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Autor: Vejodovsky, Boris
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The Act of Reading as Performance

Boris Vejdovsky

The word “performance” suggests the fulfilment of a contract, a promise, or a request.¹ It also designates an act which consists in carrying out a task, doing something according to a particular manner or ritual, or representing a character in a play. By reading the word performance, I want to cross the borders between its related yet differing meanings in order to see in what respect reading can itself be a performance, that is, the fulfilment of a contract, the carrying out of a task, the doing of something according to a particular manner or ritual, and the giving of a theatrical interpretation.

Even though my present discussion of reading could be translated to the reading of other texts, I shall focus on the reading of plays because it may be the form of writing where the tension between reading and performance is the most manifest. I would like to start my reading in a well-known place: a truism. It is a truism to say that a play is not written to be read but to be played, acted, performed. At the same time, it is impossible to perform a play unless the play is read.

It appears that – at least in the case of plays – reading is caught in a contradictory double-bind: on the one hand it cannot perform what the play is intended for; on the other, it must be performed for the play to exist as a play. In both cases, reading appears to be an incomplete, unsatisfactory act, which calls for completion and fulfilment. Plays not only call for reading – just like any text –, they also call for a complement to reading, the (stage) performance. From that point of view, reading, it might seem, is hardly a *performance*, insofar as contrary to what the etymology of the word suggests, it is hardly the “thorough completion” of a task or a contract. It does not fulfil the promise made to the reader or the request put on it by the text.

Considered thus, reading would be the interface between the text of the play – *Hamlet*, say – and its live presence on stage. The play would exist in

¹ “To perform” < ME *performen* < AF *performer*, alteration of OF *perfournir*, < *per-* (from the Latin) ‘thoroughly’ + *fournir* ‘to complete’ (*Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*).

at least two different states: its silent and inanimate form on the page, and its live and moving form on stage. The performance of the play would bring the characters “alive” on stage: we can see Hamlet or Ophelia act and we can hear them speak. To the silence of the printed page, the stage performance opposes the voices of the actors, just as the black and white marks on the paper are replaced by colorful costumes, lights, and sound effects. Between the silence and the absence of the page and the presence of the voices on stage, reading takes place. The reading of the text makes visible the prosopopoeia whereby a sign “Hamlet” is endowed with a voice and a human face. For this to happen, someone must read the text – before an actor can interpret the role of Hamlet and perform the play, someone must play the role of the reader, that is, perform the act of reading.

Reading occupies the space between the page and the stage. It transposes us from one to the other. The reading of the play crosses the borderline between these spaces that are also different realms of meaning – just like my interpretation of the word crosses the borderline between the different meanings of the word “performance.” Reading translates one meaning into another. The etymology of the word “translation” suggests that something is “carried over” a border, from one language into another, from one culture into another, and so on. This spatial movement is of course echoed in the etymology of the word “metaphor.” The translation operated by reading on the text makes of the performance of the play “an extended metaphorical equivalent of the ‘original’ text” (Miller, *Topographies* 316).

Thus, in an uncanny way, reading both unites the text and the stage performance and disjoins them, making them radically other. In this sense, it is a *performance* because it brings into effect a contract between the ritualized form of the text and that of the stage performance. Reading is the token of the contract; as in the old Greek ritual of contracts in which an object was broken into two and could be reunited as a token of the contract between two parties. The name of that object in Greek is *symbolon* from which our word “symbol” derives. Reading is performed as a ritual, or as a *symbolic* act because it stands as the token for the relation between the text and its stage performance. As a symbolic performance, it separates them and throws them together.

The “reader” is the person who stands between the live performance on stage and what appears to be, by contrast, the dead and inanimate marks on the page. The reader is the “agent-in-between,” the broker who negotiates the terms of an understanding between the two different realities. If we follow up the image of the silent and inanimate text and that of the live performance, it

appears that reading endows the text with life, and that the reader is an inverted Charon who ferries the “dead” characters of the play and the inert print characters of the page across the Styx to bring them (back) to life.

Stephen Greenblatt opens his book *Shakespearean Negotiations* with the sentence: “I began with the desire to speak with the dead” (1). Reading is a performance that seems to promise just that: to make the dead speak. It promises “to make a rendition,” to present, i.e. to make present what is absent and to make alive what is dead. J. Hillis Miller writes that prosopopoeia, the trope that endows an inert entity with a voice and a face, is a trope we must always resort to in order to read any sort of narrative; according to him, we cannot *not* endow with a face and a voice the characters whose narrative we read (Miller, *Pygmalion*). How is prosopopoeia linked to performance? Miller’s proposition might help us to understand the function of reading for the performance of a play, as well as the performance and performativity of reading itself.

The reading of a play is a performative speech-act because it makes the “performance” of the play happen. Even if it is not actually staged, a silent reading endows the text with at least one voice – that of the reader (Ong). It is impossible to read without “sounding,” at least mentally, the words of the play; by the same token, it is impossible *not* to project the characters into space to figure out their movements and gestures. Without that translation, the text of the play cannot make any sense. By translating it, reading endows the text of the play with sense. It creates thus both a continuity and a discontinuity: what we see on stage as a result of reading both is *and* is not “Hamlet.” In a review of a French translation of Walter Benjamin’s *Illuminations* Maurice Blanchot writes:

One supposes that each language would have a single and self-same kind of perspective, always with the same meaning, and that all the kinds of perspective could become complementary. However, Benjamin suggests something else: each translator lives off the difference among languages, even while pursuing, apparently, the perverse design of suppressing it. (Blanchot 70; my translation)

In the case of the play, what we see on stage “lives off” (to use Blanchot’s words) the difference between the printed characters and the characters on stage. Reading is a performative speech act that makes “Hamlet,” the character, appear on stage, but the result of that speech act is always unpredictable and the “Hamlet” on stage is never the “Hamlet” of the text. By carrying it over onto the stage, reading changes the meaning of the text, and while it seems to be the magical operation that allows us to speak with the dead, it

might be that it only sends us back the echo of our own voice in an empty crypt.

This discontinuity created by reading is dangerous for the text, for it suggests on the one hand that the play can only be understood when it comes alive on stage; on the other, it suggests that it never does come alive because we can never be sure that what we see on stage is indeed "Hamlet." If plays can only be made sense of in performance, it follows that no matter in what language the play is performed we always watch "translations" whose "faithfulness" we can never ascertain. Blanchot notes that

The well-translated work is praised in two opposed ways: one would not believe it to be translated, people say; or again, it is truly the same work, one rediscovers it again to be marvellously the same; but in the first case one effaces, for the sake of the new language, the origin of the work; in the second case, for the sake of the work, the originality of the two languages; in both cases something essential is lost. (Blanchot 71; my translation)

Most people will agree that a good performance of *Hamlet* (i.e. a good interpretation) has to make the spectators of the play discover or rediscover it while remaining faithful to the original: no interpreter is left free to invent a new *Hamlet*. As in Blanchot's reflection on translation, a performance of a play (sometimes the same performance of the same play) can be praised for opposite reasons. While we are ready to accept what is called in Protestantism a certain "latitude of interpretation," we nonetheless need to believe that there is such a thing as an "original" *Hamlet* which we can store in our bookshelves and return to in order to re-present it over and over and over again.

Reading as an act of translation of the text into performance questions the rightful status of that interpretation (is it good? is it justified?), but at the same time it poses the question of the originality of the "the text itself." Greenblatt appropriately observes that not only have textual historians "undermined the notion that a skilled editorial weaving of folio and quarto readings will give us an authentic record of Shakespeare's original intentions, but theatre historians have challenged the whole notion of the text as the central, stable locus of theatrical meaning" (Greenblatt 10). If our only access to the so-called original is an act of translation, then the rightful status of that original is forever moot.

Deconstructionist critics – de Man, Derrida, Miller – have explored this difficulty and concluded that not only do we always read in translation, but we always translate something which is also always already a translation. Even more traditional critics who refuse these views make use of them in so-

called "historical notes" that accompany most modern editions of Shakespeare's plays. Such notes indicate, for instance, that in *The Tempest* Shakespeare refers to *The Metamorphoses* or to *The Aeneid*; that Prospero's character might be based on a biographical deflection of Leonardo da Vinci, and so forth. In other words, the notes give us clues about the previous translations that intervened in the writing of the play and which are now to help us with our own translation. Of course, these clues give us access to no original state of the text, but only to more translations: Ovid's text is his interpretation of myths and legends, which are in turn an interpretation, and so on and so forth.

Where do we stop in this *mise en abyme* of translation? Two radically divergent answers can be given to this question. We stop when "we are satisfied that we have approximated the author's meaning" (Abrams 438), or we stop when we must, that is, when we find ourselves in an impasse where we no longer know how to interpret or translate because the interpretative process has led us into a maze of divergent and contradictory possibilities. The impasse may "only be veiled by some credulity making substance where there is in fact an abyss, for example, in taking consciousness as a solid ground. The thinly veiled chasm may be avoided only by stopping short, by taking something for granted in the terminology one is using rather than interrogating it, or by not pushing the analysis of the text in question far enough so that the possibility of a single definitive reading emerges" (Miller, "Ariadne's Thread" 74).

The two positions above come from the controversy between M.H. Abrams and J. Hillis Miller, two critics who embodied in America in the late seventies and early eighties the strife between so-called traditional criticism and deconstruction. Apart from the American critical debate and the academic skirmishing to which it gave rise, I believe that this divergence illustrates two radically different views of the world and of the performance of reading. In the first case, reading is a necessarily failing though partially satisfactory hermeneutic act because it "approximates" the author's intention, that is, the original status of the text. In the second case, reading is also admittedly an approximation, but not an approximation of an ideal original. While the former is a re-membering of an irretrievably lost original, the latter consists of the projection or the invention of a narrative myth that makes the ongoing process of translation possible.

When it comes to the interpretation of plays, this means that the reading of a play is an incomplete translation, an unsatisfactory interpretation that the staging of the play tries to complete. *Performance* as staging seeks to "thor-

oughly complete" the translation. But it is doomed to always remain partial and therefore can never be a *performance* in the thorough sense of the word but only another performance of the act of reading.

The "Hamlet" whom we see and hear on stage is not alive; he is a ghostly apparition suspended between the realms of life and death by the act of reading. What we have on stage is not Hamlet but an *avatar* of Hamlet. I do not mean that it is a "version of" Hamlet, which would suppose a free act of creation by the reader. The etymology of the word avatar suggests that it is a sort of tropological translation of a person. The word derives from the Sanskrit *avatara*, 'descent,' from *avatarati*, 'he descends,' from *ava-* 'away' + *tarati*, 'he crosses over.' (I believe that it is worth bearing for a while with these complicated genealogies of meanings, for they are very much related to what we are doing here.) *Hamlet* [the text] may be the origin of the "Hamlet" we see on stage and that was brought there by the act of reading; but the Hamlet we see is never the descendant of the text. It is its avatar, which means that it descends *from* the text but *away* from the text. Reading takes Hamlet from the text to transport him onto the stage, but Hamlet never makes it across the Styx. He remains suspended between the two shores by the always incomplete translation.

How are we to judge the performance of reading, then? If it fails to ascribe life, if every reading is only misreading and every translation only mistranslation, can it be true that, as Miller writes in *Topographies*, "'Getting it right' no longer has the same urgency when it is seen to be impossible"? (337)? The fact that reading can never be a performance in the sense of a "thorough completion" of the task that is assigned to it must not be understood negatively as the counterpart of an ideal act of reading which we have lost and can now only "approximate." The prefix *mis-* in "misreading" or "mistranslation" must be read not as an indication of failure but as indicating that reading introduces difference into the performance of the text. What is performed through the act of reading is neither exactly "Hamlet," nor an "approximation" of Hamlet. Therefore the text can never father its rightful descendants; the descending line of the text always goes astray and produces avatars of the text.

Hamlet (the text) begets "Hamlet" but this implies stepping over the direct genealogical line. French has a wonderful word for this: *forligner* – to go astray, to lose, or break the line. This apparent failure of performance in which "Hamlet" does not come alive on stage is precisely the positive act that keeps *Hamlet* [the text] alive. In a pattern reminiscent of the genealogies of the Old Testament, the act of reading ensures that there is, as it were, a fair

amount of endogamy and exogamy in the begetting of Hamlet on stage. Too much of the former would lead to a weakening of bloodlines, while too much of the latter would lead to such thinning of Hamlet's blood that we would no longer recognize him on stage. The incorporation of difference through mistranslation allows *Hamlet* to survive and perpetuate itself. Hamlet lives neither on the page nor on stage; he/it lives in the performance of the act of reading.

Let me turn to Blanchot's translation again to conclude. He writes:

In truth, translation is in no way destined to efface the difference of which it is on the contrary the play: constantly it alludes to it, it disseminates it, but sometimes in revealing and often in accentuating it, it is the very life of this difference. It finds there its august duty, its fascination also, when it happens proudly to bring close to one another the two languages by a power of unification that is proper to it and that is like that of Hercules bringing together the two shores of the sea. (Blanchot 71; my translation)

Our reading of the text is a performance in which we constantly try to cross from the unstable shore of the text to the shore of its representation on stage. But we never get there. Despite our Herculean efforts, we are left between the two and we never quite manage to bring together the two shores of the sea.

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