

The Performance/Thought of Roland Barthes

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Life is not an academy, still less a military academy; instruction has to find a way to become art.

—Geoffrey H. Hartman¹

This is an essay about how hard it is to write an intelligent essay about performance. I have not been able to digest completely into neutral prose two partial voices who intrude on this discussion. Roland Barthes, who models a critical persona that pretends to unite the two voices who shout from different sides of the mind, has no need of my approval, and this is not a polemic in his favor. It is, rather, the record of a spectator's response to Barthes, a spectator who says to himself "I can do that; I *must* do that." May not performance be liberated from text, as Barthes has liberated literature from language? Is not literature the performance of language?

PROLOGUE

The gap between performance and thought is alarming. If theory seeks the structure of thought and art its movement, then a thoughtful performer must bestride not only that gap but its double as well. Performance is an exponent of thought's movement, raising it to a new power, a moving movement. The theory of performance is therefore a kind of cubist undertaking, forcing onto the plane of writing facets that cannot be viewed from the same point: structure, movement, and a moving structure of movement on the same canvas. It can't be done, except by sleight-of-hand. The theory must perform itself. The gap is not of distance, but of site; the two faces look away from each other, joined behind the eyes. The bar that joins them is not a theory of performance, but a performance/theory.

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Every artist should be a theoretician, if only in self-protection. Every theoretician should be an artist, if only as an incentive to responsibility. Perhaps criticism, on the other hand, should be left to amateurs.² To bring art and theory together, performance and thought, seems an obvious thing to do. They are so close—for with hindsight on finished work we see that the two are homologous, superimposed on each other in an almost perfect match. For so many centuries we have tried to say, silenced sometimes by repression and sometimes by the knots in our tongues, not that the play *speaks* thought, but that it *is* thought (and the thought which it speaks too often obscures the thought which it is). But as play and thought hover before us, feeding each other like pulmonary and nervous systems, mere aspects each of the other, we are deceived. We cannot see that the two systems float in different planes, no more connected than the layers of organs on the cellophane sheets of an encyclopedia's anatomy diagram. The homology is real, but there is no process to connect its terms, separated as they are by a barrier of time which, though not impenetrable, always seals itself behind us. I can think, or do, but never both. In the midst of play, I cannot even see its thought; thinking its thought, I cannot play. And only hindsight, glossing over the particles of time in an incoherent edenic blend, makes it seem that I lived two moments at once.

Must I choose between doing and knowing what others have done? To evade that costly choice, you must know that the synthesis you seek is neither fundamental nor natural, that its reality is no more no less than a convincing performance; and you must know that the role is a double one. Behind the scenes, like Poche and Chandebise,³ you will dash from one farcical door to another, dressing on the run. The scholar/artist flops like a stranded fish between two intimately antagonistic roles which, if the dance is nimble enough, appear to be their own and each other's causes. Tea for two.

Barthes acts as though the gap between performance and thought could be closed, pointing us always toward what has not been said (or what is not aware of its own speech), toward marginalia, toward popular culture, toward the interactions of multiple codes of meaning, toward the print of the reader's body in the reading of text, toward the print of his own reading body in writing. Description is to art, he said, as paraphrase is to the poem. Literature is "the deception of language": it is what escapes, a mark of what still cannot write its name. Artistic theory must therefore extend language to what it cannot yet encompass, breaking present barriers in favor of a larger circumference.

Perhaps it will some day be possible to describe all literature as the art of disappointment, of frustration. The history of literature will then no longer be the history of the contradictory answers writers have given to the question of meaning but, quite the contrary, the history of the question itself.⁴

Literature disrupts language. To say "a cat is a reptile" is to speak falsely; to say "a rose is a flower" is to speak truly. But to say "my love is like a red, red rose" is to speak neither truly nor falsely, but rather, between two ideas which linguistic space holds far apart, to point out the invisible yet resonant

hyperspace shortcut. Can there be such a thing as a theory of literature? or, even more problematic, as a performance/theory? a translation which does not betray? Theory tries to speak, while performance fails if it can be spoken. Barthes changed the idea of what it is the theorist must speak. His writing became a "structuralist activity," a new poetics "which seeks less to assign completed meanings to the objects it discovers than to know how meaning is possible, at what cost and by what means."⁵ Thus he transformed the purpose of theory from exegesis to functional analysis, and its method from description to simulation. "Structuralism is essentially *an activity of imitation*"; which is as much as to say that the theoretician is to be recognized not by a certain kind of difference from the work on which he comments, but by a certain kind of similarity—"there is, strictly speaking, no *technical* difference between structuralism as an intellectual activity, on the one hand, and literature in particular, art in general, on the other."⁶ The performer can think, provided that thinking is pretty much like performing. The thinker can write without betraying his subject, if his writing performs.

"If by some 'structuralist activity' we make a simulacrum of art, is not that simulacrum a work of art itself? and does not this new work, constructed to do something rather than to say something, require a thinker to recuperate its meaning into language? Are we not merely postponing the dilemma of Criticism?"⁷

And another voice stage left asks whether there is no value in postponement.

"Is the critic's consummation to be approved of, merely because he so devoutly wishes it? Is the closure of meaning entailed in 'criticism' worth the price? Closure will always exclude what brought you to the theatre."

As I follow Barthes into the wilderness, therefore, I am not alone, for Poche and Chandebise follow me. I cannot shut my ears to an argument that rages within my own head. The future is at stake, and access to the promised land where performance and thought shall meet.

FEAR OF MARGINS

But on the day when the Philosopher's word would justify the marginal jests of the debauched imagination, or when what has been marginal would leap to the center, every trace of the center would be lost.

—*The Name of the Rose*⁸

From right and left the insults fly. The voice on the right calls the voice on the left a vagrant and a whore; left calls right a thug and a parasite. This is no polite argument: sounds of a scuffle, of fisticuffs, of breaking glass, of cabinets careening down spiral staircases. Blow of a truncheon on bone. In truth, the body is vagrant, a sly enemy to each empire of thought, an excessive source, a reminder that thought cannot think itself. Discourse, therefore, even that enlightened critical discourse which acknowledges its debt to the body, must suppress that body to keep the peace and carry on its business.

From the left, quiet for the last few moments, a very rude noise.

. . . the fart and the belch would claim the right that is only of the spirit, to breathe where they list!⁹

Though Aristotle recognized the soul of the drama when he saw it, he was so embarrassed by its body that he refused to discuss it.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the discovery of a copy of his vanished book on the Comedy puts Umberto Eco's fourteenth-century monks into a murderous frenzy. The justification of comedy unleashes all that the learned cleric has labored to suppress: an unholy trinity of fool, idler, and glutton. The actor, a corpulent ambassador from the margins of text, always brings a new piece to the puzzle we thought we had solved.

If he were God, he would keep reversing the victories.¹¹

The academy is, therefore, sworn to protect us from the performer, and from language's excess; but the performing artist (or the artist, performing?) is always sworn enemy to *this* form of language.

The very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new, thereby creating an unheard-of speech in which the sign's form is repeated but never is signified.¹²

For the timelessness of art is anarchism. The eternal work of art is a work that bursts all languages, always.

I would define the poetic effect as the capacity that a text displays for continuing to generate different readings, without ever being completely consumed.

—Umberto Eco¹³

In order to burst a language, of course, a literary work must first be admitted to it. But an actor speaks without language, summoning import like a black magician from nothing. "Take my wife—please." His place in the commonwealth of letters is, to say the least, contestable.

University departments and learned disciplines have been founded on the idea that, while art is mysterious, someone must think clearly about it. Though the artist may speak with a privileged eccentricity, the critic, we generally think, must speak with a clarity which proves that his language carries no prejudice.

Language . . . is quite simply fascist.¹⁴

Barthes accuses the critical voice of perpetrating, with its myth of clarity, a fiction which lacks the courage to admit itself as such.

"The 'mystery' of art is a myth! Art should expose itself, and put the critics out of work! Criticism lies when it pretends to innocence! The only honest writing about art is a writing that partakes of art's subjunctivity,¹⁵ a writing that shows itself to be 'made up,' a writing which *does* more than it *says*, a writing which—like the actor who would not have us really believe he is Hamlet—PERFORMS!"

Sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt.

—Longinus¹⁶

“Yet after the flash and the clap of thunder, effective as they are, I must repair the roof. What else am I to do? If I deserted my post, you would have to step in and do my job for me. Don’t forget that this division of labor is in your interest. I stay on the ground so that you can fly.”

THE MORAL ISSUE OF PARAPHRASE

No literature in the world has ever answered the question it asked, and it is this very suspension that has always constituted it as literature.¹⁷

The text named Roland Barthes, refusing in the presence of the question its homage to the answer, acts out the role of literature. It rejects the sovereign seat offered the critic, from which an omniscient subject might observe the art object. For Barthes, there can be no innocent sight. “Knowledge is a taking of sides,”¹⁸ reading is a writing,¹⁹ objectivity is an ideology in bad faith.²⁰ Truth is a performance, not a discovery, and when the performance is well-received, there can be no disproof. “There is no other proof of a reading than the quality and endurance of its systematics.”²¹ Interpretation is an answer, performance a question. The artist knows that questions are interesting and answers boring. Questions get us moving, but answers stop us in our tracks.

Different words, different thing.

—Herbert Blau²²

We were taught in school that a good poem cannot be paraphrased. Poetry is not in what you say but in how you say it, not in content but in reaction of content on form, not in the words but in the concrete collisions of the words. Every explication of the poem is therefore false to it *as poetry*, and true to it only insofar as it is reduced to something else.

“The urge to explain the poem is an urge to degrade it. A true response to the poem does not reduce: it is a simulacrum, not an explanation. It demonstrates understanding not by saying what the poem says, but by doing what the poem does.”

“But poetry is only a special case of literature, a privileged field for eccentricities that would not be tolerated in the sober light of prose. Poetry is language’s Feast of Fools, proving the very norms it so flagrantly violates. Be sensible! Most language, and most literature for that matter, *can be paraphrased*. And when we do so, we are *not* degrading it. On the contrary, we favor it by displaying its meaning. Beware! o beware the lies of strolling players! They would have you believe that all literature is poetic!”

“POETRY IS NO DEVIANT! Poetry is the pure and original case of literature! And literature is precisely that use of language which escapes paraphrase.”

The performer now claims that his work is poetry, and unsusceptible to paraphrase. If he is right, then like the poet he may claim to be his own law.

DOGS, CHILDREN, AND WORDS

Through most of the theatre's history, performance has served as a ground for the figure of the agon. If the theatre is a mirror held up to nature, the holder has been hidden behind it, and we have seen what was written rather than the writing. Yet only in those moments when the glass became clear, and we saw the performer, did the stage come into focus. Only then did we see the actor in his pure function of disappointment. It is no wonder that we repress that primal scene; there are no words for it.

"Am I accused of repression? Not content with the privilege of his idleness, with my license of his eccentric behavior, he would turn me out of the temple, would he? As if his rights were not founded by my speech! as if his sanctuary, his theatre, were not built on my command! Without my advocacy, he will wander outside the city gates!"

"And precisely when, pray tell, does the actor appear on the stage of criticism? only *when there's nothing else to write about*. Only when the text is so debased, so antique, or so obscene, that a great actor carries it gasping and retching on his back. In the age of the actor-managers, or in the *commedia*, the circus, the music-hall, the vaudeville. Only then does the public fail to forget that it comes to the theatre to see acting. Beware, my fellows! o beware of words! for, like dogs and children, they steal the stage from you."

OPENING THE TEXT

In a sense, no performance of a text can be as complete as my imagination of it, but that sense is mere tautology, for performance is what incompletes the text. Imagining the text, I confine its meaning, but performing the text, I open the cage again. The actor is a signifier who slips, sometimes on a banana peel, before the signified, interrupting the line of sight which, if completed, would terminate the text's activity.²³

A signifier is what best holds out against the immediate and conclusive establishment of a meaning: the texture of a voice, the resonance of music, the construction of a stage image.

—Patrice Pavis²⁴

The thought of performance, when all is said and done, can survive only in a space opened up between the arousal and the completion of meaning, between that which means and that which is meant, between the arc of a finger and "Come here." Manipulating (perhaps eccentrically) Ferdinand de Saussure's articulation of the sign,²⁵ the performance/theorist separates significance from meaning, maintaining that a thing can be a *signifier* even if we do not yet know what is *signified* by it. The quality of being a signifier, considered separately from what is signified, is called *signifiance* by Barthes²⁶ and by Julia Kristeva.²⁷ The signifier opens the mystery with a question, while the signified closes a question with the answer.

"Down in the sweatshops of the stage, the back face of the sign passes from hand to hand in its naked state. The lewd icon spreads its legs and

invites your penetration, available to your unknown lust—and his—and hers—and theirs. You pay for your own meaning, planted in the actor's body, and when you have it you are sad again. You will return to re-enact the crisis of your truth, but it is you who are faithful—the actor is a whore. Marry him, and he must mock the vows or leave the stage, for though he represents desire, it is you who desire. Inspiring, he expresses nothing, but draws the breath with which you speak.”

“The sign is a unit! Inseparable! A signifier is such only if it signifies *something*. A signified is signified *by something*, which we call a signifier. You can no more have one without the other than I could drop this shoe without dropping . . . ”

“Observe his investment in *the other shoe*. Afloat in a sea of signification, he must beach himself on a signified island or drown. I, on the other hand, can tread water forever. I thrive on suspense. Do re mi fa so la ti. . . ”

Meaning, therefore, is in the spectator's, not the performer's mind. The actor, not yet wedded to a meaning, is like a screen on which many meanings might be projected, and he does not much care which. His signifiante is that quality by which he is able to signify, that attractive difference which draws the eye.

When an arm is raised, there is raised in us a parallel dramatic state.
—Jacques Lecoq²⁸

“Before you hear what I say, you must *want to hear me*.”

“The ‘performance/theorist’ only confirms the ancient prejudice against actors: he says that an actor *must* be promiscuous, that his job is not to speak truth or to keep promises, but to seduce.”

“An actor refuses to be made honest. His training is a rigor of availability. Peeling the mind away from meaning as we would the soul from mammon, we scourge the flesh till it accepts its pleasure. We ring the body's changes, justified by grace rather than by truth.”

“If you disavow truth, how can I defend you? I must speak your truth for you, whether you like it or not.”

If literature is the disappointment of language, then performance is the disappointment of literature. Performance refuses to complete itself; the performer inhabits a realm of the signifier, and performance/theory must penetrate that realm, taking great care not to commit the performer's “signifiant” differences to any fixed correspondence with particular signifieds.

“What is signified by F-sharp? Silly question. Yet if F-sharp were not signifiant, the instrument would not be built to play it.”

Before semiological vocabulary became current in the theatre, there were no intellectual tools for discussing the essential aspect of performance, for the

actor's work could not be discussed without interpretation, and therefore without reduction to discourse. Now that semiology has pried off the sign's lid, it may be possible to write performance/theory.

THE PRECISION OF DIFFERENCE

These spiritual signs have a precise meaning which strikes us only intuitively but with enough violence to make useless any translation into logical discursive language.

—Artaud²⁹

“I lift my arm to *here* rather than to *here*, and you pay attention.”

“I pay attention to your meaning, not to your gesture. Who cares about your arm?”

Artaud pointed the way toward an idea of “meaning” that cannot be rendered in language.

“Now I've caught you at your own confusion. For it is, after all, a *meaning* that you claim. But how can there be a ‘precise meaning’ without a ‘language’? The answer is, there can't.

“Artaud, your patron saint, called for a ‘language of signs’³⁰—and gave the whole game away. Your revolt is shallower than you think. There is no attack here on language *per se*; you merely wish to substitute the limitations of a gestural language for those of learned discourse.”

“Don't pay attention to Artaud on this matter. He was confused. No one taught him semiology. He knew not what he saw, because he had not split the sign.”

“But he marvelled at the sense of meaning, the ‘admirable intellectuality’, in the Balinese dance.”

“Exactly! the ‘sense of meaning,’ but not the meaning itself. As a Westerner confronted with this exotic object, he knew not the code by which these gestures could be resolved into meaning. And he saw that that resolution would be, on balance, a loss.”

Artaud's moment is the moment before meaning, when we attend to the acting rather than to what is acted, to the song rather than to what is sung. We pay the performer—when we pay him—to nurture that moment. But to the critical temper, an actor's skill must always seem a sin, venial perhaps, but nevertheless needy of forgiveness.

Whenever it happens that I am more moved by the singing than by the thing that is sung, I admit that I have grievously sinned and then I wish rather not to have heard the singing.

—St. Augustine³¹

Yet the theoretician of performance *must hear the singing*. Missionary that he is, it is the singing he must save. He can only catch it in the throat of the

singer. He must enter the artist's body, going where that body goes and doing what it does. He must himself know what it is to scrawl graffiti over text.

“Deprived of meaning, Artaud saw the fecundity of gesture, ready to burst with meaning that has not yet been born. It's a matter of timing.”

That moment at the top of the breath, when there is something to say though we know not yet what it is, belongs to the actor. When the thought is out, then we understand; but the actor is already gone, drawing the next breath.

“No language of gesture can speak for me. In performance, meaning is not a professional concern.”

The *sign*, as the performer speaks of it, is not a word in any language, for it lacks double articulation.³² Artistic signs are only singly articulated. Many sign-systems (like the musical scale) are articulated into atomic terms (twelve tones) which the linguist might call *phonemes*. But though these tones may be combined into phrases, sections, and movements, those second-order structures never attain a stable meaning: *this* particular chord cannot be counted on (outside of *this* work) to represent love, or Siegfried, or my cat. The musical syntax, in other words, never terminates in *monemes* (words). We never quite know what it means. So music never achieves a second articulation: it is not a language. Nor should we know what the actor's body *means*. The performer works beneath language, and somewhere between the two articulations, tending toward the second while never letting go of the first in order to attain it. The first articulation is the source of the second, a nutrient soup out of which it is formed, but which always threatens to dissolve and reform any particular language. Systems of gesture, insofar as they remain performance systems rather than languages, do not mean, but arouse meaning.³³

“You must learn to make fine distinctions: as fine as the difference between now—and *now*. And this distinction above all you must learn—between text that speaks and text that makes you speak for yourself.”

The actor is not so much a speaker as a guardian of the power of speech. He presents two faces to two different interests. To those invested in an established critical discourse, he presents a mask of destruction—the barbarian against whom the gates are locked. To those who long for a language that asks new questions, he presents a mask of recreation—an Arthur returned from Avalon, legitimizing a new old order. It's all in the timing.

Performance/theory articulates the precision of things. On the stage, nothing doesn't matter.³⁴ Language is swamped in signifiers that never knew themselves as such until they were—just this moment—tossed in from the wings. Things perform: the direction and tint of a light, the shape of a movement, the precise moment of an entrance, the texture of a sleeve, all sing louder than the words. A theatre that denies this desires its own death.

THE INADVERTENT SELF

One's unsuccessful acts are the most successful . . . one's failure fulfills one's most secret wish.

—Jacques Lacan³⁵

What we mean is what we cannot say. Our words are discreetly mocked by the behaviors on which they are broadcast. The content of our discourse is faulted by eruptions of form, which made and can remake on a whim the crust of language. Roland Barthes sang the accidental songs of things (clothes, food, cars, popular art) exposing the power of the sign to function through contradictory meanings. In winter, wine "is associated with all the myths of becoming warm, and at the height of summer, with all the images of shade, with all things cool and sparkling."³⁶ Its "significance", shared in the eyes of citizens with the most diverse interests, binds a society together, transmuting extremities to moderation, "making a weak man strong or a silent one talkative," giving the worker his "heart for the work" and the intellectual his "virility" for the same.³⁷ Acting *as if* wine possessed such qualities, Frenchmen bind each other in the performance of its myth.

Yet wine is only one of uncountable myths. Behind discourse, the carnival stripper throws her clothes in all directions, while the speaker thinks it is for him the crowd whistles. Never looking over his shoulder, a tool of mythology, he speaks in ignorance, though not in innocence.

"Must I pursue you in the wrestling ring and the roller derby? the carnival and the street fair? the music hall? the burlesque house? the ball park? the sitcom? Shall I never find you on the Shakespearian stage?"

"If you want to speak in my name, you must follow me to places that will turn your nose. Performance is more honored in the stage's disgrace than in its triumph: when great words leave the stage in disgust, acting assumes its title."

The poem sounds sublime because we are holding the poet's underwear.

THE BRECHTIAN REVOLUTION

For art to be "unpolitical" means only to ally itself with the "ruling" group.

—Bertolt Brecht³⁸

Who has bought the amoral force of the signifier? It does not work for free. Forms are not neutral: they sold themselves in the streets before the play began, and the bidding was fierce. Political power is the power to decide how reality is signified, and the stage, an answerable form of the problem of knowledge, is a model of truth conditions. Its conventions determine the kinds of things that can be taken for true. Brecht's importance as a theoretician, therefore, lies not so much in his revolutionary politics as in his insight into the power of form for revolution or for reaction. The change that comes from devising new answers is superficial: to ask new questions, we must see by new rules, knowing that we make the rules up as we go along.

To transform himself from general passive acceptance to a corresponding state of suspicious inquiry [man] would need to develop the detached eye with which the great Galileo observed a swinging chandelier. He was amazed by this pendulum motion, as if he had not expected it and could not understand its occurring, and this enabled him to come on the rules by which it was governed.³⁹

Barthes exposed the semiology in Brecht, who pulled the sign's lid off and released into our common air the strangeness which it had contained.

Brecht divined the variety and relativity of semantic systems: the theatrical sign does not appear as a matter of course: what we call the *naturalness* of an actor or the *truth* of a performance is merely one language among others.⁴⁰

Strangeness explodes the obvious. *Verfremdung* exposes common sense cowering in its polka-dot underwear; we are reminded that we have alternatives. Recovering the activity of sight, we can then participate again in the construction of signs and of language. It is most unfortunate, therefore, that *Verfremdung* is rendered in English as "alienation," a word implying loss. "Alienation" may correctly render the sense of Marxian *Entfremdung*, that tragic loss by which "the object which labor produces—the product of labor—confronts it as an *alien being*, as a *power independent* of the producer."⁴¹ But the tone and the direction of *Verfremdung* are opposed to that loss: *Verfremdung* is the moment in which the viewer reappropriates his previously alienated labor of meaning: not "Alas!" but "Halt!"; not a sigh but a rebel yell. The *verfremdet* reader, in Barthes's words, can "give nature a new apportionment," and base this apportionment "not on 'natural' laws but, quite the contrary, on man's freedom to make things signify."⁴² *Verfremdung* is a festival for the repossession of mind.

"Brecht's moral role is to infiltrate a question into what seems self-evident,"⁴³ for clarity can enslave us. Brechtian perception is active, creating what it sees; a theatre of the scientific age must reward that activity. A Brechtian theatre must expose its own apparatus, reminding us that we ourselves make the leap from one half of the sign to the other, and that theatrical practice is always questionable. "There is no such thing as an 'essence' of eternal art."⁴⁴ The "falsely obvious" is only another ideology, serving someone's interest: "the foundation of the bourgeois statement of fact is common sense."⁴⁵ "The evils men suffer are in their own hands . . . the world can be changed": by thought.⁴⁶ But this can only happen if there is "a certain distance between signified and signifier: revolutionary art must admit a certain arbitrary nature of signs."⁴⁷ Otherwise, the artist only perpetuates an accepted code of "truth," of the "nature" of life or of the human being. The artist therefore must think politically, for if he does not know whom he serves, he will serve the worst. "What is involved here is essentially a morality of invention."⁴⁸ Who knows the nature of human life? Who has the right to claim to know? Any revolutionary faith must believe in transformation, the reshuffling of signs.

The continuity of the ego is myth. A man is an atom that perpetually breaks up and forms anew.

—Brecht⁴⁹

THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

A text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.

—Barthes⁵⁰

Why do you buy tickets? What do you expect? There is a joke about the actor who "played Hamlet" (and lost). Does the joke mean that he "got it wrong"? I think not—did you know "the answer"? If you knew the answer already, why did you go to the theatre? To demonstrate your superiority?

"If you really believe you are better off in the theatre of your mind, by all means stay there. But tonight you bought a ticket. I don't think you came here to give an examination. You came here hoping against hope that you would be surprised. You may not know this, of course. If I surprise you, you may be offended. Yet you came here because truth no longer pleases you, and you want something more. You can't stay away, can you?"

The actor who played Hamlet and lost is an actor who failed to exceed his text. Correct but boring. There is, of course, such a thing as simple incompetence, but it is easy to spot, and does not sour the stomach like mediocrity. What we ask of the actor is not that he hold the text in place (the printed page does that very nicely, thank you) but that he keep it moving toward us, for he serves the text's destination, not its origin. So he must view the author's critical assassination with interest. He cannot pretend neutrality. His public, no matter what it thinks it wants, has never excused any neglect of itself. And hard pressed as he is to keep the stage alive, an actor has only the text (not its author's intention) to help him. No matter how hard he stares at the page, he sees only the words. But staring long enough, he begins to see how the words want to move *under his eyes*, and that movement is his *scenario*.

What does Barthes have in mind as he longs for "the death of the author"?⁵¹ a political change, a delivery of power from a certain kind of "critic" into the hands of a certain kind of "reader." In fighting for the right of fresh reading, Barthes has become the legitimate revolutionary chief of actors, who belong to the ancient profession of fresh reading. The actor opens up his text, and passes it to us before it closes again. He practices the widest possible aperture of the sign, while the author's "intention" (or the director's "concept") functions chiefly as a sphincter. The author whom Barthes wants to kill is the author who (I assure you) turns over in his grave when *you* speak in a way that *I* don't like. The appeal to the author was always already false, even on the drama's first day, for when vegetables begin to fly, it is not the author who receives them in the face. The only authors who ever ruled the stage were also actors.

. . . the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophany . . .⁵²

The academy makes for itself the scarecrow of an author, to protect its garden of text; the clerics flap its arms to scare away the vagrant birds who would read the text directly. But the actor has always read scripture in the

vernacular. He has direct access to the Word. When the dummy is buried, the text will breathe freely again. Then we will unfasten its corset, the law will relax, and "the anonymous body of the actor" will reign supreme: his flesh "granulates, it crackles, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss."⁵³ Make no mistake about it: in liberating the actor from the author's false authority (and from the falsar authority of the director, his lieutenant),⁵⁴ we liberate the text itself, which never wants to stop speaking, even to the person who penned it. "My own words," wrote Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "take me by surprise and teach me what I think."⁵⁵ The historical author dies to his text in writing it, each word pushed onto the page like the bottled message pushed out to sea. The words still his are the words not written yet.

WILD MAGIC

Everyone then his own magician, and no man a magician alone.
—Ihab Hassan⁵⁶

Socrates taught us to draw divisions, and to expel the poets from the republic of discourse; but performance/theory seeks to recover a mode of thought older than Socrates, in which assertion and imagination have not yet been split apart. We aspire to a discourse that will bridge poetry and philosophy, performance and thought. The actor informs us that we must let words run naked again, splitting the sign, dismantling the double articulation of language to reveal the shifting signifiers beneath, precise differences marked by that power which they never quite spend. With an authoritative gesture, I hold these available icons open for penetration.

Words should hang like lovely fruits on the indifferent tree of narrative.⁵⁷

The thought of Roland Barthes performs, and his criticism sings with the Syren grain of the voice: an imminent criticism, it hopes to reflect for a moment the movements of that flesh which it inhabits.

Literary language . . . hereby appears as an enormous and sumptuous debris, the fragmentary residue of an Atlantis where the words, overfed on color, on shape, in short on *qualities* and not on ideas, shine like the splinters of a direct, unthought world which no logic can manage to dim.⁵⁸

EPILOGUE: THE CRITIC'S LAMENT

"It would be easy for the critic to let himself be seduced, not only because the theory that Barthes inspires aims at a theatrical and therefore seductive effect, but also because Barthes put his finger on the critic's weak spot. In our envious secret fantasies of power, we penetrate so deeply into the poem that we become the poet: the critical work is a vicarious satisfaction of the urge for a forbidden pleasure. Now they tell us that the proscription is repealed. We can safely come out of the closet with the poet's clothes on.

"An attractive prospect. But in considering it, the critic is deciding whether to remain a critic. Knowledge by impersonation is a knowl-

edge that cannot be spoken—and what sort of a critic would it be who could not speak?

“You don’t suppose, do you, that we enjoy this? The work of criticism is no picnic, though it is carried on in the proximity of a festival. It is the critic who works through your holidays, keeping open the office which others have forsaken. As long as he wishes to keep his position, he may not go out the door, though he may observe the carnival through the curtains of an office window.”

To write about performance is no easy thing, yet it must be done; and if it is not done well, it is not done at all. One must turn discourse against itself. One must allude to thought that escapes language. One must pay homage to exactly meaningless differences. Can you tell, at any given moment, which of my contestant voices is speaking this essay’s end?

“The price of explanation is to lose the thing explained: the promised land is always over the horizon. To live in the work’s presence, a power of astonishment is required, astonishment that flickers with weakness of the flesh, yet allows that critical glimpse of the promise, while the mist lifts for a moment in the afternoon.”

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Notes

1. *Criticism in the Wilderness* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1980) 2.
2. The word “criticism” cannot be convincingly separated from “judgment,” usually unfavorable, of a completed work of art. See Michael Kirby, “Criticism: Four Faults,” *The Drama Review* 18 (1974) 59-68. This activity, at its best a glorified form of reviewing, has always served other purposes than art, and might as well be left to those whom we will not mistake either for artists or for theorists.
3. The famous double role from George Feydeau’s *A Flea in Her Ear*. See John Mortimer’s translation (London: Samuel French, 1968).
4. “The Last Word on Robbe-Grillet?,” *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Chicago: Northwestern UP, 1972) 203. While Howard translates *déception* as “disappointment,” it may also mean exactly what it looks like to the English reader. “Peut-être sera-t-il possible un jour de décrire toute la littérature comme l’art de la déception. L’histoire de la littérature ne sera plus alors l’histoire des réponses contradictoires apportées par les écrivains à la question du sens, mais bien au contraire l’histoire de la question elle-même.” (“Le point sur Robbe-Grillet?,” *Essais critiques* [Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964] 204).
5. “The Structuralist Activity,” *Critical Essays* 218. “. . . qui cherche moins à assigner des sens pleins aux objets qu’elle découvre, qu’à savoir comment le sens est possible, à quel prix et selon quelles voies” (“L’activité structuralist”, *Essais critiques* 218).
6. “The Structuralist Activity” 215. “Le structuralisme est essentiellement une activité d’imitation . . . il n’y a, à proprement parler, aucune différence *technique* entre le structuralisme savant d’une part et la littérature en particulier, l’art en général, d’autre part” (“L’activité structuraliste” 215).
7. The word “criticism” is so corrupted by its history (see previous note) that one flinches as one uses it, even though there is sometimes no acceptable alternative. Let me say here, in explanation of several senses in which the word may appear in this essay, that there is an honorable Criticism, having to do with the analysis and comparison of works of art, which verges upon Theory, the construction of models of thought which illustrate and inform works of art, but which sometimes needs to be separated from it.
8. Umberto Eco, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt, 1983) 475. This, of course, is not the statement of Eco himself, but of a character in the narrative: Jorge, who is about to destroy the only extant copy of Aristotle’s *Comedies*.
9. Eco 477.
10. “The tragic effect is quite possible without a public performance and actors; and besides, the getting-up of the Spectacle is more a matter for the costumer than the poet” (“Poetics”,

trans. Ingram Bywater, *Rhetoric and Poetics of Aristotle*, ed. Friedrich Solmsen [New York: The Modern Library, 1954] 232-33).

11. Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977) 46-47. "S'il était dieu, il renverserait sans cesse les victoires" (*Roland Barthes* [Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975] 51).

12. Roland Barthes 114. "Le travail même de l'amour et du langage est de donner à une même phrase des inflexions toujours nouvelles, créant ainsi une langue inouïe où la forme du signe se répète, mais jamais son signifié" (*Roland Barthes* 118).

13. *Postscript to "The Name of the Rose"*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt, 1983) 8.

14. "Inaugural Lecture, College de France," trans. Richard Howard, "A Barthes Reader," ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) 461. "Mais la langue, comme performance de tout langage, n'est ni réactionnaire, ni progressiste; elle est tout simplement: fasciste" (*La Leçon* [Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978] 14).

15. Victor Turner has characterized rituals as having a subjunctive rather than an indicative voice. "The subjectivity of ritual" is "that part of it which expresses supposition, desire, and possibility, rather than actual fact" ("Frame, Flow, and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality," *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, ed. Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello [Madison, WI: Coda Press, 1977] 36).

16. *On the Sublime*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1899), repr. *Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, ed. Bernard F. Dukore (New York: Holt, 1974) 77.

17. "The Last Word on Robbe-Grillet?" 202. "Aucune littérature au monde n'a jamais répondu à la question qu'elle posait, et c'est ce suspens même qui l'a toujours constituée en littérature" ("Le point sur Robbe-Grillet?" 203).

18. "Taking Sides," *Critical Essays* 168. "Savoir est une partie engagée" ("De part et d'autre," *Essais critiques* 172).

19. "The more plural the text, the less it is written before I read it" (*S/Z*, trans. Richard Howard [New York: Hill & Wang, 1974] 10). "Plus le texte est pluriel et moins il est écrit avant que je le lise" (*S/Z* [Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970] 16).

20. "Lansonism," for instance, "is not to be blamed for its prejudices but for the fact that it conceals them" ("What Is Criticism?," *Critical Essays* 257). "Ce ne sont donc pas ses partis pris que l'on peut reprocher lansonisme, c'est de les taire, de les couvrir du drapé moral de la rigueur et de l'objectivité" ("Qu'est-ce que la critique?," *Essais Critiques* 254).

21. *S/Z* 11. "Il n'y a pas d'autre preuve d'une lecture que la qualité et l'endurance de sa systématique" (*S/Z* 17).

22. *Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theatre* (New York: Performing Arts Jour. Pub., 1982) xviii.

23. Cf. Lacan's "incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier" ("The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious," *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan [New York: Norton, 1977] 154). "La notion d'un glissement incessant du signifié sous le signifiant s'impose donc" ("L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud," *Écrits* [Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966] 502).

24. *Languages of the Stage*, trans. Jill Daugherty (New York: Performing Arts Jour. Pub., 1982) 200.

25. *Course in General Linguistics* (London: Fontana, 1974). Kier Elam has described the Saussurian sign as "the semiotic unit, whose signifier or sign by vehicle is the work itself as 'thing,' or ensemble of material elements, and whose signified is the 'aesthetic object' residing in the collective consciousness of the public" (*The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* [London: Methuen, 1980] 7).

26. Barthes associates *signifiance* with his "third meaning" of an image ("The Third Meaning," *Image-Music-Text* [New York: Hill & Wang, 1977] 54). Stephen Heath, in his "Translator's Note" 10, calls it "the un-end of possible operations in a field of language."

27. In *Semiotikké: recherches pour un sémantanalyse* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1969) 313, *signifiance* is "le surplus de travail excédant la chaîne signifiante."

28. "Mime-Mouvement-Théâtre", trans. Kate Foley and Julia Devlin, *Yale/Theatre* 4 (1973) 118. This document, which serves as a manifesto for his school, is often distributed in French and English by Lecoq himself at his seminars.

29. "On the Balinese Theatre," *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove, 1958) 54. "Ces signes spirituels ont un sens précis, qui ne nous frappe plus qu'intuitivement, mais avec assez de violence pour rendre inutile toute traduction dans un langage logique et discursif" ("Sur le théâtre balinaï," *Le théâtre et son double* [Gallimard, 1964] 81).

30. *The Theatre and Its Double* 61. "Un langage de gestes" (*Le théâtre et son double* 81).

31. "Confessions," X, 33, *Augustine of Hippo: Selected Writings*, trans. Mary T. Clark (New York: Paulist Press, 1984) 150.

32. See André Martinet, *Elements of General Linguistics*, trans. Elisabeth Palmer (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1960) 22-24.

33. Here I must pay tribute to Susanne K. Langer's pre-semiological but enormously influential explanation of the difference between music and language. "Since there is no assigned meaning to any of its parts, it lacks one of the basic characteristics of language—fixed association,

and therewith a single, unequivocal reference It is not a language, because it has no vocabulary" (*Feeling and Form* [New York: Charles Scribner's, 1953] 31).

34. Herbert Blau often reminds me that *nothing*, if articulate enough, definitely *does* matter—absent Banquo. This observation only goes to prove, though, that *nothing*, not even "nothing," doesn't matter.

35. "The Freudian Thing", *Écrits* 122. "L'intention la plus innocente se déconcerte à ne pouvoir plus taire que ses actes manqués sont le plus réussis et que son échec récompense son vœu le plus secret" ("La chose freudienne," *Écrit* 410).

36. *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972) 60. "Il exalte les climats, quels qu'ils soient, s'associe dans le froid à tous les mythes du réchauffement, et dans la canicule à toutes les images de l'ombre, du frais et du piquant" (*Mythologies* [Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1957] 76).

37. *Mythologies* 58-59. "Il est avant tout une substance de conversion, capable de retourner les situations et les états, et d'extraire des objets leur contraire: de faire, par exemple, d'un fable un fort, d'un silencieux, un bavard Pour le travailleur, le vin sera qualification, facilite démiurgique de la tache ('coeur a l'ouvrage') Par le vin, l'intellectuel s'approche d'une virilité naturelle" *Mythologies* 74-75).

38. "A Short Organum for the Theatre," *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964) 196.

39. Brecht 192.

40. "Literature and Signification," *Critical Essays* 263. "Brecht a pressenti la variété et la relativité des systèmes sémantiques: le signe théâtral *ne va pas de soi*; ce que nous appelons le *naturel* d'un acteur ou la *vérité* d'un jeu n'est qu'un langage parmi d'autre" ("Littérature et signification," *Essais Critiques* 259-60).

41. From "Alienated Labor," trans. T. B. Bottomore, *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. Eugene Kemenka (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1983) 133.

42. "Literature and Signification" 263. "*Changer les signes* (et non pas seulement ce qu'ils disent), c'est donner à la nature un *nouveau partage* (entreprise qui définit précisément l'art), et fonder ce partage non sur des lois 'naturelle', mais bien au contraire sur la liberté qu'ont les hommes de faire signifier les choses" ("Littérature et signification" 260).

43. "The Tasks of Brechtian Criticism," *Critical Essays* 75-76. "Le rôle morale de Brecht est d'insérer vivement une question au milieu d'une évidence" ("Les taches de la critique brechtienne," *Essais Critiques* 88).

44. "The Brechtian Revolution," *Critical Essays* 38. "Il n'y a pas une 'essence' de l'art éternel" ("La révolution brechtienne," *Essais critiques* 52).

45. *Mythologies* 11, 155. "Le notion de mythe m'a paru dès le début rendre compte de ces fausses évidences Le fondement du constat bourgeois, c'est le *bon sens*" (*Mythologies* 9, 243).

46. "The Brechtian Revolution" 38. "Les maux des hommes sont entre les mains des hommes eux-mêmes, c'est-à-dire que le monde est maniable" ("La révolution brechtienne" 52).

47. "The Tasks of Brechtian Criticism" 75. "Il est donc nécessaire qu'il y ait une certaine distance entre le signifié et son signifiant: l'art révolutionnaire doit admettre un certain arbitraire des signes" ("Les taches de la critique brechtienne" 87).

48. "The Tasks of Brechtian Criticism" 76. "Il s'agit ici, essentiellement, d'une morale de l'invention: ('Les taches de la critique brechtienne' 88).

49. Willett, "Conversation with Bert Brecht" 15.

50. "The Death of the Author," *Image-Music-Text* 148.

51. "The Death of the Author" 148.

52. From *The Pleasures of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, *A Barthes Reader* 413. "Le langage tapissé de peau, un text où l'on puisse entendre le grain du gosier, la patine des consonnes, la volupté des voyelles, toute une stéréophonie de la chair profonde" (*Le plaisir du texte* [Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973] 105).

53. *The Pleasures of the Text* 414. ". . . pour qu'il réussisse à déporter le signifié tres loin et à jeter, pour ainsi dire, le corps anonyme de l'acteur dans mon oreille: ca granule, ca grésille, ca cresse, ca rape, ca coupe: ca jouit" (*Le plaisir du texte* 105).

54. It is naive to think that directors can liberate text, that Serban's revision of Chekhov or of Moliere, Gregory's of Lewis Carroll, or Brook's of Shakespeare, changes anything about the servitude of the actor and of text. A director may assume the mantle of the absent author, but this only makes him the commander of the Guard. To liberate the performer *from* text is to liberate the performance *in* text, and that is no easy matter. The revision of an *auteur* is, historically speaking, no revolution but merely a palace putsch, a squabble over who shall speak for meaning. Only the actor can give text its own voice back, knowing that text is a singer, not an orator. To argue the actor's role in this liberation is the stuff of another, much longer, essay.

55. "Problèmes actuels de la phénoménologie," *Actes du colloque internationale de phénoménologie* (Paris, 1952) 97, trans. Alan Bass, in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978) 11.

56. *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1982) 258.
57. "Chateaubriand: Life of Rancé," *New Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980) 48.
58. "Chateaubriand: Life of Rancé" 47-48.