Theatrical Performance: Illustration, Translation, Fulfillment, or Supplement?

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Theatre theorists of the romantic period agreed almost without exception upon the arbitrariness of neoclassic rules in general and the unities of time, place, and genre in particular. Rejection of these rules, however, by no means implied that works of art lacked organizing principles, and one of the first concerns of romantic theory was the discovery and description of such features. Shakespeare was invaluable to these critics as his success was clearly achieved without recourse to neoclassic standards, yet by the same token, he presented a new problem in the definition of the organizing principles by which his works could be defined. The German romantics proposed a solution which resolved this difficulty by metaphor: Shakespeare created as nature created; his works had what Schlegel called a "mysterious inner unity," like that which organized living beings, a unity which came to be called organic.

The literal development of this metaphor may be seen in Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, when young Wilhelm opposes the cutting of a Shakespearean play on organic grounds: "Wilhelm absolutely refused to listen to the talk of separating wheat from chaff. 'It is not a mixture of wheat and chaff,' he said. 'It is a trunk, boughs, twigs, leaves, buds, blossoms, and fruit. Is not each one there with the others and by means of them?''"¹ Later, as a producing theatre director, Goethe took a more pragmatic view, but others, like Tieck, continued to champion uncut Shakespeare on these same grounds. The struggle to restore and ultimately to present the plays in a text as close as possible to Shakespeare's original was a major issue for the nineteenth-century stage.²

Corrupted texts were hardly the most serious problem this new approach presented to dramatic theory, for implied within the organic view was a challenge to theatrical performance itself. If the Shakespearean texts (or any other plays) were indeed organic

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wholes, complete within themselves and with each part related to every other (an assumption that dominated critical consideration of these texts after romanticism), then why was performance necessary at all? Was it not, in fact, inevitably redundant? Conversely, if performance itself were regarded as an organic whole, must not every part of it be incomplete if considered by itself? How then could organic unity be claimed for the text, obviously a part of this larger whole?

Nor was organic unity the only aspect of romantic thought at work to make the relationship between dramatic text and performance increasingly problematic. If a great drama offered, as Samuel Johnson said it must, “just representations of general nature,” then that general nature could be assumed to be as readily available to the sensitive actor as to the original poet. When, however, pre-romantic and romantic theorists began to speak of individual genius and of the historical, geographical, and cultural relativity of aesthetic creation, they necessarily placed text and performance in a dialectic relationship. Genius being individual, the actor of genius would inevitably differ in artistic vision from the genius Shakespeare, and historical and cultural changes would cause further separation. Taine’s race, moment, and milieu guaranteed that even Shakespeare himself in changed circumstances would have expressed his genius in very different ways.

Faced with this dilemma, many critics since the romantic period have followed the path suggested by the early theorists of organic unity, focusing upon the original text, restored as accurately as possible, as the most direct expression of the original genius and dismissing performance entirely or relegating it to a distinctly minor position. Not infrequently, performance has been seen as not merely a distraction, but an actual menace, in that it threatens always to corrupt the original vision by “interpretation”—making it something other and (unless the performer is a genius superior to the originating dramatist) necessarily inferior. Charles Lamb’s “On the Tragedies of Shakespeare,” a well-known early essay expressing grave misgivings about performance, complains of “how much Hamlet is made another thing by being acted” and asserts that the “distinguishing excellence” of Shakespeare’s plays is what makes them “less calculated for performance on a stage than those of almost any other dramatist whatever.”

If performers insist upon presenting plays, critics in this tradition would urge them to “interpret” as little as possible, to “let the text speak for itself.” The less added in the way of gesture and visual ornament (both viewed very coolly by Lamb), the better—a staged reading is preferable to a fully staged production, but the solitary intelligent reader alone in his study remains the best of all.

What function is left for performance under these circumstances? For many such theorists, only what we might term illustration. Like the pictures in a nineteenth-century novel, a staging may add to the attractiveness of a play but not to its essence. Performance is often considered a bit vulgar, appealing to the sort of audience who would find a Dickens novel interesting only if it had pictures. This concept of performance as necessary illustration for the unlearned is an ancient one, first developed

at length in the Renaissance by Castelvetro, who insisted that drama was created for the pleasure of an “ignorant multitude” that could not be reached as readers but only as “spectators and hearers.”

Later critics who sought a more utilitarian drama than Castelvetro still found his view of the audience useful, since the accessibility of performance to the unlettered made it a potentially powerful instrument of instruction. An outspoken modern example of this attitude may be found in the opening of Strindberg’s preface to Miss Julie, which calls the theatre a “Biblia Pauperum, a Bible in pictures for those who cannot read what is written or printed.” Among this presumed audience Strindberg lists the young, the semi-educated, and women “who still have a primitive capacity for deceiving themselves and allowing themselves to be deceived.” Similarly, Croce sees the value of stage performance in its making the written text available in some measure “to those who cannot or do not know how to read it.”

The idea of performance as illustration has clearly contributed to the passion with which many experimental artists and theorists of this century have rejected the text, whose crushing dominance according to this theory relegated those who enjoyed theatre to an aesthetically lower class, and made an autonomous art of the theatre impossible. A pioneer in such rejection was Edward Gordon Craig, who in On the Art of the Theatre expressed a willingness to accept the proposition that Shakespeare’s plays had no need of staging. Hamlet, he says, was complete when written, and “for us to add to it by gesture, scene, costume or dance, is to hint that it is incomplete and needs these additions.” For that very reason, he argues, theatre should reject the traditional texts, to which performance can add nothing significant, and develop its own independent art of color, light, rhythm, and abstract form. A major part of the subsequent avant-garde, both in theory and in practice, has found Craig’s slicing of this Gordian knot an extremely attractive basis upon which to develop a modern art of the theatre.

At the same time, other modern theorists have attempted to maintain the idea of organic unity in the text without either reducing performance to the humble role of illustration or following Craig’s radical path of separation. One popular strategy has been to represent the text-performance relation with the metaphor of translation rather than illustration. An early twentieth-century champion of this approach was Stark Young, whose reviews and theoretical writings frequently speak of the necessary re-creation in theatrical terms not only of literature, but of other arts—architecture, costume, and music—when these become art in the theatre. Young writes: “a word, a sentence, spoken in the theatre has from that moment been recreated in new terms and must stand a new test. It is no longer a word on a page but is translated now into a new medium, the theatre.” This way of dealing with written text and performance has been recently widely employed in theatre semiotics, since

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* Lodovico Castelvetro, Poetica d’Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta (Basel, 1576), p. 29.
* Edward Gordon Craig, On the Art of the Theatre (Chicago: Browne’s, 1911), pp. 143–44.
many of its critical tools, derived from linguistics, seem highly appropriate to a view of performance and script as two different communication systems between which certain messages might be "translated." Marco de Marinis, for example, approaches the spectacle as a sort of "text," with its own signifying systems separate from those of the written text.9

The theorists who follow this approach are in part interested in elevating performance to a position of authenticity equal to that of the written text, but the parallel to translation does not entirely achieve this end. The more literally one takes the linguistic analogy, the more one foregrounds the script, the very thing these theorists are attempting to avoid. Their model is conditioned by the normal presuppositions of theatrical production, in which this so-called translation runs always from script to performance and not vice versa; such a situation necessarily privileges the script as defining the originary parameters of the translation and makes performance subservient not only temporarily, but artistically, since it is unusual indeed for a translation to be considered aesthetically superior to its original. Both Croce and Pirandello speak of performance as translation, but for both this term is a pejorative one. Pirandello remarks, "So many actors, so many translations, more or less faithful, more or less fortunate, but like any translation, always and necessarily inferior to the original."10 The translation analogy raises technical problems as well, since in fact the written text is "translated" into theatrical terms only in a very special sense. True, words are spoken instead of read, an important phenomenological shift, but they remain the same words. The original is in one sense changed, but in another it is literally embedded in its own presumed translation.

This brings us back to the paradox of organic unity in theatrical works. Unable to accept the idea of one harmoniously unified work of art embedded within another, the illustration theorists, as we have seen, essentially denied this unity to performance, making it a largely superfluous addition. The opposite position, however, has also been taken—that organic unity is achieved only in performance, and that the text as written is incomplete. This might be called the theory of performance as fulfillment, and it also has attracted many adherents in the present century. An early American champion of this position was Brander Matthews, who with his students carried on an extended debate with such Crocean theorists as Joel Spingarn. In England theorist-directors Ashley Dukes and Harley Granville-Barker similarly called for an end to the idea of a completed written text whose "rigid conception" could only stifle the essential creativity of other theatre artists. What made Shakespeare great, they argued in direct opposition to critics like Lamb, was not that his plays were complete as written, but that they were incomplete in a particularly imaginative way. He wrote "not to dictate, but to contribute; not to impose but to collaborate," creating characters and situations which would stimulate creative completion by actors, directors, and designers.11 At the same time in France, Henri Ghéon similarly asserted that the best dramatists provided a series of pregnant hints and stimulating fragments for the actor to make com-

plete on the stage. More recently, Anne Ubersfeld has spoken of the dramatic text as "troué," as a message consciously created with "holes" which are to be filled by another message-text, that of the *mise-en-scène*.

The two approaches to performance, as fulfillment and as illustration, pose opposite theoretical problems. The one privileges the unity of the written text, thereby undermining any parallel claims by performance, but the other, by privileging performance, similarly undermines the written play. Many fulfillment theorists frankly speak of the written text as both incomplete and inadequate. Some would allow the "holes" to be filled in by the theatrically imaginative reader, possessing something akin to what Francis Fergusson called "histrionic sensibility," but others would agree with Matthews that until the play physically appears on the stage it remains lacking in something essential, despite whatever satisfactions it may provide for the reader.

More recently another, and perhaps more fruitful way of expressing this problematic relationship has been offered in the writings of Jacques Derrida, particularly in the discussion of Rousseau and of the supplement in *Of Grammatology*. Throughout Rousseau's writings Derrida finds a tension, highlighting the supplement. All the manifestations of culture—art, image, representation, convention—were in Rousseau's eyes supplements to Nature, which in his neo-Platonic vision, were alien to, inferior to, and unnecessary to Nature's own totality. Rousseau's condemnation of the stage derives from this view of reality. Like those theorists who have considered performance as illustration, he attempted to deal with the staged play as "a pure and simple addition, a contingency." Rousseau, however, did not merely find this addition superfluous, but actively threatening to Nature's presence and plenitude (like the "dangerous supplement" of onanism) and hence to be stoutly resisted.

The main thrust of Derrida's critique is to demonstrate the impossibility, even within Rousseau's own terms, of seizing the natural in its presumed original, unsupplemented form. Everywhere in Rousseau, as Derrida demonstrates, uncontaminated Nature is revealed as a myth, a construct of desire. The supplement does not appear with performance's repetition, nor with the written text. Nature itself is always already involved with the supplement.

The concept of the supplement, as theorized by Derrida, provides a new way of thinking about several of the key paradoxes which bedevil theories of performance as illustration, translation, or fulfillment. Derrida insists upon two separate, somewhat contradictory, yet equally essential significations of this concept. First, the supplement "adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence." Second, it "adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void."

Performance illustrates admirably this double dynamic. Illustration theorists have stressed the first signification, performance as something "added on"—a supplement

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15 Ibid., 144-45.
joined to the already existing plenitude of the written text. Fulfillment theorists have stressed the other signification, of performance as supplement in the sense of filling a void, perhaps even a void not apparent until the performance was created. Like the supplement, performance is necessarily engaged in this subversion of the illusion of plenitude in the written text, and this is doubtless why Rousseau, and not a few subsequent literary theorists, have opposed it so determinedly.

Roger Laporte, in discussing the concept of the supplement, uses a well-known French dictionary as an example. When a supplement is published, it forces an adjustment of perception in both directions. Looking backward to the original publication, it reveals an incompleteness hitherto not apparent, and looking forward, its very existence suggests that further supplements are now possible and probably inevitable. This particular dynamic has much in common with theatrical performance: a play on stage will inevitably display material lacking in the written text, quite likely not apparent as lacking until the performance takes place, but then revealed as significant and necessary. At the same time, the performance, by revealing this lack, reveals also a potentially infinite series of future performances providing further supplementation. Thus is established the infinite chain of supplements which, according to Derrida, "ineluctably multiply the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself," the thing here being the original drama in its plenitude. This is why, as Tyrone Guthrie once observed, characters such as Hamlet could be interpreted in thousands of ways and yet there never has been nor ever will be staged "the ideal performance which completely realizes the intentions of Shakespeare or Molière or Eugene O'Neill or whoever else." The life of interpretation, as Foucault observes, is the realization that there is no primal coherent set of signs, but only interpretations.

This way of approaching the long-vexed question of the relationship between text and performance may seem at first disturbing, since it challenges the strategy shared by each of the other approaches, a strategy that tends to conflate organic unity and plenitude and to insist upon this quality for the successful aesthetic experience. Illustration theorists as a rule assume plenitude in the written text, fulfillment theorists in the performance, each thereby necessarily subverting the grounds of the other. Translation theorists attempt to suggest equivalent plenitude on both sides of the relationship, while the concept of the supplement makes the counter-assumption, denying plenitude to either written text or performance. This strategy, however threatening it may initially appear, can in fact provide a fresh pragmatic foundation for understanding the text-performance dynamic for both theatre practitioners and literary scholars. Many of the former have long developed their work with an intuitive understanding of Derrida's insight, but few have been willing, like Guthrie, to challenge openly the

19 Quoted in the translator's introduction by James Harkness in Michel Foucault, This is Not a Pipe (Berkeley: University of California, 1982), p. 12.
widely-held assumption of originary textual plenitude. Literary scholars, on the other hand, have often been uncomfortable with performance, fearful of its apparent tendency to undermine the object of their primary interest. The concept of the supplement avoids the problems attendant upon privileging either performance or written text, problems inevitably arising from each of the previous types of theories. Moreover it provides some understanding of why plays in fact can offer rich experiences in both study and on stage. At the same time, it leaves audiences and readers with the realization, potentially saddening but in fact filled with excitement and promise, that not all that this play has to say has been said, that other different but equally rich experiences with it are always possible. And isn't this after all what keeps the audience and the reader as well returning to favorite plays with ever-fresh anticipation, not of simple repetition of past pleasure, but of always evolving fresh constellations of experience?