

The Theatre of Emotions: Garrick, Shakespeare, and the Paradox of Acting

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Actors and poets have sometimes been accused of lacking solidity, a substance of their own. This paper will carry us on a brief journey around the essence of acting and performance which will take us from Plato to Stanislavski, and even closer, to the neurology of perception and action. We will approach William Shakespeare, David Garrick, Denis Diderot... and we might as well remember in passing John Keats, who admired Shakespeare's great potential for impersonality and for merely *poetic* truth— his "*Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason".¹ Poets and actors share the "negative capability" of holding and joining contradictory attitudes, and opening themselves to alterity without petty personal involvement or disturbance. They contain multitudes—they are all Whitmen, so to speak. Dramatists and others writers of fiction have their share of multiplicity, too. But it is poets, and actors even more so, who have the ability (or disability) to annihilate their own self, a self which perhaps they ultimately lack.

¹ John Keats, letter to George and Thomas Keats, Dec. 1817; in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Gen. ed. M. H. Abrams with Stephen Greenblatt. Vol. 2. New York: Norton, 1999, p. 889. The editors observe (note 9) that in speaking of 'negative capability' "Keats is concerned with a central aesthetic question of his day: to distinguish between what was called the 'objective' poet, who simply and impersonally presents material, and the 'subjective' or 'sentimental' poet, who presents material as it appears when viewed through the writer's personal interests, beliefs, and feelings. The poet of 'negative capability' is the objective poet". Compare Coleridge's opposing Shakespeare to Milton (see below). This discussion may provide an additional context for our discussion of emotionally involved or uninvolved modes of acting.

In his critical dialogue *The Paradox of Acting* (*Paradoxe sur le comédien*, which he began to write c. 1773, and was published very posthumously in 1830), Denis Diderot examined two contrary positions on the question of theatrical acting.² One of the dialogue's speakers, "the Second" (although the "First" seems to be Diderot himself, they have no names; Diderot uses these terms to refer to them, "the First" and "the Second")—the second, then, upholds there the conventional thesis that great actors are gifted with an extreme sensibility. They are able to feel deeply, they can revive within themselves the emotions of the characters they impersonate, and it is this emotional sensibility that allows them to mimic, to express and to communicate these sentiments. It is a traditional view perhaps best exemplified for Diderot in Pierre Rémond de Sainte-Albine's essay on acting, *Le Comédien* (1747). This view from an Age of Sentiment held well its ground, of course, throughout the ages of Romantic and Victorian feeling, well past the nineteenth century. And it is also, broadly speaking, the thesis underlying the Stanislavski method, once the twentieth century witnessed the continuing success of this notion: according to this new emotionalism on steroids, an actor must identify with the character, in a way *becoming* the character at an imaginative or emotional level, and then act the role in question by being moved spontaneously from within, impelled in a natural way by the passions he feels or by the personality which has been allowed to take hold of him.³

The other speaker in the *Paradoxe*, "The First", a spokesman for Diderot himself, takes to an extreme the contrary (and equally conventional position)—the anti-emotionalist thesis. He argues that actors (great actors, for it is with great acting that we are concerned) do not really feel

² Denis Diderot, *Paradoxe sur le comédien précédé des Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel*. Ed. Raymond Laubreaux. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1967. English edition: *The Paradox of Acting: Translated with Annotations from Diderot's 'Paradoxe sur le comédien'*. Trans. Walter Herries Pollock. Prologue by Henry Irving. London: Chatto & Windus, 1883. Online facsimile at the Internet Archive. // URL: <https://archive.org/details/cu31924027175961/page/n91/mode/2up> (accessed 1 Sept. 2022).

³ See e.g. Constantin Stanislavski, *Building a Character*. Trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. 1950. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. As is well known, Stanislavski's ideas on acting were extremely successful, not just through his own company, the Moscow Art Theater, but also in the field of American drama through the Group Theatre and the Actors Studio, with Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Elia Kazan, Cheryl Crawford and Robert Lewis, and passing from there to classical American cinema. See the documentary by Joanne Woodward et al., "Broadway's Dreamers: The Legacy of the Group Theater." (PBS American Masters, 3.8, 26 June 1989). Online at *YouTube (Arbiter)* 6 March 2017 // URL: <https://youtu.be/VGAqGU-uv3A> (accessed 7 March 2017).

the emotions they communicate—that they are performing a fiction, an imitation which does not rest on a real emotional involvement; they are merely recreating external signs, and their acting is a rational reconstruction of those objective signs of the emotion, without the emotion itself. Pure acting, mere theatre. The example chosen by Diderot is a contemporary of his, the great English actor David Garrick, an eminent player of emotions in the age of sensibility.

This debate which took place mostly in Diderot's mind (and in his personal conversations) would take center stage in the Victorian period, after the posthumous publication of his dialogue, when William Archer set forth Diderot's thesis in the form of a vivid dichotomy expressed in the title of his work on theatrical acting, *Masks or Faces* (1888). Archer set in contrast the *emotionalist* theory, which favours "playing from the heart", to the Diderotian *anti-emotionalist* theory "acting from the brain alone"—the one he favoured himself, while being careful to avoid extremes.⁴ Archer felt satisfied that Dr. Johnson and Kemble were on his side (*Masks or Faces*, p. 26). He noted, however, quite respectable and expert views upholding the emotionalist theory—authorities such as Cicero, Horace and Quintilian among the classical *loci*, and celebrated actors such as Tommaso Salvini and Effie Bancroft among his contemporaries.

There is in these opposite theses, thus pitted against each other, something offensive to right reason—especially when we sense that, in a way, we would want to believe both of them. Quite paradoxically. This is, not, however, the paradox meant by Diderot: the one that baffles him is contained wholly within the bounds of the second thesis—that of the First speaker, if you follow me—Diderot's *anti-emotionalist* position. To wit: "the player's paradox" or "the paradox of acting" is that the actor neither feels nor suffers, but is nevertheless capable of imitating, communicating and transmitting these sentiments *all the better when his own sensibility is least involved* in the performance of the role. Acting is, Diderot argues through the mouthpiece of the First speaker, an eminently *intellectual* activity, not a passional or emotional one. It is grounded on a rational recreation of the characters and of the (spontaneous or deliberate) gestures and signs these characters may

⁴ Archer, William, *Masks or Faces? A Study in the Psychology of Acting*. London and New York: Longmans, Green, 1888. Online facsimile at the *Internet Archive*. // URL: <https://archive.org/details/MasksOrFacesAStudyInThePsychologyOfActing> (accessed 20 aug. 2022).

produce and give off—it does not rest on an emotional identification with the characters.

In the following passage, both of Diderot's speakers seem to have reached an agreement, as they describe the author's "paradoxical" thesis, applying it both to theatre proper and to the theatricality of social life at the court:

THE FIRST. (...) I take thee to witness, Roscius of England, celebrated Garrick; thee, who by the unanimous consent of all existing nations art held for the greatest actor they have known! Now render homage to truth. Hast thou not told me that, despite thy depth of feeling, thy action would be weak if, whatever passion or character thou hadst to render, thou couldst not raise thyself by the power of thought to the grandeur of a Homeric shape with which thou soughtest to identify thyself? When I replied that it was not then from thine own type thou didst play, confess thine answer. Didst not avow avoiding this with care, and say that the playing was astounding only because thou didst constantly exhibit a creature of the imagination which was not thyself?

THE SECOND. A great actor's soul is formed of the subtle element with which a certain philosopher filled space, an element neither cold nor hot, heavy nor light, which affects no definite shape, and, capable of assuming all, keeps none.

THE FIRST. A great actor is neither a pianoforte, nor a harp, nor a spinnet, nor a violin, nor a violoncello; he has no key peculiar to him; he takes the key and the tone fit for his part of the score, and he can take up any. I put a high value on the talent of a great actor; he is a rare being—as rare as, and perhaps greater than, a poet.

He who in society makes it his object, and unluckily has the skill, to please every one, is nothing, has nothing that belongs to him, nothing to distinguish him, to delight some and weary others. He is always talking, and always talking well; he is an adulator by profession, he is a great courtier, he is a great actor.

THE SECOND. A great courtier, accustomed since he first drew breath to play the part of a most ingenious puppet, takes every kind of shape at the pull of the string in his master's hands.

THE FIRST. A great actor is also a most ingenious puppet, and his strings are held by the poet, who at each line indicates the true form he must take.

THE SECOND. So then a courtier, an actor, who can take only one form, however beautiful, however attractive it may be, are a couple of wretched pasteboard figures?⁵

⁵ Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*. Trans. Walter H. Pollock. Preface by Henry Irving. London: Chatto & Windus, 1883, p. 60-62. URL: <https://archive.org/details/cu31924027175961/page/n89/> (accessed 1 Sept. 2022). Here follows Diderot's original text:

LE PREMIER (...)

Je te prends à témoin, Roscius anglais, célèbre Garrick, toi qui, du consentement unanime de toutes les nations subsistantes passes pour le premier comédien qu'elles aient connu, rends hommage à la vérité! Ne m'as-tu pas dit que, quoique tu sentisses fortement, ton action serait faible, si, quelle que fût la passion ou le caractère que tu avais à rendre, tu ne savais t'élever par la pensée à la grandeur d'un fantôme homérique auquel tu cherchais à t'identifier? Lorsque je t'objectai que ce n'était donc pas d'après toi que tu jouais, confesse ta réponse: ne m'avouas-tu pas que tu t'en gardais bien, et que tu ne paraissais si étonnant sur la scène, que parce que tu montrais sans cesse au spectacle un être d'imagination qui n'était pas toi?

LE SECOND

L'âme d'un grand comédien a été formée de l'élément subtil dont notre philosophe remplissait l'espace qui n'est ni froid, ni chaud, ni pesant, ni léger, qui n'affecte aucune forme déterminée, et qui, également susceptible de toutes, n'en conserve aucune.

LE PREMIER

Un grand comédien n'est ni un piano-forté, ni une harpe, ni un clavecin, ni un violon ni un violoncelle; il n'a point d'accord qui lui soit propre; mais il prend l'accord et le ton qui conviennent à sa partie, et il sait se prêter à toutes. J'ai une haute idée du talent d'un grand comédien: cet homme est rare, aussi rare et peut-être plus grand que le poète.

Celui qui dans la société se propose et a le malheur de plaire à tous, n'est rien, n'a rien qui lui appartienne, qui le distingue, qui engoue les uns et qui fatigue les autres. Il parle toujours, et toujours bien; c'est un adulateur de profession, c'est un grand courtisan, c'est un grand comédien.

LE SECOND

Un grand courtisan, accoutumé, depuis qu'il respire, au rôle d'un pantin merveilleux, prend toutes sortes de formes, au gré de la ficelle qui est entre les mains de son maître.

LE PREMIER

Un grand comédien est un autre pantin merveilleux dont le poète tient la ficelle, et auquel il indique à chaque ligne la véritable forme qu'il doit prendre.

LE SECOND

Ainsi un courtisan, un comédien, qui ne peuvent prendre qu'une forme, quelque belle, quelque belle intéressante qu'elle soit, ne sont que deux mauvais pantins?

(Diderot, *Paradoxe*, p. 160-62)

Diderot revels in his paradoxical thesis by narrating anecdotes of incongruence between the two levels of reality involved in acting—that of characters in a represented fiction and that of physical actors on the stage: an actress steps out of her role in order to chide the audience for misbehavior, and then steps back into her role as if nothing were the matter. Or, while the audience sees the heroine embracing and kissing the hero in a convincing way (in the fiction and from a distance), closer up the actress is complaining to the actor "your breath really stinks tonight"—etc.

These are examples in which the actors do not 'get into' the character, but merely project it externally, as a rational and controlled exercise—an applied technique of calculated gesture and movement, not an emotional experience in which the actor is spontaneously possessed by the character. For Diderot the great performers act all the better because there is no real emotion involved in their acting. Nonetheless, Diderot, *le premier*, must also admit the actors' potential for otherness, their special versatility for the impersonation of characters, a transformative ability which commands admiration in great actors such as Garrick. It is, however, only a highly successful fiction, with no trace of real feeling on the part of the performer. The second speaker finds this disturbing and irritating; he feels cheated and would wish to experience authentic emotions in the theatre—maybe he feels that the spectator's emotions are threatened by the contagion of this lack of reality exposed by the paradox of acting:

THE SECOND. It's enough to sicken one of the stage.

THE FIRST. And why, pray? If this kind of people could not achieve such feats, what business would they have on the stage? Now I will tell you a thing I have, actually, seen.

Garrick will put his head between two folding-doors, and in the course of five or six seconds his expression will change successively from wild delight to temperate pleasure, from this to tranquillity, from tranquillity to surprise, from surprise to blank astonishment, from that to sorrow, from sorrow to the air of one overwhelmed, from that to fright, from fright to horror, from horror to despair, and thence he will go up again to the point from which he started. Can his soul have experienced all these feelings, and played this kind of scale in concert with his face? I don't believe it, nor do you. If you ask this famous man, who in himself is as well worth a visit to England as the ruins of Rome are worth

a visit to Italy; if you ask him, I say, for the scene of the Pastrycook's Boy he will play it for you; if you asked him directly afterwards for the great scene in *Hamlet* he would play it for you. He was as ready to cry over the tarts in the gutter as to follow the course of the air-drawn dagger. Can one laugh or cry at will? One shall make a show of doing so as well or as ill as one can, and the completeness of the illusion varies as one is or is not Garrick.⁶

One may note in passing that Diderot seems to mistake two Shakespearean scenes he may have seen performed by Garrick, the "great scene" in *Hamlet*, including the 'To Be or Not to Be' monologue and the "bare bodkin" (III.i), and the scene of the ghostly dagger in *Macbeth* (II.1)⁷—and it is Macbeth who follows the course of a "dagger of the mind" through the air. It is quite likely that when Diderot watched Garrick's acting, probably in a literary salon, both Hamlet's and Macbeth's daggers were purely mental, or doubly mental if you like, since no material or visible daggers or bodkins are actually indispensable in the staging of these scenes.

Diderot, or "Le Premier", cites some precedents for his paradox—

For the rest, the question I am diving into was once before started between a middling man of letters, Rémond de Sainte-Albine, and

⁶ Pollock's translation (37-39). Diderot:

LE SECOND

C'est à me dégoûter du théâtre.

LE PREMIER

Et pourquoi? Si ces gens-là n'étaient capables de ces tours de force, c'est alors qu'il n'y faudrait pas aller. Ce que je vais vous raconter, je l'ai vu.

Garrick passe sa tête entre les deux battants d'une porte, et, dans l'intervalle de quatre à cinq secondes, son visage passe successivement de la joie folle à la joie modérée, de cette joie à la tranquillité, de la tranquillité à la surprise, de la surprise à l'étonnement, de l'étonnement à la tristesse, de la tristesse à l'abattement, de l'abattement à l'effroi, de l'effroi à l'horreur, de l'horreur au désespoir, et remonte de ce dernier degré à celui d'où il était descendu. Est-ce que son âme a pu éprouver toutes ces sensations et exécuter, de concert avec son visage, cette espèce de gamme? Je n'en crois rien, ni vous non plus. Si vous demandiez à cet homme célèbre, qui lui seul méritait autant qu'on fit le voyage d'Angleterre que tous les restes de Rome méritent qu'on fasse le voyage d'Italie; si vous lui demandiez, dis-je, la scène du Petit Garçon pâtissier, il vous la jouait; si vous lui demandiez tout de suite la scène d'Hamlet, il vous la jouait, également prêt à pleurer la chute de ses petits pâtés et à suivre dans l'air le chemin d'un poignard. Es-ce qu'on rit, est-ce qu'on pleure à discrétion? On en fait la grimace plus ou moins fidèle, plus ou moins trompeuse, selon qu'on est ou qu'on n'est pas Garrick. (146)

⁷ See Pollock's note, p. 38. And my note "Hamleth", in *Vanity Fea*, 13 May, 2007. // URL: <https://garciala.blogia.com/2007/051301-hamleth.php> (accessed 3 Sept. 2022)

a great actor, Riccoboni. The man of letters pleaded the cause of sensibility; the actor took up my case. The story is one which has only just come to my knowledge.⁸

—it is apparent here that Diderot added to his dialogue along a number of years, and discussed the issue with other interlocutors apart from 'the Second'. Anyway, he has already named Garrick as another great actor who shares his views on acting, as against the simplistic sentimental assumptions of Rémond de Saint-Albine or of 'The Second', so typical of the Age of Sensibility (and one must add that Diderot himself is quite sentimental as a playwright).⁹

Diderot might as well quote Shakespeare, in that celebrated passage of *Hamlet* (III.ii) in which the prince becomes a company director *avant la lettre*, and gives instructions to the actors who are going to perform *The Mousetrap* as a play inside the play. Hamlet advocates a natural style of playing, avoiding grandiloquence and exaggeration in gesture and speech, "for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing"; he specifies that deliberate control, a rational criterion, must guide the player even in the midst of passionate acting:

in the very torrent, tempest, and as I may say the whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. (*Hamlet* III.ii)

After his first scene with the players, Hamlet meditates on the contrast between his own emotions, actual emotions, and the emotions represented onstage by the actors. These are not, for Hamlet, authentic emotions, but only "a fiction, (...) a dream of passion" (II.ii), artificial emotions evoked by working up the soul to mold it after an idea, a conception (the one created by the poet).

⁸ Pollock's translation (p. 83). The original text reads as follows:

Au reste, la question que j'approfondis a été autrefois entamée entre un médiocre littérateur, Rémond de Saint[e]-Albine, et un grand comédien, Riccoboni. Le littérateur plaidait la cause de la sensibilité, le comédien plaidait la mienne. C'est une anecdote que j'ignorais et que je viens d'apprendre. (*Paradoxe*, p. 176)

⁹ See a description of Garrick's acting style in its historical context, in Simon Trussler's *Cambridge Illustrated History of British Theatre* (ch. 12, "The Garrick Years 1741-1776"). Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000, p. 178-93.

Observe, however, that this adaptation on the part of the actor to make this idea vivid and present involves his whole soul and body. And Hamlet dreams of an impossible theatre, one that is almost made possible in this play because of its metadramatic dimension: a theatre in which the actor, transformed into his character, would blend fiction and reality, acting in front of the audience with authentic sentiments, a performance that 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 faculty of eyes and ears" (2.2). Authentic sentiments on the actor's side would arouse the authentic sentiments of the audience. It appears that Shakespeare, or Hamlet, while acknowledging the paradox of acting, is tempted by the possibility of blending reality and fiction in a total spectacle. This had happened to a certain extent in the celebrated ending of *The Spanish Tragedy*, by Thomas Kyd,¹⁰ in which the theatrical murders turn out to be real ones, and it will happen again in *Hamlet*, with its final duel and its eerie transition from sports and courtly entertainment to murder and massacre. This spilling out of drama reality into drama, and viceversa, would be at the same time the apotheosis of the theatre of sentiments, and a dramatic spectacle as extreme as the theatricality inherent in life itself. Shakespeare's metadrama does just that—using the dramatic dimension of social interaction as the engine and fuel that drives and empowers his drama.¹¹

Shakespeare's metadramatic passages abound, including those that give advice on acting. A case to the point occurs in the "Once more unto the breach" speech by Henry V, in which the king addresses his soldiers in the midst of a the battle, instructing them on how to act like real soldiers—or is he a company director, an experienced actor, addressing callow actors and instructing them on how to get into the role and give a credible performance playing the parts of soldiers?

Then imitate the action of the tiger.
Stiffen the sinews, conjure up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage.
Then lend the eye a terrible aspect (...)

¹⁰ On Kyd's metadrama, which deeply influenced Shakespeare, see my note "Nought but Shows—Music for a While" (*Vanity Fea*, Dec. 18, 2007. // URL: <http://garciala.blogia.com/2007/121801-nought-but-shows-music-for-a-while-.php> (accessed 5 Sept. 2022).

¹¹ See the argument in Judd D. Hubert, *Metatheater: The Example of Shakespeare*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991.

(*Henry V*, III.i)

King Henry, like a 'methodist' in the Actor's Studio, seems to suggest that real emotional involvement and an actual transformation will follow the merely external imitation of the appropriate gestures. If you want to be brave, act it out and start with a show of bravery; real courage will find it easier to follow along. Many psychologists and writers of self-help books concur with Shakespeare here—beginning perhaps with Aristotle's observation that the human being is an imitative animal, a mimetic creature.

As a matter of fact, this very idea emphasizing the power of conscious theatricality, of the communicative projection of a gesture as a conventional sign, and not as the mere expression of a spontaneous emotion, goes deep into the roots of human nature. It is theorized as such in George Herbert Mead's social behaviorism (or symbolic interactionism). Mead's analysis of the theater of human communication draws an opposition between, on the one hand, the primary gesture as a symptom, the animal gesture one might say—and on the other, the mediated, socialized gesture characteristic of the dramatic sociality of human beings. Like Erving Goffman, another member of the Chicago school, Mead paid great attention to the dramatic dimension of human psychology and action. Although he did not develop, in the way Goffman did after him, a wholesale theory of social life as, quite literally, a series of theatrical performances, Mead finds elements of drama in the very build-up of the human person as an internalized theatre of symbols.¹²

See for instance the following passage by Mead on the human gesture as a symbol—criticizing the Darwinian theories which emphasized a continuum between humans and animals in the expression of emotions between humans and animals:

It is quite impossible to assume that animals do undertake to express their emotions. They certainly do not undertake to express them for the benefit of other animals. The most that can be said is that the 'expressions' did set free a certain emotion in the individual, an escape valve, so to speak, an emotional attitude which the animal

¹² Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Doubleday-Anchor, 1959); G. H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Ed. with an introd. by Charles W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934, rpt. 1967). See my comments on these insights from *Mind, Self and Society* in "Mead sobre el gesto como símbolo," *Vanity Fea* 23 Feb. 2015 // URL: <http://vanityfea.blogspot.com.es/2015/02/mead-sobre-el-gesto-como-simbolo.html> (accessed 5.09.2022)

needed, in some sense, to get rid of. They certainly could not exist in these lower animals as means of expressing emotions; we cannot approach them from the point of view of expressing a content in the mind of the individual. We can, of course, see how, for the actor, they may become definitely a language. An actor, for example, may undertake to express his rage, and he may do it by an expression of the countenance, and so convey to the audience the emotion he intended. However, he is not expressing his own emotion but simply conveying to the audience the evidence of anger, and if he is successful he may do it more effectively, as far as the audience is concerned, than a person who is really angered. There we have these gestures serving the purpose of expression of the emotions, but we cannot conceive that they arose as such a language in order to express emotion. Language, then, has to be studied from the point of view of the gestural type of conduct within which it existed without being as such a definite language. And we have to see how the communicative function could have arisen out of that prior sort of conduct.¹³

It is apparent that for Mead human language, and complex symbolism, originate in a kind of dramatic mediation: they involve a fictionalization or mimicry of the external signs that originally did not have a symbolic value, but merely an indexical one, originating as accidental epiphenomenon of animal behavior. As they are repeated these signs become identifiable, and thence it follows that they may be imitated. An apposite case from the primate world, an instance of communicative behaviour half way between simple signals and incipient symbolism is what we might call 'monkey translation': Diana monkeys recognize the distinct alarm cries of a different species, vervet monkeys, and they may follow this recognition by voicing their own relevant and intraspecific alarm cry, thus in a way 'translating' the vervet's call for the benefit of other Diana monkeys.¹⁴

Mead's thesis concerning human expression combines the origin of language with those of drama and of specifically human social intersubjectivity. The theory draws our attention to a close relationship between the psychological functions of acting and of gestural theatricality, and the reflexive consciousness required by human symbolism. It is a genetic theory of the reflexive mind as well, a regular engine powering a dialectically expanding complexity of consciousness in an interactional, and internalized, social setting. *We are all actors*, as the motto of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre put it, although maybe that Latin motto (*Omnis mundus agit histrionem*) should be translated as *The whole world imitates actors*, and thus drama everts through the

¹³ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, p. 16-17. Charles Darwin's views on gestures and emotional expression are to be found in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. London: John Murray, 1872.

¹⁴ See Christine Kenneally, *The First Word: The Search for the Origins of Language*. USA: Viking Penguin, 2007.

imaginary second, third and fourth walls, and permeates the whole of social life.

Garrick's fame rested on his Shakespearean roles, and his Shakespearean festivals and pageants. And Diderot's thesis on the paradox of acting, or the paradox of the player, also applied in passing by Diderot himself to the poets, seems to be especially relevant in the case of Shakespeare, a player poet, or a actor-playwright, and one who emphasized the seamless continuity between the stage, the play of imagination, and the playing out of social identities.

Remember Coleridge's disquisition on the contrasting poetic characters of Shakespeare and Milton. Milton is single-minded or monologic (as we might put, it, Bakhtinizing Coleridge's argument). Milton deals with all things in the universe, but transforms them into himself and gives them the texture of his concerns. Shakespeare, on the other hand, is plastic and fluid, he gives us the inexhaustible variety of humankind ("here is God's plenty", as Dryden put it), and he gives it in its original multiplicity; Shakespeare himself disappears from the scene, giving way to his characters, speaking through them, but perfectly transfigured into them, ideally without any trace of ventriloquism.¹⁵ Coleridge, however, emphasizes Shakespeare's capacity for transformation, rather than the specific mode of transformation or the way in which it might be achieved.

Borges, too, wonders at Shakespeare's lack of substance, in a passage that is arguably the best single page ever written on Shakespeare:

Everything and Nothing

There was no one inside him, nothing but a trace of chill, a dream dreamt by no one else behind the face that looks like no other face (even in the bad paintings of the period) and the abundant, whimsical, impassioned words. He started out assuming that everyone was just like him; the puzzlement of a friend to whom he had confided a little of his emptiness revealed his error and left him with the lasting impression that the individual should not diverge from the species. At one time he thought he could find a cure for his ailment in books and accordingly learned the "small Latin and less Greek" to which a contemporary later referred. He next decided that what he was looking for might be found in the practice of one of humanity's more elemental rituals: he allowed Anne Hathaway to initiate him over the course of a long June afternoon. In his twenties he went to London. He had become instinctively adept at pretending to be somebody, so that no one would

¹⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: Or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*. Ed. George Watson (Everyman's Library; London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1975), p. 180.

suspect he was in fact nobody. In London he discovered the profession for which he was destined, that of the actor who stands on a stage and pretends to be someone else in front of a group of people who pretend to take him for that other person. Theatrical work brought him rare happiness, possibly the first he had ever known—but when the last line had been applauded and the last corpse removed from the stage, the odious shadow of unreality fell over him again: he ceased being Ferrex or Tamburlaine and went back to being nobody. Hard pressed, he took to making up other heroes, other tragic tales. While his body fulfilled its bodily destiny in the taverns and brothels of London, the soul inside it belonged to Caesar who paid no heed to the oracle's warnings and Juliet who hated skylarks and Macbeth in conversation, on the heath, with witches who were also the Fates. No one was as many men as this man: like the Egyptian Proteus, he used up the forms of all creatures. Every now and then he would tuck a confession into some hidden corner of his work, certain that no one would spot it. Richard states that he plays many roles in one, and Iago makes the odd claim: "I am not what I am." The fundamental identity of existing, dreaming, and acting inspired him to write famous lines.

For twenty years he kept up this controlled delirium. Then one morning he was overcome by the tedium and horror of being all those kings who died by the sword and all those thwarted lovers who came together and broke apart and melodiously suffered. That very day he decided to sell his troupe. Before the week was out he had returned to his hometown: there he reclaimed the trees and the river of his youth without tying them to the other selves that his muse had sung, decked out in mythological allusion and Latinate words. He had to be somebody, and so he became a retired impresario who dabbled in money-lending, lawsuits, and petty usury. It was as this character that he wrote the rather dry last will and testament with which we are familiar, having purposefully expunged from it every trace of emotion and every literary flourish. When friends visited him from London, he went back to playing the role of poet for their benefit.

The story goes that shortly before or after his death, when he found himself in the presence of God, he said: "I who have been so many men in vain want to be one man only, myself." The voice of God answered him out of a whirlwind: "Neither am I what I am. I dreamed the world the way you dreamt your plays, dear Shakespeare. You are one of the shapes of my dreams: like me, you are everything and nothing."¹⁶

And Peter Ackroyd, in his biography of Shakespeare, reached the end of his inquiry somewhat dumbfounded, concluding that it is impossible to deduce a specific personality or an individual person behind Shakespeare's body of work, such is the extent to which the author dissolves into his characters and personae.¹⁷

¹⁶ Jorge Luis Borges, "Everything and Nothing." Trans. Kenneth Krabbenhoft. From Borges, *Selected Poems*. Ed. Alexander Coleman. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000. Online at *Robert Ronnow: Poetry*. // URL (accessed 5 Sept. 2022):

<https://www.ronnowpoetry.com/contents/borges/EverythingandNothing.html>

¹⁷ Peter Ackroyd, *Shakespeare: The Biography*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2005. See my review, "Ackroyd's Shakespeare," *Social Science Research Network* (April 2008) // URL: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1120404> (accessed 05 Sept. 2022).

It is not clear which is the solution to the "Extended Paradox of Acting"—whether the theatrical emotions are real, up to some extent—and whether real emotions are theatrical in some measure. But there is a curious concession to the opposite thesis on the part of Diderot's spokesman when, after his full defense of the actors' rationality and cool control, he has to conclude by acknowledging in great actors a certain lack of personality, or a substance in their self which is pliable and empty, capable of being molded to any character—somewhat of an absence from themselves. The perfect actor is perfectly lacking in substance—and, well, one might want to concur with Diderot.

It is more disturbing, and paradoxical, that the same reasoning may be applied, as we have seen, to the perfect poet. But Shakespeare himself acknowledged as much—Shakespeare or perhaps Theseus, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold:
That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name. (V.1)

The *airy nothing* that the poet distils perhaps from his own lack of concrete substance brings to mind another dialogue on the insubstantiality of poets and actors—Plato's *Ion*, perhaps the earliest work of poetic and theatrical criticism in the Western tradition. The poet, the actor, the character, the rhapsode who blends all of them 'in little space' into a single figure, are according to Plato, or Socrates, airy beings, without a solid substance of their own:

the craft of the poet is light and winged and holy, and he is not capable of poetry until he is inspired by the gods and out of his mind and there is no reason in him. Until he gets into this state, any man is powerless to produce poetry and to prophesy.¹⁸

The paradox of acting turns out to be even more paradoxical that it

¹⁸ Plato, *Ion*, 533 C. Trans. in *Literary Criticism; From Plato to Dryden*. Ed. A. H. Gilbert. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1962. P. 14.

seemed at first sight, given that, once we admit the almost inhuman plasticity of the actor's mind, Diderot's rationalist thesis derives almost spontaneously into its contrary. The rationality expressed by the actor is not his own, but the one transmitted by the poet infused into him. And the poet's rationality is also more than reasonable, as it involves the spontaneous transmission of forces that he is unable to understand or analyze, however well he may express them by becoming a multiform instrument not wholly under rational control or comprehension. It is apparent, then, that (beyond the paradox pointed out by Diderot's first speaker) a paradoxical synthesis is required between the antithetical positions of the two speakers in *The Paradox of Acting*.

The scientific study of mirror neurons¹⁹ may take us some way towards understanding how is it possible that a represented emotion should be simultaneously authentic and inauthentic—involving the same cognitive mechanisms as authentic experiences, yet inhibited or modified so as to allow them to be manipulated and used as building blocks of a communicable and conventionalized virtual experience. There are in primates some neurons which are activated both when a physical action is performed (grasping, for instance) *and also* when the individual *watches* the performance of the said action by another individual. The spectator and the actor experience a neural activation which is partly communal: the individuals are united, in a way, by a neural network which is activated spontaneously, joining perception and action beyond the play of intention or deliberateness. Furthermore, a similar activation takes place, in an attenuated way, in watching *visual representations* of actions or experiences—and also as an effect of semantic representation, the linguistic understanding or comprehension of the words, narrations or descriptions which verbalize these actions or experiences.²⁰ Benjamin Bergen describes a number of recent studies in neurology and psychology which emphasize that mental and semantic representations

¹⁹ See Marco Iacoboni, *Mirroring People: The Science of Empathy and How We Connect with Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux-Picador, 2009), and the references in "Redes de mentes conectadas" in *Vanity Fea* (28 April, 2010) // URL: <http://vanityfea.blogspot.com/2010/04/redes-de-mentes-conectadas.html> (accessed 5 Sept. 2022)

²⁰ More on this in my note "Intersubjetividad corporeizada (Embodied Intersubjectivity)." SSRN 7 June, 2015 // URL: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2615069> (accessed 5.09.2022) and in Alexander Huth *et al.*, "A Continuous Semantic Space Describes the Representation of Thousands of Objects and Action Categories across the Human Brain," *Neuron* 76.6 (20 Dec. 2012): 1210-1224. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2012.10.014> (accessed 5.09.2022). Of course, the perception and the comprehension of a text involve additional neural activities (inhibitory ones, among others) besides the ones which take place in direct experience or in intentional bodily actions and interactions.

and simulations involve the same neural mechanisms as actual action and perception: "All these studies point to the same conclusion. Hearing or reading language about objects leads people to mentally simulate those objects."²¹ The very basis of perception and of semantic representation is closely involved with action and with the neural simulation of action. These studies of brain functioning and neural activity show the extent to which the hyper-sociality which is characteristically human builds on biological and neurological phenomena shared with other creatures; they also give a clearer understanding of the bodily basis of meaning, imagination and representation.

The study of these neural phenomena may help us to explain the functioning of gestuality in both life and theatre, through a close enmeshing of emotional experiences and of actions, whether experienced firsthand or observed—actions which in observation and representation are inhibited and distanced even as they are lived by proxy through neural mimesis.²² The dialectical drama of emotional participation and of the inhibition of action is being performed already at the deepest levels of mental life, the basement of human personality and social interaction, in the very construction of emotions and gestures. Simulation and the fictional playing-out of otherness are to be found in the very constitution of personal identity, which takes place in the intersubjective space of sociality and communication. The roots of these processes go deep into the evolutionary history of human beings in the order of primates, but human sociality is of course much more complex than that of other primates or higher apes: Mead's, Cooley's or Goffman's symbolic interactionism reminds us that human identity proper is constituted through interiorized otherness: the theatrical image we perform and project is sent back to us through the perception of the others as a reflecting mask—so that we find here another form of this paradox, the paradox of a face which is at the same time a mask and a mirror, both for the others and for ourselves.²³

²¹ Benjamin K. Bergen, *Louder than Words: The New Science of How the Mind Makes Meaning*. New York: Basic Books, 2012, p. 59.

²² See Blair Brown, Vittorio Gallese, *et al.* "Acting and Mirror Neurons". Panel discussion at the Philoctetes Center, New York. *YouTube (philoctetesctr)* 29 Nov., 2007. // URL: <http://youtu.be/loB-Lg0X1qo> (accessed 6 Sept. 2022).

²³ See Cooley on the "looking-glass self" (Charles H. Cooley, *Social Organization: A Study of the Larger Mind*. Nueva York: Scribner's, 1909). On Goffman, besides *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, see my paper "Goffman: La realidad como expectativa autocumplida y el teatro de la interioridad," *PhilPapers* 28 Jan., 2009 // URL: <http://philpapers.org/rec/LANGRA> (accessed 6 Sept. 2022). On Mead's views, see my note

These reflections on the Player's Paradox might take us yet in another direction we cannot afford to explore here: to what extent real emotions, not the ones feigned in the institutionalized fictions of theatrical performance, but those which we live "for real" in the theatrical institution of everyday interactions, are also ruled by the dramatic conventions proper to this theatrical genre, and originate not just in the spontaneous sentiments springing from the interiority of the acting subject, but also in a social grammar of emotions. Or, to put it otherwise, how these two phenomena, spontaneous sentiments and the socially regulated dramaturgy of the self, are not mere polar opposites, but are instead involved into a dialectic feedback with each other, and develop on a par—or perhaps on a paradox. There is plenty of space for the overlapping of expressive sincerity and theatricalized emotion, and these are not exclusive of each other, neither on the stage nor on the successive stages of real life.

It is likely that in the future the neurological sciences will give us further insights into exactly what happens in the brain of the poets, and of the actors, and of the spectators who join the hypnotic experience of theatrical fictions and narrative spectacles. Plato likened them all, in *Ion*, to a chain of magnetized rings:

As I said, it is not skill that enables you to speak well about Homer, but a divine power that moves you, just as it does that stone that Euripides calls the magnet but that most men call the stone of Heraclea. This stone not merely attracts iron rings but extends its power to the rings so they can attract others just as the stone does; thus there is sometimes a very long series of iron rings hanging one from another. The power of the stone reaches out to all of them. Thus the Muse inspires some and others are inspired by them until there is a whole series of the inspired. (*Ion*, 533 C)

According to Plato, the poets, dramatists, storytellers, actors, and spectators extract their energy from one another, and transmit it in a mental space that opens, so that this experience may be possible, in the midst of reality and yet apart from it, in a different mental world. Maybe

"'Inner Dramatization': The Theatre of Interiority in George Herbert Mead" (*This Huge Stage - El Gran Teatro del Mundo* (6 Sept. 2022) // URL: <https://thishugestage.blogspot.com/2022/09/inner-dramatization-theatre-of.html> (accessed 6.09.2022) and the conclusion to *Mind, Self, and Society*, p. 334-36. The common element in these dramatistic and interactional conceptions is that internal experience and personal identity are constituted through the interiorization of social relationships and of roles performed for other persons.

the deepest paradox of acting, of drama and narration, and of real-life actors, is this mental ability to multiply the embedded or successive realities in which we live and act—the ability to compartmentalize reality into coexisting semiotic dimension, each with a coherence and a grammar of its own, and the ability to manage it all at once, so that the fabric of reality may become a multi-dimensional dramatic festival which can combine simultaneously many genres, many situations and many dimensions of experience, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in tension or confusion.

We may as well end up with the words used by Polonius, an unwitting comedian in his youth and his age, as he introduces the strolling players in *Hamlet*. These are actors who play the role of actors or, more precisely and paradoxically, perhaps are playing at this moment no role at all, since they are the members of a real dramatic company in London, somehow transported to another theatrical dimension in Elsinore. These players are playing the role of actors who are not acting, mere ordinary people who just now are not performing a play but may do it later on and are, for the time being, simple real-life actors, as we all are. But these are

The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable or poem unlimited. (*Hamlet* II.ii)

This is a reflexive description of *Hamlet* itself as a play and of Shakespeare's drama in general, powered by the living theatricality of social dramatism and real-life roles. But it is also a characterization of theater at large, and beyond—a map of the dramatic dimension of human existence as a perspectival multiplication of plays, roles, and situations, and a reminder of the endlessly generative possibilities of play-acting in a performative theater of emotions. To which we are welcome.

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