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The Performativity of Literature

Performativity in the philosophy of language means that certain deeds may be done using language, strictly speaking in speech, and the theory has become known as “speech-act theory,” its first theoreticians being J. L. Austin and John Searle. This article investigates the performativity of the text *per se*, how literature can “perform” for the reader, while also interpreting some related concepts: performance, drama, script, and intermediality through the analysis of three highly popular plays: Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* and G. B. Shaw’s *Pygmalion*.

1 Introduction

Even the performativity of language (and thus, of literature) should start with the primary element of language, which is the sign. According to Saussure’s theory of the linguistic sign, every sign is like a coin with its two sides: a sound pattern, the signifier (d-o-g) and a meaning attached to it, the signified (four-legged canine) within a certain system. Saussure claims that the relationship between the two faces of the coin is arbitrary, established through cultural convention.¹

However, if language is studied not as a system of signs, but as language in use, it is the functions of language which are to be taken into consideration. Roman Jakobson identified the constitutive factors involved in verbal communication (*addresser, message, addressee, context, code, contact*) anticipating, to some extent, the theory of speech-acts:

the addresser sends a message to the addressee. To be operative the message requires a context referred to, seizable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized; a code fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and the addressee; and finally, a contact, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication.²

1. Cf. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally *et al.*, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1986), p. 67.

2. Roman Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Language in Literature*, ed. Roman Jakobson *et al.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 62–94, p. 66.

Each of these elements has a corresponding function: *referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual* and *poetic*. Jakobson develops this classification and elaborates on their roles in verbal communication³ and thus he already notices certain features of language and speech which will be further analysed in performative theory.

Speech-act theory puts greater emphasis than Saussure on those social and cultural conventions that make up the context of any discourse; and, for Austin, the performativity of language is made up of three factors: locution, illocution and perlocution. Between speaking (the locutionary act) and the effect produced by it, such as convincing, frightening etc. (perlocutionary act), he identifies the act performed *in* speaking (the illocutionary act). Performative utterances satisfy two conditions:

A. they do not 'describe' or 'report' or constate anything at all, are not 'true or false'; and B. the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as, or as 'just,' "saying something" and "to utter the [performative] sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it . . . The term performative . . . is derived, of course from 'perform,' the vocal verb with the noun 'action': it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is an action.⁴

John Searle further elaborates on Austin's definition of the performative and states that

some illocutionary acts can be performed by uttering a sentence containing an expression that names the type of speech act. . . . These utterances, and only these, are correctly described as performative utterances. . . . Thus, though every utterance is indeed a *performance*, only a very restricted class are *performatives*.⁵

He continues with a typology of the speech acts in relation to performativity and identifies five classes: *assertives, directives, commissives, expressives* and *declarations*.⁶

3. Cf. Jakobson, pp. 66–71.

4. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 5, 6.

5. John R. Searle, "How Performatives Work," in *Essays in Speech Act Theory*, ed. Daniel Vanderveken, Susumu Kubo (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2002), 85–108, pp. 86–87.

6. John R. Searle, "A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts," in *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1–29, pp. 12–17.

Grice, another pioneer in the field of discourse analysis, proposed, as regards communication, the “cooperative principle,” according to which people involved in linguistic interaction cooperate in its production and interpretation. According to the four maxims established by Grice (*quality, quantity, relation, and manner*⁷) people say what they believe is *true* (quality), their contribution is as *informative* as necessary and not more than that (quantity), their input is *relevant to the interaction between those involved* (relation) and it is *clear, brief, and orderly*, avoiding ambiguity (manner). Grice’s contribution to discourse analysis helps us understand that fictional discourse, even when it “pretends,” imitating real discourse, complies with the same principles, and literary criticism must take these into consideration when analyzing fictional discourse and find meanings and interpretations when transgressions occur.

2 Performativity in Literature

J. Hillis Miller claims that in definitions performativity is usually connected to performance (“the quality of performance, or the condition of someone who is capable of performing or, perhaps, the object of investigation in ‘performance studies.’”), but the concept actually derives from Austin’s theory of the performative: “Performativity is a concept that is related to speech acts theory” that “accounts for situations where a proposition may constitute or instaurate the object to which it is meant to refer, as in so-called ‘performative utterances.’”⁸ Analyzing performativity and performance, Hillis Miller suggests that a novel like *Daniel Deronda* exemplifies performance, but it can also be considered

*an extended performative utterance of a peculiar kind. It generates a virtual literary reality that can be “accessed” only by way of the performative efficacy of the words on the page as I read them. Those words call or conjure into existence, like specters in broad daylight, Gwendolen, Daniel, all the other characters, their “worlds,” and all that they do and say.*⁹

Discourse analysis applied to fictional discourse must acknowledge different layers of discourse and, thus, of performativity. Analyzing fictional discourse, Searle wishes to show that there is a set of rules that connects words to the world

7. Paul H. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 26–27.

8. J. Hillis Miller, “Performativity as Performance/Performativity as Speech Act: Derrida’s Special Theory of Performativity,” in *Late Derrida*, ed. Ian Balfour (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 219–236, pp. 220, 221.

9. Miller, “Performativity as Performance,” pp. 234–5 (my emphasis).

and that these rules get suspended by the conventions of fictional discourse in a game of pretence:

what makes fiction possible . . . is a set of extralinguistic, nonsemantic conventions that break the connection between the words and the world established by the rules mentioned earlier. Think of the conventions of the fictional discourse as a set of horizontal conventions that . . . enable the speaker to use words with their literal meanings without undertaking the commitments that are normally required by those meanings. . . . the pretended illocutions which constitute a work of fiction are made possible by the existence of a set of conventions which suspend the normal operation of the rules relating illocutionary acts and the world. . . . The author pretends to perform illocutionary acts by way of actually uttering (writing) sentences . . . the *illocutionary act* is pretended, but the *utterance act* is real.¹⁰

If we introduce performance into this equation, the result is another game of pretence, as the pretended performance of the illocutionary act consists in the actual performing of utterance acts. Applied to a story or a play, we have the same “recipe” with different results:

A fictional story is a pretended representation of a state of affairs; but a play, that is, a play as performed, is not a pretended representation of a state of affairs but the pretended state of affairs itself, the actors pretend to be the characters. In that sense the author of the play is not in general pretending to make assertions; he is giving directions as to how to enact a pretense which the actors then follow.¹¹

Going back to Austin, by performative we do not refer to the reference to, or the description of, an action; the act of speech is the action: in this case *saying it does make it so*. But performativity and performance do not have anything to do with productivity. Stanley Fish, in disagreement with Wolfgang Iser, claims that the performative does not have the “quality of productiveness”; rather

the only thing the performative or illocutionary acts produce is recognition on the part of the hearer that the procedures constitutive of a particular act have been invoked: illocutionary force is not something an illocutionary acts exerts, but something it has (by virtue of its proper execution).¹²

10. Cf. Searle, “A Taxonomy,” pp. 66–67, 68.

11. Searle, “A Taxonomy,” p. 69.

12. Stanley Eugene Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 221.

Iser, indeed, is of the opinion that literary speech lacks illocutionary force, and thus concludes that literature is devoid of performativity because, even if the conventions of the illocutionary acts are in place, there is no one to recognize them as promises, commands: that is, as genuine speech-acts.¹³ Fish is right in arguing that literature does have an audience; therefore the reader will recognize the illocutionary force of the performatives and the action entailed by them, and thus he acknowledges the function of speech act analysis in deciphering the meanings and intentions associated with them:

if a character or an author is continually talking about acts he does or does not perform . . . (if questioning as an act has become the subject of discussion in a novel), then speech-act analysis will help us understand what he is doing because he is doing what it is doing . . . *illocutionary behavior* . . . is what speech-act theory is all about.¹⁴

If we take another element in Austin's definition and emphasize the context, we see that those "appropriate circumstances" are highly significant for the illocutionary act. When applied to literary works, we have to consider that language creates the fictional world in which the reader is invited as audience. But Austin disqualifies theatrical performances, stating that "a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. . . Language in such circumstances is . . . used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use."¹⁵ Austin excludes theatrical performance from the field of his theory claiming, in the final analysis, that acting is lying, even though he argues that performatives, e.g. promises, should not be semantically described in terms of their truth-value but according to their 'success': i.e. in terms of their 'felicity conditions' (a promise not kept is not 'untrue' but the person who promised something and did not keep his word has failed to carry out the speech-act 'I promise'). However, the sincerity Austin requires from the performer as a condition is even harder to define; as Carlson argues, it is difficult to pinpoint "[t]he difference between doing and performing" taken out from the theatrical context and put into the social one and which "would seem to lie not in the frame of theatre versus real life but in an attitude – we may do actions unthinkingly, but when we think about them, this brings in a consciousness that gives them the quality of performance."¹⁶

13. Fish, p. 222.

14. Fish, pp. 230–231.

15. Austin, p. 22.

16. Marvin A. Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 4.

Ohmann appropriates Austin's perspective and, attempting to apply his theory to literature, considers that even though illocutionary acts exist in literature, they are without consequences for the performers:

Writing (or speaking) a literary work is evidently an illocutionary performance of a special type, logically different from the seeming acts that make it up. . . . Literary works are discourses with the usual illocutionary rules suspended. If you like, they are acts without consequences of the usual sort, sayings liberated from the usual burden of social bond and responsibility.¹⁷

Austin excluded the analysis of performatives in literature because the actors (generally speaking) involved in the communication cannot be held responsible for their speech acts. In response to this, Keir Elam states that in theatrical performance "responsibility for the utterance as a full speech act . . . is attributed to the dramatic and not the stage speaker."¹⁸ The conventions of the fictional world do not annul the illocutionary force of the performatives; their function within that world is constructed by linguistic means, just as in the real world: the reader is aware that the world of the literary work is fictitious, but he expects everything to function 'just the same as in real life' within it. In this game of pretence that fiction entails all the actors, even the reader, play the same game and comply with the internal rules of the fictional world.

We have already seen that *performativity* is connected with, and depends on, to some extent, *performance*, be it the reading of a novel or a short story, a poem read aloud or, perhaps most obviously, the staging of a play.¹⁹ Richard Schechner considers various theories and definitions of 'performance' and decides that the central quality taken from the theatre is "the audience-performer interaction."²⁰ Thus the role of the audience is essential, and even when one is not present, one is implied. So the performative quality of a novel or a short story cannot be denied because the author has in mind an addressee; she communicates her text to her reader. But when we talk about the dramatic text, the opposition between the page and the stage is strengthened by the power conferred by the performance on stage:

17. Richard Ohmann, "Speech, Literature and the Space Between," in *Essays in Modern Stylistics*, ed. Donald C. Freeman (London: Methuen, 1981), 361–376, p. 368.

18. Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 154.

19. Patrice Pavis suggests a distinction between the text read silently from the page of a book and the staged text; cf. Patrice Pavis, "Staging the Text," in *Analyzing Performance: Theatre, Dance and Film*, trans. David Williams (Ann Harbour: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 198–226.

20. Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 22.

Stage vs. page, literature vs. theatre, text vs. performance: these simple oppositions have less to do with the relationship between writing and enactment than with power, with the ways we authorize performance, ground its significance. Not surprisingly, both strategies of authorization – literary and performative – share similar assumptions, what we might call a rhetoric of origin/essence . . . Though performance may discover meanings or nuances not immediately available through ‘reading’ or ‘criticism,’ these meanings are nonetheless seen as latent potentialities located in the words on the page, the traces of the authorial work.²¹

Plays are written to be performed, they are meant for the stage and exist only in the moment of their reception,²² and though in this article I argue for the recognition of the performativity of the text in itself, I have to admit that through the author’s intentionality the meanings and the various interpretations of a play are emphasized in performance, especially when various performances ‘throughout the world and the ages’ are considered: we cannot deny that Shakespeare’s plays gained much by the various performances over the years, and readers and critics alike can hardly approach Shakespeare’s texts without having certain performances in mind.

Performance is not something ancillary, accidental, or superfluous that can be distinguished from the play proper. The play proper exists first and only when it is played. Performance brings the play into existence, and the playing of the play and the play itself. . . . It comes to be in representation and in all the contingency and particularity of the occasions of its appearance.²³

David Cole defined theatre as “an opportunity to experience imaginative life as physical presence”;²⁴ that is, imagination is projected on the stage, available for the audience to be experienced by using all senses. The reader of the dramatic text imaginatively constructs the world physically present in front of the spectator of the theatrical performance. But the spectator deals with more varied information: “The reader is able to imagine the dramatic context in a leisurely and pseudo-narrative fashion, while the spectator is bound to process simultaneous and successive acous-

21. W. B. Worthen, “Disciplines of the Text: Sites of Performance,” in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial (London: Routledge, 2004), 10–25, p. 12.

22. “All arts . . . ‘perform’ in this way, existing only in the moments of their reception in different contexts, and thus change as they move through time and space” (Carlson, p. 153).

23. Hans Georg Gadamer in Carlson, p. 153

24. David Cole in Odette Cauffman-Blumenfeld, *The Perspectives in the Semiotics and Poetics of Theatre* (Iasi: Al.I. Cuza University Press, 1990), p. 5.

tic and visual signals within strictly defined time limits.”²⁵ Jean Alter gives us a semiotic definition of theatre as “an iconic representation of events by means of a number of codes and corresponding systems of signs. The latter is either text or stage signs.”²⁶

The umbrella-term intermediality is evoked in the context of theatre performance comprising audio and visual images, as the performance of the verbal literary text (adapted or not in a script) is accompanied and complemented by a combination of décor, music, dance, choreography, etc. In this context, intermediality can be defined as a border zone where two or more media meet to carry the message of the work of art. The stage performance is thus the intermedial translation of the dramatic text; “theatre becomes merely a clever way to reiterate writing by other means” where “scripted language operates at once as a kind of raw material for performance, but also as a kind of catalyst, burned off in the act of performing, transformed into something else rich and strange: an event, theatre.”²⁷

Freda Chapel studied the effect of intermediality in the theatre and discovered that the combination of elements (play, script, stage, actors, director, audience etc.) makes performance a display of all its instruments: “intermediality is associated with the blurring of generic boundaries, crossover and hybrid performances, intertextuality, intermediality, hypermediality and a self-conscious reflexivity that displays the devices of performance in performance”;²⁸ he further defines intermediality as “a process of transformation of thoughts and processes where something different is formed through performance . . . a re-perception of the whole, which is re-constructed through performance.”²⁹

Theatre is associated with the original text – the play, adapted into a script and performed on the stage. From this perspective, we can emphasize the essential role of the author as the primary addresser, while the audience is the final addressee without whom the text, in any form, loses its *raison d'être*: “the drama is what the writer writes; the script is the interior map of a particular production; the theatre is the specific set of gestures performed by the performers in any given performance;

25. Elam, p. 99.

26. Jean Alter, “Waiting for the Referent, Waiting for Godot: On Referring in Theatre,” in *On Referring in Literature*, ed. Anna Whiteside and Michael Issacharoff, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 42.

27. William B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 10, 23–24.

28. Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt, *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, International Federation for Theatre Research: Theatre and Intermediality Working Group. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), p. 11.

29. Chapple and Kattenbelt, p. 12.

the performance is the whole event, including audience and performers.”³⁰ In this line, I agree with Vanden Heuvel who considered drama as the “theatrical expression that is constituted as a literary artifact . . . and empowered as a text” and its power to influence the audience through performance is “mainly textual, rooted in literary conventions of narrative, language, scene, character, and semiosis.”³¹

In *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, Keir Elam starts by setting the bases for the semiotic theory of theatre with Mukarovsky’s adaptation of the Saussurean theory, claiming that Saussure’s sign can be equated with the work of art by

identifying the work of art as such (e.g. the theatrical performance in its entirety) as the semiotic unit, whose *signifier* or *sign 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 performance text becomes, in this view, a macro-sign, its meaning constituted by its total effect.³²

Elam underlines that a performance is actually “a network of semiotic units belonging to different cooperative systems” and that “[a]ll that is on the stage is a sign” (Jiri Veltrusky).³³ In this context, we understand performance as a macro-sign which entails a series of signs standing for other signs, as on the stage connotation is often employed.

Elam credits theatrical interpretation with a certain power of disambiguation due to extra-textual indicators such as stress, intonation, facial expressions, and concludes that performance helps in the clear identification of the performatives in the text:

By disambiguating (or by rendering still more ambiguous) the illocutionary mode of the utterances through such ‘illocutionary force indicators’ as stress, intonation, kinesic markers and facial expressions . . . the actor is able to suggest the intentions, purposes and motivations involved. If dramatic discourse were illocutionary self-sufficient on the page, the performance would be all but superfluous. It is never possible, then to determine finally and absolutely from the written text all the illocutions performed in a play.³⁴

30. Schechner, *Performance Theory*, p. 87.

31. Michael Vanden Heuvel, *Performing Drama/Dramatizing Performance: Alternative Theatre and the Dramatic Text* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), pp. 2–3.

32. Elam, p. 7.

33. Elam, p. 7.

34. Elam, p. 166.

Though I do not deny the power of theatrical performance to identify and emphasize speech acts, I argue for the performativity of the literary text in itself; I claim that the illocutionary acts can function even outside the theatrical performance: that is, the reader can perceive from the text alone the perlocutionary effect of the illocutionary acts in the literary work.

3. Performativity and Performance

3.1 *To be or not to be Hamlet*

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been subject to endless studies and analyses regarding the dramatic text, as well as the various performances on stage and the cinematographic adaptations. One of the most relevant terms to my purpose here is the "dramatological score" coined by Keir Elam, who puts a detailed analysis of the first 79 lines in *Hamlet* forward in order to identify different levels and patterns, strategies and development, identifying discourse elements and functions, performatives, deictic elements etc. which shape the interpretation of the text.³⁵ In this section I will attempt an analysis meant to emphasize a few elements that pertain to a study of performatives and speech acts in literature, a concise analysis bearing in mind Austin's definitions and observations.

If we take Austin's remark that in the theatre the use of language is not taken seriously, if we accept it is void and, thus, it is a game of pretence where the performatives lose their binding quality, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*³⁶ is a perfect case study: there are various layers and stages upon which various games of pretence are presented to the reader/audience; we have Shakespeare's play on the stage where Hamlet plays a role for the audience and another one, within it, for the court of Denmark: he feigns insanity, disguised in rambling words, contradictory and cruel discourses. Let us consider his behaviour and the words he addresses to Ophelia: Hamlet loved her, but he does not trust anyone, so he denies his previous pledges that would now bind him to her:

HAMLET I did love you once.

OPHELIA Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.

HAMLET You should have not believed me. . . . I loved you not.

OPHELIA I was the more deceived. (3.1.115–120)

35. Elam, pp. 185–207.

36. All parenthesised references are to this edition: William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (Chatham: Wordsworth, 1996).

Hamlet made a commitment through his declaration³⁷ and, now, he wants to break it by denying its sincerity. His cruel words are meant to sever any relationship between them (precisely because he did care for her) and to convince Polonius and Claudius of his insanity (another performance he put on, aware of the fact that his conversation with Ophelia, apparently an intimate one, had a hidden audience), but they have the unexpected result of driving Ophelia insane: a game of pretence that leads to real effects inflicted upon the receiver of his discourse. His goading “Get thee to a nunnery” (3.1.121), repeated three times during the same conversation, is meant to warn her about men’s deceitfulness: “We are arrant knaves, all; believe none of us” (3.1.129–130) and a woman’s power to drive a man to madness: “it hath made me mad” (3.1.149), and, in a way to protect her, leads to *her* slipping into madness and, finally, perhaps even to suicide (the dubious circumstances under which Ophelia dies are well known). In this layered performance, characters build dramatic worlds through their discourse in which their reactions to this discourse are real, even when the utterances are part of an act:

The characters are real within their own domain and time. Both actors and audiences identify with the characters. . . . Insofar as the characters partake of their own special reality, their performative utterances are efficacious. . . . But however brief or long-lasting, the aesthetic reality is neither the same, nor the opposite of ordinary daily reality. It is its own realm, an intermediary, liminal, transitional *maya-lila* time-space. What the “as if” provides is a time-space where *reactions can be actual while the actions that elicit these reactions are fictional*.³⁸

The play itself begins with a staging when, after the ghost of his father appears to Hamlet and asks for revenge – “If thou didst ever thy dear father love . . . Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder” (1.5.25) – old Hamlet presents the scene of his own death at the hand of his own brother. Hamlet dramatizes this scene with the help of some actors and presents it in front of the king and queen to test their reaction.

HAMLET I’ll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father

37. Cf. Derrida’s opinion according to which to say “I love you” is a special type of performative: “it is the production of an event by means of which, claiming not to lie, claiming to speak the truth . . . I tend to affect the other, to touch the other, literally or not, to give the other or to promise the other the love that I speak to him or her” (J. Hillis Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001], p. 137).

38. Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies. An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York, London: Routledge, 2002), p. 124 (my emphasis).

Before my uncle: I'll observe his looks;
I'll tent him to the quick: if he but blench,
I know my course. (2.2.605–609)

His duty is to promise to revenge his father's murder, but not trusting the word of a ghost, Hamlet does not confront the killer; he chooses to test the murder scenario by staging it: as Schechner claims, Claudius reaction will be real even if it is triggered by the staged discourse of actors performing the murder in the Mousetrap-scene. The planned play-within-play has a *myse-en-abyme* effect, building a stage on the stage and blurring the borders between the reality as we know it and the theatre. Another disrupting event for the audience is brought by Hamlet's doubts regarding his own performance: he chastises himself for his reaction to the news of his father's murder, wonders whether the act he puts on in front of the court of Denmark makes him a coward and whether an actor playing his part would do a better job:

What would he do,
Had he the motive and the *cue* for passion
That I have? He would drown the *stage* with tears,
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech;
Make mad the guilty, and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant; and amaze, indeed,
The very faculties of eyes and ears. (2.2.560–566, my emphasis)

Here I wish to emphasize the words that are related to the art of the theatre and which are included by the dramatist into a soliloquy meant to be acted on stage; when Hamlet begins to doubt his emotions and his reaction because an actor can mirror them to perfection and could even be better at it, the *myse-en-abyme* reaches unexpected depths. What is the spectator's reaction to this? Should I, as spectator, wonder if my reaction and my interpretation are 'appropriate'? The perlocutionary effect of this soliloquy makes me doubt the appropriateness of my own performance, my own reaction as reader and spectator to Hamlet's performance, just as Hamlet questions the *authenticity* of his *own* reality:

Hamlet's reality becomes at this moment inseparable from the enacted; indeed, the entire scene exerts constant pressure on the distinction between the performed and the authentic, since Hamlet uses performance as a way of trying to get at his own authentic feelings.³⁹

39. Anthony B. Dawson, *Hamlet: Shakespeare in Performance Series* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 2.

In staging what he calls “The Mouse-trap,” Hamlet becomes the director who offers a script for the play he wants enacted, he offers advice about the naturalness of the acting (“Suit the action to the word, the word to the action” as the purpose of playing is “to hold, as ’twere, the mirror up to nature” (3.2.19–20; 24–25) and then becomes spectator to the play as well as to the intended audience’s reaction. For him the king’s reaction to his play is the true show.

Now if we deem *Hamlet*, the entire text, as the perlocutionary effect of the ghost’s request of revenge, the main performative utterance from which the whole play evolves, we can analyze the play as Hamlet’s reaction to this command, his doubts regarding the reality (sic!) of the speaker (the ghost of his father, as the voice of filial duty or maybe a devil trying to tempt him) and his intentions, the play-within-play as a test and, in the end, the execution of that command. The ghost demands revenge, that is, he orders Hamlet to kill Claudius; Claudius, in his turn, orders Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, and later Laertes, to kill Hamlet. The final scene shows the performance of these orders. Even more, because the action implied by those performative utterances is not performed immediately – because of all the doubts, games of pretence, tests and delays – in the end the performance of the revenge required through the initial command results in the death of various bystanders or, as the modern report would put it, collateral damage: Polonius dies while he was a concealed spectator to Hamlet’s conversation with his mother and Hamlet thought that he was killing Claudius (3.4); because of Hamlet’s feigned madness, the discourses performed as a result of this pretence and the death of her father, Ophelia really slips into madness and drowns herself; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die in the plot meant to kill Hamlet; Laertes, more direct in his quest to avenge his father and his sister, confronts Claudius and then joins a plot against Hamlet’s life and dies himself. The queen dies drinking the poisoned wine meant for her son, Claudius dies stabbed with the poisoned sword meant to kill Hamlet and of the poisoned cup also prepared for the young Prince: nothing in this play works as planned – every action is thwarted, every intention is side-tracked. The bloodshed in the last scene seems to ‘avenge’ Austin’s theory because a direct execution of old Hamlet’s order, without the complications entailed by all the games of pretence, would have resulted in Claudius’ death and his alone. What we understand from Shakespeare’s drama is that even if fiction is pretence and its language is hollow, its effects are real.

Hamlet’s last words represent another example of performative utterance addressed to Horatio, “tell my story” (5.2.348), one that closes the circle of a performative text: the plot is the performance of the ghost’s order to his son to avenge his murder, while Shakespeare’s text appears as the performance of Horatio’s implied promise to tell Hamlet’s story .

If we consider the relation between text and its performance, we must consider the necessary steps to be taken and we see that, in order to be adapted into a script and performed, any play is first of all *read*. In *Hamlet*'s case, "[b]ecause of the play's intense concern with theatricality and performance, we could even say that reading it is performing it."⁴⁰

The irony is that the text of *Hamlet* is the result of different editions, some of which are actually transcriptions of staged performances.⁴¹ The interchangeability between the dramatic text and its theatrical performance supports the linguistic theory according to which the signified of a certain sign can constitute a sign in itself with a signified of its own, reflections of reflections, layers in the triangular pyramid of signification.

3.2 The Importance of Being Earnest or The Seriousness of Pretence

Oscar Wilde's comedy of errors is a comedy of manners, a satirical reflection on modern society and the reversal of moral values, but above all, it's a word play. It is based on a pun between the name of the character, Ernest and his character, earnest. The play centres on the need to invent an alter ego on which to blame one's transgressions. Jack Worthing reinvents himself in the character of Ernest Worthing, Jack's supposedly younger and impulsive brother. In the countryside, Jack is the responsible, serious and the moral example for his ward, Cecily, granddaughter to the man (Thomas Cardew) who found and adopted him. He invented the younger brother, Ernest, so as to escape country life and enjoy the adventure of town life. While invented, and thus absent, Ernest is brought to life through some kind of performative utterance that was never questioned. Even more, Cecily continues to build this fictitious character and manages to fall in love with him. While Jack plays the role of Ernest, he meets Gwendolen, falls in love with her and intends to marry her. There are various promises, usually made in pretence and thus false situations, the central one being Jack's promise: "I would do anything in the world to ensure

40. Dawson, p. 3.

41. For a discussion of the authority of the two quarto and the folio editions and the modern debate between the Oxford and the Cambridge editions, see Dawson, pp. 5–7. In a debate on text vs. performance, Margaret Jane Kidnie concludes that the "text," that is, a printed version of a literary work, "is indifferent to, even antithetical to, performance: a performance is 'of' the text; the text stands alone. Performance cannot be seen to form a component part of the 'play,' because performance is already constructed in language as a non-essential embellishment of, or deviation from, the play-as-text" (Margaret Jane Kidnie, "Where is *Hamlet*? Text, Performance, and Adaptation," in *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance*, ed. Barbara Hodgdon and William B. Worthen [Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005], p. 104).

Gwendolen's happiness" (*IBE* 21).⁴² His only problem is that while he intends to 'kill' Ernest and ask for her hand in marriage as Jack, Gwendolen wants Ernest, insisting on the name, in love with a form, rather than the substance of the person bearing that name. What's in a name? Apparently for both Gwendolen and Cecily, the name is everything: it inspires confidence, loyalty and honesty.

As a fictitious character in Wilde's play and with a second degree of fictionality, the fictitious creation of each character in a play 'in general,' Ernest is absolutely real in his multiplicity and ambiguity, exemplifying the Saussurean arbitrariness of the sign and the signified:

Ernest exists as a different individual in the imaginations of each of the play's central characters . . . each of the Ernests brought into existence by the diverse imaginations of Jack, Algy, Cecily, and Gwendolen clearly lacks the substance to enforce his dominance as a definitive concept. As a result, the reader forms his or her discrete sense of Ernest from an amalgamation and a reconstitution of all these evocations.⁴³

The first Ernest to appear on stage is Algernon's. For him, Jack Worthing is Ernest:

You have always told me it [your name] was Ernest. I have introduced you to every one as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. It's on your cards. (*IBE* 8, my emphasis)

I emphasized what seems to be the reported performative utterance through which Ernest was brought into existence. Algernon considers the introduction, the subsequent behaviour and the card as irrefutable evidence of Ernest's existence. After he accepts that Jack created his brother Ernest as a social pretext, and because he has an imaginary friend of his own, Bunbury, Algernon assumes Ernest's identity to introduce himself to Cecily.

For Jack, Ernest is a pretext, an outlet from his normal, respectable country life: "in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes" (*IBE* 9).

42. All parenthesised references are to this edition: Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest (IBE)* (Kila, MT: Kessinger, 2004).

43. Michael Patrick Gillespie, *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996), p. 104.

For Lady Bracknell Ernest Worthing is worth nothing; she has some minor objections to his education, his financial situation and his properties, but when the discussion comes to parentage she accuses him of “carelessness” for losing both parents; then she is appalled to discover that he actually is a foundling and that Thomas Cardew picked him up at a railway station, gave him the name of the town of his destination, Worthing, and adopted him. This lack of the proper social position disqualifies Jack immediately. The only thing that would convince Lady Bracknell to reconsider his proposal would be lineage: “I would strongly advise you, Mr. Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over” (*IBE* 21). Interestingly enough, Algernon “has nothing, but looks everything” (*IBE* 69), which makes him more than eligible (in this play about ‘nothing serious,’ each of these words appears 21 times).

For Cecily, Ernest is a romantic character, made interesting by the fact that he is often the topic of conversation. So she takes at face value her guardian’s affirmation that he has a brother she never met and about whom she hears only in romantic contexts. So she builds her own image of him, makes up a romance between them, writes letters to herself in his name and, when Algernon introduces himself to her as Ernest and asks her to marry him, she informs him that they have already been engaged for three months. Cecily had built an imaginative world into which Algernon doesn’t hesitate to enter. Cecily becomes author and addressee of love letters; then she continues to demonstrate her mastery as an author and her sensibility as a reader:

I was forced to write your letters for you. I wrote always three times a week, and sometimes oftener. . . . The three you wrote me after I had broken off the engagement are so beautiful, and so badly spelled, that even now I can hardly read them without crying a little. (*IBE* 46)

And because everything the characters do in this play is “serious,” the imaginary engagement was broken and mended and the only thing Cecily (like Gwendolen) insists upon is that her husband’s name is Ernest, as it is a name that inspires confidence:

It would hardly have been a really *serious* engagement if it hadn’t been broken off at least once. But I forgave you before the week was out. . . Besides, of course, there is the question of your name. . . You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love some one whose name was Ernest. . . There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest. (*IBE* 46–47; my emphasis)

For Gwendolen Fairfax, Ernest is an epitome of loyalty and honesty; he has “a strong upright Nature. He is the very soul of truth and honour. Disloyalty would be impossible to him as deception” (*IBE* 51). She is not talking about the man she knows as Ernest, but about what the name creates: the very man. In this case the importance of being Ernest lies in the performative function of the language: the name makes the person. When Gwendolen and Cecily discover the deception, they are ready to forgive the two men all their lies, except that regarding the name; but Jack and Algernon are ready to fix that by being christened Ernest. Wilde resolves the matter even better: he turns all deceptions into truths; while Lady Bracknell investigates Cecily’s worthiness as Algernon’s fiancée, things precipitate, Miss Prism enters the stage, and Jack’s parentage is cleared up: they discover that his name really is Ernest and that he is Algernon’s older brother, put in a bag – instead of a novel – and lost by Miss Prism in a railway station. So Jack never lied to Gwendolen – his name was really Ernest John, and he never lied to Cecily – he did have a younger, reckless brother: “it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth” (*IBE* 78) and when accused of “triviality” he counters with the famous final line about the newly discovered “Importance of Being Earnest” (*IBE* 78).

The whole play is structured with the purpose of subverting language: beginning with the title and subtitle – *The Importance of Being Earnest, A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* – its importance in constructing the reality being undermined, while the performative utterances are subverted in Wilde’s joke on the serious matters of life. The main character in the play is not the illusive Ernest but the ambiguous and arbitrary “earnest.” Wilde writes a comedy on language in which ‘earnest’ and its synonym, ‘serious,’ are used extensively, so that their meaning is subverted and even reversed. Consider Algernon’s understanding of the concept of seriousness in relation to triviality: “one must be serious about something, if one wants to have any amusement in life. I happen to be serious about Bunburying. What on earth you are serious about I haven’t got the remotest idea. About everything, I should fancy. You have such an absolutely trivial nature” (*IBE* 58).

In one of his interviews Oscar Wilde explains that the quality of the dramatic text is tested when it is staged, and when dealing with a work of art, the stage is tested for the appropriateness of its theatrical rendering, while a poorer text, when staged, actually tests the audience: “When a play that is a work of art is produced on stage, what is being tested is not the play, but the stage; when a play that is not a work of art is produced on stage what is being tested is not the play, but the public.”⁴⁴

44. Oscar Wilde in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 164.

3.3. The Fictional Pygmalion

George Bernard Shaw offers his readers his own Pygmalion, Prof. Higgins, who is able to distinguish phonetically the speaker's place of origin or dwelling on the basis of his or her pronunciation. Shaw's play begins with a demonstration of his skill, a frame for the play and a contrast against which the reader will measure the performance of the action implied in the performative which is the starting point of Pygmalion-creation.

What we have first of all is the annoyed reaction to Eliza's pronunciation:

A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere – no right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech: that your native language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and The Bible; and don't sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon. (Pyg 18)⁴⁵

From this premise, and after accepting Pickering's bet, Higgins tries to transform the unintelligible woman into 'a human being' according to his own criteria of perfection, just as Pygmalion created a statue representing the perfect woman. The transformation implied in this play has different interpretations: "Higgins trains Eliza to be a lady; Eliza, conversely, attempts to touch Higgins' soul, to train him to be a human being."⁴⁶ Eric Bentley sees in Shaw's *Pygmalion* a reversal of the mythical creator: "The Pygmalion of 'natural history' tries to turn a human being into a statue."⁴⁷ Jain puts Higgins in the role of the fairy godmother (sic!) who helps Shaw's Cinderella to be the princess at the ball.⁴⁸ Shapiro analyzes Eliza semiotically and concludes that "Higgins changes Eliza's iconic aspect from that of the flower girl to that of a duchess" while Higgins is "the indexical character, although he also wears a professional iconic aspect."⁴⁹

Shaw's play is based on a bet Higgins makes with Pickering that he can teach Eliza how to talk so she would pass for a duchess at a high society event: "Well, sir, in three months I could pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassador's garden

45. All parenthesised references are to this edition: George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion: A Romance in Five Acts (Pyg)*, ed. Dan H. Lawrence and Nicholas Green, (London: Penguin, 2003).

46. Lagretta Tallent Lenker, *Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare and Shaw* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001), p. 132.

47. Eric Bentley, *Bernard Shaw*, 3rd ed. (New York: Applause, 2002), p. 143.

48. S. Jain, *Women in the Plays of George Bernard Shaw* (Delhi: Discovery, 2006), pp. 62–63.

49. Bruce G. Shapiro, *Reinventing Drama: Acting, Iconicity, Performance* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999), pp. 118, 128.

party" (*Pyg* 18). Pickering makes this boastful affirmation into a bet: "What about the ambassador's garden party? I'll say you're the greatest teacher alive if you make that good. *I'll bet you all the expenses of the experiment you can't do it.* And I'll pay for the lessons" (*Pyg* 29; my emphasis). (And "bet" appears 13 times in a play about the effects of such a performative utterance.)

This performative utterance is the real starting point of the play: Higgins teaches Eliza how to talk, how to dress and behave, and he even establishes subjects for potential conversations. For him and Pickering, Eliza is an experiment, or, as Mrs. Higgins puts it, "a pretty pair of babies playing with your live doll" (*Pyg* 65). But the two men take their "job" very seriously, their only goal being the prize of the bet: Eliza transformed into a lady, without giving a second thought to what a poor flower girl might do with her manners and elegant speech after the experiment is over.

Eliza fails her first test at Mrs. Higgins' house because Higgins had taught her a few phrases and established two subjects of conversation: weather and health. Eliza might have learned how to pronounce correctly and deliver her phrases in exquisite English ("The shallow depression in the west of these islands is likely to move slowly in an easterly direction. There are no indications of any great change in the barometrical situation. . . I bet I got it right," *Pyg* 60), but she isn't like Higgins' gramophone and in conversation she interacts with the others, the disk falters and Eliza falls into cockney with her memories about her aunt's illness. The second test, the ambassador's party, is a success, and the high society cannot recognise the flower girl in the refined duchess-like Eliza. Higgins won his bet and the experiment is over. After the ball, Higgins and Pickering take Eliza home, happy that their doll performed perfectly, and, satisfied with themselves, they talk and behave as if she were invisible. So she fights back with and in the language Higgins had taught her, and throws phrases pronounced correctly, with well played fury and high society manners, into her Professor's face, in order to make herself visible and heard: "I've won your bet for you, haven't I? That's enough for you. *I don't matter, I suppose. . . I'm nothing to you – not so much as them slippers*" (*Pyg* 76).

The action implied in the performative is performed, Eliza has become a lady as Higgins promised, but he never takes *her* into consideration: he treats her like the clay out of which he moulds his own Galatea, not for romantic, as the subtitle states, but for scientific purposes. But Eliza is more practical and though she came to him to learn how to talk like a lady, so as to find a position in a flower shop, she understands now that in her previous position she felt better, not "so cheap" (*Pyg* 78): she sold flowers, but now all she has to sell is herself. As Higgins points out, one of her options for the future is marriage: "I sold flowers. I didn't sell myself. Now you've made a lady of me I'm not fit to sell anything else. I wish you'd left me where you found me" (*Pyg* 78).

Eliza is a modern Katherine, a 'shrew' tamed not for marriage, but because it is a challenge to "to take a human being and change her into a quite different human being by creating a new speech for her" (*Pyg* 65). And Shaw himself boasted that he created "such a heroine as had not been seen on the London stage since Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*" with the amendment that "my shrew was never tamed."⁵⁰

Shaw uses speech acts to 'perform' a person: language is used in this play to mould and create a human being. Like the mythical Pygmalion, Higgins creates a work of art and he can appreciate his creation aesthetically, the world can admire her, too; but Higgins will always remember the clay he started with. For him Eliza remains the flower girl and that is what ignites her revolt. The linguistic refinement he provided represents, ironically, just a coating for him, while for Eliza the education is complete; she is transformed by this experience, she is the living result of a bet, utterly transfigured in 'the lady' that Higgins promised: she acquires the manners, the language and even the feelings that go with the role. The play doesn't really have an ending: Higgins has another quarrel with Eliza, but he is sure she will come back with his gloves and "that's it." No happy ending for the two, (or maybe Shaw would argue that this is the real 'happy ending' for both), yet the conventional 'solution' of their marriage is rejected. So Shaw allows for an 'open ended' drama, while in a narrative "sequel" he gives Eliza the future she desired: she gets married to Freddy, she runs the flower-shop of her own, and she is still upset about Higgins.

Shaw's play is one of the most perfect examples of performativity in literature, showing how the performative utterance is developed on page to get to the performance of the action implied in it, but it is a great example of performance as well: Shaw's comedy resides in language, and therefore the reader can play with it; but this is not Wilde's type of language game; Shaw's use of language is a particularly auditory one: this play has to be performed; silent reading does not do it justice, because its salience resides in pronunciation with various accents and in various dialects. As a reader, I understand Shaw's meanings, give various interpretations, and stage the play in my mind; but at the back of my mind informing this staging will always be the cinematic production based on *Pygmalion*, *My Fair Lady*.

* * *

As I tried to show, in literature performatives have the power to conjure up worlds while performing the action implied in the illocutionary act. A promise, a bet or a command may be starting points for various literary works, and, even if they might be considered hollow, for the addressee their perlocutionary effect may be quite real.

50. Jean Reynolds, *Pygmalion's Wordplay: The Postmodern Shaw* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1999), p. 6.