Texts in Action/Action in Texts: A Case Study in Critical Method

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The jacket notes for Michael Goldman's *Acting and Action in Shakespearean Tragedy* advertise that the book represents a "new approach to the study of action in drama." The generally good reviews that the book has received suggest that, by and large, the critical community has accepted this assessment.[1] Harry Berger, Jr., whose work differs from Goldman's in significant ways, nonetheless asserts that he follows Goldman in employing this new critical approach, which he dubs "textual dramaturgy" (*Textual Dramaturgy*, 135). Goldman attempts to formulate an interpretive strategy that features textual action over semantic content. By analyzing this attempt closely, I hope to clarify both the project's importance and some of its difficulties, and to place it within a broader critical perspective. Goldman's book, published in 1985, is a paradigmatic critical document of its time. It employs a Janus-faced strategy that looks both forward and back, manifesting exciting possibilities, but at the same time resting on assumptions that prevent those possibilities from being realized. Hence, the book offers itself as a valuable case study in interpretive methodogy, one that can help illuminate the critical landscape ahead of us as we enter the '90s.

The basis of Goldman's approach is simple and elegant. The approach takes as its point of departure the theatrical performance of Shakespeare's texts. Specifically, Goldman is concerned with the problems that specific roles pose to actors. Goldman's primary contention is that the difficulties an actor encounters in trying to do what the text requires reflect the difficulties that the character encounters within the text itself. As Goldman explains, "each great Shakespearean role seems to have its defining set of acting problems and rewards, and these bear a very suggestive relation to the larger business of the play. The problems which confront the actor who plays Hamlet, for example, are very similar to those which confront the Prince in making sense of life at

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Elsinore" (13). Thus, the actor's process becomes integral to the meaning of the play itself. The problems an actor encounters are *acting* problems, in other words, problems involved in executing the actions of the role. It follows, then, that the plays must also be concerned with acting problems, with questions concerning the definition and execution of actions. Goldman's final twist is to suggest that the texts engage the concept of action thematically, that the plays are *about* action. To put it in a nutshell: Goldman's book investigates the interplay between the performance a text requires and the questions about action the text raises.

Goldman's methodology follows logically from this approach. Since he examines plays from the standpoint of individual characters, he chooses six tragedies with eponymously defined protagonists--*Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra and Coriolanus*--and centers his analyses around these protagonists. This procedure recalls the practice common fifty years ago, epitomized by the work of A.C. Bradley, of centering the interpretation of a play around a discussion of a character, a practice that fell out of favor with New Criticism and which persists today primarily in certain styles of psycho-analytic criticism (such as Adelman's). Goldman embraces this practice without critical self-consciousness or acknowledgement of its potential limitations. Below, I will suggest that this procedure does not merely mitigate the force of Goldman's readings of the texts, but inhibits any attempt to represent the phenomenon of action that is central to his project.

While the focus on individual characters is old fashioned, the project itself is quite timely, and aspects of it can be seen in other recent criticism and theory. David Grene, in a book published after Goldman's but that does not cite it, begins to sound very much like Goldman when, in a discussion of *Richard II*, he suggests that "there is a necessary fusion of the actor who is presenting Richard who is writing and acting the play for himself" (41). However, Grene's fundamental concern is the way Shakespearean characters often represent themselves as actors, an aspect of the often noted self-referential theatricality permeating Shakespeare's plays.

Unlike Grene, Goldman's objective decidedly is *not* merely to investigate the ways Shakespearean texts use theater as a metaphor. Two key aspects of Goldman's work represent important critical trends. The first is his interest in the concept of action. Many critics have shown interest in trying to understand and describe action in literary texts, and in making action, rather than image or argument, the focus of interpretation. Altieri's influential book *Act and Quality* exemplifies this concern with action:

> As my examples became more fully dramatic, the model of coherence they entailed was neither semantic nor, strictly speaking, conceptual, but instead required a scenic or imagistic sense of how actors might behave. We rely on a sense of action types, that lead back to dimension terms and require as their ground of intelligibility

> a grammar developed precisely by meditation on the nature of actions and of possible choices in contexts. (Altieri 91-92)

Of course, Altieri is still concerned primarily with action as it is represented *in* the text. A second aspect of Goldman's work is his interest in the interaction between performance qua performance and textual meaning. Such an interest in performance surfaces in very different forms in much current criticism, such as in Stephen Greenblatt's assertion that "Shakespeare's tragedy reconstitutes as theater the demonic principle demystified by Harsnett," and that "the force of *King Lear* is to make us love the theater, to seek out its satisfactions, to serve its interests, to confer on it a place of its own, to grant it life by permitting it to reproduce itself over generations" (127). Harry Berger Jr. also grants performance an essential, though very different, role in the production of meaning: "The fury, splendor, and frustration can be experienced together only in performance; we have to feel the presence and pressure of the theatrical template, submit to its fair designs, in order to measure both *its* power and the shadowy counterforce of the power it represses" ("Psychoanalyzing," 229). However, the dialectic relationship between performance and text that Berger proposes is radically at odds with the relationship that Goldman proposes.

The impetus behind Goldman's desire to privilege the actor's confrontation with the text is perhaps closest to that behind the reader-response analyses that peaked a little over a decade ago, especially as practiced by Stanley Fish. To Fish, the act of interpretation is not the means to an end, but *is* the meaning of the work.[2] For example, rather than suggesting that *L'Allegro* describes the pleasure that arises from an absence of responsibility, Fish proposes that "the experience of *reading* the poem is itself such a pleasure, involving just that absence; for at no point are we held responsible for an action or an image beyond the moment of its fleeting appearance in a line or a couplet" (118). The poem does not merely describe a certain kind of experience, but engages the reader in that experience. If Fish exemplifies a "reader-response" approach to criticism, in *Moment by Moment by Shakespeare* Gary Taylor exemplifies a "spectator-response" approach.[3] For both Fish and Taylor, critical interpretation involves closely following an imagined encounter between reader and text (in Taylor's case, the performance text) as the encounter unfolds in time. Goldman's approach explicitly encompasses a spectator-response approach when he suggests that he is interested in exploring *three* kinds of action, "the actions the characters perform; the action of the audience's mind in responding to and trying to possess the events it watches; and finally the actions by which the actors create and sustain their roles," (12) actions that he refers to as praxis, theoria, and poiesis, respectively.[4] What makes Goldman's approach original and important, however, is his concentration of the last of these action-types, poiesis. Like Fish and Taylor, Goldman's approach focuses on the moment-by-moment interaction of an interpreter with

a text. Goldman's brand of "actor-response" criticism, however, is closer to Fish's approach than to Taylor's in its suggestion that Shakespeare's texts do not merely describe certain actions; the very process of interpreting the texts for performance will engage the actor in those actions.

Each essay contains a core analysis that satisfies the form suggested by Goldman's critical model. The actor playing Hamlet must find a shape to Hamlet's seeming disparate actions, just as Hamlet must make sense of tangled events and actions; the actor playing King Lear must be able to express ever mounting levels of pain just as Lear must learn to cope with increasingly horrible events; the actors playing Antony and Cleopatra must convey a sense of greatness despite ignoble behavior, and Antony and Cleopatra also strive to project a sense of greatness that their behavior belies. Of course, Goldman never claims that the power of his paradigm is in its ability to generate generalizations of this kind. Such generalizations neither provide evidence for his model--at such a level of abstraction any play can be twisted to fit virtually any paradigm--nor do they provide especially striking insights about the plays. The promise of the paradigm is not as an engine to produce inductive principles, but as a strategy for discerning complex but elusive dynamics between text and performance.

In practice, however, Goldman's paradigm seems unable to sustain a detailed discussion, and moves in and out of focus. Each essay makes an effort in the beginning to establish an argument that uses as a point of departure some problem that the text poses for the actor, but very quickly the focus strays and the actor fades from the picture. If one opens to the middle of any essay, one will encounter what appears to be a perfectly conventional analysis of a literary figure in a fictional world.

For example, toward the beginning of the chapter on *Othello*, Goldman tells us that "the actor who plays Othello must find the cause of his cause" (47). Two pages later we are told that the actor must determine exactly at what point Othello becomes jealous (49). These assertions are virtually the only ones in the essay that make specific claims about the actor's performance. At a later point, Goldman refers to the actor when he explains how Othello creates an impression of exoticism by employing certain images. Goldman's argument inventories these images in detail, and concludes that "the action of the performer in the moments of successful exoticism allows us to experience Othello's personality as something palpably constructed" (62). Since the only action that has been specifically described is *Othello's* use of images, the use of the actor as nominal subject adds nothing to the content of Goldman's claim. The remainder of the essay considers the characters' (primarily Othello's) actions, feelings, and perceptions within the fiction--"Iago's words have filled Othello's mind with pictures of Desdemona and Cassio naked together" (53)--and draws general conclusions about Shakespearean tragedy--"by Othello at the latest . . . [Shakespeare] has arrived at a new understanding of the role of imagination in tragic action" (64).

Goldman's impulse to move away from the actor's terrain may stem from a realization that that terrain is hopelessly slippery. In order to engage his hypothesis that much of the text's meaning comes from what the text requires of the actor, Goldman must be able to identify what those requirements are. However, Goldman does not establish independent criteria for determining the text's requirements. Not only doesn't he provide general criteria, Goldman does not even offer ad hoc support for most of his specific assertions about an actor's needs. He explains that "to keep Coriolanus from being simply comic means finding the passion hidden in the chill rhetoric, the richness of spirit beneath the many signs of poverty" (150). But why should an actor necessarily want to prevent Coriolanus from being comic? And even if he does, is passion a guarantee against comic effect? Doesn't Malvolio become comic precisely at the moment he becomes passionate? And even if passion were one sure means to stifle comedy, would it necessarily be the *only* way; couldn't a clever actor, perhaps, find another, equally effective way? When Goldman asserts that the actor playing Hamlet will need to find a throughline of action for the part, he calls upon "the entire history of *Hamlet* in performance" to back up his claim (23). Yet he only cites one specific performer, John Gielgud, to represent that history. Moreover, he never explains why he rules out the possibility that a given actor, who has not internalized the Stanislavskian need for a "super-objective," might relish precisely the diversity and the unpredictability of Hamlet's actions.

Goldman sometimes tries to ground his claims about the text's demands on the actor by staying close to the seemingly objective, formal surface of the text. He observes that Coriolanus' speeches often exhibit a tortured syntax, and suggests that this syntax forces the actor to show that Coriolanus is thinking and that he cares about what he says. Almost any Shakespearean text, however, could provide evidence of some kind that the speaker is thinking and cares about what he says. More importantly, this inferential leap from the syntax to state of mind is very wide, and an actor could choose any of countless ways to account for and use the complex syntax. Perhaps, for instance, it reflects his indifference to, or even deliberate mockery of, fine rhetoric, or an anxiety, or distrust, concerning his ability to communicate.[5]

The difficulty Goldman encounters sustaining this kind of analysis is all the more significant because he is a sensitive critic who has earned deserved recognition. His experience as both a poet and an actor manifests itself in the wealth of striking observations he offers about Shakespearean language, such as his suggestion that the words that dominate Lear's speech "seem to overflow, like an unexpected, wet animal, coming out of a river to snap or lap or slaver at you, or to block your path as the line goes by" (80). His difficulty does not derive from a faulty application of his chosen critical method, but follows inexorably from the method itself, and it is precisely for this reason that his work constitutes a valuable case study. Goldman strives to pursue an interpretive strategy that rests on the recognition that dramatic texts are *scores*

for action, and as such are an integral part of a potential theatrical event. Such a strategy is key to collapsing the gap between dramatic theory and performance practice, and so for the field of dramatic criticism as a whole, the stakes are high for its success.

I propose that Goldman's project is handicapped by an inadequate model of action. While he makes a general reference in his introduction to the literature on the philosophy of action, his text avails itself of none of the assistance that literature might provide. "We need not lose ourselves in the philosophical niceties," he explains (6). Indeed, his reference to the work done by philosophers seems to function primarily as a way for him not to define his notion of action rigorously for himself. As a result, he lacks a terminology to describe actions precisely, to distinguish between different kinds of action and their corresponding conditions of satisfaction, or to distinguish actions from other phenomena (especially from intentional states, such as attitudes, desires and intentions). Goldman presents "to snatch into thickness" (*Macbeth*), to "radiate nobility" (*Antony and Cleopatra*) and to "contemplate" (*Hamlet*) all as action descriptions on a par with one another, and with such concrete actions as "opening the door."

Unfortunately, the one time Goldman draws on the philosophical literature specifically, he misreads it. In his discussion of *Hamlet*, Goldman describes J.L. Austin's distinction between stages, phases, and stretches:

> By *stages* he means the mental preparation that goes into the action--decision, planning, etc. *Phases* comprise the discrete physical doings that combine to make up an action of any size--the separate strokes of paint in the action of painting a wall. The *stretches* are the successions of effect, ultimately very remote, that any action may have. A political assassination in Serbia involves Europe in a war which leads to a revolution in Russia without which *Dr. Zhivago* would never have been written. (18-19)

Thus for Goldman, stages, phases and stretches are three categories which describe the unfolding of an action, corresponding to the formation of an intention, the physical execution, and the results. In fact, for Austin, stages, phases and stretches describe, not three steps in one process, but three completely different kinds of distinctions one can make when discussing actions. Austin's term *stages* captures Goldman's reading of the three terms together, describing "the machinery of the act--the intelligence, the appreciation, the planning, the decision, the execution and so forth" (Austin 201). *Phases*, by contrast, describe the various physical actions that are performed sequentially as part of a complex action, for example each stroke of paint that goes into painting a picture. Finally, *stretches* are different descriptions that one can use to describe any given action. Thus, to use Goldman's example, one could describe the political assassination of the Archduke Francis

Ferdinand as an act of firing a gun, or of killing, or of avenging the honor of Serbia, or of starting World War I. Note that the concept of *stretches* is not coextensive with that of an action's *results*. *Stretches* are different levels of description for an action, some of which will be related to each other causally--e.g. firing a gun *causes* a man to be killed--and others will not--e.g. killing a man does not cause an act of revenge but *constitutes* the revenge. Moreover, not all results are stretches. One could not describe the assassination as "writing Dr. Zhivago," even though *Dr. Zhivago* was written as a result of the assassination.

By misreading Austin, Goldman not only loses two potentially useful distinctions (phases and stretches), but much worse, he loses the very idea that when discussing actions, there are a number of different kinds of distinctions to make, that action is a multi-dimensional concept. He is left with a misleadingly reductive model of the one dimension he does extract from Austin: instead of Austin's deliberately open idea of stages (recall Austin tosses off five examples just for starters), Goldman was left with a rigid three-step model.[6] Still, this distortion of Austin is the only conceptual apparatus Goldman introduces to describe actions with any specificity. And since in practice such stages are difficult to separate cleanly (as Austin recognized), Goldman abandons even these distinctions, replacing them with a term of his own--"spectrum"--that describes the entire life of an action. Ironically, Goldman uses Austin to justify exactly what Austin is trying to counter: vague and slippery discussions of action.

While Goldman might have been able to make productive use of Austin's stages, phases and stretches (especially the latter, which more recent literature refers to as "accordion" descriptions[7]), the Austinian concept that would have proven invaluable to his analyses is the distinction between locution, illocution and perlocution that Austin sets forth in *How to Do Things with Words*. Goldman's conception of action provides no way to discuss the specifically performative use of language, and thus provides no way of distinguishing between what language *does* and what it *means*. Without a way of describing illocutionary force, Goldman must do all his work with reference to syntax (as in his discussion of *Coriolanus*) or vocabulary (as in his discussion of *Macbeth*). In a book that focuses on action as traced in dramatic language, this limitation is devastating. To observe the kind of specificity that the notion of illocutionary force would lend Goldman's project, compare Fish's analysis of *Coriolanus* (in "How to Do Things with Austin and Searle") with Goldman's.[8] Goldman is totally vulnerable to Derrida's attack on Austin (as Austin himself is not): he reduces action to just another kind of meaning.[9]

I do not mean to suggest, of course, that one can not discuss action in Shakespeare without using the conceptual scheme provided in *How to Do Things with Words*. Indeed, the primary thrust of Fish's exercise is to demonstrate the limitations of using speech act theory to interpret individual literary works. What I am suggesting, however, is that some kind of conceptual

framework, some developed notion of how to identify actions and describe their force, is necessary. And whatever this framework may be, to have any hope of success it must take into account something that Goldman does not: context. Goldman's focus on individual characters removes action from its social context, stripping the drama from the dramas. The essays almost invariably conjure up a strange scene wherein an actor confronts a text in a void and tries to ascertain what the formal properties of the text tell him or her about the character. Even in the chapter on *Antony and Cleopatra*, the only one in which Goldman has two agents at his disposal, Goldman discusses two actors' parallel confrontations with the text, not their interactions with each other.

The essential lesson that Austin offers--which one might also derive from the work of Wittgenstein or Heidegger among others--is that language is conventional action, gaining force only within a community that grants it force. The very act of structuring his analyses around individual protagonists, analyzing characters in isolation, sabotages any discussion of conventional actions (such as actions in language, or speech acts). Ultimately, Goldman's negligence of context denies him access, not only to action, but to character itself. As Burke's paradox of substance reminds us: "one cannot separate the intrinsic properties of a character from the situation that enables him to be what he is" (107). A clear definition of context is especially vital to Goldman since he is interested in discussing not just one, but three levels of action, and therefore at least three distinct contexts.

The one point in the book at which Goldman does try to contextualize the action of the performance comes in his discussion of *Macbeth*. Goldman observes that the play was first performed soon after the failed Gunpowder plot almost eradicated the royal family. "The image of that catastrophe--an explosive manifestation of evil, absolute and as if out of nowhere, the sense that value and order could be wiped out in an instant--contributed, I think, to the investigation of evil that Shakespeare felt compelled to make in *Macbeth*" (98). Goldman seems unsure exactly how to use this historical information. Note his assumption of authorial intent here that produces the image of a compelled Shakespeare. The qualifier, "I think," becomes necessary because of the speculative nature of this invocation of authorial intent. "And so he began his play" (a narrative of the author in the act of writing) "with a terrible noise, followed instantly by a loathsome and, for the moment, incomprehensible appartation: *Thunder and lightning. Enter three WITCHES*" (98). From this incident, Goldman draws the following conclusion: "I do not mean to suggest that the sudden thunder and menace at the beginning of *Macbeth* is anything like a deliberate allusion to the Gunpowder Plot, but an English audience recently familiar with the Plot would have been especially sensitive to the moral and metaphysical overtones of the opening scenes" (98-99). Inexplicably, Goldman uses this argument to support a proposal about how the scene should be staged today.

The force of this argument is to reconstruct the scene of Shakespeare's writing, identifying a "source" for the play in the conventional sense, and also to reconstruct the audience's consciousness at the original time of performance. Goldman describes the historical scene of the text's original performance tentatively, almost apologetically ("I think," "not *anything like* a deliberate allusion, but. . . ."), which is understandable, since the specifically Elizabethan audience has no place in any of the three levels of action that he has defined as the foci of his investigation. Goldman's underlying assumption, never confronted explicitly, is that the texts are fully present, timeless, accessible to modern-day actors. Thus, historical claims sit uncomfortably with him. However, Goldman's half-hearted introduction of historical material suggests that he recognizes the need to delineate *some* specific scene for the action he describes in order to justify the force he attributes to it.

Compare Goldman's use of historical evidence with Greenblatt's in an essay like "Shakespeare and the Exorcists." While Greenblatt establishes that Shakespeare had read Harsnett's book (94), his argument would not be devastated if it were proven that Shakespeare had never heard of Harsnett. Greenblatt could merely assert, as he often does (for example in "Martial Law in the Land of Cockaigne"), that the text "represents characteristic Renaissance beliefs and practices" (130). He is not proposing a simple, one way relationship between source and text; his point is not that an Elizabethan audience would be reminded of Harsnett's book as they watched *King Lear*. The source text functions as a scene within which the action of the *King Lear* is defined. Because the play functioned in a scene that included Harsnett's text and others like it, or even just a scene that *could* produce such texts, the play's force was defined in relation to those texts. The text could not help but enter into the "institutional negotiation" underway regarding theater, exorcism, imagination, Protestantism, Catholicism, etc. Greenblatt's strategy is clearly defined: he strives to resituate the text within its historical context, and so must carefully reconstruct that context as a Foucaultian archaeological layer. Insofar as the historical context is similar to our contemporary context, the Shakespearean text will still resonate for us, but (at least ostensibly) such resonance is entirely incidental to Greenblatt's endeavor.[10]

Kenneth Burke provides a completely different way to establish a clear context within which to lend force to textual action, one not ultimately dependent on reconstructing the historical scene of performance. In his essay on "Coriolanus and the Delights of Faction," Burke examines the drama within the text itself, within a context defined in terms of the poetics of tragedy as Burke expounds it. (It makes little difference whether this poetics has any validity outside of Burke's imagination as long as it is adequately defined.) First Burke posits a scene of social tension between privileged and underprivileged. While he suggests that this tension was manifested in Shakespeare's time by rioting due to Enclosure Acts, he stresses that the tension is not peculiar to the Elizabethan context, but is latent in all societies (89). "If

we are going to 'dramatize' such a tension, we shall want first of all a kind of character who in some way helps *intensify* the tension" (82). That character, naturally, is Coriolanus: "Coriolanus is excessive in ways that prepare the audience to relinquish him for his role as scapegoat" (83). Finally, the other characters are defined to put the text into motion, to provide all the elements necessary for action to take place. "Aufidius is 'derived from' the character of Coriolanus. The conditions of the play set up Coriolanus as a gerundive, a 'to be killed,' and Aufidius is to be the primary instrument in the killing" (84).

Ultimately, Burke is less concerned with the action of the characters, with the action mimetically *represented*, than with that of the representation itself. Indeed, the poetic action Burke describes is precisely that of the text producing a dramatistic structure, with the text itself functioning as the agent of this action. From this perspective, Coriolanus and Aufidius, the "to be killed" and the "instrument in the killing," function as *agency*, as objects with which and upon which the text acts. If one views *Hamlet* from such a perspective, the question of why Hamlet delays the assassination of Claudius drops out of focus and questions of why and how the text itself delays the assassination replace it. Among the possible actions one might consider would be the text's representation of a figure called "Hamlet," and it's attribution of certain desires, intentions, abilities, and limitations to this figure. At least as significant, however, would be the actions of the text that frustrate attempts to resolve the figure of Hamlet and that render any such attributions dubious or unstable. Moreover, the text's actions of delay may well be distributed among a number of characters; and the actions pressing for revenge might be distributed among these same characters. In other words, the boundaries that define and oppose poetic action might break up the text very differently than those that define and oppose "characters." Pursuing an investigation within the scene of action that Burke suggests, one could go on to consider myriad actions that have little to do with notions of "character" at all: the text's repetition of tropes; its use of conventional devices such as dialogue, stichometry, soliloquy; its compliance with and deviations from principles of genre.

Insofar as he wants to pursue an investigation of the actions a modern-day actor would be called on to perform, clearly Goldman cannot follow Burke's approach in defining context in terms of a poetics of tragedy. Imagine the futility of explaining to an actor playing Coriolanus that he is "a gerundive, a 'to be killed.'" By investigating the action of the text as a whole rather than the actions of autonomous characters, Burke's poetical grammar not only eliminates the authority of character, it removes the actor and audience from the scene of action altogether. And this situation would obtain in any poetical grammar, not just the poetics of tragedy defined by Burke. But given his concern with explaining a modern actor's interaction with the text, neither can Goldman follow Greenblatt in identifying the scene of action with the scene

of the text's original composition. Still, like Greenblatt and Burke, Goldman does need to define *some* context for the action he examines.

To pursue his project as he defines it, Goldman would need to contextualize the texts in the scene of their performance. A text, naturally, will present very different problems and opportunities to different actors, depending on the actor's presuppositions about acting in general and Shakespeare in particular, as well as on the nature and degree of the actor's skills. The political, social and artistic ideas prevalent at the time and place of the performance, and the actor's (conformist or subversive) position with respect to these ideas, as well as with respect to the text itself, will also have considerable impact on the nature of the actor's actions.

Developing one's analysis within the context of performance necessarily would create a large degree of indeterminacy, which Goldman tries to avoid entirely. This indeterminacy would not, of course, be absolute; its limits could be established relative to the context of performance as it was defined. At the one extreme, one might investigate the problems the text would pose for a defined group of actors working in a specific time and place; at the other extreme, one might try to investigate the problems that the text might pose to *any* actors in *any* time or place. (This latter task, almost certainly, would be impossible to accomplish; but it is certainly possible to attempt, and the attempt could yield useful results.) In either case, or in any of the more promising cases in between, one would be exploring, not a single set of the actions that the text requires, but a range of potential actions that the text might suggest, allow, or provoke.[11]

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer gives implicit support to a critical method that delivers on Goldman's promise to elucidate the relationship between action and acting in dramatic texts: "The performance of a play . . . cannot be simply detached from the play itself, as if it were something that is not part of its essential being. . . . Here the methodological advantage of starting from the idea of play becomes clear. The work of art cannot be simply isolated from the 'contingency' of the chance conditions in which it appears. . . . *A drama exists really only when it is played*" (104, emphasis added).

Goldman eschews the kind of analytical work that a general exploration of a text in performance would entail, even within a narrowly defined performance context. Still, even as it stands Goldman's critical procedure is liberating insofar as it itself constitutes a kind of performance, a "reading" of the text in just the way an actor's performance is a reading of the text. Interpretation so conceived becomes something we (readers/actors) do to, or with, a text, rather than a process of extracting latent meaning that we claim has always been in the text. If one construes Goldman's book as presenting a particular performance, then one need no longer be concerned with the arbitrary quality of the "requirements" Goldman perceives that the plays impose on actors; each "requirement" represents one among many possibilities for action that the text makes available to an actor. (Even seen as providing

just one possible "reading," Goldman's approach suffers from a context too weakly defined to lend much force to actions.) Goldman, however, does not appear to accept his own readings as just one possible performance, or to be ready to accept a critical method that is as open as performance, one that really does play with a text in the context of its reading.

One writer renowned for his espousal of just such a model of criticism, of course, is Barthes: "The more plural the text, the less it is written before I read it; I do not make it undergo a predicative operation, consequent upon its being, an operation known as *reading*." For Barthes in his post-structuralist stage, reading is acting. And indeed, Barthes goes on: "an *I* is not an innocent subject, anterior to the text, one which will subsequently deal with the text as it would an object to dismantle or a site to occupy. This 'I' which approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts" (10).

Goldman, by contrast, suggests that his interest in action is related to an interest in closing and in possessing texts:

> We talk about works of art because we wish to make them ours, to bring them within the boundaries of the self, to possess them in some way. Since we experience a play as a series of events occurring in time, any attempt to possess it requires a conception, such as the idea of action, which links separate events into a directed unity. (7)

The use of action as a net within which to enclose and contain a text is just that described by Barthes when he describes the code of action, the "proairetic sequences," as instrumental in creating readerly, closed texts:

> [The proairetic sequences] are born of a certain power of the reading, which tries to give a sufficiently transcendent name to a series of actions, themselves deriving from a patrimonial hord of human experiences . . . when subjected to a logico-temporal order, they constitute the strongest armature of the readerly. (203-204)

Goldman's ultimate desire is to unify, to close, and he is surprisingly up front about how his interest in action derives from this desire: "most of us have wished for a feeling of action in our lives (rather than, say, a feeling of disconnected activity)" (5). And the flip side of this desire is a fear of the free play of action.

It is no wonder, then, that Goldman should inhibit the play of action in his own text. Similarly, his stable notion of character, and the centrality of that notion in his analyses, begin to make sense, since for Goldman "'character' occupies the same region of conceptual space as 'action.' Like action, it . . . is a way of describing how being may be had, how inner events cohere and how they are connected to outer events" (164). Goldman gives voice to a fashion-

able skepticism: "Man is no more than a beast if he does not act, but every action is such as a man might play, and efforts to act significantly regularly lose the name of action" (164). Ultimately, however, he puts himself in a position to summarize the relationship of act to agent for each protagonist with a pithy label (165).

Alice Rayner has suggested that "in play . . . the act of playing creates the subject. . . . The agent does not determine the action but 'finds himself' in the action" (18). Goldman's notion of character in performance is very close to Rayner's: "The type of self to which we pay most attention in the theater--the 'character' presented by the actor--could be said to have a unique ontological status. It is not the personal self of the actor, but the self he creates by acting." But Goldman does not allow this theatrical self to play; he has deeper plans for it. For the theatrical self has a quasi-magical characteristic: "the gap between self and deed seems curiously to vanish" (10). Goldman thus can find in acting a unity with character denied in real life. "Through the actor . . . we experience the possession of a self as an action, in which we participate. We *have* the hero's being because the doing of that being is passed on to us" (167). This conception of character in performance is consistent with his description of the actor a decade earlier in *The Actor's Freedom* as "a particularly interesting and energetic human being who is not simply the actor and not properly the character, but the actor-as-character" (6). What lends acting its "terrific" power, Goldman suggests in that book, is that it represents a confrontation with an Other over which the actor gains control through imitation.

Goldman's conception of character is symptomatic of a general preoccupation with structural unity that affects every level of his analysis. This preoccupation has a number of serious consequences:

1. It encourages a "closed" reading of the text that defines a fixed action and meaning for each line.

2. It forces each of these individual readings to contribute to the definition of a single action encompassing all of a character's actions. Thus, it closes off the very possibility of dialectic, or of actions that produce an open, problematic, unresolved effect, and demands that each action become absorbed within a unitary hierarchy.

3. It produces a reductive notion of "character" defined in terms of the character's over-arching "action."

4. It restricts the play of action in the text by forcing all actions to fall under a character's authority. Therefore it discourages an articulation of the complex relationship between the text and the actor, and obscures the distinction between what the text does to the actor, what the actor does with the text as an interpreter of the text, and what the actor does on behalf of the text in the name of a "character." Further, it prevents any consideration of the ways the text might act against the character who utters it (as in irony) or

even, more radially, the ways the text might undermine the very image of a unified "character."

5. It requires the invention of a unifying action that envelopes the play as a whole, and furthermore identifies this action with the singular action defined for the central character. This sense of a unifying action, in turn, invites (or perhaps presupposes) the illusion of an organizing authorial consciousness to lend intentionality to the textual act.

6. Finally, Goldman's desire for unity encourages him to identify the action implied by his own critical approach with the action of the text itself. Since the focus of his approach is on actions, he strives to find a way to depict every play he examines as being *about* actions. This last effort represents a desire to unify his action as a critic, the action of the plays, and the *meaning* of the plays.

In summary, when Goldman's project is situated within a larger critical context, it becomes clear that it represents only a small, though important, aspect of a general exploration of textual action. Critics have devised critical strategies that elucidate textual action within various distinct, though ultimately inter-related, contexts. New Historicism examines the force of a text within its originating context, and Burke's dramatistic approach examines the force of the actions that shape the text itself. Porter, like Fish in "How to Do Things with Austin and Searle," explores the force of actions within the fictional world of the text, while Taylor considers the force of stage actions on a theater audience, much as Fish considers literary texts within the scene of reading in his usual reader-response criticism. Berger has begun to explore the interaction between the printed text and the performance text, positing a sometimes-dialectical relationship between the two. And Goldman begins to explore the complex dynamic between the printed text and the actor. But as long as our ultimate focus is on a tidy, unified, thematic prize, as long as we insist on reducing *action* to *meaning*, we will be unable to investigate textual action as a phenomenon in its own right. Goldman's book points to a promising and powerful new critical approach. We cannot follow the path of this new approach, however, if we insist on reaching old destinations.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Champion, McGuire.

2. Later Fish abandoned any notion of "the" meaning of a work: "The business of criticism was not (as I had previously thought) to determine a correct way of reading but to determine from which of a number of possible perspectives reading will proceed" (16). Nevertheless, the process of reading remained instrumental in determining any meanings.

3. In *Imaginary Audition*, Harry Berger distinguishes between "the theatrical model of stage-centered reading" and "the literary model of stage-centered reading," invoking Taylor as a prominent exponent of the former and himself as the originator of the latter (xii). The theatrical model strives to represent the experience a spectator might have while watching a performance. The literary model, on the other hand, does not constrain interpretations to the psychological limitations that the conditions of spectating might impose, such as the rapid pace of production and limitations of short-term memory, but rather allows itself the "armchair reader's" luxury of "decelerated close reading" (143). Nonetheless, he insists that "plays are to be imagined not as poems, films, videotapes, or life slices but as plays, and as plays staged according to the conditions and conventions of the kind of theater that Shakespeare's plays represent" (143).

4. Goldman's suggestion that "many difficulties of criticism arise from not distinguishing" these three kinds of action is ironic (12); after carefully making these distinctions in his introduction, Goldman has little recourse to them in his text. As a result, the three levels of description are often unclear and confused.

5. Such efforts to derive specific cognitive content from formal qualities of text are reminiscent of E. L. Epstein's approach in "The Self-Reflexive Artifact."

6. Goldman's misreading hurts not only his own book, but infects other people's work as well. Alice Rayner borrows Goldman's misreading of Austin and bases a critique of Austin on it (10).

7. See Davidson (53).

8. For a more extended application of speech act theory to Shakespearean criticism, see Porter's *Drama of Speech Acts*.

9. See "Signature Event Context" for Derrida's critique of Austin. John Searle's reply appeared along with the English version of Derrida's article in the first number of Glyph; both of Derrida's articles, and a summary of Searle's, are reprinted in *Limited Inc*. These three articles have since drawn a great deal of attention as one of the first direct encounters between analytic philosophy and deconstruction. See Rorty, and Fish's "Compliments of the Author," for arguments that Derrida's critique, while applicable to Searle, does not give Austin sufficient credit.

10. Greenblatt's use of historical sources to establish the general conceptual framework for an historical moment is very much like Montrose's in "'Shaping Fantasies': Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture."

11. Michael Cohen has recently written a book that explores the options for interpretation that *Hamlet* presents to actors, working through the play scene by scene and juxtaposing numerous readings offered by actors in past performances with readings by critics and additional options he himself proposes. The book is refreshing in its agnosticism toward the possibility of identifying "correct" readings. Nonetheless, the book is uncritical about its assumptions about text, performance, and the relationship between the two.

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