and derivative way, adopts the conventions of selfhood to give "voice" to the personal experience of marginality'.

What I want to stress in conclusion is the potential range in this sort of temporal long-distance collaboration. Literature in print can sustain aesthetic and social interactions across long stretches of time and across the globe. If we insist on confining the aesthetics of the performative to live situations, binding it to the present moment, we will cut ourselves off from the many ways that a book can be a performance, when it generates responses and opens up for new collaborations that constantly challenge its stability and its status as an artefact.

Practical Aspects of Performance Theory in Literary Studies

Jon Helgason

Like any other cultural phenomenon, literary theory can, and should, be historicized and analysed. To begin with, it is relatively easy to see that theories in the academic discipline of literary studies have not leapt fully formed from a contextual or historical vacuum. Theories, much like people, do not come out of nowhere. It is well documented that the rise and success of arguably the most archetypical theory of literary studies, New Criticism, can only be understood by placing it in the context of the American higher educational system. Apart from being an excellent theory when it comes to the teaching of literature, particularly the teaching of (modernist) poetry – the object of study *par préférence* of New Criticism – it also offers a relatively straightforward and politically uncontroversial approach to literature. It is perhaps less known, but nonetheless well documented, that the rise of New Criticism also had to do with a rapid expansion of the educational system. In short, it became necessary for academic professionals to compete with one another, and the philosophy of 'publish or perish' has dominated academic life ever since, not only in the US but, increasingly, everywhere. New Criticism became an answer to these changing times. This perspective eliminated or significantly reduced the need for time-consuming historical and archival research. You had a text, often a poem of moderate length, you made a close reading of said text, and you had your publication. This is, needless to say, an intentionally simplified description, but the results are all around us in the boom in academic publications which allowed literary studies to meet the demands of a rapidly expanding educational system.

The case of New Criticism highlights that every 'major' theory has a favourite object of study, as well as external and historical reasons for its rise to fame and popularity. And, crucially, that many theories hinge on an inherent, privileged mode of reading. Other major theories can be analysed in a corresponding manner. As a re-

sponse to a call for the scientization of literary studies and the humanities as a whole, structuralism favoured the study of the novel, as well as that of narratives and genres, with a methodology derived from (the supposedly) more empirical field of linguistics. Undoubtedly, similar claims with regards to historical and social context, favourite object(s) of study, and privileged modes of reading can be made about post-structuralism or post-modernism, new historicism, ecocriticism, gender studies, and so forth. This essay will address similar questions concerning performance theory, attempting to contextualize the 'need' for performance theory.

In one of the most interesting systematic approaches to performance studies, *Perform or Else* (2001), Jon McKenzie forecasts that 'performance will be to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what discipline was to the eighteenth and nineteenth, that is, an onto-historical formation of power and knowledge'.[1] This however remains to be seen, at least when it comes to literary studies. I would say that we so far have not developed a very satisfactory aesthetic of performance, also, I would say that performance theory yet has to find its primary object of study. One possible explanation for this is of course very simple: until the late twentieth century we regarded performance as an ephemeral aspect of artistic creation. Here today, gone tomorrow.

Why performance theory?

Returning to the landscape of present day literary theory, 'theory' no longer dwells on a single distinct methodology, nor can it be said to exclusively deal with specific texts, genres or text types as a favourite object of study. This methodological and theoretical pluralism is sometimes explained by the so called 'cultural turn' within the humanities. According to Hans Rudolf Velten this turn is conditioned by four variables: 1) The inter-disciplinary nature of modern research. 2) Contemporary political, social and cultural issues and their relevance for the analysis of literature and culture. 3) The expansion of possible objects and areas of research within literary studies. 4) New cultural and technological perspectives on literature, for instance mediality and performativity.[2] This list could of course be longer. One could mention additional external variables such as globalization, social, cultural and political development on a global scale such as migration, language diversity, hybridization and interculturalism. All of this, according to Velten, calls for a more interdisciplinary approach.

1 Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge 2001), p. 18.

2 Hans Rudolf Velten, 'Performativität: Ältere deutsche Literatur' in Claudia Benthien & Hans Rudolf Velten (eds), *Germanistik als Kulturwissenschaft: Eine Einführung in neue Theoriekonzepte* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2002), pp. 217–242.

The purpose of theory in literary studies, if we are to believe Jonathan Culler, is not to provide an 'account of the nature of literature or methods for its study'. 'Theory' designates 'works that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those to which they apparently belong'.[3] The point of theory, according to Culler, is to question some of our basic tenets of thought, such as:

* the conception that the meaning of an utterance or text is what the speaker 'had in mind',
* or the idea that writing is an expression whose truth lies elsewhere, in an experience or a state of affairs which it expresses,
* or the notion that reality is what is 'present' at a given moment.[4]

Culler's definition of theory makes an interesting backdrop when it comes to performance theory. This theory denotes, as stated in the introduction to this volume, a heterogeneous and partly contradictory perspective on art and culture, famously described by Richard Schechner as 'a "broad spectrum" or "continuum" of human actions'.[5] According to Schechner, performance is first and foremost a methodological concept, a higher level concept akin to intertextuality or semiotics – two other super-level concepts. Secondly, the word performance denotes the ability of an object (for instance a literary text) or an action (for instance a declamation of poetry) to accomplish something (*Performanz*). In this latter case, the object of study, the text, is one step further away from 'performance' than the event itself. Both however have the ability to realize their potential of performativity.

Interestingly, between Cullers and Schechner's statements there are some conflicting propositions. For instance, Schechner's statement that performance denotes a methodology and Culler's statement that theory does not contain methods for the study of literature. Even Schechner's proposition has been debated, proving that the discipline of performance studies yet has to find a stable common ground. The large changes that the concept of performativity has undergone is illustrated by the fact that it by different theorists has been used first as a formal, then as an analytical tool, whereas it sometimes has been used as an ontological category.[6] What I wish to propose in

3 Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 3.

4 Ibid., p. 4.

5 Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2006), p. 2.

6 Ana Vujanović, 'Critical Performance Studies: A Practical Response to the Celebration of New Modes of Work in Performing Arts', *Performance Research: A Journal of Performing Arts*, 17:6 (2012), pp. 63–71, here p. 66.

this text is that by attempting to answer the question 'Why Performance Theory?', interesting contrasts can be highlighted and conclusions can be drawn. To put it another way, to what questions is performance theory an answer?

In the last decades, there has been a veritable flood of research projects, study programmes, and publications that have adhered to performance theory. A number of these initiatives have also been oriented towards literary studies. From a Scandinavian perspective, particularly American and German research initiatives have hitherto been noted.

One of the main reasons for the perceived 'need' for performance studies is that it ideally attempts to capture some of the complex relationships between text, author and reader as well as art and historical, social and cultural contexts, hence rendering traditional models of communication, including models for literary communication, unsatisfactory. The same goes for many theories. As Vujanović has noted, 'continental theory' – such as semiology, semiotics, structuralism and poststructuralism – has never fully managed to bridge the gap between theoretical work and social activity in a society. In the process, these theories have been unable to give a convincing account of, for one thing, the fundamental social aspects of public discourse and the ideas it expresses, or the social reality of life – the grounds where this discourse takes place.[7] For this reason, Vujanović emphasizes that contemporary theory (performance theory being one possible example), may be defined as 'a discursive activity that by means of concepts situates an object of study within its surrounding contexts: politics, ideology, economy, history, public space, identities, subjects etc.'. Through this contextual 'framing', theory questions the object of study by forcing art to recognize how art is pervaded by social, cultural, and historical discourses and practices, and, how, in turn, these discourses are pervaded by art.

The concept of 'performance' in literature remains relatively unproblematic when it comes to actual performances. Aligning with Victor Turner's, Milton Singer's, and Paul Zumthor's anthropological research, emphasizing social, collective and ritualistic aspects of performance, one can say that popular, 'folk' culture achieves much of its ready comprehensibility through a high degree of conventionality and where it is the performance itself that sets it apart from other similar and equally conventional work. As such, a performance is always based on another work and constitutes some form of mediation between that work and an audience. It is, however, more unclear how performance theory can be applied in literary studies, or whether literary studies can handle some of the inherently radical implications of performance theory.

7 Ibid., p. 64.

Performance theory and literary studies

Lynn C. Miller has outlined four major trajectories within the field of performance studies that show the transformation of this theoretical formation itself and also reflect changing attitudes towards the notion of the text, the definition of literature and what materials constitute appropriate subjects for study.[8]

Of these four trajectories, only two are entirely text-centred. According to Miller, *oral interpretation* focuses on the use of the voice to interpret traditional literature, i.e. the vocal and verbal interpretation of critically accepted writing in the form of print publication. The texts are not altered or revised in any significant way for the oral interpretation. Whereas *interpretation* involves a more traditional analysis of canonical texts in the vein of New Criticism and formalism, but this interpretive mode highlights verbal vs. non-verbal behaviour of the speaker in the text. In both these cases the performative elements are extracted directly from the text.

The *performance of literature* adds the dimension of space, along with voice and body in order to analyse a wider range of works. Also here, the original text is seen as inviolate, but this perspective takes into account the reader and the audience, ascribing them a sense of agency. What Miller finally means by *performance studies* includes a far wider range of 'literature', including cultural performance and everyday conversations, thereby including texts 'from virtually any human activity'.[9] From this perspective the interaction between performance and audience is of primary importance, whereas the text is secondary, imbedded as it is in performance. The methods of analysis used in this perspective are usually pluralistic, incorporating methods that can deal with both intra-textual as well as extra-textual variables. As Miller shows, the words 'literature' and 'interpretation' become 'subsumed under, and, frequently, function secondarily to performance itself'. Another dividing line is that literature connotes individual authorship whereas performance implies a collaborative activity.

The perspective of performance theory, capsuled here by Miller's *performance studies*, has radical implications that have seldom been explicitly addressed within literary studies. This perspective suggests that literature should no longer be regarded as primarily interesting as form and structure, nor is the meaning of the individual text on a semantic level of primary importance. What this perspective emphasizes is the *function* of literature and its *effects* within a specific context at a given period of time. Hence, this perspective conceives literature not primarily as text and meaning but as a symbolically laden and codified artefact which has effects, does something, has a

8 Lynn C. Miller, 'The Study of Literature in Performance: A Future?', in Sheron J. Dailey (ed.), *The Future of Performance Studies: Visions and Revisions* (Washington, DC: National Communication Association, 1998), pp. 51–55.

9 Ibid., p. 51.

function, thereby constituting literature as a cultural practice, a practice among many.

This stance does, as previously indicated, have implications concerning the way we think about literature. As Marvin Carlson has put it: 'The emphasis of such an approach shifts from the text to its function as a performative and communicative act in a particular cultural situation.'[10] Erika Fischer-Lichte has described this necessity in a distinct manner. She has stated that if you utilize performance as a cultural model you cannot analyse performances within a textual model, but only by studying performances as well as texts within a performance study framework.[11] The cultural turn and the perspectives gained from the cultural sciences encompasses that literature should be regarded as just one of many single expressions in an all-encompassing cultural cosmos where literature is a part of culture, being one of the variables that constitutes, upholds and changes culture.

Both Carlson's and Fischer-Lichte's statements suggest that by embracing performance theory one also has to embrace another and radically different concept of the literary text. This is actually a concept quite foreign to the traditional notion of the literary text within literary studies, since it radically undermines the romantic concept of an aesthetic of autonomy. So while we may gain something from performance studies, this theory also, ultimately, means that literature loses something of its exclusivity.

This becomes obvious when we compare the concept of textuality to the concept of performativity. While textuality denotes a set of single cultural elements that can be used to produce a structured 'web' of meaning, the term performativity encompasses an understanding of culture as event and action – as a dynamic process. The process of performativity is constituted and completed within framed cultural actions. As a consequence, what we gain should be a more profound understanding of the social function of literature, what we lose is that the literary text now is only a starting point for literary events and not the genuine object of critical study.

From the perspective of literary studies, performance theory can provide us with anthropological and social matrices for the analysis of the relationship between cultural actions and events. One of the really interesting things about performance theory is that it capsules a hope that 'performativity' may provide an access to comparative studies between European and non-European cultures, between high and low, as well as ancient and contemporary cultures.[12] This hope is however not based on the impact of performativity of literature, but rather on the contemporary understanding of basic human communication.

10 Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 14.

11 Erika Fischer-Lichte, 'Auf dem Weg zu einer performativen Kultur', *Paragrana: Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie,* 7:1 (1998), pp. 13–32, here pp. 26–27.

12 Velten 2002, p. 222.

Literature as a mode of communication

It is significant that contemporary communication theory is heavily influenced by the concept of 'performance'. Communication studies have traditionally used the terms 'transport' or 'flow' as metaphors to describe transmission, i.e. linear, one-way, models of communication. 'Communication' is here defined as the process by which the message is transmitted from the source to the receiver. However, as James Carey has noted, models of communication are not 'merely representations of communication but representation *for* communication'.[13] Communication-as-transmission privileges the position of the sender as the originator of meaning – as the legitimate source of meaning.

This of course is a perspective that literary studies knows very well, which I will return to shortly. Carey's point is however to emphasize the truly hierarchical and hegemonic bias of this model of communication and he rejects this model based on an understanding of the necessity of the receiver's active participation in the construction of meaning. This understanding has led to the development of *semiotic* models of communication – models that reject the assumption of the sender as a primary originator of meaning as well as that of transparency of meaning. In Carey's case, communication is seen as a 'the production of a coherent world that is then presumed, for all practical purposes, to exist'.[14] Communication is, Carey insists, impossible without culture.

One reason for this shift in communication theory is that the exchange of information and symbolic content in today's globalized world has become intensified. The process of cultural appropriation, sociologist John B. Thompson argues, is much more complicated than traditional communication theories have assumed. We live in a world where media products become disconnected from their context of production, but these products are in turn 'reimbedded in particular locales and adapted to the material and cultural conceptions of reception'.[15] This process of appropriation is necessary for individuals to be able to receive and make sense of the symbolic material transmitted by the media. One of Thompson's main arguments is that

> many of the key questions of culture and cultural analysis today can be defined in terms of the interface between the information and symbolic content produced and transmitted by the media industries, on the one hand, and the routine activities of everyday life into which media products are incorporated by recipients, on the other.[16]

13 James Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 15.

14 Ibid., p. 85.

15 John B. Thompson, 'Social Theory and the Media', in David Crowley & David Mitchell (eds), *Communication Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), pp. 27–49, here p. 44.

16 Ibid., p. 44.

Whereas Carney's and Thompson's Frankfurt School-style criticism is aimed at the media and 'the cultural industries', there are those who have formulated a more performative description of everyday life. One example is the British sociologist Paul Willis. In an ethnography of British youth, he examines young people's purposeful symbolic practices in daily life. Willis' work, inspired by both Michel de Certeau and Pierre Bourdieu, is based on an understanding that the aesthetic appreciation of art has undergone an 'internal hyperinstitutionalization'. This institutionalization entails that art has become disassociated with life, where form is ascribed primacy over function in order to separate 'art' from life and to separate those who (have been taught to) appreciate it, from the 'uncultured mass'. A part of this process involves making the relationship between aesthetics and education invisible. As a counter-concept to this hyperinstitutionalization, Willis launches the, essentially democratic, concept of a 'grounded aesthetics', denoting the process through which people make sense of the world: 'Everyday is full of activities which although not recognized as Art, share the same symbolic creativity as art practices.' According to Willis, symbolic work is more than just a part of everyday human activity, instead he sees it as 'an integral part of necessary work – that which *has* to be done every day, to ensure human existence' since it is through this 'symbolic creativity' we find our own place and identity. [17] Willis defines his concept of 'grounded aesthetics' as

> the creative element in a process whereby meanings are attributed to symbols and practices and where symbols and practices are selected, reselected, highlighted and recomposed to resonate further appropriate and particularised meanings. Such dynamics are emotional as well as cognitive. There are as many aesthetics as there are grounds for them to operate in.[18]

For Willis, 'grounded aesthetics' is a part of being human, as something which is always inscribed in the 'sensuous/emotive/cognitive' act of consumption and how a cultural artefact or action is appropriated, used and made into culture, and how we as humans constantly produce meanings and explanations in relation to a concrete situation. As is evident, his concept refutes such claims that creativity is located only in the act of production, also refuting the notion that consumption is merely the recognition of artistic intention. The effect of a cultural text lies not in its formal aesthetic, but is rather a function of mediation or a practice. Willis intentionally excludes the official arts, since they are, despite their potential symbolic richness, typically removed from the possibility of a living symbolic mediation by the formalist equation of aesthetics

17 Paul Willis, *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), p. 9; Idem., 'Notes on Common Culture: Towards a Grounded Aesthetics', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 1:2 (1998), pp. 163–176, here p. 173, has also defined this as 'the everyday application of symbolic creativity to symbolic materials and resources in context'.

18 Willis 1990, p. 21.

with artefacts. The performance aspect of Willis' grounded aesthetics becomes obvious with the aspect of consumption where value lies in the basis of use, rather than in inherent textual or authorial qualities.

The activity of reading and literary value

The implications of some of the tenets of performance theory should be stressed, since they radically undermine some of the foundations of the ways literary studies traditionally assesses and evaluates literature. One way is by highlighting the ways in which performance theory differs from many other literary theories by examining the basic activity of reading – itself an historical and cultural practice – by juxtaposing a traditional mode of reading with its performative counterpart.

Our mode of both appraising and reading secular literature today is still influenced by Enlightenment ideas. The idea of the individual as an autonomous, rational being was to a large extent sustained by the practice of reading. An equally important part of the Enlightenment heritage was the belief that literature was capable of reforming society. According to Certeau this myth of education 'inscribed a theory of consumption in the structures of cultural politics'.[19] At the same time, Enlightenment models of reading and writing have been dominated by 'scriptural imperialism' by hierarchizing these activities, where it is writing that produces the text, whereas reading is conceived as consumption – a generally passive activity. Modernity, still influenced by this conception, sought to view the author as being in complete control of the text, whereas the reader was merely a passive recipient.

To this day, the vestiges of this Enlightenment heritage linger on. Contemporary culture still hierarchizes the activities of writing and reading. 'Canonical' reading (both religious and secular) is to receive it from someone else. One of Certeau's main points is to challenge this 'assimilation of reading to passivity', as well as the system that distinguishes and privileges the producers (authors, educators) in contrast to those who merely 'consume'.[20] Instead, Certeau asserts, reading should be regarded as an activity of 'silent production'; the reader does not passively absorb what he or she reads, but instead reinvents, misunderstands, and adapts the reading to his or her own interests and concerns, making the text 'habitable'.[21]

This is quite the opposite to a more traditional, institutional mode of reading, which presupposes the semantic autonomy of a text, and where the reader defers to the

19 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, transl. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 166.

20 Ibid., p. 169.

21 Ibid., p. xxi.

text. According to Certeau, this is due to 'the social institution that overdetermines his [the reader's] relation with the text'.[22] From this perspective, the activity of reading is imbued with hierarchical relations such as teacher and pupil, producer and consumer. Certeau reminds us that historically, the church and other authorities created a semi-literacy by teaching people to read, but not to write. The power to write and, equally, the power to give an authorized interpretation was reserved for a social elite:

> By its very nature available to a plural reading, the text becomes a cultural weapon, a private hunting reserve, the pretext for a law that legitimizes as 'literal' the interpretation given by socially authorized professionals and intellectuals (*clercs*).[23]

What Certeau emphasizes is 'the silent, transgressive, ironic or poetic activity of readers'.[24] In the process he rejects both the notion of reading-as-consumption and reading as the imposition of an ideology on a society, simply because a group does not absorb what it consumes. According to Mark Poster, Certeau deploys a form of language theory in which consumption (the reading of literature-as-consumption, in this case) is equivalent to a production of meaning – a form of speech act.[25] Poster also emphasizes the hitherto neglected aspects of consumption concerning language, identity, imagination and desire, in which consumption (in which general media consumption is just one of many) can be regarded as an expression of one's identity and as part of self-construction, reminiscent of Judith Butler's understanding of gender.[26]

A case in point of the inherent hegemonic nature of canonical modes of reading is William B. Warner's rereading of the narrative of 'the rise of the novel'.[27] As Warner notes, the reading of novels purely for entertainment posed a challenge to the Enlightenment educational project. The problem hinged on dual concerns about the nature of reading as well as the reader. The Enlightenment project needed to codify and differentiate between different types of novels – between worthy novels and mere entertainment – and, similarly, between different reading practices – whether the reader was reading with the correct or the wrong kind of absorption, a question thematized in such diverse fictional characters as Don Quixote and Madame Bovary, who are both shown absorbed, and hence lost to the world, through their mindless, compulsive reading.

The eighteenth-century discussions concerning the reader, and fears voiced about

22 Ibid., p. 171.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., p. 172.
25 Mark Poster, *Information Please: Culture and Politics in the Age of Digital Machines* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 238.
26 Ibid., p. 242.
27 William B. Warner, *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684–1750* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

the uncritical, passive entertainment offered by the novel, and the ensuing development of methods to separate 'good' from 'bad' literature, illustrate Certeau's point.[28] The 'creation' of the worthwhile novel was intended to countermand early modern reading practices that 'threatened to short-circuit the Enlightenment educational project'.[29] For this reason, the institution of the novel as a literary type was, as Warner states, based on 'a complex tautological relay: a literary work must have a legitimate author, and the author is one who produces authentic literary works'.[30] At the same time, the legitimacy of the author and the authenticity of the work needed to be secured by literary criticism, reinforcing the nexus of the author and his work. The institutionalization of the novel became a reality only when select novels were associated with the cultural prestige of authorship and became the object and occasion for criticism. The elevation of the novel by establishing a connection to authorship, literary criticism, literary history, and a place within the educational system was, according to Warner, an attempt to tame early modern mass culture. But at the same time, this institutionalization has had a determining effect on how we conceive of the relationship between text, author, and reader, as well as the practice of reading itself.

One relatively recent example of an attempt to solve this Gordian knot is Rita Felski's work, *Uses of Literature* (2008), which employs a decidedly performative approach in its description of readers' 'modes of textual engagement'. According to Felski, this term denotes the 'multi-leveled interactions between texts and readers that are irreducible to their separate parts'.[31]

So, to what questions is performance theory an answer? What it emphasizes is a new understanding of the reader, now regarded not merely as a consumer but as a prosumer. Also, it implies a strong awareness of literature as action and event, framed by cultural, social, and political settings, and therefore highlighting questions of ideology, hegemony, and authority. It is perhaps fitting that the rise of performance theory seems to coexist with a time where the distinction between popular culture and 'high art' is seemingly on the verge of vanishing.

28 Jon Helgason, 'The Artisan and the Professional: The Origins of Modern Authorship', in Jon Helgason, Sara Kärrholm & Ann Steiner (eds), *Hype: Bestsellers and Literary Culture* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2014), pp. 203–219.

29 Warner 1998, p. 294.

30 Ibid., p. 278.

31 Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008), p. 14.

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Acknowledgements

This anthology brings together essays presented at the Lund–Nanjing seminars, two in Sweden (in Lund and Stockholm respectively) and one in Nanjing, in 2014. The seminars were made possible by the generous support of STINT (the Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education), the Royal Society of Letters at Lund, the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, and Nanjing University.

While working on this anthology, we have been helped by a number of people and institutions. First of all, we would like to thank the contributors, who encouraged us every step of the way, conscientiously met deadlines, and put a great deal of effort into their work. We wish to express our gratitude to all other seminar participants for their active participation and enthusiastic critiques. And a special thanks to Charlotte Merton for her keen and thorough copy-editing.

We wish to thank the Royal Society of Letters at Lund, for their kind assistance with the cost of the copy-editing of the text. Finally, we are grateful to the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities for accepting *Performativity and Literary Studies: The Lund–Nanjing Seminars* in their conference series, and for financing the publication of the volume.

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