

To Stage a Reading:
The Actor in British Modernism

Jeffrey M. Brown

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ABSTRACT

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The popular British theatre of the late nineteenth century has often been regarded as both aesthetically and politically bankrupt: bombastic and spectacular, it offered a vision of sensational theatricality lacking both the formal innovation and the intellectual charge of the later avant-garde stage and of literary modernism. My dissertation, by contrast, argues that one element of the nineteenth-century stage survived and claimed a place at the heart of British modernism: the idea of the actor. In successive chapters stretching from 1897 to 1958, I take up works of fiction and drama by Bram Stoker, Bernard Shaw, T. S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf, revealing how various performers of the late-Victorian stage became essential to the formation of modernist aesthetics. I show that the actor's significance lay not only in her cultural station but also in her subversive mediation of artistic convention and self-conscious reenactment of the past; by returning to the performers of the 1890s, these British and Irish writers reconceived the terms that are central to our understanding of modernism: personality, history, and tradition. As the late-Victorian stage passed out of living memory, these writers continued to invoke the actor in their treatments of the technological proliferation of text, the politics of reading during the First World War, the authority of obituary in the literary tradition, and the potential for re-writing historical progress through the lens of community theatre.

Positioned between media—theatre, poetry, and the novel—and also between opposing visions of creativity and the artistic process, my research intervenes in related discussions in both theatre studies and the scholarship on modernist literature. By focusing on the art of the actor at

this pivotal moment in both theatrical and literary history, I challenge the dominant assumption of an abstract anti-theatricality on the modernist stage by discussing the ambivalently “naturalistic” performance styles of Henry Irving, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Marie Lloyd, and Ellen Terry. Likewise, I argue that their art of acting reframes the key terms of literary modernism by reversing the prerogatives of textuality and the cultural practice of reading. The objective of my dissertation is not simply the excavation of yet another element of mass-cultural awareness in modern literature, but rather the revelation that the actor provided a means of continually restaging the advent of modernity (and the death of the past) into the middle of the twentieth century.

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INTRODUCTION

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
 The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
 Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
 Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
 O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
 Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
 O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
 How can we know the dancer from the dance?

- W. B. Yeats, "Among School Children"¹

At the end of "Among School Children" (1927), W. B. Yeats poses one of modernist literature's most enduring quandaries. At its broadest level, Yeats's poem probes the autonomy and endurance of the human soul: looking back upon youth as a "sixty-year-old smiling public man," the speaker confronts a Platonic dissonance between "nature" and the "ghostly paradigm of things," a problem thrown into stark relief by the alienating pressures of modernity. The poem's notorious concluding question—"How can we know the dancer from the dance?"—therefore seems to speak to modernism's most immaterial concerns. It invokes the terms of T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," using the medium of dance (rather than that of poetry) to interrogate the ideal of the autonomous artwork and to probe that work's problematic relationships to its originating body and to the complex of circumstances—social and historical as well as psycho-physical—that may have occasioned its production. As a result, the poem points to the essential position that performance and theatricality occupy in the articulation of modernist values. It is the project of this dissertation to explore one aspect of this articulation: an enduring fascination with the performances of iconic late-Victorian actors into and through the middle of the twentieth century.

"Among School Children" fits easily within the canon of the high-modernist poetry of the

¹ Yeats, "Among School Children," in *Selected Poems and Four Plays*: 121–23.

1920s in part because it balances the problem of artistic media within purely metaphysical terms. Couched in an amorphous tradition both Christian and Greek, the poem also rests upon a heritage of lyric conventions that affirm poetry's uniquely abstract capacities: its metaphors reach swiftly beyond their immediate referents; its parables are easily altered; and its range of affects—passion, piety, and affection—are both blended and neatly distinguished. And so that concluding question is, in this sense, duplicitous: the poem invokes a problem that its own medium seems to have answered, and the ease with which we—standing at the vantage of a hundred years—can read this poem outside the strict rubrics of autobiography stands as proof. Shifting that question into Yeats's own medium—"How can we know the poet from the poem?"—not only robs it of its profundity; it also forces us to recognize the easy triumph of New Critical ideals in our approach to modernism's interests and accomplishments.

Whatever genuine anxiety or uncertainty the poem generates thus comes out of a tension between the media of text and those of performance: to "know the dancer from the dance" requires a set of skills and habits of mind for which *reading*—or the various interpretive tactics associated with literature—appear to be a poor analogue. That concluding question cannot easily stand as an evocative synecdoche for all creative or artistic output; rather, it indicates a problem unique to dance, to music, and to performance. Here and elsewhere throughout the modernist canon performance becomes a provocative "other" to literary art, representative of irreducible paradoxes, sensuous extremes, and irrevocable cultural barriers. The attractions of performance seem to embody a rejection of modernist literature's basic preoccupation with the advantages of textuality; for this reason (among others) major modernist voices—including, quite prominently, Yeats himself—often express ambivalence or outright disdain for the gross physicality and pandering immediacy of performance and theatricality. And when—as in "Among School

Children”—that uncertainty is expressed as a kind of fascination, it appears in a form that deliberately purges the effects of text and linguistic semiosis: the dancer appears from the other side of a chasm across which the poem cannot reach, enticing but forever out of touch. Yeats’s remarks are thus countered and confirmed from the other side by the champions of early twentieth-century anti-textual avant-garde performance, from the Dada manifestoes to Antonin Artaud’s “No More Masterpieces.”

It is therefore unsurprising that traditional, text-based theatrical performance is often ignored or deliberately eschewed both by prominent modernist writers and by standardizing scholarly accounts of modernism, a bias that is habitually affirmed along both socio-cultural and aesthetic lines.² In cultural terms, the denigration of traditional dramatic performance in the early twentieth century is yet another example of the persistence of an “anti-theatrical prejudice,” a bluntly moral distaste for a form that relies both upon the favors of its lower-class audience and the exhibitionist and deceitful inclinations of its practitioners. Jonas Barish’s *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (1981) has long been recognized as the landmark work on this historical phenomenon. Moving from ancient Greece through to twentieth-century Europe, Barish charts the ways in which different modes of theatrical work have, under various social regimes, invoked different measures of hostility; though the circumstances change, a basic fear of the theatre’s moral contagion is always present and is usually linked to the marginal social position of theatrical workers. But this overt social prejudice is compounded in the early twentieth century by a renewed attack on the philosophical values of “theatricality” from high-minded aesthetic theorists. The directly mimetic effects of naturalistic theatrical performance are seen as antithetical to the basic purpose and function of modernist art, and the theatre’s appeal to and reliance upon a constant rapport between performers and audiences denies the modernist work’s

² For a condensed history of this trend, see Shepherd-Barr, “Modernism and Theatrical Performance.”

perfect autonomy and abstraction from social determinants.³ The theatre is seen, in these terms, as a debased form of art, dependent upon broken tools and imperfect media—media that include the bodies and voices of its performers.

In this dissertation, however, I hope to resituate traditional dramatic performance in the narrative of literary modernism by focusing interest upon one of the theatre's most challenging effects: the work of the actor. "To Stage a Reading: The Actor in British Modernism" tracks the surprising survival and remarkable influence of the late-Victorian actor on the development of modernist literary values into and through the first half of the twentieth century. This influence manifests itself both in terms of modernism's social and cultural contexts as well as its evolving attitudes toward artistic production and reception. For late-Victorian and modernist writers, the actor does not serve merely as a touchstone for certain notions of collectivity, performance, or mass culture—values against which literary modernism has long been defined. Instead, the actor provides a means for continually revisiting and reasserting notions of textuality and textual reception even as he or she provides a lens through which modernist literature can also engage with its own historical contexts. By both embodying and resisting the prescriptive effects of the dramatic text, the actor isolates problems of physical media in modernist literature: her performance is read both as an expression of textual imperatives and also as an opportunity to define a uniquely personal contribution to the "art" of the stage that resists the interpretive rubrics of textual dramaturgy. Furthermore, the actor of the late-Victorian age—an era so quickly sundered from twentieth-century life—provides a means for a modernist intervention in popular

³ This distinctively modernist form of "anti-theatricality" was defined and expressed most vehemently in 1967 by the art critic and historian Michael Fried, who famously declared that the "*success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theater.*" (Fried, "Art and Objecthood": 163.) While Fried's polemic has naturally served as a rallying point for equally one-sided defenses from the theatre's adherents over the past fifty years, recent work within the last decade on modernist anti-theatricality has provided more subtle and convincing accounts of the ways in which such "anti-theatrical" attitudes actually inform the most vital contributions to theatre history made within the early twentieth century. See especially Puchner, *Stage Fright*.

culture and mass historical consciousness as the twentieth century rolls onward and the stakes of reconsidering the world of the 1890s are revised. The sense of severance that has long been associated with modernist literature—an ambivalent severance from the historical, the social, the political, and even the personal and psychological—is not articulated against the late-Victorian actor; rather, such divides are both invoked and bridged through modernist treatments of these actors.

Throughout this dissertation, I will argue that the idea of the actor is a concept with which a variety of major literary voices throughout the first half of the twentieth century were able to conceive and represent the import, the function, and the reception of their work, in terms both of their loftiest aesthetic ideals and of their most immediate cultural and political circumstances. The actor allows us to witness “stages of reading” throughout modernist literature, a phrase that I deploy here in two significant senses. First: the actor places the act of reading itself on stage, translating a private and inward habit into a publically visible and politically efficacious action. He or she does this both through the most literal form of staged readings—enacting scenes in which a textual object is used and perused onstage before an audience—and also through more metaphoric staged readings, by making visible interpretive choices that an audience of readers themselves are forced to make when encountering dramatic texts. Second: the actor makes us aware that the acts of reading and reception are situated chronologically as part of larger processes of aesthetic production and social communion. A single reading of a literary text—or a single performance of that text—is simply one stage or phase in a complicated network of transmission and circulation. To focus attention on the late-Victorian actor into and through the modernist period means, in this sense, to reassess continually how the “stage of reading” he or she represents fits into broader notions of cultural

advancement, social stratification, historical progress, and political engagement.

To stage a reading of modernist literature by means of the actor thus returns us once more to the terms of Yeats's "Among School Children." Though the speaker's struggle to "know the dancer from the dance" is worked out according to the terms of Platonic metaphysics—and though it therefore recalls the problems of *mimesis* that drive "anti-theatrical" high-modernist art—its prompt is grounded in the most benign problems of twentieth-century education: "The children learn to cipher and to sing, / To study reading-books and histories, / To cut and sew, be neat in everything / In the best modern way..." The troubling reality of "reading-books and histories" delivered to children so tidily "in the best modern way" intrudes upon the speaker's consciousness; and while the dilemmas of aesthetics, religion, and time quickly bear him beyond the classroom, the poem nevertheless suggests that the strained link between pedagogy and poetry—or between the populace and the poet—might be renewed through the rubrics of performance. In the chapters that follow, I will suggest the ways in which certain ideas of the actor and of the art of acting were seen as one means of effecting this goal in the work of four major British writers of the early twentieth century.

Historical Overview: The Late-Victorian Stage

The argument of this dissertation concerns a wide range of the actor's effects upon conceptions of modernist literature, which are roughly outlined and described in subsequent sections of this introduction. Each of these effects, however, takes place within a network of other associated interactions, which make simplistic generalizations about uniform influence notoriously difficult to assert. Moreover, both the power of the actors that I discuss and the discourses that surround them depend, to a large degree, upon a sense of uniqueness or indelible personal specificity in

the actor's performance. What I will call the "paradox of the actor"—originally defined by Denis Diderot in the late eighteenth century and reconfigured by Henry Irving in the late nineteenth century—concerns the simultaneous submergence and celebration of the performer's personality in the construction of a mimetic theatrical performance. Throughout this dissertation, certain ideas of celebrity are cautiously invoked and touched upon with respect to this paradox; likewise, the "It Factor"—an idea of celebrity charisma that is at once instantly and universally recognizable, crucially indefinable, and eminently commodifiable and marketable—will maintain a lurking presence in some discussions of an actor's personal abilities, especially when those abilities seem to flourish their idiosyncrasies against the traditions of training, custom, and habit.⁴ In this sense, localized cultural cache, personal reputations, and individualized "imperfections" in performance might appear to be the sole determinants of the actor's value, and these features are both too fickle and too specific to bear the weight of any larger critical assertion.⁵ Given the complexity of these circumstances, it is admittedly difficult to "be neat in everything / In the best modern way," when putting together an account of modernism through the lens of four specific actors who achieved their apexes of success on the London stage

⁴ See Roach, *It*: 3. Roach's approach to this indefinable phenomenon attempts a stripping-away of all cultural and physical effects as it descends toward a trans-historical core: successive chapters penetrate from "accessories" and "clothes" down to "skin," "flesh," and "bone." However, the idea that "it" recedes *inward* is a function of the gradual revision of attitudes about actors and individual psychology from the early modern period through the present day—a fact that Roach acknowledges even as he reaches toward an anachronistic vision of "it" that "connects the Stuart Restoration and the theater it launched...to Hollywood."

⁵ Much ink has been spilled in recent years on the phenomenon of "celebrity" in the scholarly literature on modernism. This work is undoubtedly part of an ongoing effort to erect new bridges across the "great divide" between modernist art and popular culture, in what Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz have called the "New Modernist Studies." Of course, a central tenet of most of this work is that modernist writers and artists leveraged a pre-existing mode of "celebrity" engagement as part of a broader meta-critical intervention in aesthetic culture; celebrity personae were developed as partially or wholly-fabricated masks through which the artist could encounter the public. The great irony of these arguments, of course, is that even as paradigms of acting and theatricality were self-consciously adopted by writers stretching from Oscar Wilde to Gertrude Stein, a similar self-conscious intelligence was—and continues to be—denied to actors and performing artists. This divide is actually the focus of the opening moment of Aaron Jaffe's *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity*, which pinpoints the various ironies at play in a staged publicity photo of Marilyn Monroe unself-consciously absorbed in reading James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

between 1890 and 1910.

As a result, it is worth providing at the outset the facts that draw these figures together as well as a rough sketch of the principles that guide the chronological organization of the subsequent chapters in its engagement with modernism. The dissertation is divided into four main chapters, each of which links a specific theatrical performer to a writer and to one or more literary texts produced between 1890 and 1960. Chapter One concerns the intimate relationship between the actor Henry Irving and his business manager, the novelist Bram Stoker; Chapter Two describes the ways in which the dramatist George Bernard Shaw capitalized on notions of the actor's education, focusing on Shaw's interests in developing and showcasing the talents of the actor Mrs. Patrick Campbell; Chapter Three analyzes the poet T. S. Eliot's fascination with the music-hall actor Marie Lloyd and how Lloyd's death influenced Eliot's conception of poetic form, the literary tradition, and the theatrical medium; and Chapter Four discusses Virginia Woolf's look back at the career of Ellen Terry, the actor and pre-Raphaelite icon, in her final critical and creative works.

The dissertation is therefore bookended by a partnership that defined the English theatrical world in the final decades of the nineteenth century: the collaboration between Henry Irving and Ellen Terry. Between 1878 and 1898, Irving and Terry were the uncontested stars of the London stage, the twin pillars that upheld nearly every production at an acknowledged beacon of late-Victorian culture: the Lyceum theatre, Irving's "temple of art," which was dedicated largely to lavish, bombastic historical epics and Shakespearean revivals. To this pair, the other two actors I confront hold a complex relationship. Mrs. Patrick Campbell was a star of the respectable stage in her own right, and in the last years of the century she often appeared at the Lyceum during the absence of Irving and Terry. At the same time, however, she gained

renown through her charismatic performances as the archetypal “fallen woman” in the contemporary dramas of Arthur Wing Pinero, and so Shaw would deploy Campbell within a popular “potboiler” romance during the First World War in order to activate a peculiar paradox of class consciousness, historical awareness, and theatrical engagement. Marie Lloyd, on the other hand, embodies a more authentic connection to a popular or lower-class form of the theatre: she rose from obscure roots to a measure of fame (if not fortune) in the music-hall, a venue whose aesthetics and audience were explicitly opposed to the high-art pretensions of Irving’s Lyceum. Lloyd appears as a necessary “other” to Irving, though (as I will describe) she also appeals to an idea of the actor’s craft that Irving himself had engaged.

These actors therefore create a complex and multifaceted image of the late-Victorian theatrical world, both in its wide range of functions and in its surprising forms of coherence. Between these figures, a number of basic genres and modes of theatrical performance receive necessary attention; and while I continually assert claims about each actor’s unique effects on literary conceptions of acting, each chapter also places its focal figure in comparison to other performers that inhabited similar roles, occupied similar venues, or performed in similar modes. Irving is situated at the end of a long line of English actor-managers, stretching back in history through David Garrick to Richard Burbage; Mrs. Patrick Campbell is placed alongside the Lyceum stable as well as Shaw’s other collaborators in smaller theatrical enterprises, from J. T. Grein’s Independent Theatre to Harley Granville-Barker’s Royal Court; Marie Lloyd is distinguished from her fellow music-hall artists even as she is linked to a wider conception of the chorus and of choral roles throughout theatrical and English history; and Ellen Terry is connected not only to her collaborators on the stage but also to the wider circles of Victorian poets and painters that took her as a muse throughout the final decades of the nineteenth century.

While all four of these actors represent a fairly restricted idea of theatrical performance—traditional mimetic naturalism on a proscenium stage—they also speak to much wider cultural and historical phenomena that surrounded and defined the theatre and aesthetic culture at the turn of the twentieth century.

This sequence of chapters offered in this dissertation provides a fluid and varied account of modernist literature's inception and growth through multiple genres in relation to the work of these actors, using localized connections and collaborative ideas rather than unilateral assertions about modernism's prerogatives, interests, or effects. Throughout the dissertation, I have avoided monolithic definitions about modernism and its intents, preferring instead to reveal the ways in which each one of these writers—who are traditionally associated with wildly different conceptions of modernism and its related movements—focuses his or her work through a consistent set of approaches to the actor's craft. The goal of this dissertation is not, therefore, to describe the ways in which the late-Victorian actor contributes to the fulfillment of any singular notion of modernism or modernist thought but rather to show that specific functions of the actor's work became central to various projects undertaken throughout the modernist period.

The historical aspects of my arguments are grounded in the player's unwritten legacy, on a sensibility about actors that reaches toward trans-historical abstraction even as it manifests itself in the most intimate and immediate aspects of material history. Due to a surprising confluence of aesthetic teleology and cultural transformation, actors—the principal targets of the “anti-theatrical prejudice” since time immemorial—rise to a unique prominence in late-Victorian London and become the pretext and the inspiration for modernist reformations of literary practice and reception. The actor does not take part in any unified or consistent vision of modernism; rather, I argue that one idea of the actor—embodied variously by Irving, Campbell,

Lloyd, and Terry—stands within the Great Divide that has often been used to characterize modernism, thereby permitting the articulation of a panoply of modernisms that reflect backward along historical, cultural, and aesthetic lines. Though one line of high-modernist thought tends inexorably toward that form of textualized abstraction and historical severance, the actor's work provides a consistent means to challenge these notions: to stage iterative re-readings of modernist literature according to the variety of functions that define the actor's unique art.

Functions of the Actor in British Modernism

The Actor as (Textual) Medium

To argue that these actors stand within the Great Divide is necessarily to argue that they occupy a middle-point between two opposing ideals: that they are not simply liminal but rather *intermediate* in their relationship to the positions that bind them on either side. The idea of a Great Divide—construed variously as a chasm between past and present, between aesthetic regimes, and between classes—has long characterized modernist studies, in part because it provides a simple means for charting a “seismology” of cultural upheaval in the early twentieth century.⁶ The major assertion of this dissertation is, in this one sense, a modest one: suggesting that the work of these four pop-cultural figures can fill a void requires, perhaps, the reduction of the Great Divide metaphor from an apocalyptic cataclysm to a more manageable kind of social fracture. It is not my intent, however, to downplay the more radical elements of modernist thought or the more severe historical and cultural transformations associated with this period, even though my focus remains upon a relatively conservative image of the bourgeois London stage. Instead, I offer the actor as a benign means of approaching and confronting historical and cultural severance: both on stage and throughout the wider cultural realm, the actor stands

⁶ Bradbury and McFarlane, “The Name and Nature of Modernism”: 19.

between the illusion of perfect social continuity and the threat of an unprecedented break from the norm.

On a more immediate level, however, I focus on the idea of the actor as an aesthetic medium. The problem expressed at the conclusion of Yeats's "Among School Children"—"How can we know the dancer from the dance?"—is only one example of frustrated modernist attempts to understand performance media, and this anxiety has its roots in efforts to process and define the various functions of art and aesthetics throughout the nineteenth century.

As a collaborative art, the theatre represents a hybrid of other media, from text and music to scenic art and costuming. This confluence of separate artistic genres and media on the stage is what immediately precipitates the modernist attack on the values of theatricality, in part because the theatre tends to emphasize or embody an effort to work *between* media: the theatre is intermediate and has no medium to call its own. In the words of the art critic Michael Fried—the most vocal champion of "anti-theatrical" modernist art—"the concepts of quality and value... are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within *the individual arts*," and "*what lies between the arts is theater* [emphasis his]."⁷ It is not simply that the theatre forces the spectator to confront a space that is liminal and multimedial; it is also that this effort threatens to undermine notions of quality and value by questioning the integrity of such boundaries.

These ideas of artistic integrity were themselves products of a Victorian disposition regarding the immaterial and ephemeral in art and aesthetics. With regards to theatre, the early nineteenth century witnessed a growing division between textual drama and theatrical performance. Following from the Romantic privileging of the lyric, poetic drama was seen as crudely dependent on physical representation; and in reaction to the concurrent "rising tide of bardolatry," tragedy became "increasingly a nontheatrical genre," and "closet drama" was

⁷ Fried, "Art and Objecthood": 163–64.

substantiated in print instead of performance.⁸ Jonas Barish asserts:

From our present point of vantage in time, nineteenth-century attacks on the theater frequently have the air of a psychomachia: the artistic conscience, struggling against the grossness of the physical stage, striving to free itself from the despotism of the actors, resembles the spirit warring against the flesh, the soul wrestling with the body, or the virtues launching their assault on the vices.⁹

By the end of the nineteenth century, this phenomenon produced two simultaneous effects: first, the rise of the theatrical director as an authorial force capable of granting to the stage that purity of “artistic conscience”; second, the elaboration of printed dramatic texts and “closet dramas” both as publishable commodities and as readable genres with their own formalist codes and rhetorics, based on the literate and literary sensibilities of their audience. As a result, studies of modernist literature and modern drama have often focused on a divisive split between textual and theatrical representation of dramatic works after the nineteenth century.

On the stage, the rise of the modern theatrical director allowed the unification of the arts of the stage under the aegis of one whose “artistic conscience” could grant legitimacy to the theatre as a medium—but only by emphasizing a strained and abstracted notion of what that “medium” was. In many ways, this development is associated with Richard Wagner, whose institution of the theatre as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—roughly, “total art work”—brought together text, music, scenic effects, and actors’ performances under one complete vision designed around a coherent experience for the theatrical patron. And so Martin Puchner attributes to Wagner the “invention of theatricality” as a determining event in the history of modernism.¹⁰

However, Wagner’s totalizing notion of theatre was in part brought about by submitting the various arts of the stage to a singular theory—one of “gesture.” Under Wagnerian

⁸ Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*: 328.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 349.

¹⁰ Puchner, *Stage Fright*: 31.

“theatricality,” both the operatic score and the actor’s motions act according to an anatomizing effect of the directorial vision. Wagner attempted to bring about this theory by striving for (and failing to achieve) a textual effect of universal notation for these “gestures”: both stage directions for actors and the score for musicians could be represented through “a combination of a symbolic and a pictorial or iconic mode of representation” on the page.¹¹ Puchner asserts: “Because of his investment in gestures, Wagner, more than anyone else before Beckett, tried to force directors to conform to his stage directions, and the devotion of his followers can be measured by their willingness to obey his stage directions.”¹² Wagner’s conception of “theatricality” thus does not only establish a directorial prerogative; rather, it establishes that prerogative as in a sense authorial and textual, and it collapses the present effects of theatrical performance back into a historical recapitulation of an “original” staging under Wagner’s own direction. The medium of “gesture” thus displaces the physical media of the stage—including, especially, the bodies of the actors—in a manner that reproduces the immateriality of text.

Meanwhile, studies of the textual production of dramatic work beginning in the early to mid-nineteenth century usually acknowledge the various forces that permit or even demand publication over theatrical production, including (but not limited to): the gradual articulation of a sense of “intellectual property” for dramatic authors; the elaboration of various mechanisms and economic arrangements for the spread of print culture in Europe; the realities of censorship, particularly on the stage; the democratization of education and the increase of “mass” literacy; and (perhaps as a direct result of the last) the hierarchical invention of reading strategies and techniques enabled by the institution and development of literary study in the university and

¹¹ Ibid.: 54.

¹² Ibid.

among the elite.¹³ The upshot of this development is that the expansion of textual “art” throughout the modernist period also sees—in occasionally submerged ways—the deployment of competing and provocative forms of textual rhetoric in the production of printed plays. Such efforts occur in a myriad of contexts and have been deployed to any number of ends, continuing down to the present day: dramatic publication is now more than ever engaged in the potentials of print rhetoric.¹⁴ A major aspect of modern dramatic history therefore confronts the ways that various playwrights between the nineteenth century and today use the medium of text in a way that supplants, elides, or outright contradicts the possibility of physical enactment.

Both of these efforts—the director’s effort to establish a medium of theatricality and the dramatist’s effort to renovate the medium of text for the theatre—are frustrated and occasionally foiled by the work of the actor. Therefore, a major through-line of this dissertation concerns reciprocal efforts within the modernist period to define the actor as a medium apart from the text he or she speaks and the anatomized gestures he or she embodies.

Each chapter of this dissertation therefore begins by confronting the actor’s relationship to the textual medium, aiming to determine whether the actor’s abilities are meant to function alongside or against textual or immaterial ideals. Chapter One begins this work by assessing the ways in which Henry Irving redefined the terms of Denis Diderot’s “paradox of the actor” in order to transform the actor into a medium of “restoration”; such a notion is central to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, which deploys an ideal of acting in order to reconstitute the broken texts and fractured psyches that define the novel’s form. Chapter Two, on the other hand, considers the ways in which Bernard Shaw used the print publication of his dramatic works to initiate a kind of combative resistance to the norms of textuality; *Pygmalion*—his most overtly metatheatrical

¹³ See especially Peters, *Theatre of the Book*.

¹⁴ See Worthen, *Print and the Poetics of Modern Drama*.

play—is, in part, about the actor’s ability to supervene the distinctions of class and power that are embodied within a purportedly “universal” phonetic representation. Chapter Three interrogates the relationship between poetry and theatre by confronting the friction between an actor’s “naturalistic” performance and the abstractions of language in the mid-century poetic drama of T. S. Eliot. And Chapter Four describes the efforts undertaken by Virginia Woolf to revise *Freshwater*—a play about the interrelated media of poetry, painting, photography, and acting—such that the actor Ellen Terry transcends the problems inherent in the strict imperatives handed down by the Victorian aesthetes that inaugurated this sensibility about the integrity of the individual arts.

My treatment of the actor as a medium also explicitly avoids overtly mechanistic or biological approaches to the actor’s body. These notions are central to alternative conceptions of a theory of acting within this period, linking theorists from Stanislavski and Meyerhold through Artaud to Grotowski. My desire has been to avoid the dualistic mind-body distinction that dominates such approaches even when they seek to subvert it. Meyerhold, for example, offered a “scientific” approach to the actor’s bodily medium couched in these explicit terms: “The actor must train his material (the body), so that it is capable of executing instantaneously those tasks which are dictated externally (by the actor, the director).”¹⁵ This sense of dualist severance takes on additional significance with the rise of new psychological and physical sciences in the early twentieth century, but it also has its roots in Diderot’s paradox and is therefore linked to the kind of nineteenth-century “anti-theatricality” discussed by Barish. In contrast, I argue that Irving, by circumventing Diderot, offered an opportunity to view the actor in a manner that “restores” that break, translating the actor him- or herself into a medium for textual and historical representation that both transcends and embraces the actor’s physical limitations. For Irving—and therefore for

¹⁵ Meyerhold, “Biomechanics”: 198.

the writers and dramatists I confront throughout this dissertation—the question of the actor’s medium lies not between the mind and the body nor between the unconscious and the conscious, but rather between the living and the dead.

The Actor as Historical Icon

To read the late-Victorian actor into British modernism necessarily means building bridges back across the Great Divide in history as well as aesthetics; it means arguing for a lingering presence of Victorianism in social and cultural terms even after the global calamity of the Great War and the collapse of Britain’s imperial aspirations—to say nothing of the technological, scientific, philosophical, and psychological transformations also associated with the movement from the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth. To some, the British theatre felt these upheavals far less than other locations and other media: London, by and large, did not host the same avant-garde theatrical life associated with other centers of modernist performance culture, like Zurich, Paris, Berlin, or New York; and British drama remained dominated by the influence of Bernard Shaw—whose own dramaturgical practice was rooted in nineteenth-century stagecraft—through the middle of the twentieth century.¹⁶

I argue that an attention both to the novelty and to the conventionality of the late-Victorian actor alerts us to the ways in which historical consciousness is generated in order to accommodate the sense of breakage that defines this period; the obvious limitations of the bourgeois stage actually provide a means of accounting for historical transformation through its use of the actor. For this reason, the chapters assembled below work to isolate the variety of different historical functions the actor performs throughout late-Victorian and modernist literature. There are two significant senses in which the actor performs as a historical icon.

¹⁶ Innes, *Modern British Drama*: 13–55.

The first—and most immediate—is that the actor, as a public figure, provides a link to an entire cultural network of values and ideas; moreover, he or she can function as both an emblem of these values and as their most visible opponent. This notion of the actor’s historical function necessarily touches upon notions of celebrity and iconicity that are endemic to the media culture of the twentieth century. However, the role of fame and cultural recognition is notoriously difficult to describe, especially during the early twentieth century: partly as a result of rapidly expanding forms of mass-cultural expression, this period sees the continual revision and reformation of the notion of celebrity. The forms of celebrity that dominate modernist thought are to some extent anti-theatrical, insofar as they rely upon that same notion of atomized, dispersed identity associated with textual publication, film, and radio. As Julia A. Walker has observed in an essay on “modern drama and the problem of the literary”:

With the wide-scale implementation of telegraph, telephone, phonograph, radio, and silent film technologies at the turn of the twentieth century, the felt experience of communication radically altered. When a pattern of electrical impulses could be sent across the continent and decoded in a matter of seconds, when the grain of the voice could be heard apart from the immediate physical presence of the speaker, when meaningful gestures were presented by bodies removed in both space and time, the messages transmitted through these new technologies must have seemed strange because so unexpectedly removed from the moment of their communicative intent. The act of communication—once experienced as a relatively integrated process—was rent apart; the communicative experience shivered into various splintered elements.¹⁷

In such an experience of communicative disruption, the “individual arts” retreat to their separate functions, Walker alleges, and the dramatic text cultivates its “literary” character at the expense of its engagement with other communicative arts (or “meaningful gestures”) onstage.

For this reason, I suggest that the modernist interest in the late-Victorian actor is manifested explicitly against the notions of “celebrity” that come to dominate discourses about public or historical role-playing. The late-Victorian actor’s historical iconicity is *not* a product of

¹⁷ Walker, “Bodies, Voices, Words”: 68.

his or her pervasiveness within a media-saturated culture but rather the opposite: the late-Victorian actor becomes a historical icon because his or her effects—and presence—are so discretely limited, bound by the architecture of the stage and by the limitations of his or her own life. Actors provide a link (back) to the culture of late-Victorian London in a way that emphasizes separation and isolation: though these figures are “larger than life,” it is actually their ability to manifest the banal visibility of mortality that provides the key to their role in historical consciousness.

This sense of limitation is connected intimately to my treatment of the “medium” of the actor. Therefore, each of the chapters below proceeds from its discussion of textual and theatrical media to encounter the question of historical significance. Chapter One performs this work by discussing how Irving’s representation of Victorian supremacy actually devolved upon his own failure and subsequent death: his 1895 performance of *King Arthur* connects the mythic king’s personal limitations to the dreadful effects of an imperial delusion, and Irving’s steady decline and death a decade later indicates the impossibility of a kind of historiography generated out of a belief in “great men.” Chapter Two probes the opposite effect: Stella Campbell’s nostalgic performance in *Pygmalion* on the eve of the Great War reminds us of the ossified anachronisms that become a symbol of hope and renovation for a culture that must confront the new reality of warfare and destruction. Chapter Three, on the other hand, considers the violence done to an individual’s life through the conversion of a death into a form of cultural biography and critique: T. S. Eliot’s rhapsodic obituary for Marie Lloyd in 1922 provides the misreading that fuels Eliot’s later efforts to represent death onstage. And Chapter Four describes how Virginia Woolf’s revision of Ellen Terry’s life—including her continual re-reading of Terry’s own autobiography—inspires a view of historical role-playing that eschews the agency of larger-than-

life historical actors in favor of the localized connections fostered within a theatrical community.

There is also a second sense in which these actors function as historical icons: through that pervasive historical anti-theatricality, the actor occasionally comes to represent an invisible and trans-historical form of otherness. Part of this effect is due to the social marginalization of actors as well as to the impossibility of reconstructing performance history in an age before recording media like film and radio: Irving's cultural history of the acting profession therefore assumes consistent ideals of what a great actor represents throughout all of theatrical history, even as it asserts that that ideal is met only intermittently by discrete individuals. Throughout this dissertation, then, the actor is also used to touch upon the potential for a universal sense of identity or collective history: in Eliot's vision of the Greek chorus (and the music-hall), for example, the actor links the populace to their collective plight in a way that surpasses or exceeds individual manifestation. This sense of an *invisible* union represented by the actor—something that escapes the rubrics of textualized history and a culture that focuses on individual achievement—is essential, even when it is moderated by an interest in representing the actor's limited achievement of a trans-historical ideal.

And it is this possibility—the actor's ability to embody an invisible cultural continuity even while maintaining a highly segregated personal identity—that provides the key to understanding the actor's function in literary reception.

The Actor as Reader

To stage a reading of modernist literature necessarily involves the transformation of the audience into the actor, and one of the major arguments of this dissertation is that modernist works *demand*, in some sense, a kind of staging. They require an audience attuned to the processes of

reception and the networks of transmission in which the literary work is embedded, an audience willing to “play its part” in the production of meaning. I argue that the actor becomes the most literal means of encountering a problem fundamental to the modernist period: by making the problem of literary reception visible—by enacting, before another audience, a reading of a dramatic text—the actor offers modernist writers the chance to interrogate shifting norms of cultural reading, especially as they relate to crucial issues of personal identity and democratic education.

Throughout the nineteenth century, both publishing and pedagogical reforms brought astonishing transformations to the landscape of readership in England: even as new forms of literature—including periodical and print ephemera—generated new forms of audience engagement, the expansion of literacy within a lower-class audience made new demands upon the genres and codes of literary work. As a result, this period saw the production of new ideals of criticism and new articulations of the reader’s role in thoughtful, sustained communion with textual art, and these notions were gradually folded into the assembly of “modernist” literary values over the ensuing decades. In the work of figures like Matthew Arnold and Henry James—such as *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) and “The Art of Fiction” (1885), respectively—new modes of critical reading were fostered in explicit opposition to the habits of textual engagement modeled by a “mass” readership. In many cases, this kind of work was built upon a rejection of audience behaviors associated with other media, especially the theatre: where the theatre offered an aesthetic experience for conspicuous consumption in a highly visible and socialized space, novels and poetry would be built upon an experience of contemplation pursued in isolation, designed around the individual’s invisible (and sometimes inarticulate) contact with the work of art. As a result, the forms of literature generated out of the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries—up to and including the “difficult,” experimental works that characterize literary modernism—are “anti-theatrical” in their attitude to reception as well as to medium and form.

Throughout this dissertation, I document several successive attempts to use the actor’s encounter with a literary text as a model for critical thought about the processes of reading, both as an exercise of individual interpretive prerogative and as a form of cultural communion. In one sense, to speak of an actor’s “reading” of a dramatic role is a natural means of validating individual creative license in appreciating a dramatic text. This form of individualized reception actually uses a text to join the actor to a long history of other former “readers,” simultaneously acknowledging points of difference while asserting a more fundamental continuity: Irving’s Hamlet is not Garrick’s Hamlet, and neither is Shakespeare’s Hamlet; but all three can occupy the same discursive field by challenging notions of “authorized” readings of dramatic literature. Furthermore, the actor’s encounter with a textual object onstage is often used to reflect upon the ways in which approaches to reading are immediately confounded by their contexts: for example, the sort of serendipitous miscommunication engineered by letters sent awry is a standard plot device for Shakespeare as much as for Shaw. The actor’s literal reading therefore offers a way to emphasize a collective approach to the task of interpretation (historically or socially) even as it indicates that the act of reading is often determined by circumstances that exist far outside the boundaries of the page.

At the same time, I demonstrate that the actor’s significance to the reading process can also work in the opposite direction: even as actors are continually viewed as readers, so too are readers constantly encouraged to act. I suggest that the forms of acting generated by each of my focal figures—Irving, Campbell, Lloyd and Terry—inspire new types of behaviors in the audience of the theatrical or the literary work: the work of the actor spreads outward in mimetic

ripples, as audience members are gradually converted or educated in the types of action appropriate to a democratically engaged readership. The friction generated between two ideals of “acting”—to engage in pretense (theatrical acting) *and* to make effective movements within a social group (political action)—is highlighted by the actor’s work within the culture. To convert the reader into the actor necessarily means confronting this simultaneous impulse toward deception and civic responsibility.

I argue that the actor’s engagements with the problems of aesthetic media and the crises of social history all devolve upon a fundamental link between the reader and the actor. Each chapter of the dissertation therefore concludes by discussing this effect. Chapter One ends by revealing that Stoker’s engagement with the social history of novel readership—including its conservative impulses and its heavily gendered codes—is inflected by Irving’s persuasive arguments for the actor’s moral involvement in literary education. Chapter Two shows how Shaw hoped to develop a militant and aggressive critical attitude in his readers by offering Stella Campbell’s Eliza Doolittle as a paradigmatic “monster of illiteracy.” Chapter Three concludes by demonstrating that Eliot’s use of Marie Lloyd destabilizes the critical dicta of his manifesto of canonical literacy, “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” And Chapter Four reveals that Woolf’s populist ideal of the “common reader” depends heavily upon her understanding of the fundamental differences between the critical attitudes generated within the theatre and those unknowingly inculcated within the private spaces associated with privileged reading.

In the end, the actor’s importance to British modernism lies here: in the promise that the actor can provide a means for the literary work to expand beyond the boundaries of its own medium and time, to be eclipsed and restored intermittently and discontinuously in the actions of its readers—in one more performance, on another night, in another time. Or, as Woolf herself

would put it in the final line of her own last novel:

“Then the curtain rose. They spoke.”

I.

**“MADE MANIFEST IN THE READING”:
SIR HENRY IRVING, BRAM STOKER, AND THE PARADOX OF THE ACTOR**

There is a moment early in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) that has become something of a touchstone for critical readings of the novel’s historical anxieties. Having been summoned to Transylvania to execute a real estate transaction with the mysterious Count, the young British solicitor Jonathan Harker soon finds himself a virtual captive in the ancient Castle Dracula during his host’s peculiar daytime absences. Harker’s prison is curiously well-appointed: one of the rooms to which he is permitted access is a small library equipped with all the advantages of contemporary London print-culture—not only a variety of books about English history and customs but also the modern ephemera of newspapers, magazines, and almanacs, including (Harker is somewhat proud to discover) the current Law List. But one evening, against the Count’s explicit orders, Harker forces open a stuck door, escaping into one of the castle’s neglected wings. In spite of their obvious state of disrepair, Harker finds in these rooms an air of comfortable domesticity—leading him to conclude, naturally enough, that this apartment was “evidently the portion of the castle occupied by the ladies in bygone days.” And it is as he contemplates the activities that once must have characterized these rooms that Harker sits down to write in his diary:

Here I am, sitting at a little oak table where in old times possibly some fair lady sat to pen, with much thought and many blushes, her ill-spelt love-letter, and writing in my diary in shorthand all that has happened since I closed it last. It is nineteenth century up-to-date with a vengeance. And yet, unless my senses deceive me, the old centuries had, and have, powers of their own which mere ‘modernity’ cannot kill.¹

The reader of *Dracula* is then met with the novel’s most significant narrative lacuna; when

¹ Stoker, *Dracula*: 40–41.

Harker's narration is resumed in the following line, he is frenzied, desperate for the sanity granted by the act of written retrospection. In the pages that follow, Harker recounts his first true encounter with the novel's demonic forces: for as he lay in a kind of ecstatic stupor within that dreadful apartment, Harker was seduced and nearly vamped by three hypnotic maidens, rescued at the very moment of penetration by the Count himself.

This moment, therefore, represents a kind of critical junction point for a novel that is itself a document of late-Victorian liminality: Harker's narration ceases at the precise moment when the presumptive authority of his voice collides with (and recapitulates) the assumed actions of a subjected and historically prescribed other. This diagnosis of the scene is in keeping with the majority of the critical work produced on this novel in recent decades. *Dracula*, it is argued, offers an image of the anxieties that beset *fin de siècle* British culture: social, sexual, psychological, racial, political, economic, colonial, and technological, and the list could easily continue. Such readings, though, often depend upon an implicit suggestion of authorial passivity, an idea ratified not only by the low profile of Bram Stoker himself—who wrote little else of note, and was known in his day primarily as the business manager of Sir Henry Irving's Lyceum Theatre, a minor figure existing in the shadow of one of Victorian society's leading artistic practitioners—but also by the very medium in which Stoker chose to write: the Gothic romance, a genre strictly defined both by historical literary convention and by the consumptive habits of its low-cultural audience. Alan Johnson has cogently outlined the problem: “One of the striking characteristics of the considerable number of critical essays written about Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) in the past thirty years is that, more often than not, they deny that Stoker really knew what he was doing as he wrote it.”²

In this chapter, I argue that this assumption of authorial passivity—the same assumption

² Johnson, “Bent and Broken Necks”: 231.

made and then mimicked by Jonathan Harker within the scene outlined above, and then duplicated continuously throughout the entire novel—is actually the product of Stoker’s intimate awareness of the paradoxical powers of the actor. During the twenty years preceding *Dracula’s* first publication, Stoker’s career was defined by that of Henry Irving, whose personal crusade to embody, redeem, and uplift the value of the actor’s profession utterly transformed the theatrical and social landscape of Victorian England. Born John Henry Brodribb and raised in a remote village in Cornwall, Irving adopted his stage name at the age of eighteen and endured years of struggle as a young actor before he burst into the national consciousness with his idiosyncratic and morally compelling portrayal of the murderer Mathias in Leopold Lewis’s *The Bells* in 1871. Assuming control of the Lyceum shortly thereafter, he embarked upon a series of stately revivals of the Shakespearean canon and bombastic historical epics. Irving’s work at the Lyceum was defined by a curious contradiction: his fastidious attention to a vaguely historical accuracy of costume and spectacular scenic detail was matched only by his willingness to cut and refashion the texts of the plays to suit his bizarre and unique theatrical mannerisms and his odd beliefs about dramatic structure and the implicit focus of performance.

With his fame and theatrical fortune apparently assured by the late 1870s—by which time he had enlisted Ellen Terry to be the (second) brightest star in the Lyceum’s constellation—Irving subsequently emerged as the most passionate and vocal advocate of his medium within the culture at large. Over the following fifteen years, Irving delivered and published dozens of spirited apologia for his work, each of which was divided neatly between substantiating theatrical art within the Arnoldian terms of late nineteenth-century aesthetics and justifying its moral value against a more traditional (and less articulate) anti-theatrical prejudice. These efforts reached their culmination in the summer of 1895: on July 18, Irving became the first actor ever

to receive the knighthood. As she bestowed the honor, Queen Victoria is said to have professed: “We are very, very pleased, sir.”³

During the years of Irving’s triumphant rise, Bram Stoker served as a solemn companion to Irving, occupying a role that was, by turns, that of a business manager (which he was, officially), a secretary, a valet, and—most significantly—a collaborator. The public persona of “Henry Irving” was undoubtedly a product of Irving’s own egotism and deeply-held personal convictions, but it was also an effect of a deliberate process of behind-the-scenes discussion and debate, a composite portrait drawn through a careful reconstruction of English theatrical history and contemporary cultural criticism. Six months before Irving was knighted, Bernard Shaw had the audacity to voice this concern in *The Saturday Review*: in a backhanded endorsement of Irving’s bid for the “official recognition” of the knighthood, Shaw jeeringly asked, “Who writes Mr Irving’s lectures?”⁴ He answered his own question years later, in a retrospective on Irving’s tenure at the Lyceum: “His henchmen Bram Stoker and L. F. Austin wrote his letters for him; for he did not know how much more creditable to him were his own simple and natural compositions than their displays of cleverness.”⁵ The precise extent to which Shaw’s assertion was literally true cannot be perfectly established, but archival research in the Stoker papers at Stratford-upon-Avon has offered material that would confirm both Stoker’s and Austin’s intimate involvement in the composition of Irving’s speeches and correspondence.⁶

Regardless of its exact veracity, Shaw’s charge presents astounding meta-theatrical

³ Qtd. in Richards, “Introduction”: 8.

⁴ Shaw, “Why Not Sir Henry Irving?": 30.

⁵ Shaw, “Preface” to *Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw*: xxii.

⁶ See Richards, “Introduction”: 24. Richards’ research has also revealed elements of back-biting and passive-aggressive wrangling even in this small circle; apparently, Austin held a barely-concealed disdain for Stoker’s contributions to “Irving’s” opinions and ideas.

implications, for it directly recapitulates that familiar allegation of authorial passivity. For Shaw, the “cleverness” of Stoker and Austin seems to represent a kind of poisonous artifice, destructive to the “natural” authenticity embodied by Irving himself. Irving ought not to have identified so completely with the authorial “role” constructed for him to play—to widespread adulation, no less—by his handlers; in Shaw’s terms, Irving’s achievement should have been recognized as the ultimate triumph of the actor himself over the binary logic endemic to contemporary notions of theatricality, textuality, and the “art of acting.”⁷ Through his own “natural” expressive force, Irving somehow seemed to elide and supersede the divisions between the actor and the role, between the text and the performance, between the past and its reenactment, between the theatre and the “real world.” He constructed the actor as an end in himself; as a result, he represents a kind of theoretical fulcrum, the end-point for a certain type of theatrical-historical naturalistic teleology and also the foundation for an opposing idea of modernist performativity. In other words: Irving’s career also lies at a critical junction point, is itself a document of late-Victorian liminality. And he also ceases to exist at the precise moment when his own presumptive authority collides with (and recapitulates) the actions of a subjected and historically prescribed other: the actor.

I argue that Stoker’s awareness of—indeed, his own involvement with—this aspect of Irving’s cultural significance is directly reflected in *Dracula*’s representations of artificial (or “theatrical”) behavior and its perception of “mere ‘modernity’” as a function of “nineteenth century up-to-date” textuality. The coincidence of these two separate issues—the establishment of authenticity and the enforcement of historical superiority—lies in Irving’s “place”: not only

⁷ Of course, it is worth noting here that Shaw—who expended much energy constructing his own public persona as that of an authorial dictator and directorial puppeteer—wished to instrumentalize Irving’s talents for his own ends. There is more than a hint of hypocrisy in this indictment of Stoker and Austin; but this issue will be taken up more at length in the following chapter.

that described by his critics and supporters throughout his lifetime (most notably, Bernard Shaw, William Archer, and Edward Gordon Craig) but also by Irving himself, in the lectures he delivered on the “art of acting” and the history of his craft. As a result, it is only through an acknowledgement of Irving’s peculiar powers that Stoker’s novel is able to move toward its uncomfortable resolution. Putting aside the blatant anti-theatricality of the novel’s relentless persecution of Lucy Westenra throughout its middle section, *Dracula*’s third act effects an ambivalent reconciliation of its forces—the theatrical and the natural, the historical and the textual—in the figure of Mina Harker.

In Mina’s efforts—reading the minds and enacting the texts of others—Stoker reveals the most enduring aspect of Irving’s legacy: an insistent awareness of actor’s ability to elide the distinction between subject and object. And while both Irving’s career and Stoker’s novel have since been subsumed within the broader dynamics that characterize the “late-Victorian,” their partnership nevertheless provides a model by which the art of acting—an art defined in the abstract and founded in classical aesthetic theory but continually rediscovered according to unique cultural and personal circumstances—reaches beyond its limits: the limits of history, of the stage, and of an ambiguously-coded notion of theatricality. Through the production of the actor as an ideal, Irving’s art infiltrates other media, shadowing our engagements not only with performance but also with the reciprocal values of textuality, as Stoker’s novel continually demonstrates. In subsequent decades, this peculiar understanding of the art of the actor and its attendant ideals would become central to various attempts to rethink and reconstruct similar interactions across media and within cultures, between the powers of “old centuries” and the ineffable attractions of “mere ‘modernity.’”

Irving's Masks and Faces: The Abstract and Brief Chronicles of English Theatrical History

To what position in the world of intelligence does the actor's art entitle him, and what is his contribution to the general sum of instruction? We are often told that the art is ephemeral; that it creates nothing; that when the actor's personality is withdrawn from the public eye he leaves no trace behind. Granted that his art creates nothing; but does it not often restore?

- Henry Irving, "The Art of Acting," 1885⁸

Logically speaking, even the life of an actor has no preface. He begins, and that is all. And such a beginning is usually obscure; but faintly remembered at the best. Art is a completion; not merely the history of an endeavor. It is only when completeness has been obtained that the beginnings of endeavor gain importance, and that the steps by which it has been won assume any shape of permanent interest.

- Bram Stoker, *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*, 1906⁹

The Second. The degradation of modern actors is, it seems to me, an unlucky heritage from the old actors. *The First.* I think so.

- Denis Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*, 1773, 1830, 1883¹⁰

In spite of that eternal commonplace of the theatre—that its effects are fleeting, that its value coincides with its disappearance—there are few actors whose legacy has proved more durable and more contentious than that of Henry Irving. Though he was subject to countless critical appraisals and at least one adoring biography during his lifetime, it was not until after his death that Irving became the focus of fervid and conflicted attempts to reassess the importance of his entire career, describing not only the success of his individual performances but also his total value to the development of theatrical art in England since the mid-nineteenth century. The effort continues: the centenary of Irving's death in 2005 has sparked a minor resurgence of interest in Irving, best represented by Richard Foulkes's critical "re-evaluation of the pre-eminent Victorian

⁸ Irving, "The Art of Acting": 46–47.

⁹ Stoker, *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*: vii.

¹⁰ Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*: 50. The three dates offered here refer to the pamphlet's composition, first French-language publication, and first English-language publication, respectively. Throughout the subsequent discussion of Diderot, I will quote exclusively from Pollock's original English translation, for reasons that will quickly become apparent. As a result, I will also maintain Pollock's translation of the title of this work, though Diderot's French—*Paradoxe sur le comédien*—is more properly translated as *The Paradox of the Actor*. This tension between the abstract "acting" and specific human "actor" informs both Diderot's work as well as my interpretation of its history, as will be seen in the following pages.

actor-manager” and Michael Holroyd’s biography of the Irving and Terry families.¹¹

The most significant of the early efforts is Bram Stoker’s *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*, published within a year of Irving’s death—which was followed soon after by Ellen Terry’s *The Story of My Life*, a substantial portion of which was devoted to the Lyceum and to Irving, in 1908. But undoubtedly the most peculiar of the Irving retrospectives was produced in 1930 by Edward Gordon Craig, the highly influential British scenic designer whose 1911 *On the Art of the Theatre* is a seminal text of modernist theatricality. As the son of Ellen Terry, Craig had spent his childhood backstage at the Lyceum and performed with Irving’s company as an actor before turning to design in the mid-1890s. He was, therefore, perfectly positioned to provide both an artistic judgment and a personal account of Irving’s life. To a large degree, Craig’s *Henry Irving* is occupied with rescuing Irving’s reputation from the generation of passive denigration it endured through the continuing survival of William Archer and Bernard Shaw, the “Ibsenite” proponents of the “New Drama” in the 1890s who had founded their own careers upon a rejection of Irving; Craig hyperbolically links Irving’s decline to “Mr. William Archer, Mr. Shaw, Brutus, Cassius, and all of ’em, who were running Irving down day by day, behind his back.”¹² The overt theatricality of Craig’s personal jab at Archer and Shaw actually underscores the import of his historical analogy: like Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, Henry Irving betrayed his own hubris through the receipt of a public honor, and like Caesar he was written into history as much for the tragedy of his foreclosed potential as for his prior achievements.¹³

¹¹ See Foulkes, *Henry Irving*, and Holroyd, *A Strange Eventful History*.

¹² Craig, *Henry Irving*: 195. It ought to be noted that Craig’s conflicts with Archer and particularly with Shaw had a long and complicated history, involving far greater (and sometimes far pettier) stakes than simply the status of Irving’s legacy. See Fisher, “‘The Colossus’ Versus ‘Master Teddy’: 199–221.

¹³ Another implicit parallel: like Shakespeare’s Caesar, Irving made a modest refusal of his honor before finally accepting it. According to multiple biographies, it was an “open secret” that Irving was offered—and declined—the knighthood in 1883, on the eve of his first American tour. This fact dovetails neatly with the argument I offer below,

The true importance of Craig's re-evaluation, though, lies in the remarkable term by which he defines this potential: "Irving," Craig writes, "was the nearest thing ever known to what I have called the Übermarionette."¹⁴ And it is in this guise indeed that Irving persists, years after the man born John Henry Brodribb passed away: "If anyone died, was laid to rest in Westminster Abbey, it was Brodribb; for Henry Irving, that shadow of a coming event, the Übermarionette, is still living."¹⁵

By deploying this term, Craig performs a startling revision of modern theatrical history, for his Übermarionette—first described in *On the Art of the Theatre*—is an icon of a modernist theatre designed in explicit opposition to the stale prescriptions of the late-Victorian naturalist stage and its brand of mimetic acting. To be sure, Craig's real object in *On the Art of the Theatre* is the establishment of an abstract, avant-garde theatricality that replaces an imitative form of "Nature"—what Craig calls "photographic and weak actuality"—with a spiritualized and symbolic reality.¹⁶ ("If there is a thing in the world that I love it is a symbol," he proclaims in the opening pages.¹⁷) But the principal means by which this replacement should be effected is the eradication of the flesh-and-blood actor:

Do away with the actor, and you do away with the means by which a debased stage-realism is produced and flourishes. No longer would there be a living figure to confuse us into connecting actuality and art; no longer a living figure in which the weakness and tremors of the flesh were perceptible. The actor must go, and in

which reads Irving's efforts beginning in 1883 as part of a protracted attempt to substantiate the knighthood he would finally achieve in 1895.

¹⁴ Craig, *Henry Irving*: 32. There is little consistency in Craig's use of this word, which is only sometimes hyphenated, only sometimes capitalized, only sometimes italicized, only sometimes equipped with an umlaut. In subsequent quotations, I have used whatever version was printed in Craig's original; in my own text, I have adhered to this capitalized, non-italicized rendition sans umlaut, which recognizes both the term's proper importance as well as its status as an English neologism, not a German word.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 40.

¹⁶ Craig, "The Actor and the Über-Marionette": 81.

¹⁷ Craig, "God Save the King": xv.

his place comes the inanimate figure—the Über-marionette we may call him, until he has won for himself a better name.¹⁸

An ideal of Craig’s future theatre, the Ubermarionette is also a primitivist manifestation of a timeless history, “the last echo of some noble and beautiful art of a past civilization,” belonging equally to ancient Greece, Egypt, America and Africa in the pages that follow, though “[i]n Asia lay his first kingdom.”¹⁹ Entirely unsuitable for the popular stage of late-Victorian and Edwardian London, the Ubermarionette was to be the herald of something different altogether: “The über-marionette will not compete with life—rather will it go beyond it. Its ideal will not be the flesh and blood but rather the body in trance—it will aim to clothe itself with a death-like beauty while exhaling a living spirit.”²⁰ But while this ideal artistic medium—like Stoker’s undead—seems to represent all the ambivalent conflicts of an incipient modernism (the eschewal of material reality as the object of artistic representation, the uncertain valorization of the colonial other, the displacement of positivist science by mesmerism and spirituality, etc.) it is more directly the product of a paradox quintessentially theatrical. That is, of course, Denis Diderot’s *Paradox of Acting*, the philosophical treatise that has proved a point of serious contention for theatrical practitioners since its first publication, and for nobody more so than Henry Irving, who supplied the preface to the first English translation of Diderot’s work in 1883. “A great actor,” Diderot writes, “is also a most ingenious puppet.”²¹

The proposition that Craig made in 1930—that Henry Irving was, indeed, the Ubermarionette—has rarely been taken seriously, partly because it displays so obviously the effects of a nostalgic hero-worship, and partly because it seems to provide no historical outlet, no

¹⁸ Craig, “The Actor and the Über-Marionette”: 81.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 82, 91.

²⁰ *Ibid.*: 84–85.

²¹ Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*: 46.

line of direct influence that would allow Irving to take his place at the genesis of modernist theatre. Even the most generous of responses to Craig's proposal fails to move beyond a general "what if": "What if, instead of considering Sir Henry Irving as the last of the great Victorian actors, we considered him as one of the harbingers of modernist theater?" Jim Davis has asked.²² But Davis's ensuing essay struggles, like Craig's book, against the shadow cast on Irving's career by the writings of William Archer and Bernard Shaw: "The case for Irving's significance in a continuum—rather than a rigidly compartmentalized version—of the history of acting and staging may seem strange in the light of criticism leveled against him by Archer and Shaw."²³ In other words: the history of modern English theatre has been dominated by narratives that emphasize either the political potential of the "New Drama" (Archer and Shaw) or the aesthetic ideals of a unified and abstracted scenography (Craig), and both of these insist on enacting a periodizing split that marginalizes Irving at the precise moment of his greatest achievement. "We must stop treating Irving as a Victorian curiosity," Davis declares, though the consequences of a new recognition for Irving remain somewhat uncertain.²⁴

It is, however, precisely his ability to naturalize his own "curiosity" that makes Irving essential to an alternative effort at theatre historiography. At the center of this effort lies Diderot's *Paradox*, itself an anachronism, which lays bare not only the aesthetic stakes of redefining theatrical art but also the social and moral consequences of doing so. As a philosophical dialogue, the *Paradox* relies heavily on abstract absolutes, justifying its argument in terms of the grand distinction between Art and Nature, its incidental anecdotes easily giving way to the philosopher's zeal for analogy and logical proof. But as an artifact, the *Paradox*

²² Davis, "He Danced, He Did Not Merely Walk": 27.

²³ *Ibid.*: 32.

²⁴ *Ibid.*: 35.

remains “fixed” in time even as its own history provides a perennial opportunity for re-staging its central conflict as a timely—and eminently theatrical—response to a contemporary debate. Though conceived in the intellectual climate of pre-revolutionary France, steeped in the aesthetic milieu of Racine’s neo-classicism, and deeply informed by contemporary advancements in scientific thought, *The Paradox of Acting* was not published until 1830, long after Diderot’s death in 1784; when it finally emerged in English translation in 1883, then, it provided a focal point for cultural debate within a society vastly different from that of its original production. The most famous English rejoinder to Diderot’s work was William Archer’s *Masks or Faces?*, published in 1888, whose title literalized the *Paradox* as a struggle between the actor’s inanimate and animate instruments and thereby anticipated the development of Craig’s Ubermarionette. What lay at stake in both Diderot’s treatise and Archer’s response was precisely the validity of a mimetic ideal: an ideal assumed by Diderot to come before and to define the actor’s work, and one demolished by Archer’s emphasis on the process of that work.

But while Archer’s rigorous reply countered Diderot’s proposition with point-by-point refutations drawn from a mountain of empirical evidence both historical and contemporary, it was actually Henry Irving who provided the more compelling and tactically effective response. Though he too rejected Diderot’s conclusions, Irving seized the opportunity Diderot’s ideals provided to re-enact English theatrical history as a timeless anachronism, portraying himself—both in his idiosyncratic and highly individual mannerisms and in his unique position in the cultural-historical spotlight—as the necessary and natural product of a historical process that mapped the actor’s triumph onto the broader celebration of authentic English character.

The Paradox: Diderot, Archer, Irving

“Character” is the central issue of Diderot’s *Paradox*, for the term holds both artistic and moral connotations. Indeed, the relationship between these two meanings is, for Diderot’s protagonist, just one of the many paradoxes that define his work: “It has been said that actors have no character, because in playing all characters they lose that which Nature gave them, and they become false just as the doctor, the surgeon, and the butcher, become hardened. I fancy that here cause is confounded with effect, and that they are fit to play all characters because they have none.”²⁵ Though the work does not shy away from cultural criticism, its value to the history of acting theory has been founded upon the terms by which Diderot establishes the actor’s “genius.”

The *Paradox* is chiefly concerned with the rejection of “sensibility” as the basis for great art—and especially for the art of the actor, who becomes, in Diderot’s vision, something like a scientist-philosopher, the epitome of disinterested observation and clinical detachment: “In my view [the actor] must have a great deal of judgment. He must have in himself an unmoved and disinterested onlooker. He must have, consequently, penetration and no sensibility; the art of mimicking everything or, which comes to the same thing, the same aptitude for every sort of character and part.”²⁶ Though these comments are pitched as aesthetic philosophy, they are in fact founded upon seventeenth- and eighteenth-century revolutions in scientific thought, as Joseph Roach has amply shown. “Sensibility” was not to be defined strictly in terms of emotionality or a susceptibility to passion and metaphysical inspiration but rather as a function of a mechanized view of human biology; its rejection—in favor of a perfected vision of art—was founded upon Diderot’s belief that “the development of a machine so complex as the human

²⁵ Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*: 48.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 14.

body cannot be regular.”²⁷ And it is in the complexity of Diderot’s notion of the science of acting that Roach locates the *Paradox*’s perennial fascination: “By construing the art of acting in light of his vitalistic materialism, Diderot synthesized the vitalistic and mechanistic explanations of the actor’s body. He alternatively sustained and provoked both parties by using metaphors derived equally from machinery and organisms.”²⁸ This difficult synthesis gave birth to a long history of baffled and frustrated responses—and Roach notes that Henry Irving “represents only one link in an unbroken chain of actors to have been insulted” by Diderot’s work²⁹—but the *Paradox*’s greatest achievement was the simple recognition, built equally upon logic and empirical science, that acting could be systematized and regarded as a “craft.” Throughout the *Paradox*, Diderot’s analogies between acting and the other arts—chiefly painting and sculpture—derive their force from a conviction that the human body might be regarded as a plastic medium, no different from paint or marble, and that its manipulation is best achieved by an abstracted, intellectualized consciousness. Or, as Roach puts it: “Above all, we owe to Diderot our concept of the actor’s art as a definable process of creating a role.”³⁰

But while his “process” depends upon the actor’s scientific regard for “Nature” and the working of the human body, the “role”—or character—is produced entirely within the intellectual ether. Diderot’s *modèle idéal*—translated in Walter Herries Pollock’s 1883 English version as “ideal type”—becomes the focus of the actor’s mimetic craft. The actor is the most dedicated empiricist in his observation of Nature: “The great actor watches appearances; the man of sensibility is his model; he thinks over him, and discovers by after-reflection what it will be

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 40.

²⁸ Roach, *The Player’s Passion*: 117.

²⁹ *Ibid.*: 136.

³⁰ *Ibid.*: 117.

best to add or cut away.”³¹ It is only in this moment of “after-reflection”—a process of memory and imagination, both creative and reproductive—that the “ideal type” is established. Critics of Diderot have long debated whether his “ideal” is truly Platonic or whether it is, rather, more Aristotelian; in spite of its curious publication history and relatively narrow concern, the *Paradox* holds a minor but significant position in the history of philosophy not least because of its problematic engagement with various notions of mimesis.³² But regardless of the relationship between the “ideal type” and either an empirical or an absolute reality, its position in the actor’s “process” is essential: the actor must establish the “ideal type” *before* he commits his body to its reenactment. Diderot makes this point most clearly in his discussion of Mlle Clairon, the eighteenth-century French actress who stood as Diderot’s paragon. Of her performance of Voltaire, Diderot writes that the “ideal type was not Clairon. Where, then, lay her talent? In imagining a mighty shape, and in copying it with genius. She imitated the movement, the action, the gesture, the whole embodiment of a being far greater than herself.”³³ As a result, Diderot is able to establish the actor’s artistic legitimacy on an effort more intellectual than physical: it is in the creation of the “ideal type,” in fact, that the art of acting closely reflects the perfection of the other arts. The authority of the “ideal type” lies in its completeness; the actor triumphs over sensibility primarily through the conviction that the “role” is present in its entirety before its enactment and is never reliant on the inspiration of the moment.

At the same time, however, Diderot notes that this abstracted sense of the artistic

³¹ Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*: 37.

³² See, for example, Gebauer and Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture, Art, Society*. Gebauer and Wulf use Erich Auerbach’s classic work as a point of departure, spending four hundred pages tracking a history of mimesis from Plato to Derrida, as the term and related ideas move beyond artistic representation to expressions of power and social organization. In spite of this broad purview, they devote a slim but incisive chapter exclusively to Diderot’s *Paradox*.

³³ Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*: 42–43.

“character” carries with it a reciprocal effect on the great actor’s social “character”: as a scientist-observer of the panoply of human life, the actor remains aloof at best, vaguely disdainful of genuine social intercourse, incapable of sympathy, and forever removed from civic engagement. His diagnosis of the actor’s personal “character” reads like an exaggerated litany of anti-theatrical complaints:

In society, unless they are buffoons, I find [actors] polished, caustic, and cold; proud, light of behaviour, spendthrifts, self-interested; struck rather by our absurdities than touched by our misfortunes; masters of themselves at the spectacle of an untoward incident or the recital of a pathetic story; isolated, vagabonds, at the command of the great; little conduct, no friends, scarce any of those holy and tender ties which associate us in the pains and pleasures of another, who in turn shares our own. I have often seen an actor laugh off the stage; I do not remember to have ever seen one weep.³⁴

To be sure, Diderot’s charges might be laid against any artist (or, indeed, scientist) who believes his work to depend on a disinterested objectivity; and the history of aesthetic movements is filled with injunctions that the true artist must effect precisely this detached disposition.³⁵ What makes the actor’s fulfillment of this ideal so uniquely disturbing, then, is the confluence of natural philosophy and cultural history: on the one hand, the actor’s conduct is the product of a “natural” absence of character, a paradoxical predisposition toward personal vacancy; on the other, the actor’s station is also an effect of historical circumstances that would define his profession as morally debased, of economic realities that would render the stage victim to the worst consequences of social organization. “The stage is a resource, never a choice,” Diderot proclaims. “Never did actor become so from love of virtue, from desire to be useful in the world, or to serve his country or family; never from any of the honourable motives which might incline

³⁴ Ibid.: 47.

³⁵ See, for example, my third chapter for a discussion of this phenomenon in the quintessential manifesto of modernist “impersonality,” T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

a right mind, a feeling heart, a sensitive soul, to so fine a profession.”³⁶ A redefinition of scientific reality enabled Diderot to describe the actor’s control over his body—to insist, indeed, that “character” is not inherent or biological, and never the product of “sensibility”—but it would take a redefinition of social reality to fulfill the promise of his theory. It is no wonder that Diderot’s protagonist—after expressing this rhapsodic hope for a theatre of the future—is countered by a blunt statement from his interlocutor: “The degradation of modern actors is, it seems to me, an unlucky heritage from the old actors.”³⁷ This heritage is “unlucky” because of its dependence both on broad socio-historical phenomena and on the distortion of perspective around individual celebrity performers. So long as the cultural station of “acting” remains bound to the flourishing of the performer’s individuality rather than his workmanlike pursuit of an abstracted “ideal type,” this “unlucky heritage” will define theatrical history.

By 1883—the year that Diderot’s *Paradox* finally hit England—London culture had reached a moment of transformation, one which (again, paradoxically) allowed theatrical practitioners the opportunity to turn their backs upon these distasteful aspects of theatrical history in order to reassess the social and aesthetic functions of “theatricality.” It is a commonplace of theatre history to assert that this transformation had little to do with the literary quality of most Victorian drama. Rather, the conditions that permitted the “New Drama” of the 1880s and ’90s were more social, political, economic and technological than they were aesthetic. They were in part the products of the reforming zeal of the Lord Chamberlain, in charge of the vetting of all plays produced in England since the Licensing Act of 1737, whose powers the Theatres Act of 1843 redefined as exclusively focused on the “preservation of good manners,

³⁶ Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*: 47.

³⁷ *Ibid.*: 50.

decorum or of the public peace”; while the Act permitted the expansion of theatres in provincial territories and therefore the advent of the music hall, it also invested the censor with the responsibility (even the opportunity) to provide more proper entertainments for middle- and upper-class audiences. Combined with advancements in theatrical architecture and lighting both on and off the stage—which improved conditions in the house for wealthy patrons even as they enabled extraordinary displays of theatrical spectacle on the boards—the renewed attraction of the respectable theatre gave birth to the Victorian era’s most important contribution to theatrical art: “stage realism,” best represented by the subdued, cup-and-saucer naturalism of Tom Robertson’s portraits of contemporary English life at the Prince of Wales Theatre in the 1860s.

To be sure, this “triumphalist narrative” has most often been articulated in service of the literary achievements of the English theatre of the 1890s: these developments allowed playwrights like Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw to make the exhibition of “realistic” contemporary behavior both their principle stylistic instrument and their most visible target of ridicule. As such, the narrative has been laid open to criticism by historians more sensitive to the actual business of the nineteenth-century stage: Tracy Davis, for example, has singled out Henry Irving’s Lyceum—lavish and iconic, representative of the “respectable” theatre’s dominance over Victorian London—as an extraordinarily costly and wasteful endeavor, rescued only by Irving’s successful marketing of his wares away from the West End in provincial tours and abroad—a fact which would not have been lost on Irving’s business manager, Bram Stoker.³⁸ But the key element of any argument for the theatre’s aesthetic relevance during this time was an almost willful disregard for such crass financial matters, both by the champions of Victorian

³⁸ Davis, “The Show Business Economy, and its Discontents”: 38. In the same volume, this “triumphalist narrative” is also dismantled by Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, whose history of audiences during the period also defies the neat alignment of “realism,” “respectability,” and “upper-class” taste. See Davis and Emeljanow, “Victorian and Edwardian Audiences”: 93–108.

“civilization” and its discontents—such as, for example, Henry Irving, that paragon of decency, and William Archer, the first English translator of Ibsen and herald of a more “progressive” taste. While Archer’s justification of the actor’s art would remain narrowly focused on the substantiation of Ibsenite realism by “emotionalist” actors who could channel “authentic” mental states into their performances, Irving confronted instead the curious social forces that defined the theatre’s status, exploiting those tours outside of London precisely in favor of an argument that would make him the representative of a different sort of historical authenticity.

Both efforts, of course, took Diderot’s *Paradox* as their main foil, tracking the genesis of theatrical art not in terms of the material conditions of the stage in the nineteenth century but rather the ideals the theatre ought to represent. For Archer, this meant confronting the fundamental assumptions of Diderot’s text as both conceptually inconsistent and historically limited. His introduction to *Masks or Faces?* (1888) affects the disdainful air of an elitist skeptic: “To the average intellect,” Archer writes, “nothing is so alluring as a paradox. The reason is simple: in accepting a paradox, the average intellect feels that it has risen above the average... And if it seems a distinguished thing to believe a paradox, what must it be to invent one? Surely the summit of human ambition.”³⁹ Archer’s principal qualm is with Diderot’s methodology. “The paradoxes of philosophy generally prove, on analysis, to be contradictions in terms,” he declares, and he later derides Diderot’s tautological assumptions: “If we define the great actor as ‘he who does not feel,’ all controversy is of course at an end, for Diderot is safe in the inexpugnable fortress of a circular argument.”⁴⁰

Archer’s own ambitions hew far more closely to the scientific method—“We want to arrive at the laws which govern the average or typical mimetic temperament; and to this end we

³⁹ Archer, *Masks or Faces?*: 75.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*: 75, 77.

must study as large a circle as possible of individual cases”—and his primary resources are the products both of contemporary psychological research and of the new science of behavioral evolution; one of his primary texts is Darwin’s *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.⁴¹ But though Joseph Roach has indicated Diderot’s importance to the development of a “science of acting,” it was, for Archer, Diderot’s commitment to the trappings of philosophical argumentation rather than material reality that prevented him from establishing contact with more fundamental truths.

And as a result, Archer is able to dismiss Diderot even as he capitalizes on Diderot’s most vital contribution to theatrical history: the pride-of-place afforded to the “art of acting” in both aesthetic philosophy and the burgeoning field of human psychology. Though Archer’s critique drips with characteristic arrogance and principled elitism, these are qualities indeed borrowed from his opponent: because of Diderot, Archer is able to treat theatrical work as worthy of such overtly intellectual, abstract, and disinterested analysis. As he conducts his generous survey of England’s theatrical talents, both minor and major—for “we should hear not only Hamlet but the Player King, not only Romeo and Juliet but Friar Laurence and the Fiery Tybalt”—Archer blithely ignores the potential stigma of associating with such people.⁴² Referring to these players by their roles, Archer (perhaps unconsciously) also upholds the sort of dignity Diderot affords to the *modèle idéal*; though he rejects Diderot’s assertion of a total divorce between this ideal and the actor’s personal self, it is nevertheless through a recognition of constancy in the actor’s artistic process that Archer establishes the basis of his critique. And though, like Diderot’s, Archer’s work relies on certain qualitative judgments—which, owing to the theatre’s ephemerality, cannot possibly be substantiated—it also commits itself to an almost

⁴¹ Ibid.: 76.

⁴² Ibid.: 78.

democratized sense of the theatre as precisely the “commonwealth” enterprise Diderot imagined. “My endeavor,” Archer confesses, “has been to collect... the views and experiences of ‘actors of the highest order.’ I believe, however, that not only ‘actors of the highest order,’ but every intelligent artist who studies himself and others, has a right to be heard upon the questions at issue.”⁴³ While an ambiguous “talent” must remain the final determinant of the actor’s success, the fundamental craft of acting can be described as universal to all of its dedicated practitioners, who go to their work with the steadfast commitment and clear-headed sensitivity of all proud and thoughtful professionals.

However, by universalizing its arguments, Archer’s work never quite articulates its immediate consequences. Though his work benefits from a century of progress in understanding the relationship between physiology and psychology, it is tentative about approaching the value of the theatre or theatricality within a culture itself poised at a moment of transformation, and it holds its own historical stakes at arm’s length.⁴⁴ Part of this reticence can be glimpsed in Archer’s cautious nod to Shakespeare in the quotation above: by grounding the entire theatrical spectrum within *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, Archer implicitly dismisses nearly three hundred years of theatrical development even as he constructs a history around the theatre’s Elizabethan apotheosis. Indeed, he relies on Shakespeare as a philosophical authority to counter Diderot: “Far more explicit and weighty are the utterances of Shakespeare, who, as it seems to me, went to the

⁴³ Ibid.: 77.

⁴⁴ We might note that in spite of his commitment to Ibsen and political drama, Archer was aesthetically conservative; there was, for him, no necessary relationship between progressive intent and formal innovation, and his understanding of “modern” dramaturgy depended deeply on hackneyed, “well-made” conventions. This was, actually, the root cause of his split with Bernard Shaw during their collaboration on Shaw’s first play, *Widowers’ Houses*, during the 1880s: Archer’s “well-made” scenario was insufficient for Shaw, who pushed the play through a further act because the perfect symmetry of Archer’s plot negated a more productive engagement with its social consequences.

root of this matter and has said what might well have been the last words upon it.”⁴⁵

In doing so, however, Archer subtly contradicts his own stated methodology. Those “last words” Shakespeare offered are none other than Hamlet’s advice to the players, which includes the famous injunction to “hold, as ’twere, the mirror up to Nature”; but, as Archer himself has reminded us, if we wish to get a true portrait of the actor’s process, “we should hear not only Hamlet but the Player King”—we must listen not only to the grandest declarations of theatre’s aesthetic integrity but also to the most humble confessions of the theatre’s itinerant laborer.

No one, of course, was better equipped to speak into this tension than Henry Irving. Indeed, Irving placed the divide squarely at the center of his own direct response to Diderot, which—unlike Archer’s distended rebuttal—occupies only a slim, five-page preface to Walter Herries Pollock’s 1883 translation of the *Paradox*.⁴⁶ Irving makes clear the reason for his brevity: “it is no business of mine to vindicate human nature against the philosopher’s fantasy. The basis of his speculation is the character of actors, and as he is sufficiently inaccurate in painting this, there is no necessity to follow him through all the variations of his theme.”⁴⁷ Unlike Archer, Irving feels no compulsion to engage with either the theoretical or scientific bases of the *Paradox*. His concern is exclusively socio-historical, and though the piece attempts a rapid discussion of the actor’s process—which depends on the his “double consciousness,” an idea Irving attributes to François-Joseph Talma, the French actor and contemporary of Diderot—he does so as part of an effort to describe the centrality of this process to a brief history of

⁴⁵ Archer, *Masks or Faces?*: 82.

⁴⁶ This is not to say that Diderot’s work was not central to Irving’s other, more voluble claims for the value of his art. The most significant of these was the “Irving-Coquelin Debate,” a series of articles published in the late 1880s between Irving and the famed French actor Constant Coquelin, an avowed adherent to Diderot’s principles. This debate inevitably took on broadly international significance: most of the articles appeared in American periodicals.

⁴⁷ Irving, “Preface to Diderot *The Paradox of Acting*”: 32.

English theatre. This emerges as a response to Diderot's complaint that actors are "isolated, vagabonds": "This picture may have had some truth then," Irving allows, though "nobody will pretend that it is true now. The stage in Diderot's time did not enjoy that social esteem which makes public spirit and private independence."⁴⁸

It is precisely within the actor's display of both "public spirit and private independence" that the century of progress since Diderot can be measured, and in order to do so Irving reconstructs theatrical history as though Shakespeare provided not the last but rather the *first* words, eschewing the austere aestheticism of Diderot's French stage in favor of a more deeply moving and properly "English" popular theatre. And so, like Archer, Irving returns us to Hamlet's advice to the players—with the emphasis, however, now placed on the latter. Though Shakespeare might have provided the maxim, "Garrick made a revolution in English declamation by showing that Hamlet's advice to the players might be literally obeyed. But to French critics of that day this was rank heresy. They would not admit that it was the function of tragic poets and actors to hold the mirror up to Nature."⁴⁹ As a result, it becomes the actor's crucial social role to reveal the validity of this "mirror"; it is to David Garrick, not Shakespeare—the Player King, not Hamlet—that we owe due gratitude for the theatre's contemporary station and its ennobling potential. This alternative genealogy of English theatre—one based on the actor's work, not the poet's or the philosopher's prescriptions—turns upon Irving's sense of Garrick's "obedience": the famed eighteenth-century actor somehow sparks a "revolution" through submission. As a result, he becomes more of a model than an icon: in Garrick's development of English naturalism, Irving witnesses the triumph of the actor's art in an ideal of civic engagement. Representative of "public spirit and private independence," the English actor—the embodiment

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.: 34.

and inheritor of Shakespeare's sacred dicta—both mirrors and sustains the social fabric.

The Player King: Irving, Arthur, Stoker

Irving's brief response to the first English translation of Diderot's *Paradox* manifests a new paradigm for conceiving of the actor's function: the actor-as-author, a model that displaces traditional notions both of authority and of acting. On the one hand, the actor Irving capitalizes on the author's prerogatives simply by writing this preface, demonstrating an ability to define and categorize all actors' work through the production of his own text; on the other hand, he asserts that the actor's true value lies in the enactment of unwritten potentials that supervene the "philosopher's fantasy." It is this paradoxical ability—which reverses the terms of Diderot's own paradox—that Stoker would ultimately dramatize in *Dracula*, where authors and readers take on a subversive "obedience" modeled on Irving's ideal, and it is this ability that Irving himself went on to demonstrate through subsequent decades of authorial and theatrical work.

This work was undertaken both on the actor's stage and the lecturer's platform—two venues that became inextricably related during Irving's triumphant rise from humble beginnings. The modesty of Irving's own childhood in distant Cornwall and of his theatrical apprenticeship in touring companies throughout the middle decades of the century offers a perfect representation of the ideals he would come to embody in his success: an expression of both the quiet dignity of the English countryside and the enduring tradition of the player's complete immersion in the repertoire. Born in 1838 and raised in the remote village of Halsetown (a few miles outside St. Ives), Irving came of age in a milieu defined equally by the strange fantasies of Celtic mythology and the severe realities of rural poverty—both of which would inform the

psychologized melodrama that stood as the hallmark of his acting style in later years.⁵⁰ Though he left school for a career in a law office when he was thirteen, Irving was drawn to the theatre in spite of his mother's devout Methodism, and his first break came not through serendipity or familial connection but through his own committed pursuit: at the age of eighteen, he invested a small legacy from an uncle in essential theatrical properties (wigs and other costume pieces, standard fencing equipment), secured an interview with a leading Shakespearean actor-manager, and purchased the title role in an amateur production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Irving's theatrical education immediately returned him to the provincial playhouse and subjected him to the demands of learning the repertoire: the rapid memorization of dozens of roles, the regulation of gesture and movement, the physical exhaustion of multiple daily performances. Both "obscure" and "faintly remembered" in the words of Bram Stoker, Irving's early history would actually provide the foundation for the theatrical proselytizing that defined his later career: though appearing *sui generis* in the manner of all great artist-personalities, Irving could also claim the dignity afforded by a kind of Dickensian personal narrative, a standard model of nineteenth-century working-class respectability at once estranged and romanticized by the fascinations of the stage. His personal idiosyncrasies—the occasional oddities of his stage dialect and his overtly affected movements onstage—dovetailed perfectly with this curious ideal: the obscure individual as a manifestation of universal social value.

After his debut at the Lyceum and the fabulous success of *The Bells* in 1871, Irving embarked on a simultaneous effort of personal and professional self-promotion, using his growing influence over the Lyceum's productions (he assumed control of the theatre in 1878) to showcase his own talents while he seized every opportunity to speak publically on behalf of his fellows' work. By the early 1880s, Irving's Lyceum had achieved an unprecedented position in

⁵⁰ Holroyd, *A Strange Eventful History*: 91–97.

London culture. This afforded Irving the platform he sought to advance his peculiar social agenda, one which re-imagined the theatre at the center of English society. Throughout all of Irving's early addresses runs an ambivalent populist strain: a suggestion that English culture and virtuous character can unite all peoples in an idealized Victorian homogeneity.

Though undoubtedly a conservative fiction, this homogeneity—an “extraordinary organic wholeness,” in the words of Jeffrey Richards⁵¹—was a fixture of the Victorian popular imaginary, and Irving's greatest achievement was the inscription of actors into the narrative of its fulfillment. Indeed, the Lyceum Theatre itself became central to this broader cultural development, and even William Archer attested to Irving's exceptional accomplishment: “An amusement which was formerly ‘worse than wicked—vulgar,’ has now become better than respectable—fashionable. But the Lyceum is more than fashionable, it is popular. There is probably no artistic institution in England that unites all classes as it does.”⁵² The goal of Irving's efforts throughout his managership of the Lyceum remained singularly focused on the unification of English culture under a set of collective values rooted in the Victorian ethos: a “chivalry” of the work-ethic, a Christian moral rigor derived not from the prescriptions of the clergy but from the internal convictions of individual duty. At the same time, however, Irving recognized the impossibility of disentangling the value of his profession from the achievements of specific figures: the universality of value he desired lay at odds with the bare fact of the theatre's ephemerality and the singular expressiveness of the star actor.

In Irving's own case, this contradiction remained central to the arguments of his most vocal critics—especially William Archer: “Reasoning from results, in fame, social consideration, and hard cash... should we not conclude that this actor, whom an enlightened nation delights to

⁵¹ Richards, “Introduction”: 9.

⁵² Archer, *Henry Irving, Actor and Manager*: 29.

honour as never actor was honoured before, must be one of the most incontestably great artists of all time? But here comes in the anomaly. There has probably never been an actor of equal prominence whose talent, nay, whose mere competence, has been so much contested.”⁵³ Archer couched these comments in the first—and undoubtedly the most influential—of the Irving appraisals published during the actor’s life: his 1883 *Henry Irving: Actor and Manager*, which seized the opportunity offered by a brief hiatus in Irving’s tenure at the Lyceum during his first American tour to present an authoritative summation of Irving’s effects both on London culture and theatrical art—particularly the craft of acting. While Archer is full of praise for the former, he targets the latter with vitriolic critique, arguing that Irving’s near-incompetence as an actor stems from his unself-conscious dependence upon artificial, almost caricatured “mannerisms”: “It is idle to argue that all actors have mannerisms. All remarkable actors have a manner, but that is a totally different thing. Mannerisms, I take it, are exaggerated habits, almost or quite beyond the actor’s control, which obtrude themselves without rhyme or reason in all he does... Besides, there are mannerisms and mannerisms—and Mr. Irving’s are of the worst.”⁵⁴ Not a single one of Irving’s most fundamental instruments escapes Archer’s excoriating assessment: his movement and diction—even his ability to stand still onstage—are all painfully affected to Archer’s eye. Though it would be another five years before Archer produced *Masks or Faces?*, there is already in *Henry Irving* a hint of his disdain for the mechanized human body and its artificial impulses. “[Irving’s] patient intelligence has, indeed, ‘mastered a certain mechanism,’” Archer admits,

but it is a mechanism in which the wheels are complicated, the action irregular, and the friction immense. To vary a former illustration, he has set about building an organ for himself, without studying either the laws of acoustics or the instructions of experienced organ-builders. The result is a cumbrous instrument, from which he brings forth music, strangely attractive indeed, but broken and

⁵³ Ibid.: 32.

⁵⁴ Ibid.: 59.

fitful, the keys creaking painfully every now and then, and the pipes wheezing ludicrously.⁵⁵

Irving's personal "magnetism" is thus explained as a kind of uncanny fascination, and it is in the "immense friction" of Irving's efforts that his potential is wasted.

To Archer, however, these qualities were not only the products of Irving's inborn idiosyncrasy but also of his provincial professional origins and, indeed, the pride Irving took in the narrative of his own life. "Mr. Irving's theory is founded on his own experience," Archer writes. "He is self-taught: he is successful: therefore let genius be its own master. The fallacy is very natural."⁵⁶ Intensely self-motivated, Irving had realized at an early age that he was destined for the stage—but his apprenticeship in the theatre was long and difficult, and he suffered at the hands of more than one audience for the awkwardness of his native manner; Michael Holroyd speculates that Irving's characteristic affectations were developed as a way to compensate for a congenital stammer—"mannerisms" arising not out of an uncontrollable habit but an overtly measured response to the same.⁵⁷ Archer acknowledges that "the functions of [the actor's] training are twofold: on the one hand to develop, on the other to repress, the individuality," but he fails to recognize the stakes in Irving's more humble—and culturally grounded—investment in his peculiar, informal training. "If [Irving] had gone through the most perfect of conservatoires he could not have been more successful; but it does not follow that he would have been less so, and he would certainly have been a better actor," Archer maintains.⁵⁸ Recognizing only the aesthetic and not the social value of the actor's education, Archer is unable to appreciate that Irving's understanding of his craft—and his own individual and (perhaps) overly affected

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*: 60–61.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*: 58.

⁵⁷ Holroyd, *A Strange Eventful History*: 93–95.

⁵⁸ Archer, *Henry Irving, Actor and Manager*: 58.

embodiment of it—derives its force from prosaic, ennobling account of its gradual growth in the English countryside.

Archer’s damning critique—which, as Jim Davis has reminded us, remains to this day the most indelible record of Irving’s inimitable style—was delivered at an epochal moment in the actor’s career, as the author himself acknowledges: 1883 marked Irving’s departure for his first American tour.⁵⁹ But while Archer saw this tour as merely a recognition of Irving’s financial security at the Lyceum—the conqueror moving onward, expanding into new territories—it signaled also the initiation of Irving’s decade-long effort to resolve this indictment of the actor’s idiosyncratic “individuality” with his unique sense of English history and English virtue. Resting on his achievement of unprecedented success during his first decade at the Lyceum, Irving used his tours abroad to re-enact his own rise as an embodiment of the abstract virtues of the actor’s art, both in its aesthetic purity and its social value as a historical “restorative.” The enterprise would culminate in the winter of 1895, with Irving’s last great production before receiving the knighthood: the magisterial tragedy of *King Arthur*.

Nowhere is Irving’s intent more clear than in his 1885 address at Harvard University, the first of many dedicated to “The Art of Acting.” The mere fact of his profession’s rising station is the focus of Irving’s opening remarks, which use his own status as recognition of a reciprocal dignity in Harvard’s position at the intellectual and cultural heart of American society.⁶⁰ “As an

⁵⁹ Ibid.: 11.

⁶⁰ This avowal is worthy of a brief footnote acknowledging Irving’s invitation to speak at Harvard as part of a larger movement in the history of the University and of higher education in the United States. In this 1885 address, Irving paid tribute to Harvard President Charles William Eliot, at whose behest he was invited to speak. Eliot, who rose to his office in 1869, was essential to the establishment of the research university as a center of disinterested inquiry and to the rise of the liberal arts education in the United States, and in many ways helped to create the institutional prerogatives that have continued to define American academic life over the past hundred years. (See Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas*: 43–50.) Irving was the first actor ever to speak at Harvard, and the intellectual merit afforded

actor, and especially as an English actor, it is a great pleasure to speak for my art in one of the chief centres of American culture;” Irving confesses, “for in inviting me here to-day you intended, I believe, to recognise the drama as an educational influence, to show a genuine interest in the stage as a factor of life which must be accepted and not ignored by intelligent people.”⁶¹ But while he seems to found his lecture upon this progressive impulse—and the triumph of “intelligence” over ignorance and prejudice—the majority of Irving’s comments offer practical advice to aspiring players along the lines of a moderate “naturalism” he’d espoused elsewhere.

It is not until the lecture’s final moments that Irving begins to justify these modest suggestions in broader terms, asking:

To what position in the world of intelligence does the actor’s art entitle him, and what is his contribution to the general sum of instruction? We are often told that the art is ephemeral; that it creates nothing; that when the actor’s personality is withdrawn from the public eye he leaves no trace behind. Granted that his art creates nothing; but does it not often restore?⁶²

For Irving, the value of acting—as an art, not merely as a tool of instruction or as a means of delivering the dramatic text—lays precisely in its relationship to collective social memory: the actor embodies not only the goodwill and popular spirit of his audiences but also represents their link to the values of eternal cultural esteem. The actor’s work constitutes a kind of resurrection and renewal—not a parasitic imitation—and draws equally from his personal vitality and the invisible “experience” of the tradition: thus, by celebrating his own idiosyncrasy in performance, he was participating in a cultural effort to produce a lasting sense of cohesion.

to the insights of this English theatrical celebrity might be read as a recognition of Eliot’s progressive impulses as well as his desire to ground them within the more abstract, elite associations of London culture. It may be significant that this honor was granted to the English Henry Irving and not the American Edwin Booth, a Shakespearean actor of similar renown.

⁶¹ Irving, “The Art of Acting”: 36.

⁶² *Ibid.*: 47.

This notion of “restoration” would become the keynote in his subsequent addresses on the actor’s art. A decade later—and only six months before he was knighted—Irving would conclude a similar appeal by stating: “Acting may be evanescent... it may not create...but it can live...and its work can, like the six out of the seven wonders of the world, exist as a great memory.”⁶³ But in making this declaration to an audience of Harvard undergraduates in 1885, Irving was trading on both the elitism of America’s premier university as well as the earnest enthusiasm of its youthful—and democratically minded—students; he appealed not to the landed but to the “educated classes,” and he referred to actors as “workers” as often as “artists.”⁶⁴ As a result, he was able to downplay the emotional or affective allure of his profession: the “great memory” renewed by the actor’s performance exists not solely in the popular imaginary or in the heart of the ignorant philistine but rather in the “world of intelligence,” a world occupied by men of singular genius whose mental exertion is both systematized and eclectic, both rigidly disciplined and openly curious. The “great memory” of the actor is not a symptom of celebrity but a product of the moralizing force of the broad-minded cultural historian.

And Irving himself would exhibit this broad-mindedness upon his return to England: in 1886, he offered a repeat performance of his Harvard debut, this time at Oxford. But where Irving’s American address affected an elevated tone alongside its pragmatic concerns, his efforts at Oxford offered instead a “learned disquisition” on the history of English acting couched in a bout of false modesty. “I have not had the advantage—one that very few of the members of my profession in the past, or even in present times have enjoyed—of an University education,” he confesses. “The only *Alma Mater* I ever knew was the hard stage of a country theatre... You must not expect any learned disquisition from me,” he urges—before embarking precisely on

⁶³ Irving, “Acting: An Art.”: 102.

⁶⁴ Irving, “The Art of Acting”: 49.

such an effort in an elaborate and detailed account of three hundred years of English acting.⁶⁵ (Of course, Irving's proud ignorance was supplemented behind the scenes by Stoker's Trinity degrees.⁶⁶) The subjects of Irving's lecture were "Four Great Actors"—Richard Burbage, Thomas Betterton, David Garrick, and Edmund Kean—who, together, offered a composite portrait of English theatrical history since the time of Shakespeare. And the focus of this history was the triumph "on the stage of Nature in contradistinction to Artificiality."⁶⁷

As he does in that brief preface to Diderot's *Paradox*, Irving attributes the invention of the naturalistic tragedy to Shakespeare, and his first remarks in this lecture affect the dry tone of an Oxford don as Irving counters his audience's knowledge of classical theatre with his own immersion in the players' legacy: "Take the Greek Tragedy for instance: the actors, as you know, wore masks, and had to speak, or rather intone, in a theatre more than half open to the air... but I may say that Shakespeare was the first dramatist who dared to rob tragedy of her stilts..."⁶⁸ But Shakespeare's "revolution"—and the founding of English aesthetic culture—was achieved only by the noble efforts of the theatre's faithful but silent visionaries. "In order to carry out these reforms, in order to dethrone Artifice and Affectation, [Shakespeare] needed the help of actors in whom he could trust, and especially of a leading actor who could interpret his greatest dramatic creations; such a one he found in Richard Burbage."⁶⁹ Again, Irving's diction weds a progressive political rationality to his conservative moral faith. If Shakespeare is cast as a "reformer" bent on "dethroning" stale ideals, Burbage becomes the dependable bedrock upon which a new regime

⁶⁵ Irving, "Four Great Actors": 52.

⁶⁶ When once asked whether he was a "university man," Irving replied: "No, but I employ a secretary who was." Stoker's advantages were the perfect complement to Irving's pretensions, and we can sense their alliance most clearly in such remarks about and for an "educated" audience. (Belford, *Bram Stoker*: 99.)

⁶⁷ Irving, "Four Great Actors": 52.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*: 53.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

might be built; Shakespeare's (or Irving's) measured iconoclasm only reveals a more fundamental continuity. Burbage's own invisibility to the historical record is the central theme of Irving's remarks; it is even implied that Shakespeare must have served his theatrical apprenticeship under Burbage, "undergoing a special form of education, consisting rather of the study of human nature than that of books."⁷⁰ In Burbage and Shakespeare, Irving reverses the customary relationship between actor and author—and, and as a result, Burbage becomes both the inspiration for and the expression of Hamlet's advice to the players, which Irving recites in full. The performative authenticity espoused by the Prince—and evidenced everywhere in Shakespeare's own dramatic writing—thereby represents only the most visible sign of Burbage's achievement, a "great memory" immortalized in the greatest of plays.

At the same time, however, Burbage's discrete singularity is essential to the sort of historical work Irving wishes to perform. If this lecture seems to claim some authority over the unwritten heritage of theatrical work in England—and if it likewise trumpets the modest anonymity of an ideal, naturalistic acting style—it also depends upon the popular recognition that this ideal was achieved by specific men. In his biography of the actor, Irving cites only contemporary accounts that either founder in vague abstractions or else rely on necessary tautology; "Ben Jonson uses Burbage's name as a synonym for 'the best actor,'" Irving boasts—for this is, of course, the culmination of the work Irving himself hoped to achieve.⁷¹ The sort of naturalism Burbage represented was not, therefore, a complete submergence beneath any one of Shakespeare's characters but rather his disappearance into the role of "the actor," within the raucous theatres of Elizabethan London, within the annals of the historical record, and—most importantly—within the players' discontinuous, invisible "tradition," the performative paradox

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

to which Irving was heir apparent.

For, indeed, the discontinuity of Irving's history of English acting becomes its chief organizing feature: throughout the entirety of his address at Oxford runs the theme of rebirth and renewal, efforts enabled only by the lapse or loss of his enduring ideals. Each movement of his lecture is marked by one of these conspicuous lacunae: Betterton is born "eighteen years after the death of Burbage"; Garrick first appears onstage "little more than thirty years" after "the death of the honoured Betterton"; and Kean is finally born "nearly nine years after the death of Garrick."⁷² (An unspoken sequel to these: Irving is born in 1838, five years after the death of Edmund Kean.) As in Irving's earlier lectures, the implicit cycle or dialectic created by this intermittent achievement promises both progress and stasis: in the rebirth of the great English tragedian, Irving witnesses a restoration of cultural value, manifested most literally in an alliance between the enduring glory of the Shakespearean canon and the popular success of forgotten contemporaries. Quoting the obscure eighteenth-century actor Everard, Irving claims, "in the same night [Garrick] has played *Sir John Brute* and the *Guardian*, *Romeo* and *Lord Chalkstone*, *Hamlet* and *Sharp*, *King Lear* and *Fribble*, *King Richard* and the *Schoolboy!*"—as though Garrick's greatness is displayed only in the immediacy of his theatrical anachronisms.⁷³

And as Irving adopts the role of the authoritative cultural historian, he employs the peculiar powers of his craft in order to elide gaps in historical logic—the shifting conventions of different historical eras, the political, economic and social circumstances of theatrical production, the personal abilities and advantages of his four luminaries—as though such problems only affirm the more fundamental truth of his thesis. For Irving, the Actor—the now-idealized figure embodied by these four (or, perhaps, five) men—is the exclusive focus of theatrical (or, perhaps,

⁷² Ibid.: 56, 58, 63.

⁷³ Ibid.: 62.

all artistic) development since Shakespeare inaugurated English aesthetics on the ideal union of Art and Nature. Throughout the lecture, Irving displays an admirable sensitivity to each figure's cultural milieu, painting brief scenes in broad but effective strokes (and undoubtedly aided in this effort by Stoker's hand in the initial drafting); but each of these serves only to emphasize the emergence of the Actor's brilliance. Though Irving's own Lyceum seemed a triumphant union of all theatrical arts—of scenery and costume, of lighting and music—the development of these ancillary effects is noted only in passing, as a progression that simply enabled the more effective display of histrionic talent. Burbage's fame is achieved in spite of the cacophony and “confusion” of the Elizabethan playhouse; Betterton's “introduction of scenery” and the ensuing investment in theatrical spectacle are downplayed as “appropriate accessories”; and Garrick's segregation of the stage and the audience is described as a final purgation of “those abominable nuisances,” as though the actor had not erected but merely preserved the integrity of the fourth wall.⁷⁴ In each case, Irving uses historical detail as similar ancillary set-dressing: the phenomenon of theatrical history itself becomes a kind of eternal performance; and though the effects might change, the story—and the Actor's role—remain the same.

Such remarks and such venues did much to substantiate the stakes of Irving's project, but this effort was only sustained by his work at the Lyceum. While “naturalism” remained a stylistic ideal throughout his tenure, Irving never staged a modest drawing-room comedy or pursued any effect of Robertsonian (let alone Ibsenite) “realism” at his theatre. “It may be admitted that nothing is more objectionable than certain kinds of realism, which are simply vulgar,” he once avowed.⁷⁵ The acknowledgement that reality has “kinds” might indicate the sensitivity of Irving's theatrical imagination, for the sort of scenic truth he achieved on the Lyceum stage

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*: 55, 58, 62.

⁷⁵ Irving, “The Art of Acting”: 46.

eschewed the “photographic and weak actuality” that Craig’s modernist theatre likewise disdained. But where Craig aimed at the abstract and timeless, Irving’s interests were exclusively historical—so long as this “history” was aligned with the narrative he established elsewhere. In this, Irving followed Garrick’s lead: the Lyceum season was split between Shakespearean revivals and forgettable contemporary spectacles—in many cases, broad adaptations of literary classics (*Don Quixote*, *Dante*) or else vaguely melodramatic historical epics (*Charles I*, *Richelieu*, *Louis XI*, even Tennyson’s *Becket*). “The 19th century was preeminently the age of History as drama, just as it was the age of drama as History,” Jeffrey Richards has claimed, indicating that the overall intent of the Lyceum productions coincides with the broadest features of Victorian popular aesthetics.⁷⁶ To a certain extent, this was true: the simultaneous dramatization and moralization of significant “moments” allowed Carlyle’s “Great Man” theory of history to conform neatly with the singularity of Aristotelian action.

But in Irving’s hands such efforts inevitably devolved upon the actor himself, not simply as an egomaniacal individual (which he was) but rather as a manifestation of all that was noble in his profession. His own performances remained at the center of every production—a fact made all the more curious by his failure to conform to romantic ideals. Never the dashing leading-man, Irving maintained instead a psychological intensity and bizarre personal magnetism suitable only for tragic heroism or diabolical manipulation. The potential for either—or for both at once, as in his portrayal of Shylock—was central to his success and to the endless fascination of his theatre.

In the winter of 1895, all of the elements conspired in Irving’s most characteristic—though hardly his greatest—production yet: *King Arthur*. The allure of the Arthurian archetypes to Irving is understandable: they offered stories both of fantastic glory and of domestic tragedy, idealized representations of the values and the problems most central to the Victorian ethos.

⁷⁶ Richards, “Introduction”: 10.

Arthur was a suitable symbol of national pride at the height of England's imperial expansion: the enduring myth of chivalric rule offered a convenient justification for a technologized and thoroughly modern form of domination. At the same time, however, the Arthurian tales also lent themselves all too easily to caricature and satire: the pageantry could easily overwhelm the drama, rendering the mythic figures childish and their downfall absurd. Arthur had not been portrayed onstage in a serious dramatic production for over two hundred years, and though Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* had resurrected a literary interest in the hero-king of England in more recent times, the Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite fascination with the chivalric past also fixed Arthurian imagery in a manner more conducive to broad, pictorial staging than to immediate, vital acting.⁷⁷ While Arthur's transcendent attraction was inevitable, his successful realization on an unambiguous proscenium stage was anything but ensured.⁷⁸

Irving's *King Arthur* triumphed, however, not by emulating the lofty, poetic effects of his literary forebears but rather by isolating and emphasizing the unique capabilities of his stagecraft. Years earlier, Irving had actually commissioned an Arthurian script from Tennyson based on the *Idylls*, but this collaboration with the poet-laureate fell through; Irving next sought the efforts of W. G. Wills, the successful dramatist and painter with whom he had frequently collaborated. Though he bought Wills' play, the text was never produced: according to Bram Stoker, Irving "did not think it would act well."⁷⁹ In order to ensure a more efficient "acting" version, then, Irving finally enlisted the dubious talents of J. Comyns Carr—an art critic and sometimes amateur dramatist—whose initial rewrite of Wills' "draft" eventually resulted in an

⁷⁷ Tennyson's poem was, in fact, complemented by the photographic efforts of his neighbor Julia Margaret Cameron; these staged "illustrations"—and their model, the young Ellen Terry—would become the subjects of Virginia Woolf's *Freshwater*, discussed at length in my fourth chapter. The actor's defiant relationship to Pre-Raphaelite aestheticism may account for much of his or her fascination for modernist writers.

⁷⁸ Kirshen, "Embodiment of the King": 66–69.

⁷⁹ Stoker, *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*: 253.

entirely new text. This protracted search had an expected conclusion: the text was ultimately worthless and dispensable, for the real focus of the production would be the magnificent scenic display, the operatic score, and the heightened pathos of Irving's performance. Bernard Shaw, in one of his earliest pieces for *The Saturday Review*, put it most directly: "I do not suppose that Mr Irving said to Mr Comyns Carr in so many words, 'Write what trash you like: I'll play the real King Arthur over the head of your stuff'; but that was what it came to."⁸⁰

The difficulty set before Irving could not have been greater: devoid of both stylistic grace and basic dramaturgical sensibility, Comyns Carr's play was structured episodically, condensing the whole of the Arthurian tradition into a sequence of disjointed scenes built around an "indispensable visual element" provided by Sir Edward Burne-Jones and carried out by Lyceum painters Hawes Craven and Joseph Harker.⁸¹ The play consisted of a prologue and four acts, each given a suitable title (or, perhaps, caption) within the program: *Excalibur*, *The Holy Grail*, *The Queen's Maying*, *The Black Barge*, *The Passing of Arthur*. While this spectacular scenic arrangement permitted an impressive interplay of various thematic strands (the mystical and the Christological elements of the Grail Quest; the multiple icons of femininity offered by the Lady of the Lake, Guinevere and Elaine; etc.), it also deflected the production's narrative thrust, and the broad pictorialism of Burne-Jones's designs threatened to leave Irving himself merely a minor element in a larger pageant of romantic ideas.

To the actor's credit—though to the production's awkward failure—Irving's subjection beneath the weight of these design choices became a metatheatrical mirror of Arthur's own tragedy: Irving proved his prowess and Arthur his nobility as both elegantly bowed to their fates.

⁸⁰ Shaw, "King Arthur": 15.

⁸¹ Kirshen, "Embodiment of the King": 71. A minor note: Sir Edward Burne-Jones was a celebrated Pre-Raphaelite artist and designer, but *King Arthur* represented his only work for the Lyceum. On the other hand, Joseph Harker, one of the Lyceum's regular backstage professionals, has been largely forgotten, but his literary namesakes, Jonathan and Mina Harker, endure as the protagonists of Stoker's novel.

The performance was, perhaps, the greatest climax of Irving's efforts: the actor himself represented both national glory and individual modesty, his own egotism a self-reflexive display of his profession's centrality to the narrative of England's triumph (and, perhaps, its fall). In embodying Arthur, Irving invested the King—that image of the national conscience—with his own peculiar affectations, those performative gestures of his that were both “naturalistic” and indelibly personal; he played, in Shaw's words, the “real King Arthur,” the manifestation of an ideal irrespective of its relation to Comyns Carr's play and unique to Irving's own self. Moreover, he did this in spite of a production that offered him few opportunities to do so. For Shaw—Irving's most perceptive (if pernicious) critic—Irving's acting provided a submerged narrative through-line that affirmed the play's tragic focus. “There is one scene in the play,” Shaw writes, “in which Mr Irving rises to the height of his art, and impersonates, with the noblest feeling, and the most sensitive refinement of execution, the King Arthur of all our imaginations in the moment when he learns that his wife loves his friend instead of himself.” For Shaw, who exercises his sardonic brutality on every other element of the production, this singular “moment” informs the vital core of an otherwise stale production built on old-fashioned and childish notions; it is “a masterly fulfillment of the promise of one or two quiet but eloquent touches in his scene with Guinevere in the second act”—“eloquent touches” that emerge amidst the spectacle and romantic “twaddle” of the rest of the play.⁸² And Shaw was not the only one to recognize Irving's accomplishment in this scene, which endured years later in a brief memoir by Lena Ashwell published in 1939. Ashwell would become a celebrated actor in her own right during the early decades of the twentieth century; in 1895, however, she was merely Irving's ingénue, hopelessly awed by her first chance to perform at the Lyceum, in the role of Elaine.

I had only a short scene with Miss Terry in the first Act, but the corpse of Elaine

⁸² Shaw, “King Arthur”: 15, 16, 17.

was an important figure in the third Act in which the great scene occurred, the scene in fact which was the play, so I begged to be allowed to be the dead girl so that lying on the bier I might at least be able to listen.... The King is dazed, paralysed at first with grief and disillusionment, then in a paroxysm draws his sword and rushes on his friend, but Excalibur drops from his hand. Lancelot goes and Irving has one scene of exquisite pathos with the humiliated Guinevere. It is his one real chance in the play, and exquisitely he took it.⁸³

Ashwell, “playing” a corpse, represented the most literal subjection of the actor to the design as she lay, veiled, upstage of the action, melting easily into the lavish scenic backdrop; but she recalls how she had actually wept during the scene—“One night I had been crying and when Irving lifted the veil my face was wet with tears”—as though Irving’s extraordinary ability lay in this profound reanimation, the transformation of the mere pictorial effect into an act of living theatre, itself preserved in Ashwell’s memoir as the concatenation of competing verb-tenses and the seamless replacement of “the King” with “Irving.”⁸⁴ Though Comyns Carr’s *King Arthur* immediately disappeared as a piece of poor Arthuriana and mediocre spectacle, Irving’s performance was the culmination of his decade-long attempt to re-center a nostalgic account of English history around the theatre and, particularly, the actor’s art. *King Arthur*’s dependence on the nearly worn-out conventions of Pre-Raphaelite aestheticism and Victorian chivalric fantasies only served to highlight this crowning achievement.⁸⁵

Irving’s performance in *King Arthur*, which opened on January 12, 1895, dovetailed neatly with his most overt bid for the knighthood in a lecture offered at the Royal Institution on February 1: “Acting: an Art.” In a characteristically circuitous manner, Irving laid out his justification: “Official recognition of anything worthy is a good, or at least a useful thing. It is a part, and an important part, of the economy of the State; if it is not, of what use are titles and

⁸³ Ashwell, “Irving as King Arthur”: 326–27.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Pun intended.

distinctions, names, ribbons, badges, offices, in fact all the titular and sumptuary ways of distinction?”⁸⁶ Once again, it was up to Bernard Shaw to render Irving’s methods explicit, and he did so in terms of the recent Lyceum production:

What Mr Irving means us to answer is this question: “The artist who composed the music for King Arthur is Sir Arthur Sullivan; the artist who composed the poem which made King Arthur known to this generation died Lord Tennyson; the artist who designed the suit of armour worn by King Arthur is Sir Edward Burne-Jones: why should the artist who plays King Arthur be only Mister Henry Irving?”⁸⁷

Of course, this question echoed one of Shaw’s frequent indictments of the Lyceum spectacle, which wasted extraordinary resources on that Irvingesque “kind” of reality: “Real walls, ceilings, and doors are made by real carpenters; real tailors and dressmakers clothe the performers; real armorers harness them; and real musicians write the music.... All that remains is to get a real poet to write the verse, a real philosopher to do the morals, a real divine to put in the religion, a real lawyer to adjust the law, and a real painter to design the pictorial effects”—and, one assumes, a real knight to play a “real” king.⁸⁸ Shaw’s irony cuts both ways. If, on the one hand, he means to criticize the Lyceum’s expenditure on effects that only detract from the essence of the performance, then he also recognizes that Irving’s managership might tend not toward egotism but toward an infinite division of labor between (entitled) professionals: the ideal theatre as an act of endless collaboration melding seamlessly with the “real” world beyond the footlights. And if, on the other hand, he means to suggest that this division brings about only dilution and the debasement of purpose—that it denies the virtuoso his chance to function in multiple capacities, an idea which lies at the heart of the actor’s art—then his suggestion that Irving’s performance ought to see its echo in the “real” world is an acknowledgement of Irving’s

⁸⁶ Irving, “Acting: an Art.”: 93.

⁸⁷ Shaw, “Why Not Sir Henry Irving?”: 32.

⁸⁸ Shaw, “King Arthur”: 12–13.

peculiar station: Irving is no “naturalistic” virtuoso able to disappear into a role, but rather his ability to play *himself as a king* is a demand that the world recognize this as at least partially true.

At the moment Irving was knighted, his theatre therefore represented a quintessential theatrical paradox: Irving’s attempt to dramatize the essential myth of English history terminated in the long-awaited inscription of the actor into the official annals of the nation, and the Lyceum’s most sumptuously aestheticized production saw the emergence of the actor as a naturalistic end in himself. For Martin Meisel in *Realizations*, Irving’s tenure at the Lyceum offered both the apotheosis and rejection of the nineteenth century’s dominant aesthetic mode, a “pictorialism” that fixed the object of artistic contemplation. This effort had, in some ways, directly political roots, as Meisel acknowledges in a brief epilogue to his chapter on “history as spectacle”: “a glance at the organization and character of stage crowds in the nineteenth century encounters the dialectic between the mass of men and heroic individuality...Eventually...the theatre arrives near the end of the century, not at a resolution, but at an illusion that unites, once more, the hero and the crowd, and the individuality of the members of the crowd with a participation in the multitude.”⁸⁹ For all of Irving’s cautious populism (as outlined above), the Lyceum never aimed at political “resolution” (or revolution) but rather at a heightened consciousness of the efficacy of “illusion”: the actor himself as a site where we might witness that paradoxical unity. “In pursuing this synthesis,” Meisel writes, “Irving the actor and Irving the *metteur en scène* were at one. The unity of scene and persons—including the stage crowds—now so fully achieved was the unity of a single creative consciousness projecting its idea through the instrumentality of the theater.”⁹⁰ As “conventional” as they seemed—and as central to middlebrow culture as they became—Irving and the Lyceum refuse to be read as representative

⁸⁹ Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts*: 225.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*: 430.

of any standard aesthetic phenomenon. “The paradox of Irving’s acting and production was that his holistic Art of the Theater was directed toward achieving a complete illusion, a seamless, ordered dramatic reality. Yet Irving remained overtly theatrical and rhetorical, a technical actor building an impersonation out of infinite detail, and informing it with his own vitality.”⁹¹ The instability of this paradox, then, leads us all the way back to Diderot, as Meisel concludes:

If the nineteenth-century theater originates, philosophically at least, in Diderot’s campaign for a more pictorial stage, and if by that he meant to secure a more sincere fiction—that is, a seamless dramatic illusion, a self-enclosed mimesis—then Irving was simultaneously the fulfillment, conclusion, and reduction of that powerful aesthetic ideal.⁹²

For Diderot, the “paradox of the actor” was meant to affirm the fundamental integrity of the theatre as a temple of art and moral instruction. Irving, who constructed the Lyceum as that temple, and who embodied that iconic paradox, nevertheless produced a provocative instability, one that may have pointed toward another phase of theatrical evolution.

But like Arthur himself, Irving was forced to witness the disintegration of his ideal and the collapse of what he had built. In February of 1898, disaster struck: a fire at one of the Lyceum’s storage facilities destroyed properties and sets valued at some £50,000, a devastating blow to a company that was, even prior to this, only barely solvent. Even worse—in order to meet Irving’s expenses the previous year, Stoker had actually reduced the insurance policy to cover only about ten percent of the loss.⁹³ Soon after, Irving suffered illness and injury; by the end of the year, he had signed away his interests in the Lyceum to a syndicate in order to avoid total financial ruin. Though he lost control, Irving continued to perform at the Lyceum until

⁹¹ Ibid.: 431–32.

⁹² Ibid.: 432.

⁹³ Belford, *Bram Stoker*: 278.

1902, when even the syndicate failed to sustain the Lyceum's extravagant costs and diminishing returns. The final years of his life saw Irving's return to the sort of touring repertory of his youth, as the aging actor struggled to maintain the sequence of roles he had played at the Lyceum, now under far more difficult circumstances. On October 13, 1905, Irving took the stage for the last time, in Tennyson's *Becket*; and though he completed the performance, his martyrdom onstage was followed soon after by his own more prosaic death, in the lobby of a hotel a short distance from the theatre.⁹⁴ It may be a testament to Irving's success as the engineer of his own personal narrative that its conclusion satisfies a neat tragic irony: the actor who had done so much to elevate the station of his profession was brought down by the harsh, material realities of the theatrical marketplace.

To no one would this story have been more devastatingly legible than Bram Stoker, who published the first significant Irving biography—the two-volume *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*—in 1906. There, Stoker began:

Logically speaking, even the life of an actor has no preface. He begins, and that is all. And such a beginning is usually obscure; but faintly remembered at the best. Art is a completion; not merely the history of an endeavor. It is only when completeness has been obtained that the beginnings of endeavor gain importance, and that the steps by which it has been won assume any shape of permanent interest.⁹⁵

The shape provided by his account is, unsurprisingly, personal, a worthy complement to the more “official” Irving biography the actor had established implicitly throughout his lifetime. Stoker had, of course, participated actively in the formation of the Irving narrative, both in the literal composition of Irving's countless letters and addresses and in his unflinching service to the

⁹⁴ For a broader discussion concerning the confluence of the character's and the actor's deaths, see my third chapter about T. S. Eliot's treatment of the death of Marie Lloyd; that discussion also involves Eliot's own dramatization of the Becket martyrdom in *Murder in the Cathedral*, which is not necessarily a simple coincidence. This may be one of the invisible connections that sustains my greater argument.

⁹⁵ Stoker, *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*: vii.

Lyceum's finances during the decades of its dominance over London's theatrical landscape: Stoker's presence is palpable within Irving's triumph and his ruin, an ironic paradox to rival Irving's own. Stoker's remarks in this brief preface to the *Personal Reminiscences*, however, reveal his own fascination with the differences between Irving's "art" and the more traditional boundaries assumed by the "completion" of his written account.

In this sense, Stoker's understanding of Irving's powers pitted Hamlet's familiar injunction—that the actor's job is "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to Nature"—against Hamlet's own alternative: the idea that actors are "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time," bound within and limited by their own historical narratives. The momentary epiphanies of Irving's performances—such as those recorded by both Shaw and Ashwell in their appreciation of *King Arthur*—are to Stoker contrary to the fundamental temporal symmetry implied by "Art": in order to "assume any shape of permanent interest," the work must achieve a kind of totality; in order that we might appreciate his achievement, Irving must die. The actor appears from nothing, but he disappears into himself; his fascination is that of an inverted teleology—of the same narrative momentum that Stoker grants to the power of vampirism in his most famous novel.

In *Dracula*, Stoker reveals the lasting influence of Irving's peculiar construction of the actor throughout his life's work. The novel's early sections seem to endorse a kind of aesthetic anti-theatricalism in line with Diderot's *Paradox* and Edward Gordon Craig's Ubermarionette: the grotesque mimicry of the immortal vampire is a perverse image of the actor's art, indicative of both the cerebral abstraction of the *modèle idéal* and the "unlucky heritage" of the socially degenerate player of no "character." But this persecution of the actor *within* the text ultimately gives way to Irving's more deliberate and historically compelling construction of the actor-as-author, revealing an actor *of* the text. The novel's third act sees Mina Harker's re-performance of

Lucy's vamping, with a crucial difference: where Lucy is trapped by a problematic insistence upon textual authority, Mina's redemptive assumption of the powers of vampirism draws our awareness to the continual reproduction of the novel's text—its editing and compilation, the performative elision of its numerous gaps and fissures—in a way that recalls the “restorative” goals of Irving's ideal actor.

Reading Faces, Writing Bodies: Anti-Theatricality in the Staking of Lucy Westenra

Do you ever try to read your own face? *I do*, and I can tell you it is not a bad study, and gives you more trouble than you can well fancy if you have never tried it.

- Letter, Lucy Westenra to Mina Murray, *Dracula*⁹⁶

At first glance, the plot of *Dracula* seems to be founded upon a deeply conventional anti-theatricality, a moral skepticism toward acts of mimetic reproduction that is linked to the trans-historical identity of its villain. The immortal Count represents Diderot's “unlucky heritage from the old actors,” and his threat is characterized by a fragmented and anecdotal history grounded in unwritten folklore and never fully substantiated by the novel's events. Against this threat, the novel seems to marshal the authority of its own medium: it is the material integrity of the written word—and the moral authenticity this implies—that becomes the characters' principal sanctuary from the empty, performative reproduction of vampirism. As the novel proceeds, each of its major figures takes up the pen—and, eventually, the typewriter and the phonograph—in attempts at historical preservation meant to secure his or her sense of personal identity from the perversion and corruption of the Count and his minions. Nowhere is this clearer than in the construction of Jonathan Harker's Transylvanian diary, which provides his only hope for salvation and sanity, as the scene cited at the head of this chapter illustrates.

⁹⁶ Stoker, *Dracula*: 57.

As a result, the overwhelming tendency is to read Irving's influence upon *Dracula* as directed exclusively at the Count himself. Barbara Belford has offered the most straightforward version of this argument: the Count is a demonic portrait of Irving, or a grotesque and depraved reflection of Stoker's and Irving's parasitic relationship to one another. (Unsurprisingly, Belford makes much of the overt homoerotic tensions on display in the novel, especially during the Count's rescue of Harker in that aforementioned scene.⁹⁷) The most extreme versions of this argument even involve Ellen Terry, who takes on the role of Mina to complement Irving's Count and Stoker's Jonathan Harker: while the Lyceum festers under the invisible pressure of Irving's egotism, Terry emerges as a kind of inevitable savior whose personal gifts allow her to triumph in spite of (or on account of) Irving's "taint"—an icon of the sort of late-Victorian femininity both empowered and repressed within Stoker's novel. And this notion is upheld by the vague disdain the real Irving held for Stoker's fictional work. According to a popular legend, Irving appeared only briefly during the reading Stoker staged at the Lyceum in order to secure the dramatic copyright for *Dracula* in the weeks before its first publication; when asked whether he liked it, Irving pronounced a single word—"Dreadful!"—before continuing with his own preparations for the night's performance as Napoleon in *Madame Sans-Gêne*.⁹⁸ As Belford remarks: "Stoker had put his unspoken grievances on the pages of *Dracula*, but Irving probably never read the book"; Stoker's contemporary "penny-dreadful" was likely beneath the notice of the actor so committed to the grandeur of classic theatre and historical reenactment.⁹⁹ According to this line of argument, Stoker's own passive-aggressive rebellion against Irving becomes the

⁹⁷ See Belford, *Bram Stoker*: 7.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*: 270. Irving did not appear as the Count in this performance, and *Dracula* was never staged again during Stoker's lifetime. Nor, one might add, did Terry appear in the role of Mina; rather, the character was played by her daughter Edith Craig, who—like her brother, Edward Gordon—would become a central figure for the modernist British theatre of the ensuing decades.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*: 280.

author's means to assert himself over the actor more broadly, and Stoker's personal sniping transforms into a broadsided bombardment on the Lyceum's "historical" aims and the theatre's more general pretensions.

This argument, as I will show in the final section of the chapter, entirely ignores Stoker's intimate involvement with Irving's more comprehensive goals—for himself and for his profession. But it cannot be denied that *Dracula* quickly evokes that conventional, puritan disdain for the theatre. The novel's antagonist is, throughout, an image of theatricality pushed to absurd and extreme ends of depravity. A creature of deceit and lust, the Count represents a sort of predatory mimetic instinct, endlessly and emptily reproductive, an absolute moral void: he is, in Diderot's terms, "polished, caustic, cold." At the same time, however, a fear of the Count's vampiric *mimesis* is voiced within the text long before its characters discover any proof of the Count's true designs; the "anti-theatrical prejudice" precedes any action of the Count's, illustrating its characters' and its readers' predispositions to distrust an "unnatural" replication.

Penetrating deep into the castle's crypt during the novel's opening section, Jonathan Harker discovers a fattened, leech-like Count newly sated with blood: an image of swollen, decadent cultural consumption. Immediately, Harker jumps to extraordinary conclusions: "This was the being I was helping to transfer to London, where, perhaps, for centuries to come he might, amongst its teeming millions, satiate his lust for blood, and create a new and ever-widening circle of semi-demons to batten on the helpless."¹⁰⁰ The logical leap witnessed here is entirely unsubstantiated by the novel: not only has Harker yet to witness any proof of the Count's reproductive capacity—this comes only later, when the Count "vamps" Lucy—but it seems starkly at odds with the evidence he has so far encountered. Harker is only ever aware of the Count's *three* mistresses—hardly the "teeming millions" of his nightmarish imagination. In order

¹⁰⁰ Stoker, *Dracula*: 54.

to rationalize this jump, one must admit to a fear present already in Harker: a distrust of “soulless” reproduction in the figure of the actor, a man whose very being lends itself so quickly to mass-cultural consumption. Evocative of Artaud’s stirring pronouncement—that the theatre functions as a plague—Harker’s fear of the Count as an epidemic is directly linked to the Count’s paradoxical mimetic abilities.¹⁰¹

The power of Harker’s fear—a fear so easily echoed by the reader—lies in his own sustained voice within the novel’s first four chapters. The act of writing grants him unity and sanity, but it also works to reinforce a kind of problematic authority elsewhere denied to the novel’s authors. What makes Harker’s Transylvanian diary unique and isolated within *Dracula* is, indeed, its unity: as the novel moves into its later sections, it is much more rigorous in its attention to its own chronology, fracturing each of its narrative voices in order to collate them by the dates upon which the accounts were originally composed. The two months we spend in Harker’s voice, though, allows this later schizophrenia to function cohesively. As David Seed—one of few critics to examine the formal strategies of the novel—has noted: “[Harker’s] journal gives the reader a ‘memory,’ a store of images that enables him to interpret the fragmentary signs that fill characters’ later accounts. Their very incapacity to analyze their accounts—in this respect as in others, Harker sets the pattern—compels them to be as accurate as they can.”¹⁰² Harker’s diary thus serves to guide interpretation, not simply to “lull” the reader into a sublime experience of Harker’s own growing terror. The break exhibited with the dominant orientation of the rest of the novel works anachronistically: the temporal “flow” of the novel’s later events are already prefigured by the structural logic of this section. Thus, *Dracula* operates within the

¹⁰¹ “In the theater as in the plague there is something both victorious and vengeful: we are aware that the spontaneous conflagration which the plague lights wherever it passes is nothing else than an immense liquidation.” Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*: 27

¹⁰² Seed, “The Narrative Method of *Dracula*”: 198.

“phenomenological” response-theory of Wolfgang Iser, who provides a sweeping description of the reader’s response to *all* literary texts:

The reader’s role is to occupy shifting vantage points that are geared to a prestructured activity and to fit the diverse perspectives into a gradually evolving pattern. This allows him to grasp both the different starting points of the textual perspectives and their ultimate coalescence, which is guided by the interplay between the changing perspectives and the gradually unfolding coalescence itself.¹⁰³

Dracula’s conformity with Iser’s “phenomenological” theory is almost too perfect, that notion of “gradually unfolding coalescence” so nicely descriptive of both the novel’s form and the actions of its vampiric antagonists, who—at various points in the text—are “gradually materialized” from mist or moonbeam.¹⁰⁴

This vampiric function of the text and of the reader will become clear by the end of the novel, as Mina’s work to establish that “gradually unfolding coalescence” discloses Irving’s “restorative” goals. And so it ought to come as no surprise that closer attendance to the chronology of the novel’s events will offer a startling inversion of the authoritative work that Harker’s diary struggles to achieve. That crucial lacuna described at the head of the chapter—the gap that opens around the attack on Harker by the Count’s three mistresses—is sustained by a prior move, when Harker generates his own authority against the imagined “love-letters” written by a “fair lady” who might have once occupied the same physical space. That subsequent scene immediately ironizes this interaction, initiating one of the text’s vital meta-narratives: the blurring of conventional gender lines. As Christopher Craft has so thoroughly described, that encounter presents the novel’s first—and most “direct and explicit”—inversion of sexual identity: here, “virile Jonathan Harker enjoys a ‘feminine’ passivity and awaits a delicious

¹⁰³ Iser, *The Act of Reading*: 35.

¹⁰⁴ Stoker, *Dracula*: 48.

penetration from a woman whose demonism is figured as the power to penetrate.”¹⁰⁵ Though the text never tells us the origin of the Count’s three mistresses, the apparent immortality of the vampires in the text might suggest that that the women who appear to Harker are exactly those same women he had imagined, the undying residents of the castle even in that earlier, bygone age. If this is the case, the circle is complete: having imagined and duplicated that earlier performance, Harker is met by the previous actors, who now adopt the predatory, masculine role he’d just abandoned.

But the text also offers an alternate parallel for Harker’s imaginary “fair lady”: Lucy Westenra. This parallel links Harker’s fear of the actor to Lucy’s own engagement with text; as the novel moves forward, its relentless persecution of Lucy—her vamping by the Count and also her hunting by the novel’s “heroes”—is explained only by Lucy’s problematic display of the vampiric paradox of the actor and her assumption of the Ubermarionette’s primitivist and orientalist “mask.”

This parallel is established, of course, by a neat coincidence in dates. According to the Transylvanian diary, the attack on Harker occurs between May 15th and 16th, a period that directly correlates with Lucy’s entry into the novel’s text: her first letter to Mina is undated, but it must fall between May 9th and May 24th, the dates Mina appends to her own correspondence eliciting and responding to Lucy’s. Lucy’s account is certainly a “love-letter”—it is here, of course, that she announces her affection for Arthur Holmwood, soon to become both Lord Godalming and her fiancée.

In stark contrast to Harker, who is easily calmed by the act of writing, Lucy herself is far more ambivalent about the efficacy of her efforts. Following her hyperbolic confession—“But oh, Mina, I love him; I love him; I love him! There, that does me good”—she immediately

¹⁰⁵ Craft, “Kiss Me with Those Red Lips”: 109.

doubles back: “I do not know how I am writing this even to you. I am afraid to stop, or I should tear up the letter, and I don’t want to stop, for I *do so* want to tell you all. Let me hear from you *at once*, and tell me all that you think about it. Mina, I must stop.”¹⁰⁶ In Lucy’s work, the authenticity of text—so clearly established in Harker’s own fastidious attempts to record his experiences in Castle Dracula—is immediately destabilized: Lucy offers us an image of a kind of writing that threatens to challenge and unseat the prior authority of its own originating body. Lucy’s anxiety is expressed temporally: the act of writing sustains her identity—and her affective sentiment, for her love for Arthur bursts forth in that spontaneous overflow—but the cessation (the moment when writing becomes written) is problematic. Writing, for Lucy, is to be recognized as a performative *event*, its authority vested in the moment of self-bifurcation or mediation involved in transcription.

What Lucy offers, even in this early appearance, is a model for the rest of the novel to follow, situating *Dracula*’s construction of identity in terms of the actor: “representations”—either textual or performative—must remain bound to the body from which they originate. But this vaguely Platonic desire for a means of expression that evades the alienation both of text and of performance itself is countered by the novel’s turn toward physiology and psychology. This move, in effect, duplicates William Archer’s rejoinder to Diderot: confronted by the paranoid threat of vampiric *mimesis* grounded in a kind of ahistorical philosophical abstraction, these characters seek sanctuary in empirical science, “up to date with a vengeance.”

In order to function properly, the science of selfhood rests upon a textual metaphor: the body and the mind are made directly legible by the work of the physician Dr. Seward—another of Lucy’s suitors, who runs the asylum that adjoins the Count’s new home. Lucy describes the doctor’s methods:

¹⁰⁶ Stoker, *Dracula*: 57.

He seems absolutely imperturbable. I can fancy what a wonderful power he must have over his patients. He has a curious habit of looking one straight in the face, as if trying to read one's thoughts. He tries this on very much with me, but I flatter myself he has got a tough nut to crack. I know that from my glass. Do you ever try to read your own face? *I do*, and I can tell you it is not a bad study, and gives you more trouble than you can well fancy if you have never tried it. He says that I afford him a curious psychological study, and I humbly think I do.¹⁰⁷

As she writes to Mina, an act meant literally to render her selfhood legible, Lucy also attempts to encounter her own body as a different kind of text, mimicking the example of Seward. Lucy's letter is somewhat ambiguous about the results of this effort. She acknowledges that such attempts to "read faces" are an exercise of power, a power Seward certainly exercises in the asylum at Carfax, where, as a psychologist-physician he remains deeply involved in the interplay between physiology and personal identity. But Lucy imagines herself to be resistant to Seward's attempts: this is a kind of personal "flattery" that has its roots both in her coquetry and in her inarticulate sense of self-possession. Her argument, essentially, is that if she has trouble "reading herself," then it must be impossible for Seward. Her own terminology subtly derails this effort: her use of the phrase "tough nut to crack" may be an American colloquialism she's borrowed from Quincey Morris, who uses it later to describe himself,¹⁰⁸ suggesting that even her expression of intractable individuality is already a kind of mimicry. Nevertheless, there is a recognition that such attempts at self-possession are "not a bad study"; the act of frustrated reading has some value—a value unknown to those who "have never tried it." Lucy's comments, then, problematize everything Harker's had seemed to establish: attempts to know the self—either through reading or writing—are inherently flawed, always already caught up with a sense of personal performance and temporal immediacy.

What we are to make of this vacillation has everything to do with our understanding of

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.: 56–57.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.: 60.

the model that Mina herself presents as the novel moves toward its conclusion, for ultimately Lucy accounts for the accuracy of Mina's reading by describing their long history together.¹⁰⁹ But we find, of course, that the following section of the novel—during which Lucy is vamped by the Count, dies, experiences un-dead resurrection, and is finally put to rest by the united efforts of Seward, Van Helsing, Holmwood (by then Lord Godalming), and Morris—is almost exclusively defined by Mina's absence. Shortly after the Count's first attack on Lucy during her somnambulist adventure in a cliffside graveyard at Whitby, Mina departs for Buda-Pesth, where she nurses and weds Jonathan Harker; she returns to England during Lucy's final days, but her unread correspondence—which serves, for the reader of *Dracula*, as an effective counterpoint to the anxious accounts of Seward in the same period—betrays her total severance from Lucy. As a result, the novel finds itself caught in an anxious cycle of replication. The efforts of Van Helsing and Seward are repeatedly undermined, requiring the reinstatement of various talismans (garlic, etc.) around Lucy's room; likewise, all of the men participate in emergency transfusions, one after another, an iterative performance whose ironic significance (e.g., its parallels to the marriage ceremony in which Mina participates) is not lost on the novel's own characters.

Throughout this section, the novel continues to engage Lucy's relationship to text and performance, reinforcing that blunt sense of anti-theatricalism as the Count descends upon her. At one point, she records the attack the Count makes during the accidental absence of Seward and Van Helsing, an attack which proves fatal to her mother: "I feel I am dying of weakness, and have barely strength to write, but it must be done if I die in the doing."¹¹⁰ But this "memorandum" actually suffers the implied fate of that initial love-letter to Mina. Securing the

¹⁰⁹ Note: here again we encounter a minor problem. Though Lucy seems to represent herself and Mina as equals, having spent their girlhood in perfect communion, it is suggested later on that Mina had been Lucy's governess. This means, perhaps, that Mina, responsible for Lucy's upbringing, has somehow actually dictated the way that Lucy develops any sense of selfhood. At the very least, it is probable that Mina has literally taught Lucy to read.

¹¹⁰ Stoker, *Dracula*: 130.

note at her own breast, Lucy falls unconscious; after she is revived by the men, Seward notes an “odd thing” that she does while dozing. “Whilst still asleep she took the paper from her breast and tore it in two. Van Helsing stepped over and took the pieces from her. All the same, however, she went on with the action of tearing, as though the material were still in her hands....”¹¹¹ The final outcome of Lucy’s vamping is a kind of semiconscious pantomime. As she passes under the influence of the Count—for, after this last attack, no more can be done to save her—anti-theatricality enters through the destruction of text: Lucy becomes the Count’s puppet at the moment that she eradicates her written identity.

However, as Stoker introduces a theatrical, vampiric persona for Lucy, he also acknowledges its severance from the ideals Irving’s career represented through *Dracula*’s only explicit nod toward the Lyceum Theatre. Lucy’s “resurrection” is announced in *The Westminster Gazette*, which tells of the predatory “bloofer lady” haunting the neighborhood beside the churchyard where Lucy is buried. For Jennifer Wicke, this coincidence registers the novel’s paranoia concerning forms of mass culture:

Lucy becomes an object of the mass press simultaneously with her assimilation into the vampiric fold; the two phenomena are intertwined in the logic of this vampirism. Unless and until Lucy is commoditized out over an adoring, and titillated, public by virtue of her exciting vampiric identity, she cannot be said to have consummated that identity in terms of the text. While her vamping by Count Dracula precedes her “bloofer lady” role and indeed causes it, the un-dead Lucy is similarly vamped by the press, and vamps all those who come under her thrall by just reading about her in the morning newspaper.¹¹²

But this identity is not purely textual, nor is linked directly to Lucy: we immediately discover that this article describes not the “bloofer lady” herself but rather the juvenile performances she inspires. The article reads: “It is generally supposed in the neighborhood that, as the first child

¹¹¹ Ibid.: 139.

¹¹² Wicke, “Vampiric Typewriting”: 474.

missed gave his reason for being away that a ‘bloofer lady’ had asked him to come for a walk, the others had picked up the phrase and used it as occasion served. This is the more natural as the favourite game of the little ones at present is luring each other away by wiles.”¹¹³ “Bloofer lady” is, itself, a name drawn from this performance: the child’s perversion of “beautiful lady” is captured by the text in a parody that preserves its oral character.

The incident draws attention for its mass-cultural audience only through its theatrical reproduction. The young people “lure each other away by wiles,” offering a performance that is itself deceptive, and thus point toward that popular perception of the theatre: that it presents a seductive byway off the moral highroad. And in spite of the relative seriousness of the crime—it concerns, at the very least, the threat of child kidnapping and murder—the article gives way to a frivolity that masks Stoker’s true theatrical sensibilities:

A correspondent writes us that to see some of the tiny tots pretending to be the ‘bloofer lady’ is supremely funny. Some of our caricaturists might, he says, take a lesson in the irony of grotesque by comparing the reality and the picture. It is only in accordance with general principles of human nature that the ‘bloofer lady’ should be the popular role at these *al fresco* performances. Our correspondent naïvely says that even Ellen Terry could not be so winningly attractive as some of these grubby-faced little children pretend—and even imagine themselves—to be.¹¹⁴

If Lucy’s new identity is also mass-textual, it is primarily theatrical, and the immensely significant reference to Ellen Terry indicates Stoker’s sense of a brand of acting that eludes the destructive binaries of the anti-theatrical.¹¹⁵ This “bloofer lady” role is only understood in the

¹¹³ Stoker, *Dracula*: 159.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 159–60.

¹¹⁵ There is not space here to offer a full account of Stoker’s relationship with Terry, nor to do justice to the distinctions one might make between her and the sort of ideals Irving himself might have represented. I wish to suggest that Terry might serve as an adequate surrogate for the ideal of “self-presentation” represented by Irving, but I do not intend to establish a perfect equation that would elide the individuality of either figure. If anything, Stoker evokes Terry here because he chooses *not* to evoke Irving elsewhere; and if Lucy is ironically compared to Terry, then we might logically question the extent to which the Count relates to Irving. The difficulty of “reading” Ellen Terry is, at any rate, confronted more at length in my fourth chapter.

context of a contemporary reverence for actors—like Irving and Terry—that privileged not roles but “being.” Terry was, of course, known early in her career for her performances as the winsome ingénue, but even at this point in her career (Terry was 50 in the year of *Dracula*’s publication) she continued to take on such roles, with turns as Cordelia and Imogen in the Lyceum’s productions of *King Lear* and *Cymbeline* in the 1890s. In spite of—or perhaps because of—this divorce, Terry’s performances come to represent some kind of ontological limit: the children become “grotesque” only by an attempt to exceed Terry; her “being” is set against their “pretending” and “imagining,” and whatever negative value—or even playful irony—attaches to their performances is the direct result of a unique perspective that can simultaneously disparage “theatricality” and adore the performance of the great actor.

In Lucy’s second death, these tensions arrive at a tragic conclusion. Seward puts his perspective in no uncertain terms when he describes the men’s encounter with the vampire-Lucy outside her tomb.

The beautiful colour became livid, the eyes seemed to throw out sparks of hell-fire, the brows were wrinkled as though the folds of the flesh were the coils of Medusa’s snakes, and the lovely, blood-stained mouth grew to an open square, as in the passion masks of the Greeks and Japanese. If ever a face meant death—if looks could kill—we saw it at that moment. And so for full half a minute, which seemed an eternity, she remained between the lifted crucifix and the sacred closing of her means of entry.¹¹⁶

Frozen in a *tableau vivant*—for a half-minute *is* an eternity of stillness, especially in theatrical terms—the men are made witness to Lucy in the form of exaggerated artifice. Quite literally, the vampire becomes the theatrical mask: Lucy is transformed into the Ubermarionette, puppeteered both by the Count and by the men who trap her here. Lucy is read in symbolic terms: her “face meant death,” the “mask” she presents made comprehensible only as an abstract ideal. The discussion that follows—when the men pursue Lucy into the tomb and view the vampire at

¹¹⁶ Stoker, *Dracula*: 188–89.

rest—highlights the ambiguity of Lucy’s status: Van Helsing says, “It is her body, and yet not it. But wait a while, and you shall see her as she was, and is.”¹¹⁷ For Van Helsing, the goal of their action is a kind of restoration, the establishment of continuity for Lucy’s identity. What is at stake—quite literally—is that unity: Lucy must not “represent” anything but herself.

Thus, once the men’s terrible work is done, Seward describes the result: “Lucy as we had seen her in life, with her face of unequalled sweetness and purity. True that there were there, as we had seen them in life, the traces of care and pain and waste; but these were all dear to us, for they marked her truth to what we knew.”¹¹⁸ Seward immediately reaches for abstract hyperbole—Lucy, like Mina, functions largely as symbol in the Victorian male imagination, and various commentators have noted that even her name ought to be read in allegorical terms (Lucy Westenra, “Light of the West”)—but he ultimately attempts to justify Lucy’s “reality” in terms of her physical degradation, which ought to indicate some level of authenticity denied by the “perfection” of her mask-like vampiric visage. Yet, what remains crucial here is Lucy’s sustained legibility: even now, Seward continues to read her face, finding truth now where he previously found a “devilish mockery.”¹¹⁹ Seward’s reflection is as much a commentary on acts of writing and reading as it is a reinstatement of male, heterosexual power (as this scene has so often been read). Beneath his words lies a certain type of nostalgia for semiotic unity, the direct identity between signifier and signified that speaks to a very “real,” physical truth and not the idealized theatricality of the vampire. This sort of redemptive potential might have been best embodied by Ellen Terry, the ingénue who, at the age of 50, also betrayed “traces of care and pain and waste,” and against whom the performance of the vampire seems a perverted echo.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.: 190.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.: 192.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.: 190.

For Lucy, though, the possibility of achieving this restoration is foreclosed from the start. Suspended within Diderot's paradox, she remains trapped between two identities, both of which are idealized constructions. The Victorian lady, in all her "unequaled sweetness and purity," is no less a *modèle idéal* than the vampire. Seward's and Van Helsing's interests in what "was and is" point toward the anachronistic embodiment of Irving's ideal actor, but their achievement of this ideal remains horrifyingly inert: as a corpse, Lucy lies upstage of the novel's true action, melding seamlessly into the scenic backdrop. Like Lena Ashwell in Irving's *King Arthur*, she awaits revival and restoration in the performance of one who might more successfully mediate the relationship between what "was" and what "is," between the text and its "completion," between the writing and the reading of personal identity and cultural history: Mina Harker.

Hypnotism and Autoperformance: Mina Harker's Redemptive Re-reading

How these papers have been placed in sequence will be made manifest in the reading of them. All needless matters have been eliminated, so that a history almost at variance with the possibilities of later-day belief may stand forth as simple fact.

- Prefatory Note, *Dracula*¹²⁰

Where the other narrators seem to figure their acts of writing as variously dependent upon a sense of personal identity—or, rather, that their identities are dependent upon the act of writing—we find in Mina no such anxiety. Though she does, briefly, reiterate that trope exhibited by Harker, Seward and Lucy—the suggestion that writing calms the nerves—we discover she does so only when managing the preservation of Lucy's identity.¹²¹ "Diary again. No sleep now, so I may as well write. I am too agitated to sleep," she writes, when beginning her

¹²⁰ Ibid.: 5.

¹²¹ One final citation might do to justify this recurring theme in the novel. Just after Mina tells the tale of the Count's attack late in the novel, Jonathan Harker writes: "As I must do something or go mad, I write this diary" (252). Undoubtedly, this serves as a neat excuse for the author, but Stoker's continual attention to such justifications elevates the device to an element of the novel's artistic design.

account of Lucy's adventure on the cliffside;¹²² it is no wonder, then, that the passage concludes: "I was filled with anxiety about Lucy, not only for her health, lest she should suffer from the exposure, but for her reputation in case the story should get wind."¹²³ This is a crucial lexical move. Mina unites narrative with physiology in her concern for her friend, offering a clever chiasmic inversion: in a more literal sense, one would worry that her body might suffer from the "wind," and the story from "exposure." Given this worry, it might be strange that Mina would choose to write in the first place; this decision can only be explained, then, by an unconscious faith Mina holds in the power of proper reading, or of proper readers. Her narrative itself cannot "get wind," because it can only be read by figures like herself, who can (as Seward later notes in reading Lucy's face) "mark its truth to what [they] know."

This parallel between the two women is the novel's most crucial structural move, as many critics have recognized, and many of the most potent critical assessments of the novel hinge upon whatever contrast—economic, intellectual, sexual, etc.—one might identify between Lucy and Mina. Phyllis Roth, for example, offers a neat distillation of *Dracula's* organization: "The novel tells of two major episodes, the seduction of Lucy and of Mina, to which the experience of Harker at Castle Dracula provides a preface"; in her straightforward Freudian interpretation, the staking of Lucy becomes emblematic of an ambivalent Oedipal tension. Thus, at the conclusion of that episode, "the novel could not end... the story had to be told again to assuage the anxiety occasioned by the matricide."¹²⁴ Likewise, Wicke recognizes Lucy's "emblematic status as Western icon," but also that "the textual investment shifts when Mina is vamped": though the interpretive paradigm has changed, our reading nevertheless hinges on this

¹²² Stoker, *Dracula*: 87.

¹²³ *Ibid.*: 89.

¹²⁴ Roth, "Suddenly Sexual Women": 61–62.

crucial binary.¹²⁵

These readings, however, depend upon a relative ignorance of Mina's presence already within Lucy: if we are ever able to "read" Lucy, then we do so through Mina; the novel cannot quite fall into these neat halves so long as we recognize Mina's influence throughout that earlier section. This, of course, occurs on a simple logistical level: it is Mina who offers us access to Lucy's correspondence as well as performing the secretarial work of transcribing and collating the novel as it appears to us. But it also happens on that interpretive level: in the initial correspondence between Lucy and Mina, it is suggested that one cannot properly "read" Lucy unless one does so through Mina's eyes. Reading that first of the two major episodes of the novel, we are always already beside Mina herself. It is through Mina, then, that we witness proper reading as a kind of *re-reading*, the fulfillment of an inter-subjective, theatrical role as a kind of historical "restoration."

As did Harker and Lucy in their early meta-writing, so too does Mina allow us to see the major tensions underlying her work. In her first letter to Lucy, she begins:

Forgive my long delay in writing, but I have been simply overwhelmed with work... I have been working very hard lately, because I want to keep up with Jonathan's studies, and I have been practicing shorthand very assiduously. When we are married I shall be able to be useful to Jonathan, and if I can stenograph well enough I can take down what he wants to say in this way and write it out for him on a typewriter, at which also I am practicing very hard.¹²⁶

Mina's "writing" to Lucy—this formal correspondence—is delayed by her concern for shorthand: a highly self-conscious (if anachronistic) reference to Harker's shorthand diary, which has preceded this letter in the text of the novel. What Mina's studies promise her is the potential to transcribe what Harker "wants to say": shorthand offers direct access to personal intention, as

¹²⁵ Wicke, "Vampiric Typewriting": 484.

¹²⁶ Stoker, *Dracula*: 55.

mediated by spoken utterance. She cannot write for herself while preoccupied with this “work”: for Mina, the use of shorthand involves as much a willingness and desire to record the consciousness of another as it does any interest in personal preservation. The final emergence of typewritten text of this novel, then, happens only through Mina’s own actions. Between Harker’s “full presence” and the text of *Dracula* are two simultaneous media: the shorthand Harker uses and Mina herself. As much as Mina’s labor seem to be in service of a text destined for universal legibility, we cannot forget these occluded efforts: the sort of backstage “work” that Mina participates in, the diligent actions that have as their goal an allegedly passive sense of transmission. In contrast to the novel’s other major narrators—especially Harker and Seward—Mina’s work aims at restoring the consciousness of others rather than preserving her own.

“Restoration” is, of course, the focus of *Dracula*’s final chapters, as various interpretations will attest: the male heroes are only able to purge their own anxieties—sexual and otherwise—through the pursuit and eradication of the Count, which turns into a recapitulation of British imperial activity in the East (notably, it is Harker’s massive kukri blade and Morris’s bowie knife—both weapons of frontiersmen, though employed half a world away from one another—that provide the coup de grace to the Count); likewise is Mina “restored,” rescued from that status of the “fallen woman” once her connection to the Count is severed. If the Count’s powerful performative agency lies at the heart of the novel’s central conflict—the threat he poses located in his potential for breeding an empty *mimesis* conceived in common “anti-theatrical” terms—then it is balanced by an equal (if submerged) anxiety concerning Mina’s fluent literacy.

Though she consistently ironizes her relationship to the contemporary “New Woman,” it is clear—in her aspirations as a potential “lady journalist” and her ability to function as curator and collator, not simply transcriber, of the men’s documents—that Mina’s ability to manipulate

and control text are a threat to the men's monopoly over such kinds of "knowledge," as several critics have indicated. Alison Case has argued persuasively that "the novel's complex narrative structure stages a struggle between Mina and the men for narrative mastery, a struggle that turns out to be largely about the 'proper' distribution of masculine and feminine qualities among characters."¹²⁷ Case's argument turns upon a recognition that Mina's narrative power is diminished in the novel's final section: she is redeemed from her threatening status by "converting her from an interpreter into an object of interpretation."¹²⁸ In such readings, this systematic attempt to curtail Mina's agency is justified through her connection to the Count: "Mina loses control over the narration," we are told, "as she comes more and more under the vampire's spell."¹²⁹

But these readings tend to elide or otherwise marginalize the efforts Mina makes even as her narrative "control" diminishes, efforts that work to problematize notions of "control" by a total embrace of the actor's work, which is newly reconceived according to Irving's ideals. After Mina is vamped, Dr. Seward confesses a suspicion that she has already been made a puppet: "I see only one immediate difficulty, I know it by instinct rather than reason: we shall all have to speak frankly; and yet I fear that in some mysterious way poor Mrs Harker's tongue is tied. I *know* that she forms conclusions of her own, and from all that has been I can guess how brilliant and how true they must be; but she will not, or cannot, give them utterance."¹³⁰ If Mina's "tongue is tied," as Seward suggests, it is therefore severed from her consciousness: the specter of Diderot's paradox is raised, and—after Lucy's death—Seward no longer holds faith in his

¹²⁷ Case, "Tasting the Original Apple": 224

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*: 236.

¹²⁹ Senf, *Dracula: Between Tradition and Modernism*: 28.

¹³⁰ Stoker, *Dracula*: 280.

own abilities to “read her face.” Seward’s fear of Mina thus becomes a fear of the vampiric actor: he anticipates the same transformation he had witnessed and enforced in Lucy.

Of course, Seward’s anxieties have already had their potential palliative, offered a few pages earlier. Where Mina has lost her legitimacy as a narrator, she maintains her value to the men as a reader. At dawn—the time when the Count’s hold on her is at its weakest, we are told—she instructs Van Helsing to hypnotize her, thereby allowing her access to the Count’s own consciousness through their telepathic connection. Once again, hierarchies are inverted: whatever power the Count holds over her also offers her a direct line of access to him. In her trance, Van Helsing asks: “‘Where are you?’ The answer came in a neutral way:— ‘I do not know. Sleep has no place it can call its own.’”¹³¹ Mina speaks from the semiotic gap created by formalized writing, inhabiting that void indicated by the novel’s “empty” signifiers: for, of course, her mind now occupies one of the Count’s caskets. When the question is put to her again, Jonathan Harker writes of her reaction: “The answer came dreamily, but with intention; it were as though she were interpreting something. I have heard her use the same tone when reading her shorthand notes.”¹³²

It is impossible to understate the value of such a moment. In a moment of dual consciousness, Mina is presented in the image of the reader: a reader, moreover, who is speaking aloud—as from a script—writing that she herself had produced. Once again, Harker reasserts that idea he offered so much earlier, at the novel’s first depiction of the act of vampirism: the reading and writing enabled by such personal codes as this shorthand provides a venue for self-preservation, both in body and mind, through the self-confrontation of reading. Here, Mina confronts herself in a curious paradox: in “reading herself,” she invades the awareness of the

¹³¹ Ibid.: 272.

¹³² Ibid.

Count, and becomes sensible not to his thoughts but to his feelings. Seeing and hearing through his organs—and not her own—she speak in a “tone,” Harker notes, that is both dreamlike and intentional. In stark contrast to the novel’s other vampiric performances—like Lucy’s, which adopted that “passion mask”—Mina’s apparently passive submission to the will of others (both Van Helsing, her hypnotist, and the Count, her telepathic master) takes the form of an active interpretation. She is a medium, but “not a controllable medium for Van Helsing, nor just a transparent recording device of the id within, Count Dracula,” as Wicke has observed.¹³³ If the heroes are to find any kind of happy ending, it is only through the efforts of this medium of the actor, who situates herself between the self and the other, between text and performance.

This movement is, of course, borne out in the reading of the businesslike “memorandum” she writes concerning the Count’s plans. Where Seward notes that her “tongue is tied” during those initial councils after the Count’s attack, such bonds are loosened by the performance of restorative reading. This resolution, we discover, is possible only through Mina’s self-realization. At Van Helsing’s urging that she “speak, without fear,” Mina responds: “I will try to; but you will forgive me if I seem egotistical.”¹³⁴ Mina’s “egotism” apparently goes hand-in-hand with her movement toward this paradoxical medium: she is here speaking at Van Helsing’s prompt, who assures her that he will “tell [her] if [she] is right,” about experiences she felt through the Count’s consciousness. If there’s any “egotism” at work here, it is a confused and conflicted one, and one which suggests the patronizing influence of the men: Mina is naively convinced that she’s most “egotistical” at the very moment that she is most under control. The scene could therefore serve as solid proof that the novel’s acts of repression—the (re)submergence of problematic sexuality and feminine agency—are successful. Mina’s power is curtailed by means

¹³³ Wicke, “Vampiric Typewriting”: 486.

¹³⁴ Stoker, *Dracula*: 297.

of the imposition of a certain type of guilt: she censors (or censures) herself, anticipating that allegation of “egotism.”

But in the scenes that follow, Mina actually offers herself free rein: the threat of “egotism” is thereby transformed into an assertion of the actor’s prerogative for self-display in service of some other end—an assertion, in other words, of Irving’s paradox against the threat of Diderot’s. As she works on an essential “memorandum”—which spells out the plan to defeat the Count—she writes: “I have asked Dr Van Helsing, and he has got me all the papers that I have not seen... Whilst they are resting, I shall go over all carefully, and perhaps I may arrive at some conclusion.”¹³⁵ After this rereading, she concludes: “I am more than ever sure that I am right. My new conclusion is ready, so I shall get our party together and read it.” Acts of reading—and the composition of this memorandum, which remains “ENTERED IN HER JOURNAL” and never seen by other eyes—confirm Mina’s authority, even while her control of the tale apparently declines. Thus Mina’s final triumph—the “memorandum”—remains itself a “reading” (or interpretation) of other documents, and is finally validated through a reading that is *also* a verbal performance, made before an audience that greets its conclusion with something like applause: “When I had done reading, Jonathan took me in his arms and kissed me. The others kept shaking me by both hands...”¹³⁶ The adulation that follows Mina’s autoperformance remains the text’s most explicit validation of its own methods, and what follows is merely the execution of whatever plans Mina’s reading has suggested. If Mina is ever “restored” in the eyes of the text, it is here.

In this scene, Stoker dramatizes the potential for “restoration” involved in the actor’s work: as she moves seamlessly between inhabiting her own “character,” reading the mind of the

¹³⁵ Ibid.: 303–4.

¹³⁶ Ibid.: 306.

Count, and collating and interpreting the texts of the novel's "heroes," Mina seems to triumph over the anti-theatrical anxieties that would recognize these as distinct and separate efforts. Furthermore, Stoker uses this scene of "restoration" within the novel's events to gesture more broadly to the formation of *Dracula* itself as situated twice within history: first, as bound to its own ephemeral late-Victorian moment, which is conceived as a kind of geophysical text; second, as bound within the codes of the literary tradition and the rules of novelistic discourse. We can see this clearly in the two brief notes that bookend the novel. First, there is the "note" Jonathan Harker appends to the end of the text, written seven years after the events of the novel's conclusion. Here, he writes in startlingly conflicted language:

In the summer of this year we made a journey to Transylvania, and went over the old ground that was, and is, to us so full of vivid and terrible memories. It was almost impossible to believe that the things which we had seen with our own eyes and heard with our own ears were living truths. Every trace of all that had been was blotted out.¹³⁷

Those "living truths"—a notion of authenticity that has, as always, a link to vitality and physical presence—are impossible to believe, for they have lost their connection to the characters' own eyes and ears. It is no coincidence that the figure of speech Harker deploys refers to modes of textual inscription: those traces have been "blotted out," the terrain of Transylvania obscured by a mass of ink otherwise intended to represent it. Confronted with "nothing but a mass of type-writing," Harker ends his account with a sort of melancholic sigh: there remains no "proof" of the novel's events. This textual landscape has no more permanence than the actor's performance, the "living truths" of which are cut off when the actor dies. In Harker's final gesture, we see echoes of the preface to Stoker's later work, written ten years after *Dracula*: his *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*.

And so it is that note finds its immediate textual parallel in the brief preface Stoker offers

¹³⁷ Ibid.: 326.

at *Dracula*'s opening. Here, he explains the basic terms and purpose of the novel's fragmented narrative, in which varying perspectives offer the reader a more full and immediate account than could be offered by one narrator alone. This is, as Stoker well knew, a technique firmly grounded in the traditions of the novel, dating back to Samuel Richardson's epistolary novels of the eighteenth century. And it held a more immediate forebear in the popular novels of Wilkie Collins, whose *Woman in White*—another work of Victorian Gothic suspense—remained in the more recent memory of Stoker's readers. But though Stoker's preface depends deeply on the conventions of the genre, it also makes a number of subtle moves that its predecessors do not, including the disavowal of its own authorial voice. We read:

How these papers have been placed in sequence will be made manifest in the reading of them. All needless matters have been eliminated, so that a history almost at variance with the possibilities of later-day belief may stand forth as simple fact. There is throughout no statement of past things wherein memory may err, for all the records chosen are exactly contemporary, given from the standpoints and within the range of knowledge of those who made them.¹³⁸

A number of features within this brief passage stand out. First, of course, is that refusal to acknowledge any source, implying the total absence of a reliable authorial presence: the origin of this preface is as likely within the frame of the novel's fiction (it is written, perhaps, by either of the Harkers) as it is without (the voice is Stoker's, paralleling similar moves by both Richardson and Collins, in respective prefaces to *Clarissa* or *The Woman in White*). The preface also inverts the resigned melancholy exhibited by Harker in the novel's conclusion: where he doubts the validity of the physical documents, here we have an assurance of the "exact contemporaneity" of their composition; in place of a faith in material there is the certainty of the event, the near-simultaneous occurrence of action and writing. And finally: there is a suggestion, nowhere else felt in the novel, that we are reading something that has been edited. These documents have been

¹³⁸ Ibid.: 5.

“chosen”; others, on the other hand, have been “eliminated.” In a novel so fastidious in its methods, and so deeply paranoid about questions of authenticity, it ought to be almost shocking to (re)discover the suggestion of such occluded activity.

That these potential omissions are made visible only in retrospect—that the irony of this preface can only be seen once we acknowledge the melancholia of the novel’s conclusion—is the essential aspect of Stoker’s method. And in response to whatever anxieties the novel produces, he offers a simple solution: “How these papers have been placed in sequence,” he promises, “will be made manifest in the reading of them.” Ostensibly, this opening comment indicates only the actions that Mina herself takes: hundreds of pages later on, the reader will discover that it is Mina who has typed-out and collated these documents; this act is literally “made manifest” in the gradual unveiling of the plot. But, in the context of all that follows, this calm assurance takes on new meaning. Our reading, the preface assures us, is already a re-reading. Whatever actions we take have already been anticipated by the by the actions of one whose identity is coextensive with her ability to read: we are simply performing the prior activity of Mina, the novel’s first reader, whose activities themselves remain obscured until we can view them, with synchronic awareness, at the novel’s conclusion. We are like Jonathan Harker, writing that diary all unaware in the novel’s opening movement, “up-to-date with a vengeance” only insofar as we remain ignorant that our performance is merely an echo of those that have come before. The action suggested by the preface—which is itself a kind of boundary-crossing, existing simultaneously both within and without the novel’s frame—is the validation of a kind of theatrical activity: reading made manifest, a method of performance simultaneously dependent upon the absolute authenticity of historical and textual sources and an acknowledgement that those sources remain authentic only as long as they can be sustained by the personal integrity of the actor.

Like Irving's career, Stoker's novel is founded upon an anachronistic impulse toward historical revision: *Dracula* takes shape so that "a history almost at variance with later-day belief may stand forth as simple fact," and its narrative is defined by a desire for the sort of redemption and restoration that Irving promised in "The Art of Acting" and that he himself made manifest by re-reading English theatrical history against the terms of Diderot's paradox. But also like Irving's career, *Dracula* remains a "Victorian curiosity" in large part because it seems to function, so easily, as an "abstract and brief chronicle of the time," a low-cultural impression or passive representation of *fin de siècle* cultural anxieties wholly lacking the formal innovations associated with the aesthetic movements that followed. It is limited by its discrete singularity: though focused on a folkloric demon who projects the nightmare threat of infinite reproduction, the novel's own formal conservatism and the perfect symmetry of its plots collapse inward, and its processes of signification threaten to terminate in a kind of morbid self-reference, as Lucy's corpse is made to be "read" only as herself.

At the same time, however, Stoker's work continues to gesture beyond these limits: its internal continuity is what permits its continual reenactment, and its successful fulfillment only promises another singular resurrection. Indeed, though it trades upon the formal and thematic conventions of the Gothic and the epistolary—conventions deeply rooted in the history of the English novel, dating back to the mid-eighteenth century (much like the work of Irving's own "revolutionary" model, David Garrick, and to Diderot)—*Dracula* is "up-to-date with a vengeance" in its attempt to effect a self-conscious reenactment of those devices. In Stoker's work, Gothic anxieties regarding the integrity of identity are divorced from their origins in Romantic "sensibility" and reframed by modern pseudo-scientific and psychological discourses.

This modernity is itself an anachronism, however: much like the “vitalistic materialism” of Diderot’s *Paradox*, which only entered English in the late nineteenth century, its relevance is an accident of contemporary “translation,” of the simultaneous assertion of historical superiority and affirmation of trans-historical aesthetic and philosophical “truth.” For *Dracula*, such translations become performative acts produced both within and outside the fiction: and so Mina Harker—who may or may not be speaking through that beguiling and essential prefatory note—functions precisely in the manner of Irving’s ideal actor. She provides the narrative “completion” that allows the “beginnings of the endeavor to gain importance,” as Stoker’s memoir of Irving hoped to accomplish. But she also reveals that each moment within the text is a self-ratifying justification of this “completion”: like Irving’s tragic embodiment of King Arthur—a performance that mapped Victorian expansion and collapse upon his own theatrical career—Mina’s “restoration” offers only a “great moment” exquisitely seized and achieved through the authority of acting.

In simple historical terms, the Irving-Stoker partnership illustrates a reversal of the traditional paradigm relating the author to the actor: just as the author Stoker himself worked tirelessly as an employee to the actor Irving, so too did Irving’s own performances often succeed at the expense of the authorial work of a dramatic text. And though Stoker—Irving’s “henchman” and the writer of his speeches and letters, according to Bernard Shaw—may have contributed to the production of “Henry Irving,” something of this identity seemed to escape authorial control: it seeped into the gaps and fissures of the Irving narrative, making itself visible only through performative “completion,” through the compilation and collation of its fractured pieces. Stoker himself recognized this: when once asked about the potential for adapting *Dracula* for the stage, he confessed that “The Governor as *Dracula* would be the Governor in a composite

of so many of the parts in which he has been liked—Matthias in ‘The Bells,’ Shylock, Mephistopheles, Peter the Great, the Bad Fellow in ‘The Lyons Mail,’ Louis XI, and ever so many others, including Iachimo in ‘Cymbeline.’”¹³⁹ This “composite” role clearly bears something of the anachronistic allure Irving ascribed to the greatest performances of David Garrick in his 1886 lecture at Oxford; and so the novel’s own “composite” structure becomes its greatest acknowledgement of the actor’s art, and of Irving’s fulfillment of a discontinuous, unwritten “heritage of the old actors.”

As a result, this partnership also attempts to move past its historical bounds: Irving’s influence is felt not in the “character” of the immortal (and immoral) Count but rather in our own attempts to situate the text—in relation to itself, to its author(s), to English history, and to the literary tradition. Irving’s great contribution to theatrical art in the 1890s was his realization that the actor’s work can be a teleological end in itself, and this work culminated in his own knighthood and his enduring legacy as a once-and-future theatrical icon; but his great contribution to theatrical and literary history was his demonstration that this self-centered, idiosyncratic work can move beyond the stage—that the actor can function as a medium for engaging other arts and for confronting the problems of historical specificity and personal limitation. As a result, the Irving-Stoker partnership becomes a paradigmatic case study of a broader dynamic at play continuously throughout the ensuing decades: the notion that an idea of the actor—one that is bound, ineffably, to specific performers and historical moments—can be made manifest in the reading of modernist literature.

¹³⁹ Qtd. in: Skal, “‘His Hour Upon the Stage’”: 372.

II.

“IMAGINE THAT HE IS THE AUTHOR, AND BE SCORNFUL”: BERNARD SHAW AND THE ACTORS

There are four depths of illiteracy, each deeper than the one before.

1. The illiteracy of Henry Irving.
2. The illiteracy of those illiterate enough not to know that he is illiterate.
3. The illiteracy of those who have never read my works.
4. The illiteracy of Eliza, who couldn't even read the end of her own story.

There is only one person alive who is such a Monster of illiteracy as to combine these four illiteracies in her single brain. And I, the greatest living Master of Letters, made a Perfect Spectacle of myself with her before all Europe.

- George Bernard Shaw, letter to Mrs. Patrick Campbell, 7 March 1917¹

The most desirable director of a play is the author.

Unfortunately, as playwrighting is a solitary occupation which gives no social training, some playwrights are so lacking in the infinite patience, intense vigilance, consideration for others, and imperturbable good manners which directing requires, that their presence at rehearsals is a hindrance instead of a help.

- George Bernard Shaw, “Rules for Directors,” August 1949²

In March of 1917, George Bernard Shaw wrote a letter to Mrs. Patrick Campbell, the actor who had originated the role of Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion* (1914). For two decades, Shaw and Campbell—or “Joey” and “Stella,” as they termed one another—had carried out an affectionate correspondence, which veered alternately toward and away from a romantic affair as they confronted and debated the major issues (artistic, professional, and—occasionally—political) that dominated the early decades of the twentieth century. In this letter, Shaw presents Campbell with a series of accusations, linking her performances as Eliza back to the idea of the narcissistic actor-manager represented by Henry Irving. When read outside of the context of their relationship and of the sense of collaboration fostered by their work together, Shaw’s letter appears as a kind of resentful assault on Campbell’s misinterpretation of the role: by combining “four illiteracies,” Shaw suggests, Campbell proves herself not only an irrepressible egotist, but also an ignorant and complacent cultural consumer, unable to recognize both the brilliance of

¹ Shaw, *Bernard Shaw and Mrs. Patrick Campbell*: 217.

² Shaw, *Shaw on Theatre*: 279.

Shaw's "new drama" and the true narrative of Eliza's transformation. This letter, therefore, would seem to present the same rejection of the attitudes and icons of the past so often associated with a burgeoning modernist sensibility: Campbell has become—like so much of late-Victorian culture—an anachronism, the relic of a paradigm of theatrical production and engagement no longer relevant or effective in these years of war, civil disturbance, and artistic innovation. In Stella Campbell, the specter of Henry Irving—who had died nearly twelve years earlier—stands as a threat to cultural progress and to the proper recognition owed to a "Master of Letters." This letter appears to be a quintessential document of Shavian arrogance, connecting a deeply personal attack to a broad historical and cultural failure, and trumpeting Shaw's own accomplishments at the expense of a European populace unable to heed his warnings and obey his commands.

In this chapter, however, I argue precisely the opposite: namely, that Shaw's work with Mrs. Patrick Campbell—and the production, performance, and publication of *Pygmalion*—reveals the ways in which a model of collaboration between author and actor can function as a potential remedy to the sort of "literacy" Shaw truly feared in the spring of 1917. The prior year—while British casualties mounted during the six-month massacre at the Somme—Shaw had begun work on a play that situated the collapse of western civilization in terms of the complacent, aestheticist reading habits of the English elite, who insist on keeping their "revolution on the shelf" and their support of new ideas confined strictly to their books.³ In this play—*Heartbreak House*—Shaw critiques both the political efficacy of textual publication and the viability of Chekhovian (or even Ibsenite) "dramatic realism" in theatrical production. This masterpiece—unable to be produced during the war itself, and published only afterward, in 1919—therefore threatens to undo the values upon which Shaw had founded his dramatic career

³ Shaw, *Heartbreak House*: 15.

twenty years earlier: the embrace of publication and formal innovations of the Shaw play-text, free from censorship and inadequate theatrical production; the establishment of the Mephistophelian “G. B. S.” persona and the enforcement of his authorial design; and the development of a directorial prerogative in a desire for a “Shaw theatre.” In *Heartbreak House*, Shaw investigates the potential disasters that follow from a “cultured” reception of literary and dramatic work, attributing the death-drive of the war effort to the jaded attitudes of the educated and the hyper-literate.

Only by understanding Shaw’s career-long fascination with the unique work of the actor can these forces be reconciled. By embodying, at this anachronistic moment, the “illiteracy” of Henry Irving, Mrs. Patrick Campbell reveals an alternative current in Shaw’s career, one that remains resolutely opposed to the values of legibility and stands invested instead in the complex negotiations of acting and the historical contingency of theatrical performance. Shaw’s understanding of the value of the actor grew as he engaged in two simultaneous—and nearly opposed—efforts throughout the first half of his career: first, to develop new means to substantiate dramatic literature as a publishable and politically efficacious commodity; second, to develop a consistent sense of vision behind dramatic production, anticipating the efforts of the modern director—a profession that had not yet taken shape as Shaw began his career on the London stage. Behind both of these efforts lay Shaw’s conflicted attitudes toward the potentials of reception and education. By dramatizing the actor’s education—and by deliberately courting potential misreadings of the play’s central “romance”—Shaw’s work on *Pygmalion* reveals how the actor mediates a complex dialogue between print and performance, challenging the enforcement of authorial and directorial control and the legitimacy of audience response.

As the only one of Shaw’s plays to remain financially viable during the difficult war

years, *Pygmalion*—both on the stage and on the page—offers a subversive means to demonstrate the value of this work, for it uses the actor’s training to reflect ironically upon the sorts of romantic “transformation” effected by money, by education, and by revolutionary or political literature. Between its first conception in 1898, its first publication in 1916, and its successful translation onto film in the middle of the century, *Pygmalion* crosses the boundaries that sever “Victorian curiosities” from the pressures of modernity. And by sustaining this anachronistic effort through its emphasis on the Eliza’s—and Stella Campbell’s—abilities, *Pygmalion* demonstrates how the paradoxes that bound Irving’s “art of acting” to its late-Victorian moment continue to circulate between media and throughout the culture at this divisive time in modernist history.

Throwing Homer at the Schoolboy’s Head: Literary Authority and Shaw’s Performative Paratexts

In prison they may torture your body; but they do not torture your brains; and they protect you against violence and outrage from your fellow-prisoners. In a school you have none of these advantages. With the world’s bookshelves loaded with fascinating and inspired books, the very manna sent down from Heaven to feed your souls, you are forced to read a hideous imposture called a school book, written by a man who cannot write: a book from which no human being can learn anything; a book which, though you may decipher it, you cannot in any fruitful sense read, though the enforced attempt will make you loathe the sight of a book all the rest of your life.

- George Bernard Shaw, from the Preface to *Misalliance*, 1914⁴

Much of the difficulty in articulating Shaw’s fascination with the sort of dispersive agency and historical illegibility (or “illiteracy”) of the actor lies in the curious coherence of his own work: the singular consistency of his argumentative approach, the specificity and vehemence of his opinions, and the brisk wit of his balanced debates all run together through nearly seventy years of active literary output. Shaw’s work spans the entirety of the turbulent period from the 1880s until his death in 1950, and throughout his career, he operated within a panoply of rhetorical

⁴ Shaw, *Misalliance*: 35.

positions—as a failed novelist, as a “jobbing” journalist and critic, as an idealistic political pamphleteer and lecturer, as a revolutionary and controversial playwright, as a theatrical director, and finally as a Nobel Laureate and an internationally-recognized “Master of Letters,” one of the most triumphant, popular literary personae of the early twentieth century. But in spite of these continual transformations, Shaw’s work boasts a tangible sense of continuity, regardless of his medium or his audience, and there are often perceptible links between his positions on vastly different issues and within apparently separate discourses. His reflections on nineteenth-century aestheticism are connected to his attitude toward the medical profession, vaccination and the practice of vivisection⁵; his Fabian socialism dovetails nicely with his pseudo-Vitalist philosophy of the “Life Force,” and thus with his faith in a certain kind of evolutionary and social teleology.⁶ And all of these ideas are sustained by his carefully crafted rhetoric, his decades-long development of a sardonic and relentlessly assertive tone, and the measured patience of articulation in his lilting Anglo-Irish accent.

This sense of continuity is the dominant focus of Eric Bentley’s influential (and still authoritative) summation of Shaw’s career soon after the author’s death. “Indeed,” Bentley claims, “everything in Shaw leads to everything else: we have had many vaster and more scientific thinkers but few whose thinking was at the same time so manysided and so much of a piece.”⁷ The great irony of Shaw’s career, of course, was that the continuity of his thought enabled both his contemporary allies and opponents to disavow and dismiss him: spurned by Victorians and modernists alike, Shaw might seem today to hold only a brief and hopelessly prosaic sort of Edwardian relevancy, too outrageous for the staid 1890s and too moderate and

⁵ See, for example, the plot of *The Doctor’s Dilemma*, or some of the digressive debates in *The Philanderer*.

⁶ See *Man and Superman* and *Back to Methuselah*.

⁷ Bentley, *Bernard Shaw*: 42–43.

conventional for the political and aesthetic avant-garde in the later 'teens and 'twenties. Shaw remains stubbornly Shaw; likewise, the adjective “Shavian” has settled into a disappointingly reliable semantic value, easily abstracted from the play of contradiction and paradox that characterizes so much of his work.

Strangely, Shaw's unique sense of coherence has been taken up by scholars with markedly different agendas for reading his construction of unitary authority. On the one hand, Shaw seems to herald the birth of the director's theatre, a historical development that serves to invest the authority of drama with its manifestation in theatrical performance under the aegis of a single artistic “vision.” Bernard Dukore focuses on Shaw's development of directorial techniques in the 1894 debut of *Arms and the Man*—four years before Stanislavski's development of the Moscow Art Theatre and eleven years before the publication of Edward Gordon Craig's *On the Art of the Theatre*. “What may surprise the reader is not that Shaw's practice was different from that of the modern director but that it was similar,” Dukore writes.⁸ At the same time, bibliographic studies have sought simultaneously to locate Shaw's significance within the diametrically opposed tradition of print publication. Here, Shaw's stringent requirements for the printing of his work—his insistence not only on his own typographical preferences (such as, for example, the use of spacing between letters rather than italics for emphasis⁹) but also on the layout, paper stock, and binding used in his books, as well as their pricing—are seen as an attempt to bring the status of the playwright more in line with that of the novelist, whose authorial “genius” is more easily taken for granted and respected. Katherine E. Kelly has indicated the extent to which Shaw's publications helped to institute the “canon” of modern

⁸ Dukore, *Shaw's Theatre*: 5. Dukore's commentary on Shaw's directing was first published in 1971 as “Bernard Shaw, Director.” Its updated republication in 2000 asserts that it is “still the standard in its field”: a suggestion that reveals how little this view of Shaw has been placed under critique.

⁹ This is a convention (along with the dropping of certain apostrophes and the omission of other punctuation) that I have adopted throughout in my citations from Shaw.

drama during its formation in the first decade of the twentieth century—a process that had its ultimate outlet in the institutionalization of the literary study of drama in the university.¹⁰

There is an obvious contradiction between these efforts. On the one hand, Shaw—a lifelong adherent to Wagner—stands as one of England’s foremost proponents of unified theatrical production. With the Bayreuth Festspielhaus as his model, Shaw was quick to propose an “Ibsen Theatre” in his 1913 revision of *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*¹¹; he also made a series of proposals for a “national theatre” in London throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, during which time he nearly achieved a “Shaw theatre” through a series of historic seasons with Harley Granville-Barker at the Royal Court Theatre. At the same time, this emphasis on the values of theatricality—which relegate the dramatic text to one niche in a larger, multimedia design—stands in stark contrast to the authoritative monoliths of Shaw’s published works, their lengths distended (and their prices justified) by elaborate paratextual additions and appendices: stage directions that adopt the descriptive tone of novelistic discourse and “prefaces” that supply explanatory essays on the major themes and intents of the dramatic texts. These efforts in both print and performance seem to be explained only through a kind of faith in Shaw himself as a kind of uber-authorial presence, working against himself to establish “authoritative” efforts in competing—and differently positioned—media. But it is hard to believe that Shaw—who boasted an exceptional understanding of the business of theatrical production and a certain charismatic flair for self-promotion and publicity for London audiences—would have easily collapsed any distinction between a theatrical spectatorship (which varied, of course, according to venue) and the reading public that would be purchasing his books.

Instead, I argue that Shaw’s concern with his media—both the theatre and the book—was

¹⁰ See Kelly, “Imprinting the Stage”: 25–54.

¹¹ Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*: 236.

founded on his appreciation for the problems that attend to audience reception: the collapse of distinction between multiple genres and media in the pursuit of mimetic realism; the history of literary education and the democratization of reading in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and—most importantly—the ability of the actor to upstage text and to indicate the contingency of performance. Throughout his entire career, Shaw would use the paradigm of theatrical reading—a mode of engagement mediated by the actor’s resistance to authority—to destabilize common assumptions of literary and dramatic realism and its attendant political and “romantic” biases.

Dramatic Realism: “Novelistic” Stage Directions and “Theatrical” Reading

From the moment of his first dramatic publication—the simultaneous printing of his first seven works for the stage as the *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* in 1898—Shaw constantly sought to challenge any distinctions that could be made about where, how, or by whom he was read. In the preface to the *Plays Unpleasant*, Shaw refers to the unique literary form he has adopted as an early attempt at a “new art,” and prophesies, a decade down the road, an extraordinary explosion of genre—the sort of experimental writing associated with modernist fiction.

The case, then, is overwhelming not only for printing and publishing the dialogue of plays, but for a serious effort to convey their full content to the reader. This means the institution of a new art; and I daresay that before these two volumes are ten years old, the bald attempt they make at it will be left far behind, and that the customary brief and unreadable scene specification at the head of an act will have expanded into a chapter, or even a series of chapters. No doubt one result of this will be the production, under cover of the above arguments, of works of a mixture of kinds, part narrative, part homily, part description, part dialogue, and (possibly) part drama: works that could be read, but not acted.¹²

The form of Shaw’s work is unique for its time. Each act in this two-volume publication is accompanied by lengthy “scene specifications” that become “readable” by purging all direct

¹² Shaw, “Preface” to *Plays Unpleasant*: 31–32.

references to the stage and to the actor: location and set-dressing are described from within the fiction of the play, and dialogue is punctuated by directions that describe not only the characters' physical actions but also their psychological motivations, their social preconceptions, their particular biases, moods and interests. The play text would thus seem to fulfill itself from within: its "content" is "full" in the sense that it draws upon its readers' natural sense of mimetic completion in novelistic narrative forms. Shaw's *Plays Unpleasant* are thus "realistic" not only in their confrontation of social problems but also in their attempts to draw on the naturalistic formal techniques of prose fiction.

But though these efforts appear to draw on the novelistic devices of his contemporaries, Shaw is always certain to assert the priority of the stage—and, in particular, the author-actor relationship—in any innovation he has made in literary form. The passage quoted above continues: "I have no objection to such works; but my own aim has been that of the practical dramatist: if anything my eye has been too much on the stage. At all events, I have tried to put down nothing that is irrelevant to the actor's performance, and, through it, to the audience's comprehension of the play."¹³ Shaw makes a bold suggestion: his writing is meant to be simultaneously descriptive and prescriptive, using the actor as the medium for this transformation. His printed plays—particularly his innovative approach to rendering "stage directions"—are aimed entirely at the actor, through whose subsequent performance the audience will comprehend the play. This is a relationship, the preface suggests, that the closet reader must attempt to approximate.

Shaw goes on to suggest one way in which the reader must try to do this: by reading aloud, or by imagining an aural component to the printed text. "I have of course been compelled to omit many things that a stage representation could convey, simply because the art of letters,

¹³ Ibid.: 32.

though highly developed grammatically, is still in its infancy as a technical speech notation: for example, there are fifty ways of saying Yes, and five hundred of saying No, but only one way of writing them down.” The realities of publication force Shaw to do without a truly phonetic script: for—in spite of Shaw’s concurrent efforts in since-forgotten debates on philology and “language reform” in late-Victorian London—readers have not been trained to recognize letters and words crafted to emphasize accurate pronunciation over the vestigial organs of etymology. Nevertheless, readers must maintain an awareness of this frustration, an awareness of the real aspects of “stage representation” that escape the page. And thus, readers must make an attempt to supply those aspects themselves, recognizing that the contingencies of Shaw’s texts are proclaimed at every moment that their authority becomes most visible. Shaw’s distinction is subtle: there must be a “serious effort” to transmit a “full content” to the reader, but it is the effort that matters, not the content—which, after all, may not truly exist. The difficulties of reading—and that illusory panacea, the impossible dream of phonetics—would form the essential pretext for *Pygmalion* some fifteen years later.

Shaw’s emphasis on the multiple mediations and consequent frustrations of the play-text may spring directly from his failed career as a novelist. He attributes this failure to the uncritical assumption of “realism” that he views as a necessary corollary to the dominance of the novel over the field of readership. According to the preface to the *Plays Unpleasant*, Shaw abandoned the novel as a form for artistic expression precisely because of its allegedly mimetic capacity. In a brief anecdote, he tells that after visiting an ophthalmologist he discovered that his vision, in being “normal,” actually differed from that of ninety percent of the population. “I immediately perceived the explanation of my want of success in fiction. My mind’s eye, like my body’s, was

‘normal’: it saw things differently from other people’s eyes, and saw them better.”¹⁴ Shaw boasts of a more “accurate” sort of vision, unappreciated by the blind masses. He portrays himself as one of the heroic “realists” he’d described in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*: that (un)lucky one in a thousand capable of viewing reality on its own terms, unfettered by the moral “ideals” of a hypocritical society. But rather than resting on a moment of arrogance and superiority, Shaw uses this epiphany to justify his turn to the theatre: abandoning a form whose alleged “realism” was bankrupt by a deluded mass-readership, Shaw resorted to a form of artistic representation whose inherent artificiality could be proclaimed at every moment.

Given the distortions in the average reader’s “vision,” Shaw objected to any tendency to use the book as a type of mirror: his disgust with mass-readership was founded on its conservative habit of reading itself into romantic narratives. The subsequent *Plays for Puritans*, published in 1901, are thus Shaw’s attempt to strike back at such readers. He writes in the preface to those plays: “The worst of it is that since man’s intellectual consciousness of himself is derived from the descriptions of him in books, a persistent misrepresentation of humanity in literature gets finally accepted and acted upon. If every mirror reflected our noses twice their natural size, we should live and die in the faith that we were all Punches...”¹⁵ The paradox is intentional: Shaw’s deluded novel-reader is already a kind of misguided actor—he reads a role for himself, and acts upon that “misrepresentation.” This process leads directly to a self-destructive political theatricality. Shaw concludes:

Kaisers, generals, judges, and prime ministers will set the example of playing to the gallery. Finally the people, now that their compulsory literacy enables every penman to play on their romantic illusions, will be led by the nose far more completely than they ever were by playing on their former ignorance and superstition. Nay, why should I say will be? they *are*. Ten years of cheap reading

¹⁴ Ibid.: 12–13.

¹⁵ Shaw, “Preface” to *Three Plays for Puritans*: 26.

have changed the English from the most stolid nation in Europe to the most theatrical and hysterical.¹⁶

In condemning the theatricality of the novel (or the “cheap reading” that produces any kind of critical consensus about what the “novel” might be), Shaw thus deploys the actual theatre against the reader, the visible theatricality of the stage against the invisible theatricality of the page.

In doing so, Shaw renders both private reading and public play-going as inherently material practices, fixed in their time and social contexts: he maintains a sense of “dramatic realism” not by aiming at the “full content” of a coherent *mimesis* but by emphasizing the ways in which that “fullness” is achieved through a self-conscious performative act on the part of both author and audience. As a result, the published Shaw texts absolutely forbid any stable interpretive framework: by deploying a series of decontextualizing paratexts—which include both those “novelistic” stage directions and his aggressive and disdainful prefaces—Shaw self-consciously dramatizes (or theatricalizes) the audience’s encounter(s) with his work.¹⁷

Literary Education: Reading Democracy in Misalliance

Shaw’s disgust with naïve readers has its basis in his rejection of institutionalized education. Witnessing, within his lifetime, the first widespread trumpeting of literacy as a kind of end in itself within all classes of a democratic populace, he strikes out at the static forms this ideal assumes within a tired and politically bankrupt educational paradigm. The political sentiment he expresses is hardly new, of course; Shaw is simply inverting the traditional assumption of reading’s “liberal” value, an assumption held by conservative regimes since the Enlightenment

¹⁶ Ibid.: 27.

¹⁷ Shaw also struck back against such readers in the content of the *Plays for Puritans*, most overtly in *The Devil’s Disciple*. The eponymous “hero” of that play defies the reader’s sympathetic identification, for his choice of martyrdom remains resolutely unmotivated, a rejection of all who wish to follow his decisions. The more complex forms of audience alienation produced by *Captain Brassbound’s Conversion* are discussed later in this chapter.

and the dawn of democratized reading.¹⁸ Reading on its own is not to be valued, since it leads often to thoughtless, imitative “theatricality.” There is a significant difference between the self-critical literacy Shaw valued and the “compulsory literacy” imposed by schooling. And thus Shaw’s reflections on the political values of literacy are intimately tied to the didactic models he offers throughout his work, which would culminate in his most overtly “instructive” parable, *Pygmalion*.

The education-narrative in *Pygmalion* has its forebears in many of Shaw’s plays: we can see antecedents for Eliza Doolittle in *Arms and the Man*’s Raina, in the Cleopatra of *Caesar and Cleopatra* (a role also conceived for Mrs. Patrick Campbell), in *Man and Superman*’s Ann Whitefield, even in the eponymous protagonist of *Major Barbara*, all of whom receive lessons delivered against the texture of a social norm. But Shaw’s most direct critique of institutional educational practice before the war can be found in the preface to *Misalliance*, published in 1914—coincidentally, the year *Pygmalion* was first performed in London. In this “Treatise on Parents and Children,” Shaw calls for a “Child’s Magna Charta,” seeking to emancipate the younger generation from the stupidities and deliberate cruelties of enforced education, and hoping to encourage the “pursuit of learning by the child instead of the pursuit of the child by Learning.”¹⁹ The piece is frankly polemical, rarely concerning itself with actual reading pedagogy and instead devoted to an assault on the hypocritical values that underlie an educational system more concerned with keeping children out of trouble than instilling them with a sense of intellectual responsibility. In this, Shaw anticipates Foucault: by representing the school as a kind of modern penitentiary, he suggests the ways in which the institution comes to

¹⁸ In this, Shaw displays something of his Fabian intellectual elitism: his was a brand of socialism that absolutely refused to venerate or romanticize the abilities of the working class. For Shaw, the equality of all men and women was a political imperative, a precondition for any achievements of a truly civilized social body, and not a metaphysical belief.

¹⁹ Shaw, *Misalliance*: 99.

legislate modes of being by using a constricted sense of reading in order to preclude the possibility for the child's self-realization.

Though the preface to *Misalliance* later obscures the issue of literacy due to its focus on related arguments about family and child-rearing, the potential of eclectic, undisciplined reading is placed squarely at the center of one of the play's many debates. In a quintessentially Shavian move, ideas about reading are bound on all sides by related problems of class, politics, and theatricality throughout the play. The play is set at the country-house of John Tarleton, a rising middle-class entrepreneur who has made his fortune selling underwear, and who remains devoted to the cause of democratized reading: he has reinvested a large amount of his earnings in the founding of "free libraries" for the education of the masses. Tarleton's own ideals have been derived from an extraordinarily broad appetite for the literature of "free thought," which he recommends at every turn: almost every one of his argumentative positions is buttressed by a commandment to read various authors. The ostensible pretext of the play—or at least the title—concerns the potential union of Tarleton's daughter with the idle, privileged son of Lord Summerhays, veteran of the Indian Civil Service and the play's required representative of the leisured classes and of British imperialism—or "government by bullies," as Shaw calls it in the preface.²⁰ The play's controversy is generated on every point at which Tarleton's and Summerhays's positions intersect, most notably on the issue of civil service and democratic education.

Upon first entering, Lord Summerhays is quick to praise Tarleton's philanthropic motives when he speaks with Tarleton's son: "He's a perfect whirlwind. Indefatigable at public work.

²⁰ Ibid.: 140.

Wonderful man, I think.”²¹ Later, however, he challenges Tarleton’s faith in these ventures with the direct evidence of his own experience in India. The ensuing debate forms the nexus of Shaw’s engagement with reading, politics, and the theatre, a debate whose ultimate outcome points not to the unified “thesis” of Shaw’s argument but rather to the uncertain, theatricalized positions occupied by author and reader:

TARLETON. Very true. Still, Democracy’s all right, you know. Read Mill. Read Jefferson.

LORD SUMMERHAYS. Yes. Democracy reads well; but it doesn’t act well, like some people’s plays. No, no, my friend Tarleton: to make Democracy work, you need an aristocratic democracy. To make Aristocracy work, you need a democratic aristocracy. You’ve got neither, and there’s an end of it.

TARLETON. Still, you know, the superman may come. The superman’s an idea. I believe in ideas. Read Whatshisname.

LORD SUMMERHAYS. Reading is a dangerous amusement, Tarleton. I wish I could persuade your free library people of that.

TARLETON. Why man, it’s the beginning of an education.

LORD SUMMERHAYS. On the contrary, it’s the end of it. How can you dare teach a man to read until you’ve taught him everything else first?²²

The debate follows Shaw’s formula: though highly critical of Lord Summerhays’s smug complacency, Shaw affords this opponent the more “realistic” position.²³ Lord Summerhays is a jaded Platonist, appalled by the threat of writing and other debased forms of *mimesis*: his hope for an “aristocratic democracy” or a “democratic aristocracy” echoes the *Republic*, which calls for a philosopher-king, as well as Shaw’s own *Major Barbara*, which resigns itself to social injustice until professors of Greek become arms manufacturers, or arms manufacturers become professors of Greek. Lord Summerhays, willfully seeing the world as it is, concludes: “You’ve got neither, and there’s an end of it.” Tarleton, on the other hand, pleads for a kind of

²¹ Ibid.: 153.

²² Ibid.: 169.

²³ Shaw’s generosity toward such figures is a prominent strategy in his other moderate critiques of the presumptive foundations of liberal philosophy, such as *Major Barbara* or *John Bull’s Other Island*. Though rejecting its cynical principles, Shaw found much to admire in the internal logic of conservative positions.

evolutionary teleology: he prophesies the advent of the “superman,” an individual free from the constraints of conventional social labels, who is neither aristocrat nor democrat, neither arms manufacturer nor professor of Greek, but something above and beyond all these positions. Tarleton’s “superman” is, essentially, Lord Summerhays’s “aristocratic democrat,” at least in terms of his social role. For all their ostensible differences, there is much upon which these two figures agree.

Naturally, their complementary positions lead their debate about reading to a provocative conclusion: reading is simultaneously the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end of all socially productive action and politically efficacious education. An ungenerous interpretation of Lord Summerhays’s argument would find in it hints of totalitarian logic: he seeks to foreclose the potential for any multiplicity of meaning by, essentially, teaching the reader what meaning to find before setting him loose in the text. His disagreement with Tarleton once again is founded upon practical realities, for Tarleton’s liberal sentiments remain ungrounded in any kind of physical situation: he speaks of “education,” but not of “teaching.” Lord Summerhays, however, does articulate his scenario: he pitches his argument at the Foucauldian power-dynamic of the classroom. If we consider reading as something “taught,” we must consequently conceive of it in terms of the relationship between teacher and student, between those with power and those without. This hierarchical scheme precludes any possibility of the individual’s ability to read between texts and determine unwritten values through a process that might be called—to borrow a phrase from William Archer’s description of Shaw’s own research practice—the “quaint juxtaposition” of opposing forces.²⁴ Individually, each of Tarleton’s injunctions seems

²⁴ The phrase appears in Archer’s comments on the genesis of *Widowers’ Houses*, published alongside the 1893 version of that play. Archer describes his first encounter with the young Shaw in the famed Reading Room of the British Museum, where Shaw remained hunched assiduously for weeks over two incongruous texts. Archer writes: “My curiosity was piqued by the odd conjunction of his subjects of research. Day after day for weeks he had before

disappointingly deterministic: read this author as simple proof of my current point, he seems to say. Meanwhile, Lord Summerhays's insistent second-person presumes that authority lies with both men—and between the two of them, they represent the ruling classes (the capitalist and the landed aristocrat)—but his own experiences in India have exhausted him, and he maintains both the self-satisfaction and the skepticism of a retiree throughout the play. His “you” includes an authoritarian “I,” though that “I” has grown weary of governing. But if we were to follow all of Tarleton's suggestions—to perform a kind of synoptic, “quaint juxtaposition” of these myriad texts (or authors)—then the results could not be so straightforward.

As is the case with the majority of debates Shaw dramatizes, his own position is not aligned with that either of the figures onstage. Rather, Shaw himself appears in Tarleton's final, curiously ambiguous injunction: “Read Whatshisname.” The reference is quite obvious: by “31 May 1909”—the oddly specific date on which *Misalliance* is set—Nietzsche's ideas were in common currency among the intellectual citizenry of Europe; likewise, Shaw's own *Man and Superman* had been in print for six years, and had been recently performed (in various versions) at the Royal Court Theatre. Of course, Tarleton's “Whatshisname” blurs the distinction between these two authors and their multiple texts. This would be a relatively innocent offense if we read Shaw as simply parroting Nietzsche, as many of his ignorant contemporaries did—but doing so obscures Shaw's potent revision of much of Nietzsche's ideas, not the least of which is Shaw's addition of a feminine genius to Nietzsche's famously misogynistic philosophy.

But the inter-textual ambiguity does not stop here: for Tarleton could just as easily be

him two books, which he studied alternately, if not simultaneously—Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (in French translation), and an orchestral score of *Tristan und Isolde*. I did not know then how exactly this quaint juxtaposition symbolized the main interests of his life.” To be sure, *this* “quaint juxtaposition”—Marx and Wagner—perfectly epitomizes the young Shaw, but I would also like to suggest that Archer's meaning could be broadened, that *any* juxtaposition of incongruous texts, performed entirely in the service of the thoughtful reader's unique program (which is to say, “quaint” in a more archaic, etymological sense), is an essential element of Shaw's method. See Shaw, *Widowers' Houses*: 37.

referring not to Shaw himself, but to Shaw's character Jack Tanner, the "hero" of *Man and Superman*, whose "Revolutionist's Handbook," printed alongside Shaw's play, outlines an anarchist's demand for the superman. For Tanner, the "superman" is an idea that predates Nietzsche, and it will outlast the philosopher's popularity. However, Tanner is absolutely unable to describe the figure he so desperately desires: "What kind of person is this Superman to be? You ask, not for a super-apple, but for an eatable apple; not for a superhorse, but for a horse of greater draught or velocity. Neither is it of any use to ask for a Superman: you must furnish a specification of the sort of man you want. Unfortunately you do not know what sort of man you want. Some sort of good-looking philosopher-athlete, with a handsome healthy woman for his mate, perhaps."²⁵ Tanner's prescription is intentionally silly, as his eugenic plan is, essentially, a plea against any conscious eugenic plan. Thus, he displaces the discussion into a bizarre metaphorical sphere, rendering the Superman simultaneously as a capitalist commodity and culinary delight. "No market demand in the world takes the form of exact technical specification of the article required. Excellent poultry and potatoes are produced to satisfy the demands of housewives who do not know the technical differences between a tuber and a chicken. They will tell you that the proof of the pudding is in the eating; and they are right."²⁶ We must make certain to attribute these statements to the fictional Jack Tanner, and not to the very real Bernard Shaw—or even to the fictional Bernard Shaw, or "G. B. S.," the media persona Shaw intentionally crafted in the 1890s and deployed convincingly throughout the rest of his career—for this distancing explains Tanner's inconsistent rhetoric. He deploys capitalist logic only to denounce capitalism, and relies on wisdom of housewives only to reject the institution of marriage. The paradox is intentional. The doctrine of the superman can belong only to

²⁵ Shaw, *Man and Superman*: 740.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 741.

“Whatshisname”: to an ambiguous Nietzsche-Shaw-Tanner-Tarleton, a position defined by certain contextualizing moves, not to any consistent logical base. “Whatshisname” is a theatrical role: it is fulfilled only with a simultaneous acknowledgement of the contingency of its own foundations. Tanner’s argumentative scaffolding is no more and no less solid than the theatrical set he appears upon, which can whisk us from London, to the Sierra Nevada, to Hell—and back.

This digression into Shaw’s inter-medial strategies in *Man and Superman*—to which I will return in a moment—reveals the fundamental impact of Tarleton’s command. His argument climaxes at this moment of potent ambiguity: by enjoining us to “read Whatshisname,” Tarleton undermines the strategies implicit within his earlier suggestions, all of which relied upon the authority of individuals rather than the texts they composed. This irony is highlighted by the pairing of the indeterminate “Whatshisname” with the idea of the superman, who possesses a godlike intentional power: the uncertainty of the superman’s abilities is reflected in the uncertainty of the author’s identity.

As a result, this “Whatshisname” acts as a deliberate meta-theatrical aside: Tarleton seems to acknowledge the ambiguous authority—Shaw himself—that may have prescribed his own position. In a very literal sense, Tarleton *does* “read Whatshisname”: he pronounces the words of the text that Shaw has composed. But the passage also calls into question the efficacy of this onstage reading, for Lord Summerhays too provides a meta-critical suggestion of Shaw’s presence. He uses a familiar metaphor, comparing political events to the theatre, invoking precisely the threat of “theatrical” politics and thoughtlessly imitative reading Shaw denounced in the preface to *Plays for Puritans*. But the intent of this comparison is somewhat unique: democracy, Lord Summerhays suggests, is ill-suited for the stage: it “reads well; but it doesn’t act well, like some people’s plays.” On one level, Lord Summerhays’s comment appears quite

straightforward: he means to say that democracy may be founded upon rational principles, and may possess an internal logic, but that this strict adherence to reason collapses when a democracy encounters the irrationality of the “real” world. But at the same time, Lord Summerhays seems to be endorsing a bizarrely anti-social form of democracy: his distinction between reading and acting, mapped onto the common distinction between the private sphere of the solitary reader and the public domain of the theatre, would suggest that democracy functions only when removed from the social sphere. This is an irreconcilable paradox—and its production is the final point of this interaction. By suggesting that this paradoxical democracy functions “like some people’s plays,” we are forced to question where *Misalliance* itself falls, according to Lord Summerhays’s distinction. The question, I would like to suggest, is impossible to answer: by comparing this problem to the problem of democracy-in-execution, *Misalliance* asks not whether we should read *or* act, but how it is possible to read *and* act.

The Paratext in Action: Books as Missiles in Man and Superman

Connecting *Misalliance* to Shaw’s intertextual and multimedia strategies in *Man and Superman* reveals the ways in which Shaw leverages his own publications to institute a new sort of literary education—one which, at times, eschews the act of reading altogether. Unlike other early publications, *Man and Superman* advertises itself not as a “play” but rather as “a comedy and a philosophy.” This move reorients the text not around medium (the book or the theatre) but rather around a collision of genres. Shaw dares his reader to distinguish the one from the other, and he does so in two ways. First, there is the structure of the play itself. It is easy enough to see the play’s third act (sometimes performed alone as “Don Juan in Hell”) as the “philosophy,” and the surrounding three acts as the “comedy”: after all, the third act does little to motivate the “plot” of

the play, and consists primarily of an extended, unresolved philosophic debate between Don Juan and the Devil, which even eschews the temporal limitations of stage representation. (“Let us go on for another hour if you like,” the Devil suggests to Don Juan: they—along with Shaw—refuse to pander to the audience’s waning attention spans in this five-hour play.) On another level, however, the published version of the text offers a separate possibility: the “comedy” is the play itself in its entirety, and the “philosophy” is confined to Jack Tanner’s “Revolutionist’s Handbook”—which features onstage in the first scene and is appended, in its entirety, at the end of the published text of *Man and Superman*. This suggestion would neatly bifurcate Shaw’s audience(s): the “comedy” is for the play-goer, the “philosophy” for the reader, who—not bound to his seat like a polite theatre patron—may or may not choose to partake. The ambiguity of medium produces these irreconcilable distinctions in genre, all of which work to isolate and redefine the reactions of a potential audience.

I have already suggested the ways in which the “Revolutionist’s Handbook” is built upon contingent foundations that complicate notions of theatricality and realism in political action. By publishing this piece alongside the text of *Man and Superman*, Shaw thus performs two critical moves: on one hand, he establishes the legitimacy of his character Jack Tanner, whose “genius” and revolutionary aspirations are proved by the reality of the document provided in Shaw’s published volume; on the other hand, he allows the compromised “reality” of the stage to infiltrate the printed page, whose claims to authority are less critically interrogated. The key to understanding this simultaneous effort lies in the alternate paratext associated with *Man and Superman*: the “Epistle Dedicatory” directed to Arthur Bingham Walkley, London’s foremost dramatic critic at the turn of the twentieth century, who had remained deeply skeptical of Shaw’s experiments in genre and form.

Unlike Shaw's earlier volumes, the published version of *Man and Superman* does not contain a preface directed toward a general reader; rather, what we discover here is a literal "pretext" for the play, an open letter to Walkley that declares the play to be written at Walkley's request and according to Walkley's suggestions. "Here is your play!" Shaw proclaims.²⁷ With a winking irony, Shaw depicts Walkley and himself as sympathetic siblings who shared a simultaneous artistic-critical genesis: "It is hardly fifteen years since, as twin pioneers of the New Journalism at that time, we two, cradled in the same new sheets, began an epoch in the criticism of the theatre and the opera house by making it the pretext for a propaganda of our own views of life. So you cannot plead ignorance of the character of the force you set in motion."²⁸ For the outside reader, simply "overhearing" this correspondence between Shaw and Walkley, the gesture seems to legitimize Shaw's efforts: *Man and Superman* thus leeches Walkley's authority, founding itself upon the voice of one of London's foremost theatrical critics. At the same time, however, the move seems to defeat the play's own hypothesis: this is not the work of the individual artistic genius, but rather the opposite; it is the product of a critical dialogue between two complementary but opposing agencies (Shaw and Walkley), and represents anything but the triumph of the individual will that it seems everywhere to advertise.

Actually, this complementary work continues the telescoping effect produced both within and without the play. The plot of the play represents a battle between Tanner and Ann Whitefield, in which we are led to ask whether either individual can truly have control over the other. With the publication of the "Revolutionist's Handbook," this process continues: as "proof" of Tanner's genius the Handbook fails, simply because we know it to be a product of the puppet-master Shaw. And thus, we discover in this "Epistle Dedicatory" that Shaw is no master after all:

²⁷ Ibid.: 493.

²⁸ Ibid.

he is simply acting under the direction of Walkley. This published text gives us three pairs of individuals, each of which share the simultaneous titles of “man and superman”: Ann and Tanner; Tanner and Shaw; Shaw and Walkley.²⁹ The interrelations between the multiple texts of *Man and Superman* thus challenges the normative relationship between text and pretext, between the will of the individual and the forces that would seek to define him or her.

As in the preface to the *Plays for Puritans*, Shaw uses his open letter to Walkley in order to condemn an uncritical reading practice. His major strategy is to assert continually the intertextual value of his work: the proper means of understanding *Man and Superman* is to perform that “quaint juxtaposition” that crosses between texts and media. Though his own efforts may have been incited by Walkley, Shaw tells us, the actual composition of the play was the result of an extraordinary metacritical effort, informed not only by Shaw’s reading of Mozart and Nietzsche (the two most obvious forebears for the play), but by literally dozens of other authors and texts. The suggestion is quite obvious: in order to understand Shaw, we must read those texts alongside him, or else view *Man and Superman* as Shaw’s critical “reading” of his literary forefathers, and not as any kind of directly representational work of individual artistic integrity. But through an extraordinary surplus of allusion, Shaw renders certain sections of his letter to Walkley almost entirely illegible. Take, for example, this sentence:

Goethe’s Faust and Mozart’s Don Juan were the last words of the XVIII century on the subject; and by the time the polite critics of the XIX century, ignoring William Blake as superficially as the XVIII had ignored Hogarth or the XVII Bunyan, had got past the Dickens-Macaulay Dumas-Guizot stage and the Stendhal-Meredith-Turgeneff stage, and were confronted with philosophic fiction by such pens as Ibsen’s and Tolstoy’s, Don Juan had changed his sex and become Doña Juana, breaking out of the Doll’s House and asserting herself as an

²⁹ Shaw was never wholly above puns; after all, in *Fanny’s First Play*, Shaw’s later satire of theatrical production and criticism, Walkley himself becomes the critic “Trotter.” Thus we can hardly imagine it’s a coincidence that “Tanner” literally contains “Ann”: even at the level of typography and spelling, we witness this telescoping combat for control.

individual instead of a mere item in a moral pageant.³⁰

Though perhaps Shaw's general thrust is clear enough to a few, much of the real content of such statements is entirely opaque for most lay readers—which is why Shaw visibly constructs his audience as Walkley, not as the lay reader. The only way to read this “properly” is to read it through Shaw's and Walkley's eyes, to perform the “quaint juxtaposition” suggested in those strings of hyphenated “stages” of authorial-aesthetic-political development. The deep irony, of course, in this suggestion, for Walkley and Shaw—in spite of their joint development in the last decades of the nineteenth century and their shared pool of aesthetic resources—differed considerably in their reading of this literary history.

There is another option. If a truly sympathetic reading is impossible, Shaw is certain to present an alternative, available expressly for those who need most to resist the allure of the perfectly mimetic delusion. Once again condemning the homogenization of reading as a result of compulsory education, Shaw writes:

And since what we call education and culture is for the most part nothing but the substitution of reading for experience, of literature for life, of the obsolete fictitious for the contemporary real, education, as you no doubt observed at Oxford, destroys, by supplantation, every mind that is not strong enough to see through the imposture and to use the great Masters of Arts as what they really are and no more: that is, patentees of highly questionable methods of thinking, and manufacturers of highly questionable, and for the majority but half valid representations of life. The schoolboy who uses his Homer to throw at his fellow's head makes perhaps the safest and most rational use of him; and I observe with reassurance that you occasionally do the same, in your prime, with your Aristotle.³¹

Shaw refers to Walkley's characteristic critical proclivity, that desire to maintain the arbitrary boundaries of literature by legislating what is, and what is not, a “play”: Walkley was a strict adherent of formalist criticism, and—while he was often generous toward new ideas—he was

³⁰ Ibid.: 500.

³¹ Ibid.: 510–11.

exacting and conservative in his expectations regarding dramaturgical structure. Shaw suggests that Walkley thus made intermittent use of Aristotle's *Poetics*, which functions both descriptively and prescriptively: in detailing what the great tragedies were, Aristotle suggests what later drama should be. The passage quoted above might be a snide attack on Walkley's methodology, since Shaw clearly had no use for such artistic prescriptions, either classical (Aristotelian) or modern (the Scribean "well-made" play). The comparison is hardly flattering: Walkley's criticism—including his criticism of Shaw—is likened to an unruly boy bludgeoning another.

But Shaw's qualified terminology mitigates this interpretation. This use of text as a weapon is not only the "safest" use—an idea the revolutionary Shaw might justifiably associate with moral conventionality—but it is also the "most rational." The schoolboy's action might be symbolic of a kind of political defiance, a rejection of the institutionalized curriculum. But in another, more literal sense, the schoolboy is doing exactly what Shaw prescribes: he is using his Homer as "what it really is and no more"—that is, as a weighty material object, ideally suited for inflicting blunt force trauma.³² This use of the material object takes into account the socio-historical circumstances of the book's situation: it lies on the desk of a classroom-penitentiary in a late nineteenth century schoolhouse, where "compulsory literacy" has produced a sense of desperate suffering and internecine strife amongst its inmates. It also, of course, takes into account the more simple physical circumstances that define this volume: Homer's epic poem, printed in illegible characters for an audience only barely equipped with the ability to read archaic Greek, is nevertheless presented on hundreds of pages bound by a hard cover, giving the

³² We might continue to extrapolate, here: according to this logic, the flimsy pamphlets on which revolutionary literature is usually printed are of limited utility, whereas a three-volume romantic novel might offer more potential. Thus, we gain new insight into Shaw's publishing practice: the heft of his works, padded out with their extended prefaces, makes them ideal clubs.

object the heft required to function in this way. This is “realism” of a uniquely emphatic sort: by reducing the book to its weight and density, Shaw suggests that the use of literature is not confined to reading—and that, moreover, a truly revolutionary “reading” puts the text more directly into action.

It is, therefore, no coincidence that the image reappears within the play. Early in *Man and Superman*, the play’s dominant conflict is generated out of a debate between the stodgy Roebuck Ramsden and the “revolutionary” Tanner, both of whom are entrusted with the proper education of Ann Whitefield after the death of her father. Ramsden formulates his rejection of Tanner’s suitability on the grounds of that “Revolutionist’s Handbook,” which he refuses to read. Instead, the “novelistic” stage direction tells us: “*He throws the book into the waste paper basket with such vehemence that Tanner recoils under the impression that it is being thrown at his head.*”³³ Ironically, this act of defiance is what actually brings Ramsden and Tanner together, for Tanner immediately declares: “You have no more manners than I have myself.” For much of the subsequent scene, they act in conjunction with one another, while the physical object of Tanner’s book continues to circulate onstage, defining the relationships between all these resistant readers. Rescuing the text from its fate in the waste paper basket, Ann herself—the focus of this educational debate—is able to use the physical presence of the book to assert her own will over the two men. Holding the book closed before her, she manipulates both by suspending herself at the moment of choice: to read or not to read?

In the first act of *Man and Superman*, Shaw thus dramatizes his solution to the problems of “illiteracy” and education. Ramsden and Tanner become symbols for the conflicted agendas of compulsory schooling: elected as Anne’s joint guardians, they literally become the stewards for her intellectual development. As the paradigmatic resistant reader, Ann makes potent use not

³³ Shaw, *Man and Superman*: 545.

only of the book's contents, but also of the material circumstances that define her reading. She fulfills the "revolutionary" text without reading it by setting the volume on the desk as she goes "off-book," and by making herself instrumental to the search for Tanner's Superman over the course of the subsequent play. Moreover, she becomes a potential reader with a real audience, a reader whose interaction with the text is defined by her relationship to the two men who witness her choices.

She becomes, in other words, an actor. In the production of this kind of "dramatic realism" and literary education, Shaw reverses assumptions of the proper relationship between a sense of literary authority and the democratic responsibilities of readership; he ironizes the problems of performance by leaving the text victim to individuals who can acknowledge the difference between plays that "read well" and those that "act well"; and, finally, he uses his own publication strategies—including the assertion of those essential paratexts—to reflect on the book as a material commodity, circulating within the culture and performing work regardless of its actual legibility. As Tanner "recoils violently" after Ramsden's assault, we are led to ask: how much more dangerous would this action have become, had Tanner's pamphlet included Shaw's distended play as its own paratext? Shaw's authorial gestures—the appending of "novelistic" directions and explanatory essays—thus become self-defeating performative acts: they very literally grant greater weight to a choice to articulate an individual will against the dictates of "Whatshisname."

Dignity and Despotism: The Autonomy of the Actor and the Discovery of Eliza

My dear Mr. Shaw,

The idea is perfectly delightful. I wish you could see your way to doing it for me.

Please think it out and let me know.

In the meantime accept my warm thanks for your kind thought of me.

I will go through the book carefully—putting myself in entire sympathy with your idea.

Yours sincerely,

Beatrice Stella Campbell

- Letter, Mrs. Patrick Campbell to George Bernard Shaw, 16 September 1901³⁴

Though they had known one another since Campbell's notorious debut in Arthur Wing Pinero's *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* in 1893, Shaw's regular correspondence with Mrs. Patrick Campbell did not begin until the early years of the twentieth century. In 1897, Shaw conceived a play for Campbell and the heroic actor Johnston Forbes-Robertson, who had recently appeared together at the Lyceum Theatre during the absence of that other pair of leading lights, Henry Irving and Ellen Terry. Shaw's play was titled *Caesar and Cleopatra*, and it concerned the education of the willful young Egyptian queen at the hands of the knowing and masterful Roman conqueror. But though the play was written—and subsequently published—a fully realized production struggled to get off the ground. And so we discover, in 1901, that Shaw sent a volume of the *Plays for Puritans* (containing, of course, *Caesar and Cleopatra*) to Campbell, hoping again to recommend the play. According to this early note (the first by Campbell in their published letters), Campbell received the idea with “entire sympathy.” However, the production still failed to coalesce; instead, it was Shaw and Campbell's correspondence that would blossom over the subsequent decade. Thus, in 1914—once their collaboration on *Pygmalion* had finally brought Shaw and Campbell together on a successful play—Shaw once more offered Campbell a volume of the *Plays for Puritans*, this time with a sardonic dedication: “To silly Stella who threw

³⁴ Shaw, *Bernard Shaw and Mrs. Patrick Campbell*: 4.

Caesar and Cleopatra into the waste paper basket from G. Bernard Shaw.”³⁵

Between the “idea” and its realization lies the seemingly impossible process of theatrical production. According to the playful inscription offered in that copy of the *Plays for Puritans*, Shaw’s failure to mount *Caesar and Cleopatra* with Campbell and Forbes-Robertson is attributed precisely to the sort of resistance Shaw himself had dramatized in *Man and Superman*, and Campbell’s letter of 1901 would seem to confirm the subtle transference of agency this attribution would imply. It is Shaw’s “idea,” but Campbell hopes he will “do it for her”; she holds the book, though she promises “entire sympathy.” The actual text of *Caesar and Cleopatra* thus becomes simply a mediating object in a battle of two wills—that of the author and that of the actor—though each extends “sympathy” and “ideas” in the opposite direction. Under any system in which the actor holds a rival authority—by virtue of “star power,” personal charisma, or contractual agreement—the text will be rendered victim. It is no coincidence, therefore, that such struggles are the principal focus not only of *Caesar and Cleopatra* (whose plot turns around the burning of the library at Alexandria) but also of *Pygmalion*.

In reality, of course, the struggle between author and actor was peripheral to the real causes of Shaw’s failure to stage his plays, particularly in the late 1890s. Though a series of successful seasons at the Royal Court Theatre from 1904 to 1907, Shaw—working in collaboration with Harley Granville-Barker and J. E. Vedrenne—would finally gain national recognition as a playwright of worth and merit; before this, however, he was largely known only as a famously truculent dramatic critic and impassioned socialist crusader. His early plays—caught in a web of censorship and rendered commercially unviable—received few (if any)

³⁵ Ibid. There is some uncertainty over the nature of the “idea” in these early letters, but Alan Dent has offered strong evidence that it refers to a possible production of *Caesar and Cleopatra*. At any rate, the “book” is certainly Shaw’s *Three Plays for Puritans*, which had just been published that year. This confusion may actually highlight a necessary distinction between the “idea” and the physical “book,” which my argument in the previous section is intended to interrogate.

performances, usually through allegedly “private” endeavors like J. T. Grein’s Independent Theatre Society, which evaded the terms of the Lord Chamberlain’s censorship to present a landmark London performance of Ibsen’s *Ghosts* (translated by William Archer) in 1891. Meanwhile, Shaw developed an intimate understanding of theatrical business and the affairs of the great London playhouses, especially Henry Irving’s Lyceum Theatre—which, to Bram Stoker’s intense frustration, remained only barely solvent even as it became a universally recognized beacon of London culture. Throughout his tenure at *The Saturday Review* in the last years of the century, Shaw proved himself a unique voice in dramatic criticism, willing to assess the circumstances of production along with the quality and the ideas of the play. Such interests are exhibited in the thoughtful and multifaceted level of critique Shaw displayed in reviews like that of Irving’s *King Arthur*, discussed in the previous chapter.

To a large degree, Shaw’s career was therefore bound not by the limited “sympathies” of the actor, but by the material realities of the London theatrical “world” at this late-Victorian moment. Just as his publishing career engaged simultaneously with growth of “compulsory literacy” and the paradoxical realities of democratized reading and “theatrical” politics at the turn of the century, Shaw’s career on the stage marks a transitional moment in the history of London theatre, as the actor-manager system (best represented by Irving’s Lyceum) was gradually replaced by the modern arrangement of the theatrical director and producing partners. Shaw himself was instrumental in this transition: his work with Granville-Barker and Vedrenne at the Court in the first decade of the twentieth century saw all three men working in several—but notably distinct—capacities; but while Shaw functioned principally as the author of the plays, he also made himself a constant presence backstage and during rehearsal, working alongside the similarly capable Granville-Barker (who alternated between acting, directing, and writing his

own plays) to establish a coherent vision for the production and realization of his “ideas.” Though Shaw’s seasons at the Court would cease in 1907, this effort would actually culminate in the 1914 debut of *Pygmalion*—a performance allegedly produced within the actor-manager system and led by Herbert Beerbohm Tree as Henry Higgins, but also one actively directed and controlled behind the scenes by Shaw himself.

In fact, it was due to Shaw’s own careful positioning of the problem that he was able to isolate attention upon the relationship between the actor and the dramatic author rather than the parallel dilemmas of censorship, publication, and economic control. In 1895, Shaw contributed an essential preface to William Archer’s review of the previous year’s theatrical work in London, summing up the state of the theatre in the year of Irving’s triumph: “The system of actor-manager and backer is practically supreme in London... The strongest fascination at a theatre is the fascination of the actor or actress, not of the author.”³⁶ At the same time, it is impossible to state simply that Shaw was opposed to the dominance of the actor-manager, or that he was entirely revolted by the star-system and the actor’s unique charms. To be sure, Shaw raised highly visible objections to Sir Henry Irving and his Lyceum productions throughout his criticism of the 1890s, but Shaw’s projected dislike for Irving was more rhetorical than personal; Shaw remained willing to work with Irving even in spite of the “scandal” surrounding Shaw’s *Man of Destiny* in 1897, which Irving had agreed to stage at the Lyceum with Ellen Terry before reneging on the deal.

Shaw’s tumultuous relationship with Irving has undergone a series of revisions and reassessments over the past century, producing more provocative uncertainty about both men’s

³⁶ Shaw, “Preface to *The Theatrical ‘World’ of 1894*”: 44–45.

positions than genuine clarity.³⁷ It was, unsurprisingly, Edward Gordon Craig who offered the dominant version of the story, casting Shaw as the controlling and dictatorial author who doomed Irving's ephemeral "art of acting," which all but disappeared from the stage in the decades following Irving's death. Very literally resurrecting Irving's ghost in the final chapter of his 1930 memoir, Craig has the spectral Irving mournfully lament Shaw's effect on a respect for the arts of performance against the demands of the dramatic text: "As I see it now... that man has done a very great harm to my beloved profession. Among other things, he has taught dramatic critics to hold the Theatre in contempt."³⁸ In actuality, however, Shaw recognized Irving's inimitable talents; in his response to Craig's "idolatrous" memoir, he offers a startling account of Irving's genius:

[Irving] was utterly unlike anyone else: he could give importance and a noble melancholy to any sort of drivel that was put into his mouth; and it was this melancholy, bound up with an impish humour, which forced the spectator to single him out as a leading figure with an inevitability that I never saw again in any other actor until it rose from Irving's grave in the person of a nameless cinema actor who afterwards became famous as Charlie Chaplin. Here, I felt, is something that leaves the old stage and its superstitions and staleness completely behind, and inaugurates a new epoch in the theatre.³⁹

Shaw's understanding of Irving's ghost—which, unlike the enervating vampiric Count of Stoker's novel, triumphs over textual "drivel" and proves itself capable of shifting media and identity in a form as nameless as the fictionalized Shaw (or "Whatshisname") himself—actually aims at preserving that invisible and ephemeral art, using the paradox of the actor (and its transhistorical and multimedia aspirations) to emphasize the necessary backstage work of rehearsal and collaboration.

³⁷ For three significant moments in this long critical history, see Craig, *Henry Irving* (1930); Worthen, *The Idea of the Actor* (1984); and Conolly, "The Matter with Irving" (2008).

³⁸ Craig, *Henry Irving*: 243

³⁹ Shaw, "Preface" to *Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw*: xx.

This invisible effort is the central focus of an instructive essay Shaw published in 1904, entitled “How to Make Plays Readable.” The piece begins with an acknowledgment of the “economic conditions of the theatrical enterprise”: essentially, Shaw suggests, the material demands of the theatre make it much easier for the playwright to express himself in print. He asks frankly whether such playwrights must “relapse into novel writing”—simultaneously suggesting that the novel is the normative medium for the writer-reader interaction, and that writing novels would be a step backwards for the philosophic playwright.⁴⁰ He therefore chastises playwrights “who deliberately make their plays unreadable by flinging repulsive stage technicalities in the face of the public, and omitting from their descriptions even that simplest common decency of literature, the definite article.”⁴¹ The reason for this move, however, is that it sets the stage for his treatment of the actor, whose dignity the playwright really ought to respect: “[The actor’s] work is so peculiar and important; its delicacy depends so much on the extent to which a play can be made real to him and the technical conditions reduced to unnoticed matters of habit; above all, it is so necessary to his self-respect that the obligation he is under to make himself a means to the author’s end should not be made an excuse for disregarding his dignity as a man, that an author can hardly be too careful to cherish the actor’s illusion and respect his right to be approached as a professional man and not merely ordered to do this or that without knowing why.”⁴² Shaw understands the extent to which the play-text is naturally seen as a set of commandments for an actor: as a result, it must be written deliberately to avoid such suggestions, with the actor’s sensibilities in perfect focus. And so the essay finally turns on a moment of perfect communion between author and actor: “It is true that most authors consider

⁴⁰ For Shaw, it literally would have been. After producing five novels in his twenties and early thirties, he abandoned the form for the rest of his career.

⁴¹ Shaw, “How to Make Plays Readable”: 92.

⁴² *Ibid.*: 93.

themselves born actors, and that most actors consider themselves born authors; but these weaknesses should be confessed under seal of rehearsal, not proclaimed to a derisive world.”⁴³

There is something simultaneously indecent and sacred about this notion of the closed space of theatrical rehearsal, where the respective agencies of author and actor are merged and exchanged: what Shaw essentially articulates is a desire for such collaborative creative processes to rise to the forefront of the reader’s consciousness, even while they remain hidden from view.

Throughout much of his critical writing, Shaw expressed deep admiration for collaborative theatrical enterprises empowered by a communally-held investment in a social-aesthetic ideal. He was an enthusiastic fan of the Wagner festival at Bayreuth, and his call for an “Ibsen Theatre” in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* emphasized the potentials of repertory, allowing an audience to appreciate the plays’ own inter-textual links as well as the unique contributions made by a “standardized” company of actors and producers.⁴⁴ In early decades of the twentieth century, he invested much energy in the promotion of a National Theatre, to be ranked alongside similar monuments to the arts, like the British Museum or the National Gallery. Shaw’s vision of the National Theatre was not bound to the production of specific plays, or of specific authors; nevertheless, through a public endowment, the National Theatre would be free to indulge in the most challenging sorts of aesthetic collaboration, free from the oversight of any single investor. In his lifetime, the closest Shaw came to realizing his ideal of theatrical collaboration was the Royal Court Theatre of Harley Granville-Barker and J. E. Vedrenne.

Launched in 1904—when Shaw was still regarded as a brilliant critic but utterly failed playwright—the Court would become, essentially, the “Shaw Theatre” over the next three years,

⁴³ Ibid.: 94.

⁴⁴ Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*: 185.

with 701 of its 988 performances dedicated to Shaw's plays.⁴⁵ Throughout his early career, Shaw had attempted to write plays "around" a consistent set of actors and actresses, but his plans often met with failure.⁴⁶ His years with the Court Theatre were the first in which he was able to rely on a consistent ensemble in such productions, and enabled him to compose and stage works like *John Bull's Other Island* and *Major Barbara*—plays which demanded an accomplished ensemble rather than a single "star" performer.⁴⁷ The Court was also the place where Shaw's abilities as a director were developed and codified. Though Granville-Barker was often the nominal head of the productions, Shaw's input was felt at most rehearsals, and it was likely that he first learned the principles of directing at the Court—all of the commandments he would lay down in a set of "Rules for Directors" some forty years later, in an essay composed shortly before his death and quoted at the head of this chapter.

The most important "rule" he learned was to hold a profound respect for the specific capabilities of individual actors—which meant learning how to communicate his desires to different actors, each of whom demanded a separate sort of treatment. Numerous Court actors, including Forbes-Robertson, Lillah McCarthy, Sybil Thorndike and Lewis Casson would later remark upon Shaw's tact and generosity.⁴⁸ In fact, Shaw made a habit of treating his actors unequally: he not only recognized that each actor required different sorts of critique and needed

⁴⁵ McDonald, "Shaw and the Court Theatre": 261.

⁴⁶ Such failures were punctuated by the disintegration of his romantic relationships with key actresses, particularly Florence Farr and Janet Achurch. It would be easy to suggest a causal link here, but impossible to determine in which direction such a link functioned. At any rate, these failures indicate the extent to which such actresses were intractable to Shaw's social-aesthetic "plans."

⁴⁷ *John Bull's Other Island* was originally written for an entirely different theatrical enterprise: the movement for an Irish nationalist theatre headed by W.B. Yeats at the Abbey. Needless to say, Shaw's deeply cynical, "realistic" ironizing was hardly compatible with the more earnestly romantic goals of the Irish nationalists. But it is no coincidence that the play found its home at the Court, where a common ideal of collaboration (if not a universally-held political-aesthetic ideology) could enable its production.

⁴⁸ See Dukore, *Shaw's Theater*: 236, n. 33.

to be coached along different lines, but he also realized that the appearance of any uniform, pedantic aspect in his directing would be totally destructive to the collaborative atmosphere. This included an absolute policy against forcing his actors to repeat problematic moments: “A director who says ‘We must go over and over this again until we get it right’ is not directing; he is schoolmastering, which is the worst thing he can do. Repetitions on the spot do not improve: they deteriorate every time.”⁴⁹ In that fear of “schoolmastering,” Shaw reveals that his work with actors was, in a sense, a natural remedy to his anxieties about the process of education: by putting aside pedantry and compulsion, the ideal relationship between director and actor fosters a sense of mutual commitment and uniquely personal discovery.

In fact, Shaw’s emphasis on this specific point is the key to his entire directorial philosophy. Most importantly, forbidding repetition would force his actors to regard their performances as uninterrupted acts of sustained effort, building consistency into their portrayals of their characters. But it would also necessarily limit the involvement of the director in the rehearsal process, thereby investing actors with a sense of responsibility for the creation of the role. This is a point on which he differed from Granville-Barker, who was known for forcing his actors through such repetitive exercises. In a letter of 1906 concerning a rehearsal of Shaw’s *Captain Brassbound’s Conversion* which Granville-Barker was running, Shaw reminded the other man: “Go straight through and dont let them stop for anything. In any case, the policy of sticking at it until we get it is a vulgar folly. Let them take their failure and the same of it home and they will think about it and pull it off next time.”⁵⁰ Shaw’s investment of faith in his actors—as well as faith in this invisible work outside of rehearsals—reveals his dedication to theatrical process. For Shaw, the work of the director must have been the work of willful self-censorship,

⁴⁹ Shaw, “Rules for Directors”: 283.

⁵⁰ Qtd. in McDonald, “Shaw and the Court Theatre”: 274.

for “there is no effective check on the despotism of the director except his own conscience.”⁵¹

When directing his own plays, Shaw’s conscience limited his despotism to a very specific area: elocution. Though he had a strong sense of the emotional undercurrent of the plays, he often let his actors choose how to achieve the effects he desired. The distinction between his use of descriptive affect in his texts and his disdain for prescriptive direction in rehearsal is made most clearly in that essay of 1904, “How to Make Plays Readable”:

Let me give an example of a stage direction of my own which has been rebuked as a silly joke by people who do not understand the real relations of author and actor. It runs thus: “*So-and-So’s complexion fades into stone-grey; and all movement and expression desert his eyes.*” This is the sort of stage direction an actor really wants. Of course, he can no more actually change his complexion to stone-grey than Mr Forbes-Robertson can actually die after saying, “The rest is silence.” But he can produce the impression suggested by the direction perfectly. *How* he produces it is his business, not mine. This distinction is important, because, if I wrote such a stage direction as “*turns his back to the audience and furtively dabs vaseline on his eyelashes,*” instead of “*his eyes glisten with tears,*” I should be guilty of an outrage on both actor and reader.⁵²

Thus, in directing, he was notably reticent regarding most of the mechanical means of an actor’s expression—except when it came to his voice. Bernard Dukore’s survey of Shaw’s directing notebooks reveal dozens of notes about pronunciation and emphasis, some of which have survived in the stage directions of his printed plays. At times, Shaw would use musical directions, describing the tempo and volume he desired; in a few cases, he went as far as to write out a musical staff to describe rising or descending tones.⁵³ Most often, he would note lost or muffled words, or his actors’ failure to enunciate cleanly between words.

And so it is no wonder that mechanical exercises in elocution became Shaw’s primary (and perhaps only) requirement for an actor’s qualification to appear onstage. Shaw advocated

⁵¹ Shaw, “Rules for Directors”: 285.

⁵² Shaw, “How to Make Plays Readable”: 94.

⁵³ Dukore, *Shaw’s Theatre*: 77.

what he called an “athletic articulation,” in which an actor must be capable of a “staccato alphabet so staccatisimo that every consonant will put out a candle at the back of the gallery. Not until her tongue and lips are like a pianist’s fingers should she begin to dare think of speaking to an audience.”⁵⁴ Shaw’s directing toolbox was notably eclectic: without a form or system—and working in a tradition that left the responsibilities of the “director” crucially undefined—he often responded point-by-point to specific actors’ abilities and failures, which makes his consistency in treating matters of elocution particularly notable. In elocution alone did Shaw exhibit any interest in activating the detached, mechanistic ideals of Diderot’s paradox: the use of speech thus became a battle for “control” both within the actor’s body and between the actor and director; meanwhile, the rest of the actor’s performance is developed along lines that are uniquely suited to her own talents and personal inclinations.

In the 1941 edition of *Pygmalion*—whose text had been revised for the 1938 film—Shaw adds a very brief scene of Eliza’s phonetic training by Higgins. Bernard Dukore notes the way that this scene coincides nicely with exercises Shaw had prescribed decades earlier for Janet Achurch, who had acted in many of his early plays.⁵⁵ *Pygmalion* thus displays the consistency of Shaw’s techniques over a period of fifty years, in spite of the extraordinary revolutions—including the development of modern directorial attitudes and the advent of cinema—that transformed the English theatrical landscape during this period. But the ambiguous, liminal status of this scene—too brief to justify representation in the theatre, suited instead for cinematic montage, and bookended by narrative asides directed explicitly toward the curiosity of a closet reader—also brings home many of Shaw’s accompanying directorial imperatives. Higgins gives Eliza explicit directions about pronunciation, describing the placement of the tongue and teeth in

⁵⁴ Qtd. in Dukore, *Shaw’s Theatre*: 49.

⁵⁵ Dukore, *Shaw’s Theatre*: 50.

the phrase “a cup of tea”; she enunciates exactly once—“By Jupiter, she’s done it at the first shot,” Higgins exclaims—and then Higgins sends her off to practice alone (or with Mrs. Pearce), instead of insisting upon the repetition of that perfection.⁵⁶ Specific direction is always both narrowly focused and supported by a faith in the actor’s independent work.

It is, therefore, certain that these ideals were at the forefront of Shaw’s mind from the moment *Pygmalion* was first conceived, through its composition and rehearsal, and finally into its successful production and first publication. Far from being a commercial outlier—the “potboiler” positioned between Shaw’s development of true “discussion drama” with *Getting Married* and *Misalliance* and his perfection of that form in *Heartbreak House*, the pandering nineteenth-century “romance” that catered to its audience’s desire to escape from the harsh realities of the war years—*Pygmalion* represents the culmination of a concurrent narrative, which joins Shaw’s sensibilities about theatrical production to his awareness of the difficulty of reception and the efficacy of the “education” his audiences received from his work. This narrative explains the explicit choices Shaw made in conceiving and casting *Pygmalion*: from his “discovery” of Eliza Doolittle in Mrs. Patrick Campbell to his conflict and compromise in the embodiment of Higgins by Herbert Beerbohm Tree, the last great actor-manager in the tradition of Henry Irving.

Shaw first became aware of Campbell’s talents when she starred in the highly successful debut of Pinero’s *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* in 1893. The play itself was a conventional “fallen woman” drama of the time, but Shaw (along with much of London) was immediately enamored of Campbell’s performance. When Pinero then debuted *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith*—the essentials of the plot can be discerned from the title—in 1895, Campbell again appeared in the

⁵⁶ See Shaw, *Pygmalion*: 717–19.

starring role. Shaw held nothing back in his commentary: “In the case of *The Notorious Mrs Ebbsmith*, the play is bad. But one of its defects: to wit, the unreality of the chief female character, who is fully as artificial as Mrs Tanqueray herself, has the lucky effect of setting Mrs Patrick Campbell free to do as she pleases in it, the result being an irresistible projection of that lady’s personal genius, a projection which sweeps the play aside and imperiously becomes the play itself.”⁵⁷ Shaw’s rhapsody over Campbell’s acting is both ecstatic and brief, for the review quickly puts her “out of the question” in order to confront Pinero’s work instead. But before Shaw does this, he suggests that the intensity of Campbell’s acting suggests an enigmatic genius working “underneath” her physical presence. “Clearly there must be a great tragedy somewhere in the immediate neighborhood;” he writes, “and most of my colleagues will no doubt tell us that this imaginary masterpiece is Mr Pinero’s *Notorious Mrs Ebbsmith*.” Though Shaw disagrees with this opinion, the figurative language here is crucial: Shaw imagines the dramatic text as ideally juxtaposed (either beneath or “in the immediate neighborhood”) to the actor’s performance. They are separate but complementary, and the one ought to give hints of the other, though their exact relationship remains undefined.

Two years later, in 1897, Shaw first conceived of Eliza Doolittle while beginning to develop *Caesar and Cleopatra* for Johnston Forbes-Robertson and Campbell. Forbes-Robertson was Shaw’s ideal of the “heroic actor,” the modern inheritor to the tradition of stagey bombast that Shaw associated with the great mid-century talents of his youth, especially Barry Sullivan.⁵⁸ When *Caesar and Cleopatra* was finally produced by Forbes-Robertson 1906, Shaw followed it with an article detailing the actor’s unique capacities: “I wrote *Caesar and Cleopatra* for Forbes Robertson because he is the classic actor of our day, and had a right to require such a service

⁵⁷ Shaw, “Mr Pinero’s New Play”: 61.

⁵⁸ See Meisel, *Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Theatre*: 102.

from me. He stands completely aloof in simplicity, dignity, grace, and musical speech...”⁵⁹ In describing the necessity for such a figure, Shaw suggests a conflicted engagement with the heroic roles of the prior generation: “Our conception of heroism has changed of late years. The stage hero of the palmy days is a pricked bubble. The gentlemanly hero, of whom Tennyson’s King Arthur was the type, suddenly found himself out as Torvald Helmer in Ibsen’s *Doll’s House*, and died of the shock.”⁶⁰ The comparison with Irving’s King Arthur is apt.⁶¹ The potential that Shaw saw in Irving (who had literally “died of the shock” the previous year) may have been realized in Forbes-Robertson; both actors refused to conform to the standards of cup-and-saucer “naturalism,” but Forbes-Robertson proved himself capable of “modernizing” his talent where Irving had failed—just as Shaw’s Caesar remained consistently pragmatic rather than idealistic. Shaw’s Caesar is thus actually an anachronistic “restoration” in line with Irving’s paradox: where Edward Gordon Craig deployed a reference to Shakespeare’s assassination of Caesar in describing Shaw’s influence on Irving, Shaw actually revived the character and the actor by moving to a triumphant earlier moment in the Roman conqueror’s career.⁶²

Yet *Caesar and Cleopatra* was written no less for Stella Campbell. Her willfulness, charisma, innate fascination and stubborn ignorance found their perfect expression in the role of Cleopatra, who—in Shaw’s version—is a juvenile tyrant capable of learning only a part of the dignity of rulership Caesar attempts to instill in her. In a letter to Ellen Terry dated 8 September

⁵⁹ Shaw, “Bernard Shaw and the Heroic Actor”: 307. Mrs. Patrick Campbell did not participate in the performance; instead, Forbes-Robertson’s wife, Gertrude Elliot, played Cleopatra. The production debuted in America in 1906, and was brought to London in the following year.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ As detailed in the previous chapter, Irving’s Arthur was based on Tennyson’s *Idylls*, and Irving had originally contracted with Tennyson for a script for the play.

⁶² Again, see the previous chapter for a longer engagement with Craig’s text. The point, however, is this: where Craig sought to resurrect Irving as the Ubermarionette—an icon of the alienated modernist stage—Shaw did so by returning to the stagey artificiality of nineteenth-century bombast, which he then allied to a moral progressivism.

1897, Shaw speaks of his desire to “teach that rapscaillionly flower girl [Mrs. Patrick Campbell] of his [Forbes-Robertson] something. ‘Caesar & Cleopatra’ has been driven clean out of my head by a play I want to write for them in which he shall be a west end gentlemen and she an east end dona in an apron and three orange and red ostrich feathers.”⁶³ It was fifteen years before that play was written and performed, but the image remained the same: when Eliza enters Higgins’s apartment in Act II of *Pygmalion*, she wears a hat with “*three ostrich feathers, orange, sky-blue, and red. She has a nearly clean apron, and the shoddy coat has been tidied a little.*”⁶⁴ But though Shaw secured Mrs. Campbell for the part when he first read the manuscript to her in 1912, they remained without a Higgins to play opposite her for over a year.

Shaw refused to compromise on casting Higgins, attesting in multiple letters to Mrs. Campbell that she required an actor whose personal magnetism could equal—or rival—her own. “Do you want to be a Duse?” he asked her: “A hammer without an anvil! a Sandow playing with paper dumbbells! Produce *Pygmalion* with a twenty pound Higgins, and you will have an uproarious success... But the house will be under £ 200... Its successor will fail, because nobody will be able to endure you in anything worse than Eliza.”⁶⁵ Behind the compliment (both to Campbell and to himself) is a suggestion of the importance of the theatrical ensemble: if she does not have an actor opposite to draw focus away from her, she will be forever bound to her success as Eliza and inevitably typecast in similar roles—the final fate of a failing actor-celebrity, who is stung by the “cult of personality” that surrounds her and fixes her in a specific social role. And so it is no wonder that Shaw’s treatment of this problem ultimately leads to one of his most

⁶³ Shaw, *Collected Letters*. Vol. 1. 1874–1897: 803.

⁶⁴ Shaw, *Pygmalion*: 687.

⁶⁵ Shaw, letter to Mrs. Patrick Campbell, 3 July 1912, in Shaw, *Bernard Shaw and Mrs. Patrick Campbell*: 16. The reference is to Eleonora Duse, the Italian actor and famous rival of Sarah Bernhardt. According to Shaw, Duse often vastly out-shone her co-stars, to the detriment of the production.

important (and oft-cited) expositions of his theory of acting:

You are happy playing with worms. Barker loves worms. Worms never give any trouble; and in plays which can be *produced*, they make the best casts. (Darwin proved that the earth is made of worm casts). But my plays must be acted, and acted hard. They need a sort of bustle and crepitation of life which requires extraordinary energy and vitality, and gives only glimpses and movements of the poetry beneath. The lascivious monotony of beauty which satisfies those who are slaves of art instead of masters of it is hideous in my plays. Well, a man with energy enough to bring up my plays to concert pitch cannot be had and held for a salary... It must be recognized that he is indispensable to it, just as you are indispensable to it; and indispensables must share. [Emphasis his]⁶⁶

Though Shaw valued a collaborative presentation, his ideal ensemble was not exactly that of Granville-Barker at the Court, where individual members' agencies were submerged as "slaves of art"—or slaves of text. Shaw presents a startling alternative: that only "glimpses" of the coherence of his own work ought to be visible "beneath" the efforts of his actors.⁶⁷ And unsurprisingly, Shaw connects this theory both to his cosmic, evolutionary philosophy (with the winking pun from Darwin) and to the economic realities of the London theatre: *Pygmalion* needs an actor-manager as Higgins who is also an investor, with economic interests in the continued success of the play. This assertion reveals the total integration of Shaw's "work": the fictional battle between Eliza and Higgins must be replicated by a meta-theatrical struggle between two great acting talents, and must, in turn, find its final expression on the larger "stage" of the London economy, where the manager/Higgins's "investment" in the play/Eliza would be returned in both the play's economic success and the social dissemination of its "message"—for Higgins is, according to the play's ironic preface, the "social reformer" London most needs at

⁶⁶ Ibid.: 18. The letter pushes on, to offer another provocative suggestion: that Barker's revival of *Man and Superman* failed because he did not cast Mrs. Campbell in the role of Ann Whitefield.

⁶⁷ We might note the similarity here to Bram Stoker's use of Irving's paradox in the character of Mina Harker: the actor grants coherence to a fragmented text.

this blackest moment of the First World War.⁶⁸ In order to do this, Shaw and Campbell required a man of Irving-like eminence. They would find this figure in Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, “London’s last great actor-manager.”⁶⁹

In many ways, Tree embodied much of what frustrated and fascinated Shaw in Henry Irving: a vital energy and idiosyncratic creativity wedded to an irrepressible egotism. Shaw made the comparison explicit in a retrospective essay after Tree’s death: “To the author, Irving was not an actor: he was either a rival or a collaborator who did all the real work... Into this tradition of creative acting came Tree as Irving’s rival and successor; and he also, with his restless imagination, felt that he needed nothing from an author but a literary scaffold on which to exhibit his own creations.”⁷⁰ Throughout the rehearsal of *Pygmalion*, Shaw and Tree continually butted heads: Tree urged Shaw to cut Eliza’s notorious “Not bloody likely,” fearing the audience’s reaction; he requested a ballroom scene as the play’s false climax, which Shaw denied (only to include it twenty years later, in the film version); and, most importantly, he wished to play up a possible romantic involvement between Higgins and Eliza. On this last point, he refused to submit to Shaw’s wishes. On the opening night of the play, at the conclusion of the final scene—which, in Shaw’s version, ends with a decisively neutral relationship between Higgins and Eliza—Tree reappeared on stage with a bouquet of flowers, which he winningly tossed to Mrs. Campbell’s Eliza. In a personal letter to Tree some days later, Shaw wrote: “Your ending is

⁶⁸ Thus, the capitalist relationship between the actor-manager and the theatrical audience (where such managers are allegedly purveyors of “entertainment” purchased by audience-customers) is reconfigured in terms of the sort of mutually productive aesthetic struggle represented in the play’s final scene. The “play” is Higgins, the audience “Eliza”: like Eliza, we come to the theatre hoping to “purchase” lessons, but end our evening in a much more ambiguously defined position.

⁶⁹ Berst, *Pygmalion: Shaw’s Spin on Myth and Cinderella*: 17.

⁷⁰ Shaw, “H. Beerbohm Tree”: 804.

damnable: you ought to be shot.”⁷¹ In 1916, the published version of *Pygmalion* would be followed by a prose “sequel” that attempted to prove why this romance was impossible; and in 1941, the revised version of *Pygmalion* would include new dialogue at the end that would (hopefully) quash the romantic interpretation once and for all.

To focus on this battle over *Pygmalion*’s ending as a battle for “control” would mean to suggest precisely what Shaw so willfully denied in that letter to Campbell: it would mean that Shaw meant to use the power of the text to produce a cast of Barker’s submissive “worms.” Instead, Shaw’s experience in the theatrical production would suggest the opposite, that his goal was always to produce a complementary heterogeneity of effect. When directing, Shaw made every effort to preserve his actors’ autonomy, and to respond to and cultivate their unique gifts; he had no interest in prescribing how to achieve a given emotional affect, for he recognized each actor’s ability to confront such problems on his or her own terms. But it was in his emphasis on the mechanical techniques of stage diction and elocution that he developed his most consistent aesthetic-social philosophy. In *Pygmalion*, Shaw discovered a paradox that would reduce the operations of reading and of acting to the singular interaction between individuals of integrity. In the science of phonetics lay the possibility for doing justice to the fundamental division both between the actor and director and also between the mass-cultural reader—induced by “novelistic” devices to commit “theatrical” readings—and the emphatically “realist” author. Through *Pygmalion*’s use of phonetics—which links the invisible, backstage work of rehearsal and mechanistic elocution to the crises of didactic legibility—Shaw activates the threat of Eliza’s and Campbell’s “illiteracy” in order to achieve a new social function for the actor’s paradox.

⁷¹ Qtd. in Berst, *Pygmalion: Shaw’s Spin on Myth and Cinderella*: 18.

Reading Eliza/Eliza Reading: The Recursive Text(s) of *Pygmalion* and the Impossibility of Higgins's Universal Alphabet

The parallel effect of the play-text of *Pygmalion* and its antagonistic paratextual “sequel” has rarely been acknowledged. Instead, the play’s critical history would suggest the opposite: the difficulty of *Pygmalion*’s ending has given rise to suggestions that Shaw’s work in the “sequel” is essentially an attempt to reassert a kind of dictatorial power over the text, motivated by both aesthetic and personal desires. The published *Pygmalion* and its “sequel” become the “playwright’s revenge,” according to Arnold Silver, who reads the composition and revision of the text as a psychodrama in which Shaw’s personal demons and romantic failures—including his unconsummated romantic affair with Stella Campbell—are channeled into a sadomasochistic hostility toward his own play and a misogynistic persecution of its leading character, Eliza Doolittle.⁷² But such readings tend to ignore the dominant trend in Shaw’s dramaturgy and his ambivalence toward any source of authority, especially his own.

I argue that Shaw’s treatment of the printed text of *Pygmalion* becomes the most visible extension of the play’s own dominant theme: the expression of rebellious selfhood is enabled by the paradoxical interaction of the individual with sources of textual and directorial “authority.” As a result, the paratextual “sequel” functions to recast its audience in Eliza’s role, “educating” its literate reader by staging the misreading of “revolutionary” literature throughout British culture at large. In this way, Shaw makes an effort to redeploy the paradox of the actor in service of his social agenda: where Irving’s work had used the actor’s unique capabilities to establish both artistic and historical “restoration,” Shaw draws that effort into severe irony through anachronistic work that continually revises its own foundations and contexts. In the section that

⁷² See Silver, *Bernard Shaw: The Darker Side*: 179–280. Silver focuses on the alterations made for the 1941 version of the play, particularly the “bathing scene” that takes place in the middle of Act II, and notes various correspondences between Higgins’s utterances and comments that Shaw himself made in the correspondence with Campbell.

follows, I show that both *Pygmalion* and its prose “sequel” function recursively, critiquing to the transparent assumptions of their respective media, the theatre and the book. The final result of this work is to reveal the illusion of universal legibility: the emergence of phonetics as a principle of theatrical education signals the impenetrability of the written text. The most faithful reading of *Pygmalion* thus becomes an aggressive misreading: the scornful treatment of the author by Stella Campbell’s “monster of illiteracy.”

“Repetitions on the spot”: Shawian Revision and Eliza’s Meta-theatre

This recursive tendency is illustrated most immediately through the play’s continual revision of its plot and its redefinition of its focal character. The most obvious manifestation of this sort of revision is Shaw’s denial (in the original version, at least) of the play’s alleged “climax” and the culmination of Eliza’s training: the garden-party, in which Eliza wins the bet that Higgins and Pickering have made.⁷³ The event occurs between Acts III and IV. Up until this point, the narrative of the play seems exclusively focused on rendering its most essential events as self-consciously and visibly “theatrical.” The first act offers a brief demonstration of what Higgins’s phonetic mastery can do, as Higgins displays his virtuosity with a charismatic flair before a group of admiring observers, which includes Eliza. The second act reveals the forging of Eliza’s contract with Higgins, during which Higgins already recognizes the mishandled theatricality of Eliza’s self-presentation—including those ostentatious ostrich feathers in her hat. The third act offers a vision of Eliza about halfway through her development, engaging in an essential dress-rehearsal: at Mrs. Higgins’s “at-home day,” Eliza reveals that though she has mastered the

⁷³ Just for whom Eliza has won this bet is somewhat questionable: both Higgins and Pickering seem equally invested in Eliza’s success—nobody seems to be betting against her. This tends to obscure any straightforward reading of the “competition” the play generates. Opposing forces are more like complementary forces throughout the play, which says much about Shaw’s larger purpose here.

superficialities of genteel diction and physical mannerisms, she has not yet learned the “character” of the duchess she is to play at the garden party.⁷⁴

Thus the denial of the garden party scene produces not only a disruption of the play’s narrative momentum, but it also produces a significant rupture in the play’s representation of Eliza. This becomes visible if we isolate her two appearances on either side of this rupture. After that iconic line from the third act—“Not bloody likely”—delivered “*with perfectly elegant diction*,” Eliza strides coolly offstage. When she returns, it is some months later, late at night: “*She is tired: her pallor contrasts strongly with her dark eyes and hair; and her expression is almost tragic.*”⁷⁵ She does not speak throughout the early minutes of the act, as Higgins and Pickering congratulate one another, so her first significant action onstage since her departure from Mrs. Higgins’s “at-home” is also her most brutal and emotional: she hurls Higgins’s slippers at him “*with all her force.*”⁷⁶ The Eliza of Act IV has lost the calm assuredness of the Eliza of Act III, though undoubtedly she has become more conscious of her actions. The success of her “transformation” is thus cast into doubt: self-awareness, perhaps, does not lead to self-possession. The most obvious conclusion is that the play has a false center: it is not about the transformation of a flower-girl into a duchess after all, and its self-conscious “theatricality” collapses in upon itself as Eliza discovers that she has only become a proficient actor, not a respected member of high society. The subsequent two acts therefore engage an alternative set of

⁷⁴ Incidentally, Eliza *has* learned the role of meteorologist quite well—which speaks volumes about the sort of extracurricular education Higgins has offered her alongside her phonetic lessons. In response to Mrs. Higgins’s ice-breaker about the potential for rain, Eliza says: “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.” Using detached, disinterested diction, Eliza erases all personal agency from her response. This line was likely the prompt for clever cinematic additions, in which Eliza’s elocution exercises about the “rain in Spain” foreshadow the meteorological aside. Higgins’s “education” is thus misapplied: Eliza is incapable of understanding the difference between a social pleasantry and a scientific inquiry, and her technical knowledge only reveals a more fundamental failing.

⁷⁵ Shaw, *Pygmalion*: 744.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*: 747.

questions: in Eliza's own words, "What am I fit for? What have you left me fit for? Where am I to go? What am I to do? What's to become of me?"⁷⁷ Her pleas make one thing clear. At the peak of her powers, Eliza is now more in Higgins's possession than ever before: the actor remains subject to the whims of her director.

Some of the answers to her questions are provided in Act V and in the "sequel": Eliza is "fit" for either selling flowers or teaching phonetics; she is to "go" either to Higgins's mother or to Freddy Eynsford-Hill and take up living with one of them; and she is to "become," perhaps, a "woman"—or so Higgins promises, retroactively, in the play's final moment: "By George, Eliza, I said I'd make a woman of you; and I have."⁷⁸ This assertion has become productively problematic for most scholarly readers of the text, for it isolates the intersection of this play's dominant conflict with its broader social contexts. Understanding this moment properly means engaging with the play's class dynamics, since much of the irony of Higgins's assertion lies in the semantic distinction between the "woman" he alleges to have made her and the "lady" he had actually promised to make her. But it also means accounting for the multiple agencies involved in Eliza's development as well as for the larger metaphysical stakes of this "transformation." In calling her a "woman," Higgins does not refer to any biological or physiological attribute; rather, he means to indicate her sense of independence, her individuality, and her personal power: "Now you're a tower of strength: a consort battleship," he tells her.⁷⁹

In doing so, however, Higgins already belies a comment he makes when he meets Eliza, indicating the play's revision and "restoration" of its own origins. In response to her weeping at the poor treatment he gives her in Act I, Higgins says: "A woman who utters such depressing and

⁷⁷ Ibid.: 749.

⁷⁸ Ibid.: 781.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

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 Shakespear and Milton and The Bible; and dont sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon.”⁸⁰ The comment at the play’s start is meant to remind Eliza of what she already is; the comment at the play’s conclusion paradoxically asserts that this quality is something that Eliza has developed over the course of the play. This not the story of a flower girl becoming a duchess or of the same becoming a “woman”; rather, it is simply the tale of an individual learning to “remember” what she already is. Its plot is, therefore, essentially recursive: its object is simply the cultivation of Eliza’s individuality, which she had possessed from the moment that she took effort to seek out Higgins in an attempt to better her social situation, not her personal bearing. And so this conclusion is carried out in the “sequel”: Eliza and Freddy open up a flower shop, and Eliza’s profession is simply a more organized and self-aware version of the operation she had run as the “rapscallionly flower girl” of the play’s opening scene.

This interpretation dovetails nicely with a straightforward meta-theatrical reading of the play: we watch the development of Eliza’s acting abilities until she has reached a point of extraordinary virtuosity and possesses powers with which she is able to strike back at Higgins: “You cant take away the knowledge you gave me,” she tells him. “You said I had a finer ear than you. And I can be civil and kind to people, which is more than you can. Aha! [*Purposely dropping her aitches to annoy him*] Thats done you, Enry Iggins, it az.”⁸¹ This moment, of course, serves to remind us: the woman we have been watching onstage has always been an actor, and she has been “purposely dropping her aitches” all along; even the sort of exhausted surrender and helpless victimhood Eliza displays throughout Act IV was always only an act, for

⁸⁰ Ibid.: 679.

⁸¹ Ibid.: 780.

the actor is never totally subject to the director. For the play's original audiences, this awareness would have been all the more keen. Not only was Stella Campbell a star actor, but she also was hardly a physical match for the part: in 1914, she was already in her late forties, a far cry from the teenage flower girl she was supposed to represent. This also projects Eliza's act of "remembrance" back onto the audience: lulled into that willing suspension of disbelief by the unwritten assumptions of spectatorship, the audience is then forced to "remember" the theatrical situation at this conclusion and to engage with their own willing abdication of responsibility throughout the previous two hours. The play's continual transformation of Eliza actually devolves into the most emphatic assertion of what she has always been.

But this meta-theatrical reading has even more important consequences when we revisit the structure of the play, for it re-introduces the notion of "offstage" reality and re-emphasizes the boundaries between the ordinarily invisible work of rehearsal and the visible product of performance. The bait-and-switch of *Pygmalion*'s plot continues to invert audience expectations by insisting on the most literal form of "dramatic realism": it promises an opportunity to view the training of the actor by purporting to document of what happens "between the acts," and by linking the closed spaces of theatrical work to the social apparatus that supports them.

The opening moment of *Pygmalion* bridges the gap between the theatre and the social world of London. We are introduced to the Eynsford-Hills as they leave a theatre late at night and are forced to take refuge not far away, in the portico of St. Paul's church. Throughout the act that follows, we see a continual reformation in the roles of performer and spectator, as Higgins transforms from a possible police informant to an impromptu mimic-magician. Likewise, by the end of the scene Higgins is reminded of an even larger frame of spectatorship, hearing in the

chiming of the church bells the “*voice of God, rebuking him for his Pharisaic want of charity.*”⁸² Ideas of surveillance are colored by notions of an authoritarian police-state, by cosmic morality, and by the most banal forms of popular theatricality. The play’s dominant mode is thus made clear within Act I: by reversing the relationship between the interior and the exterior, between the actor and the audience, and between what is “inside” and “outside” the performance in a kind of *theatrum mundi*, the play implies that what occurs around the work of art is just as important as the work itself. It becomes, in essence, an argument not for a hierarchical relationship between text and subtext, but for the mutually productive relationship between varying contexts.

By continually reversing or renegotiating its own boundaries, *Pygmalion* lends itself perfectly to the sort of representation Shaw ideally imagined in that letter to Campbell decrying Granville-Barker’s “worms” in favor of powerfully assertive actors. The “poetry beneath” the performance becomes only intermittently visible, for the structural support for the play is revised again and again as the story proceeds. What begins as a straightforward Cinderella story (not to mention a Pygmalion-Galatea story) becomes and less and less easy to identify as the play proceeds and its intentionally invisible elements come to press more and more upon its outcome. One of these “invisible” elements is the story of Alfred Doolittle, Eliza’s father, whose own transformation exactly parallels Eliza’s, though it happens offstage. Doolittle’s limited presence seems to indicate that he is meant to operate only contextually: his story generates the contrast that makes Eliza’s story meaningful, highlighting not only the double-standard of gender, but also the economic fact that money can instigate transformation as easily as acting lessons. It would, therefore, be easy to write off Doolittle’s character as little more than a literary device (a device which extends directly to the level of language, for the punning surname is certainly more applicable to the father than to the daughter), were it not that Doolittle’s “character” is defined

⁸² Ibid.: 681.

very early on *as* a literary device. When Doolittle first appears, Higgins immediately notes his reliance on theatrical diction: “Pickering: this chap has a certain natural gift of rhetoric. Observe the rhythm of his native woodnotes wild. ‘I’m willing to tell you: I’m wanting to tell you: I’m waiting to tell you.’ Sentimental rhetoric! that’s the Welsh strain in him. It also accounts for his mendacity and dishonesty.”⁸³ Doolittle’s rhetoric “accounts” for his character traits.⁸⁴ In contrast to Eliza, who has both a “soul” *and* “the divine gift of articulate speech,” Doolittle is a character whose “soul” *is* that “articulate speech.” He effectively undoes the thesis of the play, which suggests that rhetorical mastery will allow the expression of the true individual, since Doolittle’s rhetoric dictates his theatrical falseness: in Eliza’s father, Shaw nods toward a morally conventional form of anti-theatricality. Doolittle thus presents an opportunity for a deconstructive reading of the play: *Pygmalion*’s structural motives, revealed as such, indicate only the absence of meaning at its center, and whatever redemptive theatricality Eliza learns to leverage is undone by her father’s dishonest designs.

The trouble with this reading is that it reduces *Pygmalion*’s social relevancy to an ironic commentary on the uselessness of the theatre: at the end, Doolittle shows us that Higgins’s and Eliza’s dramatic education fails to extend beyond the “green room” of Higgins’s phonetics laboratory. Eric Bentley long ago labeled *Pygmalion* a “personal play” in the guise of a “disquisitory” play, concluding: “It is Shavian, not in being made up of political or philosophic discussions, but in being based on the standard conflict of vitality and system... in bringing

⁸³ *Ibid.*: 707.

⁸⁴ The referent of Higgins’s pronoun “it” might be the “Welsh strain,” which suggests a certain level of racism in Higgins that wouldn’t be entirely out of keeping with his character, and opens up the potential to read Higgins alongside Shaw’s other benign racists, like Broadbent of *John Bull’s Other Island*. But this reading depends on ignoring Higgins’s own rhetorical parallelism. The “it also” must refer to the same object as the “thats [that is]” of the previous phrase—which is to say, the “Sentimental rhetoric!” and not the “Welsh strain.”

matters to a head in a battle of wills and words.”⁸⁵ Bentley’s argument turns upon the innate quality of the play that transcends both its melodramatic, “romantic” roots as well as the larger “social-didactic” aims of so many Shaw plays: it “cannot be explained by Shaw’s own account of the nature of modern drama, much less by popular or academic opinion concerning Problem Plays, Discussion Drama, Drama of Ideas, and the like.” In Bentley’s reading, *Pygmalion* might seem to follow the structural guidelines Shaw had set forth in the revised *Quintessence of Ibsenism*, where he defined the “technical innovation” of modern drama: a conventional play presents exposition, complication, and denouement, but Ibsenist drama replaces denouement with “discussion.” *Pygmalion* certainly ends with “discussion,” but its equitable dispersal of agency between Eliza and Higgins would seem to deflate the significance of the debate. When Eliza “sweeps out” at the end of the scene, her exit is not accompanied by a symbolic slam of the door, like that of Nora Helmer in *A Doll’s House*. Eliza’s independence is limited to Eliza and her performer alone: the conflict of “vitality and system” is really a conflict between the actor’s energetic performance of Eliza and any system that would threaten to “read” her actions as symbolic of the play’s greater “meaning.”

A reading of *Pygmalion* that devolves into an appreciation of Mrs. Patrick Campbell thus only reproduces the terms of Shaw’s attack on Pinero in his enchanted reviews of Campbell’s phenomenal debuts: her performance “sweeps the play aside and imperiously becomes the play itself.” The allegation is familiar: it also echoes Shaw’s consistent critique of Irving, who had done the same with Shakespeare and (thankfully) with Comyns Carr’s *King Arthur*. In order to resolve this dilemma, we must once more witness the transference of the actor’s abilities into a textual prerogative: for it is in the performance of Shaw’s paratexts—especially the prose “sequel” to *Pygmalion* published in 1916—that Eliza’s work most successfully leaves the stage.

⁸⁵ Bentley, *Bernard Shaw, 1856–1950*: 126.

How Not to Read H. G. Wells: Literary Culture and Pygmalion's Occluded Paratexts

The “sequel” to *Pygmalion* was appended to the text’s first publication in the summer of 1916. Unlike with the majority of his plays—particularly throughout his early career, when various difficulties made commercial performance an impossibility for Shaw—*Pygmalion*’s production preceded its publication substantially, by more than two years. Those two years, of course, were filled with other activity. Between the play’s opening night in April of 1914 and its first publication, England entered the war; Shaw put aside playwriting and emerged as a contentious (and possibly seditious) critic of militarism with his *Common Sense about the War*; all of Europe settled into a disastrous conflict of attrition; and—on the eve of *Pygmalion*’s release—the British army launched an offensive at the Somme that has gone down as one of the most needless and tragic losses of life in modern history. *Pygmalion*’s “sequel,” of course, acknowledges none of this. Instead, it pursues all of the play’s multiple plot-threads in their benign irrelevancy, offering a full history not only of Higgins’s relationship with Eliza, but also of Eliza and Freddy’s marriage and entrepreneurship, and of Clara Eynesford-Hill’s emergence into society. In doing so, it reproduces much of the meta-theatrical effects of the play itself. If the structure of *Pygmalion* continually reminds us of the theatre, its paratexts—both the brief preface as well as the extended sequel—reemphasize the reader’s relationship both to the text and to the book.

The opening statement of the “sequel” offers one of Shaw’s few positive statements regarding the distinction between *mimesis* and *diegesis*: “The rest of the story need not be shewn in action, and indeed, would hardly need telling if our imaginations were not so enfeebled by their lazy dependence on the ready-mades and reach-me-downs of the rag-shop in which Romance keeps its stock of ‘happy endings’ to misfit all stories.”⁸⁶ In terms of the actual history of the play, nothing could be further from the truth: according to common assumption, this

⁸⁶ Shaw, *Pygmalion*: 782.

“sequel” was published precisely because what was “shewn in action” during the production starring Tree and Campbell explicitly induced a misunderstanding of Shaw’s version of the story—Tree’s “damnable” bouquet-tossing seemed to affirm a romantic connection between Eliza and Higgins. Instead, Shaw is indicating a somewhat more nuanced idea: the play “shewn in action” functions circularly, to indicate the value of that “action” and of the theatre more generally; consequently, that the play in publication must likewise be extended to critique its own foundational assumptions, particularly the alleged transparency of the reading experience. The function of the “sequel” is to direct its reader toward the material experience of reading, and to the political and social responsibilities that inhere to this action.

This function is largely performed by the rhetorical format of the “sequel.” Shaw’s text offers its narrative alongside a dialectical “conversation” with its reader: direct accounts of action will, therefore, be followed by moments of editorial commentary, often deploying the ironic first-person plural (as in “our imaginations” above) to indicate the impossibility of collective action. Just as the play offers the continual reformation of spectatorship and performance, challenging the underlying assumptions of theatrical representation, the “sequel” attempts a simultaneous renegotiation of the relationship between the reader and the text. The foundational allegiances of this relationship are called into question: as readers are severed from both Shaw and Eliza, they are also cut off from one another. “Nevertheless,” the “sequel” tells us, “people in all directions have assumed, for no other reason than that she became the heroine of a romance, that she must have married the hero of it”: in calling into question the correctness of this united reaction to the text, the “sequel” thereby restores these people back to those separate directions.

At the same time, however, it refuses to rest on a point of anarchic disunity. To indicate

its own artificiality, the “sequel” constantly dramatizes the coincidence of the “facts” of Eliza’s history aligning themselves to the hypotheses generated by the author’s critical methods. Deploying a kind of Darwinian logic, the text prophesies: “Unless Freddy is biologically repulsive to her, and Higgins biologically attractive to a degree that overwhelms all her other instincts, she will, if she marries either of them, marry Freddy.” It then declares, following a pregnant paragraph-break: “And that is just what Eliza did.”⁸⁷ Prescription is immediately followed by description. This suggests an abstract severance between theory and practice that is also a fundamental, material reality of the theatre. There is usually no question of the “reality” of a “novelistic” text adhering to the “theory” it sustains: the realist novel rarely breaks frame to question its own methods. But the “sequel” to *Pygmalion* challenges this assumption. That conflict between “vitality” and “system” continues here; and though Eliza seems to be shackled by that “system” of “realist” prose narratives, such narratives are themselves immediately placed under critique.

The “sequel” indicates this shift by turning its attention to Clara, and to her infatuation with H.G. Wells. Like Eliza’s father, Clara is another of the play’s structural devices, functioning largely to indicate the disparity between Eliza’s earnest, disciplined aspirations and the snobbish, ignorant pretensions of those whose social class is only marginally above Eliza’s. Eliza’s success is the major theme of the play, while Clara is easily forgotten, along with the sad desperation of her social position. And so it is with Clara that the text offers a third means for social advancement: literary education. Where Eliza rises through the actor’s phonetic training, and her father moves upward through the simple acquisition of capital, Clara succeeds through an extraordinary “conversion” effected by her reading of Wells and Galsworthy.

Witnessing Eliza’s achievement, Clara is shocked; reading Wells, she is galvanized into

⁸⁷ Ibid.: 787.

action. The two experiences are explicitly aligned. After being “dazzled” by Eliza at Mrs. Higgins’s “at-home,” Clara “discovered that this exquisite apparition had graduated from the gutter in a few months time.” This “eyeopener... shook her so violently, that when Mr H. G. Wells lifted her on the point of his puissant pen, and placed her at the angle of view from which the life she was leading and the society to which she clung appeared in its true relation to real human needs and worthy social structure, he effected a conversion and a conviction of sin comparable to the most sensational feats of General Booth or Gypsy Smith. Clara’s snobbery went bang.”⁸⁸ Witnessing Eliza’s transformation (or, perhaps, watching *Pygmalion* onstage) is akin to reading the “realist” prose of the socialist (and Shaw’s fellow Fabian) H. G. Wells, and this section would seem to suggest a measure of faith in the transformative powers of reading literature.

But the “sequel” goes on to undercut this point: for what matters in Clara’s life is not only the content of Wells’s novels, but rather social value of reading as a material practice. Reading Wells allows her to attain a certain level of social commerce, regardless of whether Clara properly understands the texts or their underlying economic philosophy. Thus, Clara quickly becomes a social force of some note: “Without knowing how or why, she began to make friends and enemies.” Importantly, Clara does not become any kind of social activist; rather, she winds up selling furniture, but acquires her position by networking with other “Wellsians.” What matters in Clara’s reading is not her ability to recognize Wells’s aesthetic achievements, or her capacity for engaging with the problems of economic reform; instead, the “sequel” finds comfort simply in her bold willingness to make her reading the fundamental pretext of her social interactions:

In the radiance of these discoveries, and the tumult of their reaction, she made a

⁸⁸ Ibid.: 791–92.

fool of herself as freely and conspicuously as when she so rashly adopted Eliza's expletive in Mrs Higgins's drawing room; for the new-born Wellsian had to find her bearings almost as ridiculously as a baby; but nobody hates a baby for its ineptitudes, or thinks the worse of it for trying to eat the matches; and Clara lost no friends by her follies. They laughed at her to her face this time; and she had to defend herself and fight it out as best she could.⁸⁹

Clara thus becomes defined by these acts of social mimicry: her eagerness to parrot Eliza's "bloody" during the play is equated with her clueless regurgitation of "Wellsian" philosophy. Yet the "sequel" refuses to condemn her ignorance or her untutored literary scholarship; rather, it applauds the failure of these efforts, for they permit Clara access to society while simultaneously affirming her singular identity. The social ideal here is both friendly and frankly bellicose. Against her friends, Clara forges her selfhood through conversational warfare. She is both a mimic and a reader, and she is completely forthright in her attempts to be both. She is, therefore, a kind of noble "monster of illiteracy," Shaw's most honest rendering of his own ideal audience.⁹⁰ In Clara Eynesford Hill, the "transformation" of Eliza Doolittle is reflected outward onto the progressive habits of the reader of socialist literature—not because such texts always effect social change, but because they become the media of personal exchange.

Following the conclusion of Clara's story, the "sequel" offers one final comment on the nature of reading, presenting an image of Eliza's own "quaint juxtaposition" of incongruous study materials. After diligently attending classes at the London School of Economics, Eliza and Freddy approach the school's director looking for another course that might have more relevance for their flower business. The sequel reads:

He, being a humorist, explained to them the method of the celebrated Dickensian

⁸⁹ Ibid.: 793.

⁹⁰ In making this suggestion, I imply that being a flawed "Wellsian" is the same as being a flawed "Shavian." Shaw depicted such a flawed figure in *The Doctor's Dilemma*, where the artist Louis Dubedat explicitly affirms his adherence to the works of Shaw. Like Clara, Dubedat is both a hero and a fool, and his understanding of Shaw is limited to his own self-affirmation. Undoubtedly, such a depiction is deliberately ironic, but it says much about Shaw's "realistic" expectations concerning his readers.

essay on Chinese Metaphysics by the gentleman who read an article on China and an article on Metaphysics and combined the information. He suggested that they should combine the London School with Kew Gardens. Eliza, to whom the procedure of the Dickensian gentleman seemed perfectly correct (as in fact it was) and not in the least funny (which was only her ignorance), took the advice with entire gravity.⁹¹

The parenthetical aside—“as in fact it was”—mitigates some of the satire, here: Shaw both does and doesn’t sympathize with this imaginary director of the LSE.⁹² Eliza’s methodology may be naïve, but it forces her to do important work, regardless of the consequences. Undoubtedly, her study will become a perversion of both the lessons of the LSE and what she learns at Kew Gardens; but it will also be “useful,” even if only to Eliza herself.

Alongside this ambivalent reference to educational practice, Shaw presents his second *Pygmalion* story, wrapped up in a brief paragraph. The final pages of the “sequel” return to Eliza and Higgins, and to her second round of transformative lessons: for, at her request, Higgins agrees to teach Eliza how to write calligraphy. The play’s entire sequence unfolds again, with ironic results:

[Higgins] declared that she was congenitally incapable of forming a single letter worthy of the least of Milton’s words; but she persisted; and again he suddenly threw himself into the task of teaching her with a combination of stormy intensity, concentrated patience, and occasional bursts of interesting disquisition on the beauty and nobility, the august mission and destiny, of human handwriting. Eliza ended by acquiring an extremely uncommercial script which was a positive extension of her personal beauty, and spending three times as much on stationery as anyone else because certain qualities and shapes of paper became indispensable to her. She could not even address an envelope in the usual way because it made the margins all wrong.⁹³

Phonetics lessons and handwriting lessons: both are begun with the goal of allowing Eliza to function within a business context, to allow her use of language to be easily consumed by the

⁹¹ Shaw, *Pygmalion*: 795.

⁹² Who was, moreover, probably not imaginary at all: Shaw was involved in the founding of the LSE, and though he’d separated himself from the school by the time of *Pygmalion*’s publication, he undoubtedly had a specific person in mind when writing this scene.

⁹³ Shaw, *Pygmalion*: 796.

social collective; both end by putting Eliza entirely on her own, giving her both an “impractical” skill and erecting an impenetrable barrier to that consumption. Eliza’s writing becomes “a positive extension of her personal beauty,” extending not only to her unique, florid handwriting, but also to her treatment of all aspects of the material text, including paper-stock and margins. The image necessarily reflects back on Shaw’s own idiosyncratic printing standards: the Doolittlean-Shavian text becomes a material experience by virtue of its “personal beauty.” Both writers (Eliza and Shaw) aim not at transforming any common assumption of social beauty, but rather at a material manifestation of their own personal ideals. As such, their texts are rendered opaque: they entirely reject the illusion of transparency between author and reader, as their written texts are indelibly invested with their own personal presences.

At the same time, though, this final beat in Eliza’s story has another consequence: it affirms the irrevocable distance between the text of the “sequel” and one of Eliza’s “real” texts. We are reminded that what we read is a printed, commercially produced text, one which has been purposely leached of this personal presence. Access to Eliza’s unique subjectivity is thus cut off: by printing Eliza’s story, the sequel acknowledges its inability to capture Eliza herself. It also, of course, directs us back toward other attempts to “capture” Eliza on the page, and thus to the play’s ostensible purpose. That is: *Pygmalion* purports to be an exposition of the advantages of phonetics, which depends upon *Pygmalion*’s final, occluded paratext—Higgins’s Universal Alphabet.

In the brief preface to the published *Pygmalion*, Shaw offers a modest hope for his play: “The reformer we need most today is an energetic phonetic enthusiast: that is why I have made

such a one the hero of a popular play.”⁹⁴ Countering his critics—who, like A. B. Walkley, insisted that Shaw’s “didactic” plays were artistic failures—he argues that the function of this play is to teach its audience about the advantages of phonetics; moreover, he insists that he has crafted a “hero” in Higgins that hearkens back to the great “heroes” of the popular stage—figures like Irving’s King Arthur or Forbes-Robertson’s Caesar. Thus, in the 1941 edition of the play, he trumpets his own success: “I wish to boast that *Pygmalion* has been an extremely successful play, both on stage and screen, all over Europe and North America as well as at home. It is so intensely and deliberately didactic, and its subject is esteemed so dry, that I delight in throwing it at the heads of the wiseacres who repeat the parrot cry that art should never be didactic. It goes to prove my contention that great art can never be anything else.”⁹⁵

I want to suggest that Shaw here performs a deliberate misreading of his play—and, in doing so, performs precisely the sort of work he had outlined in that “Epistle Dedicatory” to *Man and Superman*: he uses his misreading as a weapon, to throw at the heads of his opponents. To suggest that *Pygmalion*’s “subject” is phonetics, or that it offers any kind of cohesive exposition of the science of language, is a patent falsehood, for this treatment is explicitly denied within the play. Just as Eliza’s “triumph” at the garden party between Acts III and IV is removed from the events onstage, so too is any “proper” demonstration of the phonetic arts. Between Acts II and III occur a vast number of scenes, all of which allegedly exist in record, but not onstage. Describing the previous months to Mrs. Higgins, Pickering states in Act III: “Every week—every day almost—there is some new change. [*Closer again*] We keep records of every stage—dozens of gramophone disks and photographs—”⁹⁶ These “records” Pickering describes are necessarily

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*: 659.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*: 663.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*: 735.

formed of multiple media: the process of the actor's phonetic training cannot be contained within any one form and require sustained, educated attention in order to properly understand.⁹⁷

But the play's most explicit reference to the "loss" of its phonetic component occurs at the beginning of Act II. Following the previous scene—in which Higgins and Pickering had decided to meet in Higgins's home in order to discuss their profession—the curtain rises on Higgins's exhibition of his laboratory. But the phonetic demonstration is over; and the meta-theatrical subtext is indicated by the opening lines of the scene:

HIGGINS [*as he shuts the last drawer*] Well, I think that's the whole show.

PICKERING. It's really amazing. I haven't taken half of it in, you know.

HIGGINS. Would you like to go over any of it again?

PICKERING [*rising and coming to the fireplace, where he plants himself with his back to the fire*] No, thank you: not now. I'm quite done up for this morning.

HIGGINS [*following him, and standing beside him on his left*] Tired of listening to sounds?

PICKERING. Yes. It's a fearful strain. I rather fancied myself because I can pronounce twenty-four distinct vowel sounds; but your hundred and thirty beat me. I can't hear a bit of difference between most of them.

HIGGINS [*chuckling, and going over to the piano to eat sweets*] Oh, that comes with practice. You hear no difference at first; but you keep on listening, and presently you find they're all as different as A from B.⁹⁸

During the first act, Higgins had given a "theatrical" demonstration of his talents, in which the science of phonetics became akin to a magician's tricks, for his "audience" was mystified by his methods. Now, he has given a more patient exposition, though this is denied to the audience of *Pygmalion*. Pickering—the audience surrogate for this missing scene—is already exhausted by the effort to understand the lesson properly. The exchange that follows explains why: for

⁹⁷ The reference to the "photographs" is provocative: what possible use could photographs have in Higgins's work? Not only would such images only be able to isolate a single moment in time—and therefore be of limited utility for describing the "athletic articulation" of sound over a period of time—but it would also, for example, require a certain distortion of the mouth and lips to make visible the movements of the tongue to the camera: and therefore such photographs could never represent what they would ideally show. Pickering's reference is undoubtedly ironic, signaling only the ways in which Higgins's work is literally invisible. The reference has another payoff, of course: it may also signal the circulation of actors' photographs in a culture that has recently begun to commodify stage celebrity.

⁹⁸ Shaw, *Pygmalion*: 685–86.

Higgins, the true “art” of phonetics involves the recognition of differences imperceptible to all but the trained expert.

It involves, essentially, turning the homogeneous into the heterogeneous. This is precisely the sort of work that Shaw held as his theatrical and social ideal. Furthermore, Higgins’s final comment turns the distinction inward, to reflect the disparity between the sort of distinctions that Pickering can hear and those that can be represented within the printed page. His example hinges on the distinction between a vowel and a consonant, not between two vowels; but it also depends upon the sequence of the popular printed alphabet, and it is represented within the text of *Pygmalion* not by any kind of phonetic rendering (“ay” or “bee,” perhaps), but by the two Roman capital letters. Higgins’s response thus generates friction between the aural and the visual, and also between theatrical spectatorship and reading. If Higgins truly could have composed an alternative alphabet with one hundred and thirty different vowel signs, it would only be legible to him. It is suggested that he has done this: in the first act, he identifies himself as “Henry Higgins, author of Higgins’s Universal Alphabet.”⁹⁹ This name itself is a paradox: no alphabet can be both “Higgins’s” and “Universal,” for Higgins constantly insists upon separating his own abilities from those without his talents and proclivities.

This point is illustrated clearly within that first act of the play. Early on, Higgins is mistaken for a police informant, as he stands alone, diligently copying down Eliza’s statements. The printed text of the play represents her first attempt to talk to Pickering; referring to the abatement of the rain, she says: “So cheer up, Captain; and buy a flower off a poor girl.”¹⁰⁰ When she is made aware of Higgins’s surveillance, she becomes hysterical, and demands to see

⁹⁹ Ibid.: 680. The way he identifies Pickering is even more problematic, for the Colonel is referred to as the “author of Spoken Sanscrit.” Undoubtedly Higgins refers to an imaginary publication of Pickering’s, but his comment draws on questionable notions of “authorship” and the relationship between printed and spoken texts and languages.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.: 673.

what he has written. The following exchange is printed like this:

THE FLOWER GIRL [*far from reassured*] Then what did you take down my words for? How do I know whether you took me down right? You just shew me what you've wrote about me. [*The note taker opens his book and holds it steadily under her nose, though the pressure of the mob trying to read it over his shoulders would upset a weaker man*]. Whats that? That aint proper writing. I cant read that.

THE NOTE TAKER. I can. [*Reads, reproducing her pronunciation exactly*] "Cheer ap, Keptin; n' baw ya flahr orf a pore gel."

THE FLOWER GIRL [*much distressed*] It's because I called him Captain. I meant no harm.¹⁰¹

What most concerns Eliza is the threat Higgins represents to her identity: "Theyll take away my character," she says, foreseeing what will happen if Higgins does report her to the "authorities." Thus the conclusion that she jumps to after Higgins's reading is likewise understandable: she fears that by calling Pickering "Captain," she was implying or assuming some level of familiarity with someone beyond her social station. And so the rest of the scene becomes her attempt to reestablish ownership over this "character," through a pointedly histrionic display. As Higgins proceeds to give his own demonstration to various bystanders, Eliza retreats to a corner, where she constantly reaffirms her selfhood aloud: "I'm a good girl, I am... He's no right to take away my character. My character is the same to me as any lady's." Eliza's anxiety invokes the anti-theatricality of Diderot's paradox: Higgins's performative text threatens to conflate her moral "character" with the actor's adoption of various artificial personas.

This is an explicit engagement with the opposition between text and performance, particularly as such issues intersect with identity politics, class- and gender-dynamics, and criminal justice. But any straightforward interpretation of this opposition is frustrated by the sort of writing and reading Higgins has performed. Eliza's initial suspicion is never resolved. When she asks how she can "know whether [Higgins] took [her] down right," the answer is simple: she

¹⁰¹ Ibid.: 674–75.

cannot “know”; she can only trust to the fidelity of Higgins’s performed reading. Her response to viewing Higgins’s text—which is not our own text—reveals, surprisingly, that Eliza can read, or, at least, that she can recognize “proper” writing. Higgins’s phonetic text is thus an argument against universal legibility, and an obstacle to any type of “reading” that would render Eliza universally accessible, or even accessible to herself. One of the submerged plotlines of the play, then, might be a third set of lessons: we know that Eliza learns how to speak for herself (in all senses of that phrase), and the “sequel” tells us that she learns how to write in her own personal and uncommercial style, but somewhere between and among all of these processes, and necessarily invisible and inaccessible, are the scenes in which she learns how to read herself.

The first scene of *Pygmalion*, as represented in the printed text, thus performs a self-conscious submergence of its phonetic content. We witness this immediately after Eliza appears onstage, colliding with Freddy and gently chiding him for his clumsiness. Eliza’s first few lines are printed in a half-hearted attempt at dialect, which Shaw drops as soon as Mrs. Eynesford Hill confronts Eliza:

THE MOTHER. How do you know that my son’s name is Freddy, pray?
 THE FLOWER GIRL. Ow, eez yə-ooa san, is e? Wal, fewd dan y’ də-ooty bawmz a mather should, eed now bettern to sawl a pore gel’s flahrzn than ran awy athaht pyin. Will ye-oo py me f’them? [*Here, with apologies, this desperate attempt to represent her dialect without a phonetic alphabet must be abandoned as unintelligible outside London.*]¹⁰²

Eliza’s subsequent dialogue is represented entirely with traditional orthography, except at specific moments when the text must necessarily highlight her pronunciation—as, for example, the two moments quoted earlier, when Eliza taunts Higgins by dropping her “aitches” in the final scene, and when Higgins imitates Eliza in the first scene. But the choice to drop the phonetic representation here has even greater relevancy for Eliza’s transformation. In this act of denial,

¹⁰² Ibid.: 671.

Shaw makes an ironic gesture toward mass-readership: the submergence of Eliza's phonetic "character" affords the text legibility "outside London," but it also naturalizes Eliza's speech, producing "entire sympathy" from the reading audience where none is in fact appropriate.

In order to properly understand this choice, we must refer back to Shaw's complicated history with non-traditional orthography and dialect in the monolithic, authoritative publication of his plays. Though Shaw had made that gesture toward an interest in phonetic spelling in the preface to the *Plays Unpleasant*, the early plays exhibit only an occasional interest in dialect, and rarely use it to distinguish between social classes. It was not until *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* that Shaw's use of dialect becomes a prominent element of his writing. The move makes perfect sense here: *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* offers an explicit engagement with the politics of British Imperialism both in Northern Africa (where the play is set) and the Caribbean, which figures crucially into the pre-history of the play's characters. As a result, the printed text of the play makes liberal use of various sorts of phonetic representations, from the Scottish brogue of the missionary Rankin to the western American accent of Captain Kearney.

But the play's most notable use of dialect concerns the cockney "Hooligan" Felix Drinkwater. In the "notes" to *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* written in 1900, Shaw confesses that this move was made deliberately to objectify Drinkwater for the play's reading audiences, who will be naturally inclined to sympathize with its heroine, the clever Lady Cicely Waynflete. At the same time, the notes constantly reject any "authoritative" pronunciation or spelling: "I must, however, most vehemently disclaim any intention of suggesting that English pronunciation is authoritative and correct. My own tongue is neither American English nor English English, but Irish English; so I am as nearly impartial in the matter as it is in human nature to be."¹⁰³ As the notes continue, Shaw invokes the phonetic expert Henry Sweet—later acknowledged as the

¹⁰³ Shaw, "Notes" to *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*: 422.

inspiration for Henry Higgins in the preface to *Pygmalion*—before confessing that without using Sweet’s highly idiosyncratic alphabet, a “proper” phonetic rendering is impossible. Instead, the choices he makes are made entirely on the grounds of the reader’s habits and psychological proclivities.

...[N]othing annoys a native speaker of English more than a faithful setting down in phonetic spelling of the sounds he utters. He imagines that a departure from conventional spelling indicates a departure from the correct standard English of good society. Alas! this correct standard English of good society is unknown to phoneticians. It is only one of the many figments that bewilder our poor snobbish brains. No such thing exists; but what does that matter to people trained from infancy to make a point of honor of belief in abstractions and incredibilities? And so I am compelled to hide Lady Cicely’s speech under the veil of conventional orthography.¹⁰⁴

In other words: Lady Cicely’s speech is rendered traditionally only to avoid “annoying” readers who will already see in Lady Cicely a reflection of themselves.¹⁰⁵ The point is brought home in the comment that follows: “I need not shield Drinkwater, because he will never read my book.” Shaw may, then, be reflecting on the ways in which class defines readership: Drinkwater “represents” cockney Hooligans, and Shaw expects to have few such individuals purchasing his books.¹⁰⁶ But really, the class argument is irrelevant: Shaw feels free to “objectify” Drinkwater via dialect simply because doing so actively prevents the reader from sympathizing with him. Rather than be “annoyed” by seeing our own intonations in print, we *choose* to view such representations as signifiers of an irrevocable otherness. Drinkwater can never read this book, because the dialect prevents the reader from ever “being” Drinkwater.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.: 423–24.

¹⁰⁵ Lady Cicely, it should be noted, was a role Shaw wrote for Ellen Terry; the assumption of the mass reader’s identification with her is therefore complicated by her *actual* identification with a unique individual. The value of Terry’s identification with Lady Cicely will be taken up briefly in my fourth chapter, for it is the subject of Virginia Woolf’s deconstruction of Terry’s identity in a retrospective essay of 1941.

¹⁰⁶ The irony here runs deep, for Drinkwater is the play’s most voracious, addicted reader of pulp adventure stories—of which *Captain Brassbound’s Conversion* is certainly one. In the play’s conclusion, Drinkwater makes an impassioned plea to have his confiscated “library” returned to him, as his narcotic reading is the only thing that has made his oppressed life tolerable.

Applying this logic to *Pygmalion* allows us to see the subtlety of Shaw's abortive use of dialect to represent Eliza. The move to dialect is initiated in order to register Eliza's otherness, but it is dropped prematurely: Eliza is represented with Lady Cicely's "conventional orthography" before she learns to speak like Lady Cicely. Thus Eliza becomes a problematic mirror: the switch to conventional orthography enables a kind of sympathetic identification even while reminding the reader that such identification might be impossible. This point is then emphasized when Eliza attempts to read Higgins's phonetic notation. Eliza, we discover, reads the same way the assumed "mass readership" of printed texts do—which is to say, she is "annoyed" at seeing her own vocalizations on paper, she insists that such writing is not "proper" (that is, it is both incorrect and morally debased), and she instinctively identifies with a presumed "standard of conduct" (in reading as in social interaction) that only partially applies to her. Over the course of the play, she undoubtedly learns to "read" Higgins's notations, and to regard herself through this alienating lens. The narrative of the play, then, concerns Eliza's severance from mass readership: she separates herself from the presumptive unity of homogenized readers, and subsequently performs a "quaint juxtaposition" of lessons from the LSE and Kew Gardens.

The use of phonetics in *Pygmalion* really directs us toward a necessary process of alienation. The text of the play is inherently incomplete, but this does not simply indicate its proper "fulfillment" onstage, for those events onstage mirror this same alienation. Ultimately, *Pygmalion* focuses on the issue of phonetics only because phonetic education isolates the essence of the theatrical interaction: the offstage rehearsal work between actor and author—as invisible as the submerged phonetic paratext of *Pygmalion*—offers one potential remedy to the stultifying effect of the pedantry and forced repetition of the literary work in isolation, presenting a relationship sustained through time and utterly resistant to universal legibility or

commodification as “text.” And thus Shaw’s accusation of 1917—that Mrs. Patrick Campbell was a “Monster of illiteracy”—was not simply pejorative. Rather, Shaw meant to illustrate the value of *Pygmalion* far beyond the bounds of the performance or the end of Eliza’s story: he declares that every “Master of Letters” requires such a monstrous resistant reader, and that genuine social progress is only enabled by an honest engagement with issues of fundamental difference so neatly embodied by theatrical interaction.

This post-mortem evaluation of their experience with the initial production of *Pygmalion* actually reflects the last piece of direction he had offered her three years earlier. *Pygmalion* opened on April 11, 1914. That morning, Shaw sent Campbell his “FINAL ORDERS.” The early parts of the letter contain minor notes about diction, but Shaw quickly moves toward his criticism of the final scene at the last rehearsal, and of Eliza’s showdown with Higgins:

On the grand finish “I could kick myself” you retreat. The effect last night was “now Ive spoke my piece, anitz your turn, Srerbert.” You must plant yourself in an unmistakable attitude of defiance, or in some way or other *hold* him for his reply. At the end when Higgins says “Oh, by the way Eliza”, bridle your fatal propensity to run like Georgina to anyone who calls you, and to forget everything in an affectionate tête à tête with him. Imagine that he is the author, and be scornful. All that is necessary is to stop on the threshold.¹⁰⁷

Eliza’s defiance is a defiance of the author; the culmination of this story about the training of the perfect actor remains suspended on the “threshold,” on the boundary-line of the stage.

Shaw’s own practices in multiple media—his experiences with both the stage and the page—lead inexorably toward such boundaries. And while, in peace time, Shaw was able to blur such boundaries with a kind of mischievous glee, their reinforcement during the war casts *Pygmalion*’s liminality into a new light. The play was an enormous success during the fateful summer of 1914, before the guns of August began their four-year barrage. Two years later, Shaw

¹⁰⁷ Shaw, letter to Mrs. Patrick Campbell, 11 April 1914, in Shaw, *Bernard Shaw and Mrs. Patrick Campbell*: 179–80. “Srerbert” is “Sir Herbert” Beerbohm Tree. It is curious to note that Shaw represents this elided name phonetically, though these words were not actually spoken aloud.

and Campbell were negotiating the possibility of a renewed run for *Pygmalion*, as Shaw was finally preparing for the play's publication. In a heartbreaking letter of 14 May 1916, Shaw writes to Campbell that the war effort has very literally interfered with the play's text: "My new volume should have been out a month ago, but there was no labor to print it, no labor to bind it, no ships to carry it to London, and no goods train taking less than three months to come to London from Edinburgh, where my printing is done." Shaw offers Campbell an advance copy, warning her not to let it suffer the same fate as *Caesar and Cleopatra*: "[D]o not go dropping it about, as no one must see it until publication is at last achieved. The sequel to *Pygmalion* is on page 191. It will not interest you..." He acknowledges that that essential paratext will fail to make an impact on English culture, and so he concludes by putting it into an ironic performance of his own, mimicking Higgins's attitude in his final lessons to Eliza as he quietly contemplates suicide: "Your handwriting is improved but there is always some little rally before the end. I wonder which is the easiest: charcoal, morphia, or prussic acid. Well goodbye: we shall probably never meet again."¹⁰⁸ *Pygmalion*'s status as a World War I text has rarely been acknowledged, not least because doing so would inevitably cast the play as a nostalgic backward glance, a desperate wish for a society whose benign failings could be solved by an "energetic phonetic enthusiast."

In this letter to Campbell, Shaw acknowledges the play's impotence, even as he recognizes that it holds a necessary function within a culture itself poised at a moment of transformation. This acknowledgement also comes at a time when Campbell herself was fading into irrelevancy: for, as Shaw had feared in 1912, she never again achieved a success on the level of *Pygmalion*. Instead, Shaw's relationship with Campbell seems to mark the inevitable forward

¹⁰⁸ Shaw, letter to Mrs. Patrick Campbell, 14 May 1916, in Shaw, *Bernard Shaw and Mrs. Patrick Campbell*: 209–10.

momentum of the transformations in theatrical production that were overtaking the ineffable art of the late-Victorian actor. As Alan Dent acknowledges, “through their quarter-century century of close friendship, Shaw’s greatness—and with it his popularity—was steadily and triumphantly increasing, while Mrs. Campbell’s was more or less steadily on the wane...”¹⁰⁹

But this letter is significant for another reason as well: for it is here that Shaw offers the first indication that he has begun work on *Heartbreak House*. “I cant write: nothing comes off but screeds for the papers, mostly about this blasted war. I am old and finished. I, who once wrote whole plays *d’un seul trait*, am creeping through a new one (to prevent myself crying) at odd moments, two or three speeches at a time.” In *Heartbreak House*, Shaw would finally articulate his frustration with a culture that placed literacy and civic action in separate houses, and he would do so in the form of a Chekhovian “fantasia,” deploying the revolutionary techniques of “dramatic realism” in order to undermine their political foundations. At the same time, however, the preface to that play would also acknowledge the redemptive potentials of nostalgic theatre in the middle of war:

The reaction from the battle-field produced a condition of hyperaesthesia in which all the theatrical values were altered. Trivial things gained intensity and stale things novelty. The actor, instead of having to coax his audiences out of the boredom which had driven them to the theatre in an ill humor to seek some sort of distraction, had only to exploit the bliss of smiling men who were no longer under fire and under military discipline, but actually clean and comfortable and in a mood to be pleased with anything and everything that a bevy of pretty girls and a funny man, or even a bevy of girls pretending to be pretty and a man pretending to be funny, could do for them.¹¹⁰

Such audiences could attend work like *Pygmalion* with something like a naïve sensitivity to its more subtle aims: a recognition of the actor’s artificiality, to such “hyperaesthetic” audiences, would function not as a soporific but as a restorative. In Eliza’s—or Campbell’s—ineffable,

¹⁰⁹ Shaw, *Bernard Shaw and Mrs. Patrick Campbell*: xii.

¹¹⁰ Shaw, *Heartbreak House*: 47.

paradoxical transformation, “theatrical values” could be altered, and the bored death-drive of the hyper-literate could be countered by a “Monster of illiteracy.”

Shaw’s work demands a sensibility cultivated through an awareness of the particularities of context, including the physical context and the idiosyncratic habits of the individual actor and the resistant reader. His plays culminate in scenes of unresolved opposition, scenes which cannot be properly reconciled within any “standard” rubric of interpretation, but nevertheless demand acknowledgement as fundamental elements of social interaction. A lifelong pacifist, Shaw created works in which texts were weapons, books were missiles, and reading necessarily involved fighting. The theatrical paradigm offered the perfect manifestation of such productive conflict. Positioned uncomfortably between the conventionality of the late-Victorian age and the upheavals of both avant-garde theatre and literary modernism, Shaw was disavowed by his aesthetic contemporaries as easily as he was by his political “allies.” Nevertheless, he offered a potent articulation of the actor’s value even at a moment when such work threatened to disintegrate beneath the weight of changing artistic circumstances—in dramatic publication and theatrical production—and the disasters of modern history.

III.

T. S. ELIOT'S DEATH OF THE ACTOR: THE STATESMAN, THE SAINT, AND THE MISREADING OF "MARIE LLOYD"

This is an age of transition between the music-hall and the revue. The music-hall is older, more popular, and is sanctified by the admiration of the Nineties. It has flourished most vigorously in the North; many of its most famous stars are of Lancashire origin. (Marie Lloyd, if I am not mistaken, has a bit of a Manchester accent.)

- T. S. Eliot, "London Letter," May 1921¹

Marie Lloyd was of London—in fact of Hoxton—and on the stage from her earliest years. It is pleasing to know that her first act was for a Hoxton audience, when at the age of ten she organized the Fairy Bell Minstrels for the Nile Street Mission of the Band of Hope; at which she sang and acted a song entitled Throw Down the Bottle and Never Drink Again, which is said to have converted at least one member of the audience to the cause now enforced by law in America. It was similar audiences to her first audience that supported her to the last.

- T. S. Eliot, "London Letter," November 1922²

Between March of 1921 and November of 1922, T. S. Eliot composed eight "London Letters" for the New York-based *Dial*. As *The Dial's* London Correspondent, Eliot was charged with the responsibility to transmit the most significant London cultural events of those years to an American audience—a responsibility he fulfilled with a characteristic ambivalence, for, read together, the "London Letters" serve as an extraordinary barometer for Eliot's trans-Atlantic anxieties and his obsession with specific critical problems in these crucial years. Though ostensibly devoted to "literary events," the "London Letters" more often indicate the author's fascination with and love for other media, particularly the theatre, the ballet, and the music-hall; when he does discuss recent literary publications, he does so with a deep skepticism, bordering on open hostility. As journalism, the "London Letters" leave much to be desired; as criticism, however, they offer a unique complement to Eliot's more scholarly work. Their informal tone and vaguely associative logic allow us to witness the author flitting lightly between observations

¹ Eliot, "London Letter" (June 1921): 687. Note: the dates appended to the "London Letters" within the text are always one month before their appearance in the *Dial*. This likely reflects the delay between their composition by Eliot and their publication in New York.

² Eliot, "London Letter" (December 1922): 661. Note again the delayed publication. Marie Lloyd died in October; Eliot's essay is dated to November in the text; the essay is published in the December *Dial*.

across a wide variety of different media within the space of a few brief pages. They rarely exhibit the agonizing attempts to enforce a distinctive critical agenda, to prescribe rules and to determine values, that so often characterizes his other criticism. They are valuable both because of this engagement with multiple media and because such an engagement precludes the adoption of the authoritative voice he exhibits almost everywhere else.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Eliot's final "London Letter," a brief obituary notice on the death of the music-hall star Marie Lloyd. For scholars both of twentieth-century performance culture and of literary modernism, this essay—revised and canonized as "Marie Lloyd" in Eliot's 1932 *Selected Essays*—has long served as a critical touchstone, representative at once both of a generalized modernist interest in low-cultural forms and of the poet's more specific fascination with the stage, a concern that would come to dominate his artistic output in subsequent decades. Many of the essay's uncertainties and its perennial critical attractions derive from its treatment of a fundamental theatrical problem: how to understand or assess the actor's representative value, in both aesthetic and social terms. To recent critics, the latter is of far greater concern.³ Eliot declares that Lloyd "represented and expressed that part of the English nation which has perhaps the greatest vitality and interest"—that is, the "lower classes"—and in the loss of this representation and expression, which constituted a kind of "moral superiority," he witnesses the apocalyptic disintegration of English culture under the poisonous influence of a technologized middle class.⁴ Eliot uses Lloyd both to invoke and to bridge the "great divide" between literary modernism and popular culture; her significance lies not only in her unique rapport with her Cockney audiences but also in Eliot's own ability to diagnose and describe cultural ills by constructing Lloyd as a literary surrogate, as a symbol rather than as a human

³ See Faulk, *Music Hall and Modernity*: 43–48; see also Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*: 85–104.

⁴ Eliot, "London Letter" (December 1922): 659–63.

being.

There is a deep irony, of course, in this treatment of Lloyd, one to which Eliot everywhere betrays awareness. For just as he valorizes her connection to a music-hall audience, Eliot also constructs Lloyd in more traditional dramatic terms. As “the most perfect, in her line, of British actresses,” Lloyd achieved an extraordinary naturalistic precision; in stark contrast to his treatment of Nellie Wallace, another music-hall star, Eliot describes not Lloyd’s singing voice nor her improvisational creativity but rather the sociological exactness of her characterizations, the “selection and concentration” of gestures she used to represent her subjects.⁵ Both an “expressive” personality and a “perfect” mimic, Lloyd seems to defy critical prescriptions. The essay offers multiple “readings” of Lloyd partly as a recognition that her art—the art of the actor—defines a medium that escapes the rigid aesthetics of Eliot’s essential manifesto, “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Indeed, Marie Lloyd also seems to define the very limit of Eliot’s own critical abilities: “Marie Lloyd’s art will I hope be discussed by more competent critics of the theatre than I,” he admits.⁶ By announcing this inability to discuss the theatre competently, Eliot draws attention to the distinction between text and performance. His ability to assess drama in formalist criticism (exhibited powerfully elsewhere) is frustrated by his inability to account for theatrical performance—or, more specifically, for the work of the actor. This problem manifests itself quite literally in his acknowledged misreadings of Marie Lloyd’s act—and even, as we see in the epigraphs above, his complete failure to “place” Lloyd geographically and temporally. In the essay’s original form, the poet concludes: “You will see that the death of Marie Lloyd has had a depressing effect, and that I am quite incapable of taking

⁵ Ibid.: 661.

⁶ Ibid.: 662.

any interest in any literary events in England in the last two months, if any have taken place.”⁷

Undoubtedly, the most significant of these “literary events” concerned Eliot’s own work. During his tenure as a correspondent for *The Dial*, Eliot was deeply immersed in the composition of a poem called “He Do The Police in Different Voices,” its title culled from Charles Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*, from a scene in which a disadvantaged young man literally performs a reading from a sensationalist newspaper to an illiterate lower-class audience. By the time of this poem’s publication in October of 1922, however, Eliot had submerged and eliminated many of its performative elements at the advice of Ezra Pound. The text that appeared that fall in *The Criterion* and *The Dial* seemed to establish itself much more explicitly in a literary-historical tradition, and it did so under a new, mythic title: *The Waste Land*. Marie Lloyd’s death, however, upstaged this work. In both his essay and his poem, Eliot describes the disappearance of a presence that elides both cultural and historical boundaries; but unlike, perhaps, that of Osiris or the Fisher King, Lloyd’s death promised no restoration and bore no transcendent “meaning.” It indicated instead the curious stakes of theatrical art, in which—for Eliot—death is enacted as a reinstatement of legibility, and the actor plays her part against a script that reads like an obituary.

In this chapter, I argue that Eliot’s interest in the theatre was generated out of this limit: the intersection between critical reading and theatrical performance. Throughout his career, the productive contrast between the poet-critic’s work and the actor’s work remained a consistent, if minor, element in his critical theory. In lectures given at Harvard University in 1932 and 1933 and later published as *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Eliot struggled to articulate a social “use” for poetry, ultimately concluding: “From one point of view, the poet aspires to the condition of the music-hall comedian. Being incapable of altering his wares to suit a prevailing taste, if there be any, he naturally desires a state of society in which they may become popular,

⁷ Ibid.: 663.

and in which his own talents will be put to the best use.”⁸ The idea of the music-hall actor—drawn from Marie Lloyd’s example—therefore becomes a medium for Eliot’s continued engagement with the problems of “personality” and the production of literary texts—that is, the artistic “wares” of the poet. From this point forward, Eliot’s creative output was devoted almost exclusively to the stage: 1935 saw the composition and production of Eliot’s seminal tragedy, *Murder in the Cathedral*. His subsequent plays—from *The Family Reunion* (1939) to *The Elder Statesman* (1958)—present a gradual move toward theatrical naturalism and also a more explicit engagement with the conventions of the bourgeois stage. In a series of meta-theatrical gestures, Eliot constantly outlines the paradox of the actor, who is at once a human being and an aesthetic object. As Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly indicates in *The Cocktail Party* (1948), “There’s a loss of personality; / [...] You no longer feel quite human. / You’re suddenly reduced to the status of an object— / A living object, but no longer a person. / It’s always happening, because one is an object / As well as a person.”⁹ Deploying the fraught terms of Eliot’s own criticism—particularly that issue of “personality”—the philosopher-therapist Sir Henry uses a theatrical metaphor to diagnose and treat many of the problems that the play’s other characters confront.

The tension between the poetic text and performance is most visibly enacted in Eliot’s “death of the actor,” an action that simultaneously validates the actor’s lost “personality” while also enabling acts of textual transmission and critical reading. This zero-sum encounter between the page and the stage inevitably produces a kind of “successful failure” in Eliot’s theatrical work, a persistent sense of an inadequate memorial to an artistic “personality.” It is, therefore, with Eliot’s final play—his most literal “successful failure”—that I want to begin.

⁸ Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*: 32.

⁹ Eliot, *The Cocktail Party*: 134.

distinction between prose and poetic drama: a naturalistic (or “prose”) surface-action veils the spiritual journeys embarked upon by his visionary protagonists, whose momentary episodes of high-poetic rhapsody serve to sever them, irrevocably, from the rest of the figures onstage.¹¹ This pattern is distinctly aestheticist, elitist, and almost anti-theatrical, for it prioritizes a “poetic” imagination whose verbal agility transcends the material realities of the stage. However, in “descending” toward naturalism, Eliot blurs the distinction between “levels”: *The Cocktail Party* (1949), *The Confidential Clerk* (1953), and *The Elder Statesman* achieve a verse-form that reproduces the rhythms of contemporary speech, but they also obstruct the removal of the “poetic” vantage-point, producing a distinct unease. Though the pattern is still visible, it is corrupt and compromised; as a result, the aesthetic achievement of the last play is muted, and its use of convention becomes almost a submission to stereotype.¹²

The assumption of this narrative trajectory to Eliot’s theatrical career, it seems, actually predated the composition and production of *The Elder Statesman*. From the moment of its first appearance, the play seemed to highlight the “failure” of the aesthetic promise Eliot held three decades earlier. In 1959, Frank Kermode published a review in *The Spectator* of Faber and Faber’s first edition of *The Elder Statesman* entitled “What Became of Sweeney?” Kermode’s essay begins with a stark declaration:

With *The Elder Statesman* Mr. Eliot has brought us to a place we could not have expected to reach when we started. We may see how the road runs from the fragmentary marvels of *Sweeney Agonistes* to the finished, fluent *agones* and subtly complete recognitions of the latest plays; but it does not follow that this is the necessary, the only possible, or even the right road. Why was this one built, and not another?¹³

Kermode’s subsequent review actually provides a standardizing account of the newly-

¹¹ Smith, *T. S. Eliot’s Dramatic Theory and Practice*: 32–34.

¹² Jones, *The Plays of T. S. Eliot*: 205–8.

¹³ Kermode, “What Became of Sweeney?”: 513.

institutionalized canon of modern drama from Ibsen through Yeats; its major turn is the moment when Eliot distinguishes himself from Yeats by pursuing a popular audience. Deeply influenced by anti-naturalistic conventions of ritual, dance, and Noh theatre, Yeats “wrote for ‘an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society’—‘not a theatre but the theatre’s anti-self.’ After *Sweeney* and the unrepeatable compromise of *Murder in the Cathedral*, Mr. Eliot chose the theatre. Yeats remained constant to his rejection of naturalism and the mass audience.”¹⁴ What is most distinctive about Kermode’s essay on *The Elder Statesman*, however, is its total lack of interest in that play itself; about the text he is ostensibly reviewing, Kermode says only that “it fails to satisfy; if we want to know why, and where we have got to, we can take our bearings both from Ibsen and Chekhov and from Yeats.”¹⁵ In Kermode’s very early reading of Eliot’s entire theatrical career—which is really a standardizing account of the newly-institutionalized canon of modern drama—the failure of *The Elder Statesman* is already foregone conclusion.

Unsurprisingly, this is the view that has dominated criticism of Eliot’s theatrical work ever since. In his recent survey of Eliot’s engagement with popular culture, David E. Chinitz makes much of Eliot’s fascination with the theatre and the music-hall, but concludes his brief glance at *The Elder Statesman* with an expected dismissal: “Though there may be wisdom in this very late play of penitence, forgiveness, and love, Eliot stands awkwardly with one foot in and one foot out of the theater, to the satisfaction of neither his critics nor his audiences.”¹⁶ Of all of Eliot’s work, *The Elder Statesman* claims the slimmest critical bibliography; even the more generous appraisals seem bound to assert that the play either fails on the point of a great achievement, or else achieves a point of minor worth. For Raymond Williams, the play is a

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*: 145.

“tragedy of another kind, in which [Eliot’s] powerful voice... finds and then loses, in experiment and accommodation, a new and serious dramatic form,”¹⁷ while Carol H. Smith merely asserts that while *The Elder Statesman* “soften[s] the discrepancies between the surface action and the underlying meanings, the fundamental dramatic conception behind the play is the same one that has operated in each play.” In other words, the play simply dulls the productive jarring Eliot achieved in his earlier work, while delivering much the same “spiritual” content.¹⁸ Common to all attempts to assess this play is a sense that Eliot’s potential had already been foreclosed, that his “moment” was past, that he had taken, as Kermode states, a divergent, determinist path some thirty years previously.

In the section that follows, I will re-situate this play as central to an alternative reading of Eliot’s theatrical endeavors, one that focuses on Eliot’s conception not of theatrical form, but of theatrical process—specifically, on the work of the actor, who becomes a vital medium for the renegotiation of the audience’s relationship to the work of art. Eliot’s interest in the theatre persisted *in spite of* his formalist approach to dramatic composition, not because of it. If he was attracted to the popular stage (as his undeniable pride at the success of *The Cocktail Party* will attest¹⁹), it was not because that theory of “levels” allowed him to smuggle spiritual “messages” into conventional plots by sustaining a fine distinction between the play’s naturalistic surface and its poetic dialogue. Rather, Eliot was attracted to the bourgeois stage because the challenges

¹⁷ Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*: 198.

¹⁸ Smith, *T. S. Eliot’s Dramatic Theory and Practice*: 215. Smith’s early work is one of very few books dedicated exclusively to Eliot’s drama, and, drawing almost entirely on Eliot’s own dramatic criticism and theory, it offers the first and most explicit survey of the ways that all of Eliot’s drama subscribes to that theory of “levels.” In a brief essay thirty years later, Smith reconfigured her reading of *The Elder Statesman*: here, its worth becomes largely biographical, a “love poem” written for his wife Valerie, as the play’s dedication would seem to suggest. The essay ends on an endearing acknowledgment of the play’s mediocre value: “And while we might wish for a more perfect play, we can all feel joy that a life of such high achievement ended with such happiness.” (Smith, “*The Elder Statesman*: Its Place in Eliot’s Theater”: 151.)

¹⁹ See Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*: 147.

faced by those who mediate between these “levels”—the actors who speak this poetry aloud, and who establish a unique rapport with their audiences—were central to the work he was attempting to achieve. As Hugh Kenner has written: “At the heart of each of the postwar plays lies a problem analogous with [the] disquieting freedom enjoyed by the actors”;²⁰ but in Eliot’s final play, the actor’s “baffled” inability to inform Eliot’s verses becomes the most necessary element of its compromised successes. In *The Elder Statesman*, a self-conscious treatment of acting provides a critique of naturalistic theatrical space and determinist plot-making. The assumptions of fourth-wall realism are contrasted with the foundations of the Greek theatre, and the offstage death of the play’s title figure evokes a deep irony around notions of ritual sacrifice, which reflects back upon all of Eliot’s previous work. By “choosing the theatre” so obviously in *The Elder Statesman*, Eliot does not submit to artistic conventions but rather questions the stakes we have invested in the conventions of the dramatic and theatrical tradition, and *The Elder Statesman* therefore indicates what is lost when aesthetic prescriptions are rigorously upheld.

The Elder Statesman, in brief, tells of the retirement, withdrawal, and death of its title character, Lord Claverton. Over the course of the play, Claverton’s public identity of thirty years is revealed as nothing more than a mask, a self-conscious attempt to distance himself from the sins of his youth—sins which are revisited now, at the end of his life, when he has finally begun to put away that public persona. As such, it is a deeply conventional work, built entirely around a gradual revelation leading to what Kermode calls a “subtly complete recognition”: Claverton is led to redemption and expiation through an acceptance and ownership of his “true” identity. Of all of Eliot’s plays, *The Elder Statesman* is thus the most clearly indebted to a Greek forebear. Of course, Eliot’s earlier plays are similarly built upon Greek models; *The Cocktail Party* and *The*

²⁰ Kenner, “For Other Voices”: 37.

Confidential Clerk also revolve around similar moments of transcendent awareness, but those plays adopt the conventions of romantic comedy and farce in order to destabilize the significance of those acts of Aristotelian “recognition.”²¹ In *The Elder Statesman*, on the other hand, this recognition bears an extraordinary gravity, producing an excess of sentiment out of keeping with its banal situation. Noting this, Raymond Williams deploys Eliot’s own critical vocabulary against him, declaring that the play’s “emotion” is hardly justified by its “rough correlative sketch.”²² While the form of Greek tragedy is admirably upheld, it seems emptied of its significance and its universalizing force.

The disparity that constitutes the play’s ostensible “failure” actually indicates the important conditions of its enactment: where its source seems to call for the sacrificial death of a mythic leader, it offers instead the self-conscious confessions of a professional actor, sadly acknowledging the limits of his abilities and of the medium he can no longer sustain. By literally staging the actor’s death, *The Elder Statesman* draws a contrast between the symbolic value of a ritual sacrifice and the more prosaic, though irreducibly present loss of an individual personality. As such, the play draws into question the assumptions we make when encountering it: it refuses to be “read” (critically or inter-textually) as anything but a “failure,” but it simultaneously indicates the potential for a more redemptive reading-in-performance, in the actor’s realization of the text through an insistent awareness of the material context of its reading.

As Eliot openly acknowledged, *The Elder Statesman* is derived from Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*. That play had long fascinated Eliot with its potential for a modern restaging; twenty

²¹ In *The Confidential Clerk*, for example, the “recognition” is preceded by a jumble of misunderstandings produced by the cliché of the foundling or orphan child. While undoubtedly more serious in conception, Eliot’s play nevertheless borrows heavily from the same tradition that produced *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a play in which the “discovery” of self-identity is rendered as ridiculous as its punning title.

²² Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*: 198. Insofar as Williams’s assessment is characteristic of most critiques of the play, an essay might well have been written entitled “Claverton and His Problems.”

years earlier, he had claimed that *The Family Reunion* (based largely on Aeschylus's *The Libation Bearers*, though the disturbed chronology of its family-tragedy borrows from the *Agamemnon* and *The Eumenides* as well) needed to be "completed by an *Orestes* or an *Oedipus at Colonus*."²³ The *Oedipus at Colonus* was the last of Sophocles' Theban plays in order of composition; and it offers the tragedian's most powerful engagement with theatricality and the actor's problematic presence. The Oedipus of *Oedipus at Colonus* is elderly, having suffered long at the hands of fate for the patricide and incest he committed in his youth. Bitter and exhausted, he stumbles onto sacred ground outside Athens accompanied by his daughter, Antigone; resolved never to leave that place, he urges Antigone to make propitiatory offerings to the Eumenides at the advice of the Athenians. Meanwhile, he endures visitations by both Creon and Polyneices, who ask him to return and die in Thebes: for an oracle has proclaimed that though Oedipus brought a plague upon Thebes for his sins, and though he was forced to live a life of exile in fruitless expiation of those sins, the land in which he dies will nevertheless be blessed by the gods. Enraged and unrepentant, Oedipus spurns the men, declares himself a victim of cruel fate, and turns instead to Theseus, king of Athens, in his final hour. Acting according the oracle's prescription, Theseus accompanies Oedipus into the sacred grove, and he is the sole witness of Oedipus's disappearance, which confers that eternal blessing upon Athens.

Oedipus's principal choice, then, is the location of his death: like Aeschylus's *The Eumenides*, *Oedipus at Colonus* is concerned with the repentance and purgation of personal guilt only in service of the inauguration of the (Athenian) state. "Salvation" is not conceived of in personal or spiritual terms: as Creon and Polyneices make clear, the blessing that Oedipus's death confers guarantees simply military superiority to the people and authoritarian legitimacy to the leaders of the *polis*. The play is thus thoroughly Aristotelian in its relative lack of interest in

²³ Eliot, "Letter to E. Martin Browne, 19 March, 1938": 107.

Oedipus's character: though his frustration is articulated in several moving monologues, Oedipus never redeems himself, and he remains, throughout, defined by his circumstances and his actions, not by his intentions. The unitary action of the play is that choice of the death site, but it is a choice not made out of any ideological motivation: unlike his daughter, Oedipus is no martyr, and his death never takes on the symbolic weight that is so palpable in the earlier *Antigone*. What is at stake is Oedipus's ontological status: *Oedipus at Colonus* presents a paradox of presence, its outcome determined by what Oedipus is, not by what he represents.

Thus, it is essential that his death occurs offstage, and that it is witnessed only by Theseus: by enacting the disappearance of this problematic presence and its diffusion into the ground of Athens at large, *Oedipus at Colonus* challenges the normativity of acts of spectatorship in the constitution of "meaning." The grove of the Eumenides is revealed as nothing more or less than a theatrical set. The transition between *mimesis* and *diegesis* (effected by the messenger's story of Oedipus and Theseus's long walk) marks the diffusion of the actor's presence onstage into the stage itself, the frame on which that subsequent act of *diegesis* plays out.²⁴ If the messenger's monologue seems to offer a kind of portability to Oedipus's death, abstracting it and presenting the possibility for narrative retelling, the monologue is nevertheless contained again within the bounds of a newly *present* theatrical space, sanctified by the actor's disappearance. The play is, as Samuel Weber has suggested, a validation of the theatrical medium at its most powerful and problematic, for it concerns itself with the fundamental inaccessibility of its own singular subject:

Whether as the nonconvergence of the 'that one, I,' or as the 'threshold' at whose limit theatrical events take place, the messenger's tale points to a happening that divides the place it 'takes' while 'moving' it somewhere else. This division or cut defines the place of death as one that, however concealed it may be, remains potentially, if grimly, theatrical. And vice versa. Theater, as a medium that cannot

²⁴ Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*: 149–51.

be contained in a story, involves a space that always tends to be a place of death. Or rather, a place where life brushes up against *being* dead.²⁵

The significance of action and medium in *Oedipus at Colonus* indicates that the obvious “failures” of *The Elder Statesman* result from the conditions of a presumptive naturalism. The translation of the *Oedipus at Colonus* into a contemporary setting involves not simply transplanting basic theatrical “types” or roles into their modern equivalents, but also accommodating for a shift in reception strategies that are preconditioned by an inherited understanding of genre and form. The dominant assumptions of both literary and theatrical naturalism rest upon the “reality” of the fourth wall: the world presented in the naturalistic work has a kind of completeness that segregates it entirely from the life of its audience and permits its interpretation by that objective audience. But this notion of a “complete world” is central to a *literary* awareness of dramatic form, as Eliot knew: his early criticism of Ben Jonson lauded the Elizabethan dramatist’s ability to use “superficiality” in aesthetic form to create just such a hermetic world.²⁶ In thus compromising these assumptions—in coming to rest somewhere between the ritual of Greek tragedy and the slice-of-life “reality” of popular twentieth-century theatre—*The Elder Statesman* denies access to a single rubric that might determine its meaning, remaining carefully balanced between the multiple genres and media into which it may be read.

If we draw a direct equivalence between *The Elder Statesmen* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, we see only the ways in which Eliot’s work constitutes an almost parodic deflation of Sophocles. In place of the tragic hero-king, conqueror of the Sphinx and savior of the city brought low through the transgression of an ancient taboo, *The Elder Statesman* offers an unassuming British

²⁵ Weber, *Theatricality as Medium*: 157–58.

²⁶ See Eliot, “Ben Jonson”: 99. According to the young critic Eliot, what “makes his plays worth reading” is Jonson’s ability to create “his own world, a world from which his followers, as well as the dramatists who were trying to do something wholly different, are excluded.” Such pronouncements lead directly to the essay’s conclusion, where he remarks that in Jonson’s work one sees a transformation of the theatre into the text, “of a form of art... into ‘literature.’” *Ibid.*: 103.

success-story, an Oxford graduate who married up, achieved moderate results in politics, retired wealthy into finance, and produced two children whose similar career-trajectories appear on the outset to be decidedly upper-middle-class. In place of the patricide, Eliot presents a late-night hit-and-run of a homeless transient lying in the road, whom autopsy reveals to be dead well before the collision happens. In place of the incest, we have only a potential breach-of-promise suit in Claverton's youth, settled easily out of court with a music-hall star who goes on to achieve a quiet, suburban respectability in her later years. And in place of the fraught ground of the Eumenides, we have instead "Badgley Court," a "*convalescent* home / With the atmosphere of an hotel— / Nothing about it to suggest the clinic— / Everything about it to suggest recovery," which is presided over by the comically dominating British matron "Mrs. Piggott."²⁷ Everything about Eliot's "adaptation" emphasizes this comparative insignificance: in its conception, it seems to indicate a kind of mournful, modern inadequacy, a "failure" of scale, and an authentic, spiritual presence denied by the play's contemporary idiom.

All of this, however, accounts only for a certain abstract, inter-textual, scholarly value to Eliot's final work; it does not excuse the play's "failure to satisfy" (to borrow again from Kermode) the intellectual or emotional interests of a contemporary audience. Part of this, perhaps, derives from the play's refusal to amplify the historical stakes of its protagonist's fall. Eliot never depicts Claverton as a relic of the past, nor does he suggest that Claverton's "failure" results from a charismatic ambition out of joint with the depersonalizing spirit of the times: this is no *Death of a Statesman*.²⁸ If anything, Claverton exhibits the opposite tendency, a desire to withdraw from a life in which he maintained a continual relevance, almost in spite of himself:

²⁷ Eliot, *The Elder Statesman*: 300.

²⁸ Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* premiered in New York in February of 1949, and Elia Kazan's production was imported to London—where Eliot may have encountered it—by that July. The play was an immediate success, winning the Tony Award for Best Play that year. Undoubtedly Eliot would have been familiar with Miller's work: he and Miller shared Broadway the following year, when Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* won its own Tony.

when his future son-in-law quotes an article on his recent retirement that expresses a hope that Claverton's "sagacious counsel will long continue / To be at the disposal of the Government in power," Claverton counters with the modest dismissal quoted at the head of this section.

As a result, the overwhelming tendency is to read *The Elder Statesman* against its Greek forbear: rather than a play whose object is the sanctification or blessing of an entire city, Eliot's play seems directed at the personal redemption of this minor public man as he comes to terms with his "true self." As Carol H. Smith observes: "Lord Claverton must strip himself of his false roles as distinguished statesman, retired executive of 'public companies,' and irreproachable father and husband, and accept the truth about his real nature and his shabby past. Only by confession to his daughter Monica can he fully experience self-acceptance in the peace of her forgiveness and love."²⁹ This reading, of course, coincides easily with the assumption of a religious motivation for Eliot's later theatrical career: recognizing that a truly "sublime" classical tragedy is impossible according to a Christian worldview (for the lives of Christian martyrs, as *Murder in the Cathedral* acknowledges not follow the codes of Aristotelian tragedy; the saint has no dawning self-awareness nor mournful "fall"), Eliot abandons grandiosity and broad social relevance in his modern Christian plays, preferring minor epiphanies that emphasize the transience of this world and the transcendence of the individual soul.

The problems with reading *The Elder Statesman* as such a "personal" play lie not only in the awkwardness of according this view with Eliot's fascination with the Greeks and his continual return to Greek models. (Smith, for example, simply ignores the significance of Oedipus's death as she charts the ways that Claverton's relationship with Monica parallels

²⁹ Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice*: 216.

Oedipus's relationship with Antigone.³⁰) Rather, the problems stem from the basic incompatibility between this view and the theatrical form Eliot has chosen: to transform the message of these plays to one that emphasizes individual transcendence and spiritual fulfillment means prioritizing a dynamic within the plays that is both anti-social and anti-theatrical. It would mean, in a sense, suggesting that Eliot never did take that divergent path, and that the goals of his later plays—in spite of their naturalistic façade—remain resolutely antagonistic to the mainstream, and similarly opposed to the conditions of the popular theatre, as those of Yeats's plays. This contradiction would thus seem accidental: either Eliot held a very basic misunderstanding of Greek tragedy and the social dynamic of the Greek theatre, or else he was totally ignorant of the effects of the contemporary naturalistic stage. Neither was the case.

These apparent disparities or contradictions are meant not to indicate the deficiencies of Eliot's medium but rather to celebrate its achievements. The "stripping away" of Claverton's social masks leads to a metatheatrical turn: in its final moments the play produces not the sterling, purified and individualized "elder statesman" recognizing his "real nature," but rather a theatrical actor of an earlier age, taking his final bow. With this actor, the play gestures toward a medium that refuses to be subordinated beneath any unitary will, either authorial or interpretive; with his death, it witnesses the reinstatement of conventional aesthetic boundaries made newly visible in the light of such a potentially subversive personality. And while this apparent restoration of "literary" form incites the play's critical denigration, the emphasis on the theatrical medium and the actor's lifetime work indicates instead the sort of event that, by "taking place," is rendered unrepeatable.

The meta-theatrical focus of *The Elder Statesman* is visible from the play's first

³⁰ Ibid.: 230–31.

The meanings are different. Look! We're back in the room
 That we entered only a few minutes ago.
 Here's an armchair, there's the table;
 There's the door... and I hear someone coming:
 It's Lambert with the tea...

[Enter LAMBERT with trolley]

and I shall say, 'Lambert,
 Please let his lordship know that tea is waiting'.

LAMBERT. Yes, Miss Monica.

MONICA. I'm very glad, Charles

That you *can* stay to tea.

[Exit LAMBERT]

—Now we're in the public world.³³

In their poetic rhapsody, Monica and Charles echo a common theme of Eliot's poetry: the collapse of semantic distinction and the failure of the signifier. The ubiquity of this theme marks it as an essential "poetic"—and textual—device: thus, it presupposes a condition of reading in which such a metaphoric, conceptual union of two spirits corresponds to the reader's own encounter with the text, abstracted from its physical surroundings. But by placing such sentiments in the mouths of two highly-differentiated theatrical figures—whose individuality is granted not only by their physical presence onstage but also by their adherence to a typology of theatrical characters (that is, the "frustrated lovers")—Eliot immediately ironizes the emotion. The sudden effect renders the couple as trite, their sentiments as insipid, and their awareness of their own situation as painfully unconscious: these are precisely the "impossible exchanges" whose "stilted air" is the principle downfall of the play, according to David E. Chinitz.³⁴ What is remarkable about the ensuing comment, then, is the way in which Monica explicitly recognizes the theatricality of the moment. With that "Look!," she registers a distinction between the "private world" of their inarticulate, "poetic" exchange and the "public world" of the stage: she draws attention to the "room/ That we entered only a few minutes ago," inverting the assumption

³³ Ibid.: 298.

³⁴ Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*: 145.

upon which Charles had opened the scene—namely, that by entering this room, he was leaving the public world of their day on the town, and that he would finally have the chance to communicate with Monica alone.

In the observations that follow, Monica places the conventions of drawing-room naturalism into question. The first convention, of course, is that apparent privacy granted by the fourth wall: Monica draws attention to the contingency of this space, the way that their actions here are no less determined than in the restaurant they had visited earlier. Next, she indicates the scenery, the “armchair” and the “table” onstage that are used to designate the space as a “drawing room.” Springing directly from her linguistic musing with Charles, she points out the paradox of theatrical semiosis on a naturalistic stage: here are an actual, physical armchair and a table that also represent an armchair and a table in the “world” of the play—these are things standing in for themselves. But the moment also highlights a disparity between the conventions of classical poetic drama and twentieth-century naturalism, as Eliot would have known: his early essays on Elizabethan drama betray an obvious awareness of the ways in which much poetry of the Elizabethan stage serves the function of supplementing an inadequate physical scenography. This is a convention that he willfully abandoned in his later plays: in describing the shift he made between *The Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party*, Eliot wrote that he “laid down for [him]self the ascetic rule to avoid poetry which could not stand the test of strict dramatic utility.” Eliot refused to compose verse for the later plays that could not be seen to motivate the action or the plot: “I tried to keep in mind that in a play, from time to time, something should happen; that the audience should be kept in the constant expectation that something is going to happen; and that, when it does happen, it should be different, but not too different, from what the audience

has been led to expect.”³⁵ In Monica’s line there is the barest suggestion, then, of that earlier “mode” of theatrical writing, in which a physical *mise-en-scène* is supplied by spoken lines: Monica’s “armchair” and “table” are brought into existence by a kind of speech-act. But in deploying such lines on an apparently naturalistic stage in performance, Eliot highlights a conflict between the presence of these objects and the inadequacy of the labels Monica uses to announce them: the line is, strictly speaking, absent of that “dramatic utility” except for its ability to indicate the theatrical reality of her situation.

This movement toward a metatheatrical awareness culminates in the entry of Lambert, Eliot’s most explicit adoption of theatrical convention. Lambert is, of course, the stage-servant. He serves no purpose in the play aside from the mediation of the space: through his actions (the bringing of tea, the announcement of visitors), Lambert supports the naturalistic foundations of the play by consistently drawing attention to the offstage “reality” of Claverton’s home. Somewhere, Lambert suggests, there is a kitchen; elsewhere a street-door and an adjoining hall, where visitors are made to await their reception into Claverton’s presence. However, by having Monica herself announce Lambert’s entry, her dialogue takes on the quality of a staged reading of a theatrical script, acknowledging the essential unreality of this guarantor of offstage “reality.” “It’s Lambert with the tea...” announces the servant’s entrance,³⁶ which Monica follows by quoting herself: “and I shall say, ‘Lambert, / Please let his lordship know that tea is waiting’.”³⁷ Monica’s metatheatrical gesture registers the reinstatement of “dramatic utility”: the lovers’

³⁵ Eliot, “Poetry and Drama”: 91–92.

³⁶ This was not the first time Eliot deployed such a device: in *The Confidential Clerk*, the rascally businessman B. Kaghan announces “Enter B. Kaghan” each time he appears.

³⁷ There are echoes, again, of the theatrical self-consciousness of J. Alfred Prufrock. The “dramatic utility” of Monica’s script stands thus in stark contrast to Prufrock’s recognition that his own dialogue would be unmotivated: “Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets / And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?...” If he never “takes the stage,” as the poem would seem to suggest, it is likely because he recognizes that his problem is one of genre and medium. See: Eliot, *Collected Poems: 1909–1962*: 5.

inarticulate fumbling for words is resolved by this adherence to the “script,” which serves to restore the priority of onstage action. By directing Lambert to bring the message to Lord Claverton, Monica restores a sense that “something is going to happen.” Lambert immediately fulfills his purpose: with his prompt response, the priority of the naturalistic conventions he represents is reasserted. Thus, the passage ends: the “stilted air” of the lovers’ poetic dialogue is trumped by a self-conscious assertion of the theatrical “reality.”

Monica’s brief epiphany thus outlines both of the essential circumstances of this stage: first, she highlights the contingency of the set, whose apparent reality is upheld by a paradox of simultaneous presentation and representation; next, she evokes the determinism of the script, which, obedient to the rules of the stage and to that careful flirtation with audience expectation, triumphs easily over the unfocused “poetry” of personal transcendence. It is, of course, essential that Monica’s awareness has no immediate outlet: Eliot stops just short of casting an ironic pall over the entirety of the play, for it is vital to the overall effect of *The Elder Statesman* that a delicate balance be maintained. But in this brief exchange, the play indicates that its stakes actually exist in dialogue with its medium: its language is only articulate insofar as its objects remain defined by theatrical circumstances.

Such circumstances are immediately illustrated by Monica’s description of her father in the moment that follows Lambert’s exit. According to Monica, even her father’s own “private” existence has been determined by the physical circumstances of the theatre: “In the life he’s led, he’s never had to be alone. / And when he’s been at home in the evening, / Even when he’s reading, or busy with his papers / He needs to have someone else in the room with him, / Reading too—or just sitting—someone / Not occupied with anything that can’t be interrupted. /

Someone to make a remark to now and then. / And mostly it's been me.”³⁸ In contrast to herself and Charles—who seem to outline a schism between “poetry” and theatre, between the independent “reading” of the soul in meditation and the staged “reading” of the theatrical script—Claverton is defined exclusively by his presence among others, “[e]ven when he’s reading, or busy with his papers.” For Claverton, those warring priorities do not exist: though the “private world” and the “public world” that Monica and Charles introduce thus seem to lead inexorably toward an anti-social (or anti-theatrical) thesis for this play, Claverton’s presence seems to disrupt this opposition. For Claverton, silent reading is also social reading; to be “busy with his papers” is always also to be emphatically present, inhabiting space, and making demands of others.

Claverton’s entry seems to mark a significant shift in the play’s engagement with its medium. The entrance would carry significant weight in any circumstance, of course—the appearance onstage of a title character, especially one who has already passively determined so much of the dialogue, will always initiate a powerful shift in tone—and Eliot here exhibits a strong familiarity with the formal handling of exposition and rising tension. But the true significance of Claverton’s character is visible immediately: Claverton enters with a book.

MONICA. You’ve been very long in coming, Father. What have you been doing?
 LORD CLAVERTON. Good afternoon, Charles. You might have guessed, Monica,
 What I’ve been doing. Don’t you recognize this book?
 MONICA. It’s your engagement book.
 LORD CLAVERTON. Yes, I’ve been brooding over it.³⁹

In response to Monica’s deterministic reference to a kind of scripted dialogue, Claverton introduces an object that performs largely the same function as the play-text: the engagement book, a convenient tool for a busy man, which subjugates his actions to the will of the text.

³⁸ Eliot, *The Elder Statesman*: 299.

³⁹ *Ibid.*: 301.

Claverton's subsequent monologue outlines what will become the play's dominant theme: there is a "nothingness" that exists at the boundary between such scripted actions and the uninhibited will of the actor, and it is into this "nothingness" that Claverton must go. When Monica chides Claverton for insisting upon remaining "busy with his papers" even after his retirement, he tells her that he has rather been

Contemplating nothingness. Just remember:
 Every day, year after year, over my breakfast,
 I have looked at this book—or one just like it—
 You know I keep the old ones on a shelf together;
 I could look in the right book, and find out what I was doing
 Twenty years ago, to-day, at this hour of the afternoon.
 If I've been looking at this engagement book, to-day,
 Not over breakfast, but before tea,
 It's the empty pages that I've been fingering—
 The first empty pages since I entered Parliament.
 I used to jot down notes of what I had to say to people:
 Now I've no more to say, and no one to say it to.
 I've been wondering... how many more empty pages?⁴⁰

If Claverton's speech seems to register a kind of disappointment—the quiet resignation of a man who knows he will no longer say important things to important people—it nevertheless also instigates a challenge to the regime under which he has operated his entire life. Unlike Monica and Charles, Claverton does not recognize a difference between the "private" and "public" worlds, nor does he suggest any distinction between the two orders of semiosis. Rather, Claverton articulates a movement into pure presence: the last years of his life are reduced not to a determinist text but rather to material pages. Claverton's "book of life" has the direct, physical utility of an actor's script. His shelf of engagement books never gestures toward the "meaning" implicit in other forms of biography—including, of course, the traditions of obituary and hagiography, which Eliot activates in "Marie Lloyd" and *Murder in the Cathedral*. Instead, Claverton's book serves only as a registry of actions taken and words spoken, a prescriptive

⁴⁰ Ibid.: 301–2.

cynicism is both “realistic” in the banal sense—he acknowledges that press and public relations are part of the power-game of politics—and an acknowledgment of the real circumstances under which he exists: that is, as an actor on a stage, performing a play whose stakes lie explicitly in the potential for “failed successes” and “successful failures.”

The opening scene of the play therefore engages self-consciously with the dynamics that seem to have determined its reputation. Monica and Charles’s dialogue is broken off by an acknowledgement of the limits of two (apparently) opposed media, and Claverton gestures toward a more productive union, one enabled by a restoration of the text to its immediate, physical utility. The presence of the “empty pages,” of course, really indicates the pages that have already been filled: Claverton is, quite obviously, enacting the play that Eliot has previously written. But by raising the question of those “empty pages”—by asking, in a sense, what becomes of the actor without a script—Claverton gestures toward the action that will become the real object of the play, just like its Greek forebear: his own death.

If the opening of *The Elder Statesman* stages the dilemma of poetic drama and mid-century naturalism, this conflict evolves only through the introduction of the play’s one true theatrical figure: Mrs. Carghill, also known as the former revue star “Maisie Montjoy,” Claverton’s old flame and Eliot’s explicit nod toward the departed tradition of Marie Lloyd’s music-hall. The significance of Mrs. Carghill’s entrance lies in Eliot’s replacement of a “well-made” convention—blackmail—with an emphasis on the present reality of performance. When Claverton first encounters Mrs. Carghill at Badgley Court, he is shocked to discover that she still possesses the love letters he once wrote her. “Have you forgotten that you wrote me letters? / Oh, not very many. Only a few worth keeping. / Only a few. But very beautiful! / It was Effie said,

when the break came, / ‘They’ll be worth a fortune to you, Maisie.’ / They would have figured at the trial, I suppose, / If there had been a trial. Don’t you remember them?” she asks.⁴² Yet, these letters are invoked only to mark the possibility of a plot that Eliot’s play refuses to pursue; *The Elder Statesman* never follows through on this threat. The letters serve as an acknowledgment of the play’s conventional roots, but this nod toward hackneyed devices again stops just short of a destructive irony. Instead, the letters perform an entirely different function: Mrs. Carghill offers to bring “photostats”—for the originals are kept in her lawyer’s safe—to Badgley Court, so that she can read them aloud to Claverton. The text thus unleashed by mechanical reproducibility is immediately subsumed within a theatrical situation: Mrs. Carghill offers to “play” Claverton by performing this reading. Once again, the text loses its priority, and Mrs. Carghill uses the theatricality of her own identity to undermine this gesture toward prescriptive plotting.

As a result of these subsequent deflations, attention is continually drawn to Claverton’s own theatrical personae. Mrs. Carghill, herself a former theatrical performer, puts this in explicit terms. Appealing to her familiarity with the “true” Claverton, she states:

At bottom, I believe you’re still the same silly Richard
 You always were. You wanted to pose
 As a man of the world. And now you’re posing
 As what? I presume, as an elder statesman;
 And the difference between being an elder statesman
 And posing successfully as an elder statesman
 Is practically negligible. And you look the part.
 Whatever part you’ve played, I must say you’ve always looked it.
 LORD CLAVERTON. I’ve no longer any part to play, Maisie.
 MRS. CARGHILL. There’ll always be some sort of part for you
 Right to the end. You’ll still be playing a part
 In your obituary, whoever writes it.⁴³

Throughout the later plays, Eliot made continual efforts to distance himself from a sort of

⁴² Ibid.: 325.

⁴³ Ibid.: 324.

awkward, “poetic” diction that characterized so much of his poetry, striving for a verse form that could mimic the patterns of ordinary, contemporary idiom. It is in statements like this one, however, that he carefully walks the line between poetic drama and theatrical naturalism. Mrs. Carghill’s speech follows a rigid structure: each line contains three stressed beats and a caesura.⁴⁴ The syntax of these sentences is simple and uncomplicated, and they could just as easily be rendered in prose. But as E. Martin Browne has pointed out, Eliot’s naturalistic verse provides important cues to his actors’ sense of rhythm: the poetry allows the actor to mediate between the dramatic “moment” that drives the speech and the literary “meaning” that contextualizes the speech within the entire work.⁴⁵ The emphasis on the repetition in line endings (“pose” and “posing,” and, of course, “elder statesman”), combined with carefully deployed alliteration (“still the same silly Richard”) and chiasmus (“And you look the part. / Whatever part you’ve played, I must say you’ve always looked it.”), gives this passage a heightened, rhetorical quality. That Mrs. Carghill achieves such a theatrical sense of rhetoric is, however, due to her own theatrical background; the “poetic” quality of these lines is motivated from within the dramatic “world” of the play, unlike Monica and Charles’s frustrated poetry of the first scene. And also unlike that first scene, these signifiers do not fail their signifieds: by taking Claverton as their object—the Claverton onstage, not an idealized “Claverton” in any of his individual roles—they serve to reinforce this theatrical basis for Claverton’s character. The essential problem of theatrical *mimesis*—the Platonic distinction between seeming and being—is, for Mrs. Carghill, no problem at all. Herself a former revue star, Mrs. Carghill is aware of the redemptive power that the paradox of the actor offers. Her own reference to Claverton’s obituary supports this sense of power: she constructs the document as a theatre in which Claverton himself will act

⁴⁴ See Eliot, “Poetry and Drama”: 88.

⁴⁵ See “The Verse of the Modern Plays in Performance,” in Browne, *The Making of T. S. Eliot’s Plays*: 295–306.

once more, irrespective of the authorial power of “whoever writes it.”

Thus, her speech represents an important moment of transition within the play, an acknowledgment of the road not necessarily taken. A conventional reading of this scene will note only the vaguely sinister overtones here: Mrs. Carghill adopts a proprietary attitude over Claverton, representing a threat to his control and to his individuality that he will ultimately have to conquer by the end of the play. But my alternative reading notes instead the opportunity she offers: the chance to see Claverton not as an “individual”—a unique soul crying out for Christian salvation in these final days of his life—but rather as a theatrical figure, a body onstage whose capacity for sustaining and enduring multiple identities represents a challenge to such normative conceptions of “personality” and “control.” Once again, the former reading absolutely depends upon a preconditioned response to the play’s apparently naturalistic foundations: to see Mrs. Carghill as a threat depends upon a passive recognition of and submission to “well-made” plot conventions. To see her instead as possessed of an almost metatheatrical awareness of Claverton means recognizing that *The Elder Statesman* is not merely the consequence of Eliot “choosing the theatre” (in contrast, maybe, to Yeats), but rather as a compelling representation of that act of choice and an articulation of its stakes. This might mean, perhaps, viewing Mrs. Carghill as representative of the paradoxical Eumenides, if we return to the terms of the play’s Greek forebear: to see her as either a Fury or a Kindly One depends precisely on whether we choose to see the play as a failed attempt to popularize a “literary” theatre that marries deterministic naturalism to abstract, modernist “poetry,” or instead as a celebration of popular “theatricality” and the particular fascination that actors represent.

The final act of *The Elder Statesman*, then, reveals the results of “choosing the theatre.” When Claverton decides to confess to Monica and Charles about his past, he places the narrative

of his life in explicitly theatrical terms:

I've spent my life in trying to forget myself,
 In trying to identify myself with the part
 I had chosen to play. And the longer we pretend
 The harder it becomes to drop the pretence,
 Walk off the stage, change into our own clothes
 And speak as ourselves. So I'd become an idol
 To Monica. She worshipped the part I played:
 How could I be sure that she would love the actor
 If she saw him, off the stage, without his costume and makeup
 And without his stage words. Monica!
 I've had your love under false pretences.
 Now, I'm tired of keeping up those pretences,
 But I hope that you'll find a little love in your heart
 Still, for your father, when you know him
 For what he is, the broken-down actor.⁴⁶

By using the metaphor of the actor, Claverton's binary refuses the division between "public" and "private" that Monica and Charles had articulated at the play's opening. Rather than suggesting a distinction between the role of the elder statesman and the man he considers himself truly to be, he acknowledges that this "true" man is almost an impossible construction. This confession is thus no celebration of his distinct, natural self but rather a resigned, but hopeful, acknowledgment of the failure of that self: he is only a "broken-down actor," the body between identities. Furthermore, Claverton's construction of the metaphorical theatre corresponds precisely to the popular naturalistic stage: not only does his attempt to identify himself with the part speak to the habits of a "realistic" production, but he also makes pointed reference to the external trappings—the "costume and makeup" and the "stage words"—that define such performances as materially dependent upon the actor, not upon an abstract *mise-en-scène*, on puppets and props, or on lighting.

Claverton's confession marks the inevitable contingency of naturalistic performance. It identifies, in fact, a theoretical crossroads that is also a historical crossroads. The conflict

⁴⁶ Eliot, *The Elder Statesman*: 340–41.

between performer and text that had seemingly been “resolved” by the “theatre’s anti-self,” where dancers, masks and Ubermarionettes could elide such problematic negotiations of subjectivity, authority and selfhood, is here raised to a moment of crisis that hearkens back to the turn of the century. Essentially, Claverton rehearses the debate between masks and faces that seemed of such importance in the late-nineteenth century: he asks whether the conditions of naturalism—in which the “role” is meant to have a complete reality—are actually antithetical to the charismatic personality of the individual performer. Claverton’s anonymous, “broken-down actor” seems to be the inevitable product of this clash: the ostentatious theatricality of the popular stage precludes a perfect reality to the onstage persona, but the assumptions of a dominant naturalism likewise deny the celebration of the performer himself. Thus, these “broken down actors” can never truly disappear into their roles; and while Claverton seems to suggest that they fall into a dreary anonymity as faceless “hollow men,” the play’s final moments suggest an alternative fate.

Once Claverton has confessed to being a “broken-down actor,” the details of his modestly sinful past are soon disclosed, to no real consequence: Monica and Charles react with minor surprise, but no dismay or approbation. When Mrs. Carghill reappears, she seems largely ineffectual, and she soon departs once more, never to trouble Claverton again.⁴⁷ In spite of this neat resolution, the play insistently pushes forward toward Claverton’s death. Rendered entirely unnecessary by the superficial resolution of the play’s ostensible plot, this death thus takes on a deep metaphorical resonance.

⁴⁷ This withdrawal of the threat of blackmail just at the moment that Claverton seems to have triumphed over it might have led, were this an Ibsen or a Shaw play, to a “discussion” of the social circumstances that both produced this threat and allowed it to be so superficially dismissed. One thinks, perhaps, of the disposal of the incriminating evidence in *A Doll’s House*, and how it is precisely this disposal that allows Nora Helmer to push forward in her separation from Torvald. Once again, Eliot might be mimicking the structural features of this genre only to deny them consequence. Far from being a “formulaic” play, *The Elder Statesman* reveals itself to be a complex engagement with form and audience expectation: as he had written in “Poetry and Drama,” this event is “different, but not too different, from what the audience has been led to expect.” Eliot, “Poetry and Drama”: 91–92.

After Claverton leaves the stage to take a brief walk, Monica and Charles reenact, in almost identical terms, the rhapsodic love-poetry that had begun the play: “Oh my dear, / I love you to the limits of speech, and beyond. / It’s strange that words are so inadequate. / Yet, like the asthmatic struggling for breath, / So the lover must struggle for words.”⁴⁸ But an awareness soon dawns upon them. Claverton has died: “He is close at hand, / Though he has gone too far to return to us.” This is followed by a vague gesture toward the sort of significance held by the death of Oedipus in Sophocles’ play: Charles remarks only that “[t]he dead has poured out a blessing on the living.” The inadequacy of this comment is striking, for it reveals its own importance only in light of an explicit comparison to the Greek text. Without this awareness dominant in the audience, the line slips easily away. Once again, this may only note a certain type of modern “failure”: in a world without hero-kings, the death of one formerly sinful elder statesman can hardly bear a significant blessing.

But I want to argue instead that this moment registers something much more significant: the disappearance of an actor whose importance lay precisely in the problematic conditions of the naturalistic stage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Eliot’s return at the end of the play to precisely the same “poetic” diction of the opening scene seems to affirm the ways in which Claverton’s presence is inassimilable within a tradition that would oppose text and performance. Only once he is gone can Monica and Charles return to a kind of poetry that is antithetical to the material world (and to emotions that lack an objective correlative, if we follow Raymond Williams). It is only without Claverton’s presence that the play becomes legible within an Eliotic critical tradition: the disappearance of the actor witnesses the reinstatement of the modernist reader, who is perfectly equipped with a critical apparatus to diagnose the “failures” of this play. In a certain sense, the play seems to elicit its own denigration: it literally stages the loss

⁴⁸ Eliot, *The Elder Statesman*: 355.

of a kind of presence that could mediate between the abstraction of the text and the material reality of the social body, which was the ostensible goal of all of Eliot's later work.

The play stages this "loss" not only as a theoretical abstraction—the lost actor wrestling with that perennial dilemma of masks and faces—but also as a historical fact: this scene is produced upon a stage that has lost both the ritual foundations of the Greek theatre and the sort of personal fascination inherent to the spectacular nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theatre. This was an eventuality, of course, anticipated within Eliot's own apocalyptic fantasy after the death of Marie Lloyd. In the decline of the music-hall, Eliot described a series of events that would condemn the "lower classes" to the "same state of amorphous protoplasm as the bourgeoisie," a faithless morass for the "morally corrupt."⁴⁹ But even in that moment, Eliot had recognized what allowed Lloyd to stand apart from such historical phenomena altogether: a "uniqueness" that lay in her ability to embody, with "selection and concentration," the gestural attitudes associated with a failing social identity. In Claverton's ability to understand and embrace the necessary distinctions between the failures of social role-playing and the successes of theatrical acting, Eliot represents one possible mode of resistance to the cultural-historical threat of that "amorphous protoplasm": an acknowledgment of the actor's work.

In fact, Eliot's understanding of this dimension of *The Elder Statesman*—and, indeed, of his other plays' similar dependence upon the work of actors—is well documented. E. Martin Browne, Eliot's theatrical collaborator and the director of all of the initial productions of Eliot's plays, has written extensively on both the processes of composition and production involved in these plays. According to Browne, all three of the men principally involved in the production of *The Elder Statesman* (himself, Eliot, and producer Henry Sherek) recognized that "[o]ur most difficult problem was the casting of the title-role." The reason was simple: "After his opening

⁴⁹ Eliot, "London Letter" (December 1922): 662.

scene, he has very little to say in the first two Acts... This means that he reaches the last Act, where his change of heart and his death dominate the play, without having had the opportunity to establish himself as a fully known and fully convincing person. The actor must therefore to a large extent create Claverton's personality from within himself," as Paul Rogers had done in the original production.⁵⁰ The same was true of many of the other characters and actors involved in that production; in fact, the rehearsals were "haunted by gossip writers" attracted to human-interest stories about the young actresses playing Monica and Mrs. Carghill and by "The Happy Eliots"—Eliot and his new wife Valerie.⁵¹ And ironically, Browne notes that the reviews were uncertain about what to do with the play's self-conscious dependence upon a dated theatrical tradition: more than one reviewer found echoes of Pinero in the construction of the plot, though none saw the deflation of the play's "well-made" Victorian devices as intentional. Skipping lightly past the play's financial failure, Browne acknowledges only that "in a small theatre it might have run for some months in London. But Sherek was obliged to take the Cambridge Theatre, one of the larger houses built between the wars, unsympathetic in atmosphere and difficult for sound. Here, a run of two months was by no means discreditable."⁵² The play, it seems, was indebted to a more intimate sensibility not only for the acting and the plot, but also for the architecture of the stage and the auditorium: Claverton's death failed to sanctify a theatrical space that was not constructed to isolate focus on the "broken-down actor" himself.

The Elder Statesman stages the "death of the actor" as a way of mediating the conflict between text and performance, between poetry and drama, between author and audience. By deflating the plot of the *Oedipus at Colonus*, *The Elder Statesman* does not only represent a kind

⁵⁰ Browne, *The Making of T. S. Eliot's Plays*: 337–38.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*: 338–39.

⁵² *Ibid.*: 341.

of modernist sensibility regarding spirituality and contemporary culture. Rather, in presenting Claverton's death as benignly ironic in its insignificance, *The Elder Statesman* performs its own metatheatrical twist on the Aristotelian reversal and recognition: rather than disappearing into a predetermined or absolute identity, Claverton manages to outlive the script, leaving behind his engagement book, his love letters, and his diminishing obituary once they have ceased to serve "dramatic utility." And as a result of this rare glimpse at the "broken-down actor," the intertextual value of *The Elder Statesman*—that is, its relationship to the literary "tradition" so often valorized in Eliot's critical writing—is quite literally upstaged by the "individual talent" of its performer. *The Elder Statesman*'s "death of the actor" simultaneously reinstates a supposed opposition between the text and the material world and undermines this opposition by endorsing and validating a kind of theatrical reading, in which the text is contextualized by the social processes uniting the author, the audience, and the actor.

This "death of the actor" becomes significant when placed in the context of Eliot's other dramatic deaths. Claverton's death entirely "fails to satisfy" on the page, for its value lies not in seeing Claverton as the character of the "elder statesman," but rather in identifying him as simply what he is onstage: a "broken-down actor" at the end of his career, taking that final bow. In this, however, Claverton is sharply distinguished from the dying characters of Eliot's earlier dramatic works, especially Thomas Becket of *Murder in the Cathedral*. Unlike Becket, Claverton is no martyr: Claverton's death, conceived in the form of an evaporating obituary or an empty engagement book, absolutely resists the sort of extra-temporal hagiographic reading associated with Becket's martyrdom. If *The Elder Statesman* produces an attempt at reconciling the page and the stage through this productive death, then it is to that earlier work we must now turn, in order to witness Eliot's alternative attempt to stage the dilemma between text and performance

and to reinscribe the actor's value in the production of written history.

The Actor in History: *Murder in the Cathedral* and the Limits of Critical Reading

THOMAS. [...] I know that history at all times draws
 The strangest consequence from remotest cause.
 But for every evil, every sacrilege,
 Crime, wrong, oppression and the axe's edge,
 Indifference, exploitation, you, and you,
 And you, must be punished. So must you.
 I shall no longer act or suffer, to the sword's end.⁵³

The temptation to read a death as powerfully symbolic is felt nowhere more keenly than in the case of martyrs: individuals who surrender their lives for an idea, and whose lives, in the moment of martyrdom, achieve a level of abstraction that removes them irrevocably from time. This sort of abstraction lends a coherency to the life of the martyr, which is conceived of almost immediately as a literary text within the hagiographic tradition. In 1923, Bernard Shaw's play *Saint Joan* offered an ironic take on the process of canonization: by using the conventions of the contemporary popular stage, Shaw forced his audience to confront the impossibility of a properly "dramatic" representation of a saint's life. For Shaw, to consider Joan's and her persecutors' actions in time as subject to competing motivations and alternative justifications means fundamentally denying the larger Christian design implicit in the Church's recent canonization of Joan, which had occurred in 1920.⁵⁴ Years later, Eliot would acknowledge his indebtedness to Shaw when reflecting on the process that led to his 1935 play *Murder in the Cathedral*.

While Eliot's play differs from Shaw's in almost every other respect—not only in its overt religious tone, but also in its establishment of a unique dramatic form, not quite in line with

⁵³ Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*: 30–31.

⁵⁴ Critics have long debated *Saint Joan*'s status as an Aristotelian tragedy for precisely this reason: to read the play's tragic action and to note Joan's *hubris* is also to deny her saintliness.

either contemporary naturalism or “historical” verse drama—it shares with *Saint Joan* a desire to put its audience’s preconceptions about its interpretation or “meaning” explicitly at stake. At its core, *Murder in the Cathedral* is about the production of history: it aims not only at representing an essential moment in English political and religious history—the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1170—but also at depicting the processes by which Becket’s murder is itself made historically significant. As a result, the play’s great challenges lie in distinguishing between the multiple media it gestures toward in this historical effort. *Murder in the Cathedral* offers us the chance to evaluate its conflation of several literary genres—the hagiography and the murder mystery—against its dependence upon the medium of the actor. Where *The Elder Statesman* gently replaces an idea of the “great man’s” authoritative biography with the contingencies of a theatrical script, *Murder in the Cathedral* recognizes the interpretive threat implicit in reading Becket as such a “broken-down actor,” and it counters this threat with a renewed investment in the sense of individuality or “personality” held by the more passive historical actors of the play: the audience-surrogate body of the chorus.

Murder in the Cathedral is only superficially a religious drama. I say this not because its religious elements are unimportant, or because its religious “message”—the significance of Becket’s martyrdom—is not primary to the play’s effect. Rather, I say this because there is little of the dramatic about the fundamental religious action of the play: the purification of Becket’s will, his rejection of the “Tempters,” and his submission to the will of God cannot be staged. Hugh Kenner long ago noted as much in his assessment of the play: “Eliot’s great dramatic problem is that the distinctions he wishes to dramatize do not terminate in distinct actions, but in the same action.”⁵⁵ If Becket is, functionally, in the same position as Claverton—an actor on a stage—then his “acceptance” of this reality is denied by the cosmic significance that is mapped

⁵⁵ Kenner, *The Invisible Poet*: 281–82.

onto the theatrical paradigm. The actor's submission to the will of the text is equated to the individual's conformity to the will of God: thus, the prescribed "action" is something that must be passively endured, and to be an "actor in history" is to be purged of personality and made subject to a kind of divine author.

This equation is made clear within Becket's last temptation in the play's first act. As he is told by the final Tempter: "You know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer. / You know and do not know, that action is suffering, / And suffering action. Neither does the agent suffer / Nor the patient act. But both are fixed / In an eternal action, an eternal patience / To which all must consent that it may be willed / And which all must suffer that they may will it..."⁵⁶ The Tempter's construction of a kind "eternal action" refers to the persistent presence of the text: only by rendering the chronological developments of the play into this kind of plastic medium can an action taken in time achieve a kind of eternity. The significance of Becket's choice therefore involves the purification of a "will" that takes no part in the events that follow. His act of volition cannot be dramatized, for it has no effect on the progress of history; if Becket "knows and does not know," he must maintain the theatrical actor's double-consciousness while surrendering the historical actor's agency. Becket's action is, therefore, at odds with the medium of the stage; by attempting to dramatize this action, Eliot succeeds only in affirming the superiority of textual (not theatrical) representation for such choices. For Kenner—whose view of Eliot as the "Invisible Poet" is so fixated upon moments of "unknowing" and erasure in the poetry and has remained influential for fifty years—one of the principle values of "the change in the orientation of Becket's will" is merely as "a commentary on *Ash-Wednesday*," the poem of

⁵⁶ Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*: 27–28.

1930 that marked Eliot's first extended work following his conversion to Catholicism.⁵⁷ In the first act of this play, Becket becomes the "invisible actor."

Therefore, instead of making a dramatic choice, Becket moves from this final "temptation" into an extra-textual awareness: in the monologue that closes the act, Becket removes himself from time and speaks directly to the audience. "I know / What yet remains to show you of my history / Will seem to most of you at best futility, / Senseless self-slaughter of a lunatic, / Arrogant passion of a fanatic. / I know that history at all times draws / The strangest consequence from remotest cause."⁵⁸ This is, essentially, a movement from *mimesis* to *diegesis*, from representation to narration. But Becket's narration of "what remains to show you of my history" is also an interpretation: his judgments are based on an assumed consensus (what he knows of "most of you," a suggestion that draws the audience together) that infers emotions (those of the "lunatic" or "fanatic") from actions. This movement replaces the double-consciousness of the actor with the certainty of the critical reader: removed from the "moment" of the play, Becket is able to interpret the play's narrative as though it were already a printed text—a history, or, more accurately, a hagiography. In the final moments of this act, Becket triumphs over even the possibility offered by the final Tempter: he will not occupy the doubled awareness of the actor, "knowing and not knowing," locked in a process of eternal action and eternal patience: instead, he "shall no longer act or suffer, to the sword's end." What follows this monologue in the play's action is Becket's final sermon before his death, which lays out the doctrinal conditions of martyrdom in plain language untainted by the ostentatious "theatricality" of poetic dialogue.

But just as Becket makes this transition from the doubled actor to the unified audience-

⁵⁷ Kenner, *The Invisible Poet*: 285.

⁵⁸ Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*: 30.

reader, he also indicates the potential for a type of misreading, pointing toward fallacious lines of causality that are created by the text: “I know that history at all times draws / The strangest consequence from remotest cause,” he cautions. This might at first seem like a gesture toward the complex design of God, who can orchestrate the production of very specific, pre-ordained results from the manipulation of the most distant events. But the divine is never explicitly invoked: instead, Becket attributes agency here only to “history,” to the will of the text abstracted from any intentional agent. This abstraction seems passively to produce those lines of connection: it is “history” itself doing the “drawing,” as though acts of interpretation made by conscious agents are—like the act by which Becket “purifies his will”—no acts at all.

I want to argue that it is the contrast between Becket’s singular awareness—as saint and martyr—and the more prosaic forms of history, interpretation, and readership that are implied by his comments that drives the play’s final turn and its most famous moment. After Becket’s murder in the second act, the four knights step forward to the edge of the stage and address the audience in prose, attempting in various ways to persuade the audience of the correctness of their actions. According to Eliot, the point of this was always “to shock the audience out of their complacency”; and he admitted resorting to this “trick” under the influence of Shaw’s *Saint Joan*.⁵⁹ As many commentators have therefore noticed, the incidental effect of this “shock” is to align Becket and the audience: as he endures the “temptation” in the first act, so is the audience forced to endure their own “temptation” in the second. “[I]n our case [this is] the temptation to deny the efficacy of his sacrifice and its relevance to us. Stepping out of their twelfth-century setting, the Knights seek by every means from blandishment to exhortation, cunningly using the techniques of modern political oratory, to make us admit the reasonableness of their action and to

⁵⁹ Eliot, “Poetry and Drama”: 86–87.

acknowledge that we are involved in it, since we have benefited from it.”⁶⁰ This alignment was part of Eliot’s original conception for the play in performance; according to E. Martin Browne, the parallelism of these two scenes in the play’s construction was reinforced by Eliot’s idea to double-cast actors as both the Tempters and the Knights.⁶¹

But this alignment of Becket and the audience cannot be completed: to achieve this would be to suggest that the playgoer is able of achieving the saint’s divine synchronicity of historical awareness. Instead, the “temptation of the audience” offers a realization of precisely the sort of misreading Becket himself outlined at the end of the first act. If Becket represents the sort of “ideal reader” as the “invisible actor,” the “readership” offered to the audience through these emphatically visible historical actors takes on a much more familiar appearance: this is a direct and practical “reading for the plot,” the fallacious production of textual determinacy in the act of recognizing and legitimizing lines of causality created by literary form and not by an absolute sense of truth. This is the sort of reading, of course, that dominates middle-brow, popular novels—especially “thrillers,” murder-mysteries, and detective stories.

Most studies of Eliot’s low-cultural interests have noted the poet’s fascination with detective fiction. For example, Grover Smith, author of an essential, early assessment of Eliot’s “sources and methods,” published an article on “T. S. Eliot and Sherlock Holmes” as early as 1948.⁶² Eliot himself published widely on detective fiction in his reviews for *The Criterion* and other publications, but such an interest was rarely articulated within his more “formal”

⁶⁰ Jones, *The Plays of T. S. Eliot*: 62.

⁶¹ See Browne, *The Making of T. S. Eliot’s Plays*: 58. Interestingly, Browne notes that Eliot reversed his stance on this twenty years later: a letter of 1956 suggests that double-casting these roles might foreclose opportunities for the audience to resolve questions of meaning on their own. But Browne notes that this comment was made after Eliot himself inhabited one of those roles, playing the voice of the Fourth Tempter in the film version. It is fascinating to note that Eliot’s understanding of the role’s structural function may have transformed after he performed it himself and granted it that ambivalent authorial stamp.

⁶² Smith, “T. S. Eliot and Sherlock Holmes”: 431–32.

criticism—except for a provocative essay on “Wilkie Collins and Dickens,” first published in 1927 and included thereafter in editions of his *Selected Essays*. This essay exhibits all the hallmarks of Eliot’s “serious” criticism, drawing Collins—best known for works of Gothic suspense—into relationship with the canonized literary tradition, including the work of Charles Dickens and Henry James.⁶³ But in between these high-minded justifications, Eliot makes a curious declaration regarding Collins’s eternal stature: “It is not pretended that the novels of Wilkie Collins have this permanence. They are interesting only if we enjoy ‘reading novels.’”⁶⁴ The quotation marks with which Eliot brackets that phrase naturally draw attention: they suggest both a level of irony—that the “interest” in such reading is *only* a kind of affective enjoyment, and has no abstract value—and a kind of obscurity that stops just short of tautology. “Reading novels” seems to represent a kind of practice that is both universal and generalizable (hence Eliot’s move from the neutral and agent-less “it is not pretended” to the collective “we enjoy”), but otherwise indefinable; in fact, it seems to suggest a kind of occluded practice that is paradoxically self-reinforcing, for the “interest” apparently possessed by the novels themselves is actually a product of the reader’s own predisposition.

In “Wilkie Collins and Dickens,” Eliot thus presents an idea that stands in apparent contradiction to his earlier critical injunction: namely, that the true “function of criticism” is to ignore any “impressionist” or affective responses to the work of art and instead “merely” to put “the reader in possession of facts which he would otherwise have missed.”⁶⁵ The sort of criticism that Eliot performs in “Wilkie Collins and Dickens” certainly supplies those facts—again, it

⁶³ Collins’s *Woman in White* is mentioned in my first chapter as an important genre precursor to Stoker’s *Dracula*. Though Eliot’s and Stoker’s approaches to the problems of the actor in relation to a sense of literary coherence are notably different, it is significant that both writers recognize that the actor’s value can be articulated in opposition to or alongside the sense of reading sustained by genre fiction.

⁶⁴ Eliot, “Wilkie Collins and Dickens”: 417.

⁶⁵ Eliot, “The Function of Criticism”: 32.

makes admirable gestures toward historicizing developments in the form of the novel—but it ultimately produces this point of indeterminacy by suggesting that the real value of Collins’s work lies precisely in that indefinable, affective region of reception. We are thus left to wonder whether the sort of “reading” performed in the reception of detective fiction is, in fact, properly “critical” at all. The outcome of this contradiction is explicitly staged in the temptation offered by the knights in *Murder in the Cathedral*: in successive stages, the knights cast the play into genres that oppose the authority of Becket’s hagiography—including cultural history and murder mystery. The knights offer “facts” which the audience may “otherwise have missed”; in doing so, however, they draw “the strangest consequence from remotest cause” and threaten the dissolution of the “message” Becket had announced at the end of the first act.

Immediately after the death of Thomas Becket, his murderers step forward to perform an allegedly “critical” reading of their own actions. The first knight presents a moral analysis of motive, couched in the “depersonalized” terms of objective criticism: “There is one thing I should like to say, and I might as well say it at once. It is this: in what we have done, and whatever you may think of it, we have been perfectly disinterested.”⁶⁶ This argument is offered in stark contrast to Becket’s own monologue at the end of the first act, which abjured responsibility to “act or suffer”: the knight’s insistence upon the knights’ “disinterest” in their own actions is the familiar, callow argument of a man “just following orders,” restaging the noble rejection of responsibility in terms of the fascist threat appropriate to 1935. Like Becket, this knight pretends to hold a kind of trans-historical awareness—“We know perfectly well how things will turn out,” he claims—but this awareness represents not a knowledge of the divine plan but rather a cynical understanding of political expediency. “King Henry—God bless him—

⁶⁶ Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*: 49.

will have to say, for reasons of state, that he never meant this to happen,” the knight states.⁶⁷ What begins as a kind of moral analysis has its outlet in an attempt at political history: already, the knights begin reading determinacy into actions taken by specific individuals, acknowledging that their own roles as “actors in history” are to be dictated by the production of authority in specific political structures.

It is no surprise, then, that the second knight follows up on this political reading. Occupying a position somewhere between the twelfth century and the twentieth, he contextualizes Becket’s death not simply within the political conditions of his time (King Henry’s dilemma, which the first speaker had outlined) but within the broader political developments of the subsequent eight hundred years. His speech culminates in a direct indictment of the audience’s own historical position: “But, if you have now arrived at a just subordination of the pretensions of the Church to the welfare of the State, remember that it is we who took the first step. We have been instrumental in bringing about the state of affairs that you approve.”⁶⁸ As Hugh Kenner has observed, “This is the one part of the Knights’ speeches the audience is likely to take seriously,” and Eliot was aware of this.⁶⁹ In fact, E. Martin Browne remarks that the audiences at the productions he directed fell directly into agreement with this argument, since these propositions “accord far more with the presuppositions on which our society is based than do those to which the Chorus assent in the last scene.”⁷⁰ The “temptation” represented by this knight’s argument is precisely the temptation of a more rigorous attempt at cultural history: this time, these “actors in history” become passive agents along with Becket and

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.: 50–51.

⁶⁹ Kenner, *The Invisible Poet*: 283.

⁷⁰ Browne, *The Making of T. S. Eliot’s Plays*: 53.

Henry II in the production a “state of affairs” that concerns far larger cultural forces.

Thus, it is only in the final “justification” that Eliot draws this perspective into explicit irony. Here, the last knight deploys the language of popular fiction to reassess the “facts of the case.” “What I have to say,” he declares, “may be put in the form of a question: *Who killed the Archbishop?*”⁷¹ As many critics have noted, this speech adopts the tone of contemporary detective stories—those of Agatha Christie or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle—and recalls not only Eliot’s arch quotation from Doyle in Becket’s first interaction with the Third Tempter,⁷² but also his beguiling title for the play, which had always been intended to evoke a contemporary thriller.⁷³ The detective-story, of course, is always a twice-told tale: it enacts the production of meaning from chaos, as the concluding retelling draws out exclusively elements that can be connected by a unifying thread of intention and causality. It ostentatiously performs, in a sense, the fundamental belief that all readers of narrative must instinctively adopt: the belief that narrative must be coherent and complete before it can be accurately “read.” This creates a kind of “double logic” that Peter Brooks has neatly summarized: “The detective story, as a kind of dime-store modern version of ‘wisdom literature,’ is useful in displaying the double logic most overtly, using the plot of the inquest to find, or construct, a story of the crime which will offer just those features necessary to the thematic coherence we call a solution, while claiming, of course, that the solution has been made necessary by the crime.”⁷⁴ Brooks turns to Walter Benjamin to validate this apparent contradiction. “If in Benjamin’s thesis... ‘Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell,’ it is because it is at the moment of death that

⁷¹ Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*: 51.

⁷² See Kenner, *The Invisible Poet*: 282.

⁷³ See Browne, *The Making of T. S. Eliot’s Plays*: 56.

⁷⁴ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*: 29.

life becomes *transmissible*.”⁷⁵ In *Murder in the Cathedral*, this “moment” is enacted literally: the significance of Becket’s life and death is immediately rendered “transmissible” by the Fourth Knight (who, of course, offers an interpretation of Becket’s “action” that has always been a common part of the historical debate over the archbishop’s death). But this “transmission” is—according to the play’s apparent thesis—wrong: this type of reading, in producing that “double logic” whereby effects are the causes of causes, produces an obvious logical fallacy.⁷⁶

Thus, in *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot stages the problem that *The Elder Statesman* would hope to resolve. The later play’s “death of the actor” would use Claverton’s disappearance to contextualize acts of reading—particularly the reading of texts that would generate their meaning outside of the material world—within a theatrical frame. By contrast, this earlier play produces a form of tragic misreading through the actor’s death. The murder of Becket and the immediate “transmission” of this death by a sudden, jarring move into *diegesis* marks the impossibility of maintaining the hermetic boundaries of the text through the practical act of allegedly “critical” reading. Eliot’s gesture toward the circular logic of the detective story—in which the act of re-reading actually prescribes the object to be read—thus also marks out this play’s own ambivalent relationship to its audience. By indicating the severance between Becket’s model of the “actor in history” and that of the knights, *Murder in the Cathedral* casts its own audience as poised somewhere between these impossible constructions, both of which insist

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*: 28.

⁷⁶ Of course, this logical fallacy is well known to all writers of detective stories. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle himself actually indicated as much through an act of self-parody late in his career. After having produced dozens of Sherlock Holmes stories, Doyle published a brief vignette in which Holmes and Watson each perform opposing “interpretations” of an action using the exact same data. Of course, Watson is “wrong,” and Holmes is “right”: the point being, then, that Holmes’s correctness is granted simply by the fact that he is Holmes. The legitimacy of Watson’s version of the events is not compromised by his logic or his observational skills but simply by his identity. Though the detective story will, thus, always seem to perform its own reading, such legitimizing readings are always the products of arbitrary notions of authority. In terms of Eliot’s play, Becket is like Holmes; the Fourth Knight is like Watson. The Fourth Knight is only “wrong” because, of course, Becket is the detective-saint, and his identity implicitly ratifies his reading.

on perpetuating textual models of authority. In order to resolve this dilemma, Eliot turns to an eminently theatrical mode of audience surrogation: the establishment of the chorus.

If the narrative trajectory of Eliot's dramatic career, from *Sweeney Agonistes* (or *The Rock*, which was actually produced) to *The Elder Statesman*, seems to chart a movement toward apparent "naturalism," then we might also characterize this movement more simply as the loss of the chorus. What began as an integral part of Eliot's approach to verse drama was almost wholly erased by the late plays. Only vestiges of a kind of choric perspective are visible in the minor characters of *The Cocktail Party* and *The Confidential Clerk*; by the time of *The Elder Statesman*, rather than mediate between the audience and the onstage action (the customary function of the chorus), the minor characters merely mark the compromised integrity of the apparently naturalistic *mise-en-scène*, as we have seen above in that play's use of Lambert and—more importantly—the literal chorus-girl Mrs. Carghill.

Eliot's abandonment of the chorus came as a result of that turn toward "dramatic utility," for the choric interlude represented a kind of "poetry" that was unmotivated by stage action. In its earliest form, the Eliotic chorus represented a kind of triumph of pure verbalism over physical action. In *The Rock*, for example, the play's pageant format is granted a kind of stability by the consistency of the chorus and the grand, authoritative tone of their interludes. According to E. Martin Browne, this "Chorus was to consist of masked figures, male and female, speaking without movement and in stiff, stylized robes. Thus the whole dramatic effect would depend on speech..."⁷⁷ In the decade following *The Rock*, Eliot discovered that this "poetic" use of the chorus, which eliminated both gesture and personal individuation in its onstage representation, was almost impossible to reconcile with the physical habits of "naturalistic" actors. In 1939's *The Family Reunion*, he attempted to achieve a kind of choric "awareness" by having four

⁷⁷ Browne, *The Making of T. S. Eliot's Plays*: 81.

principal characters break the frame, step forward, and speak from a point of view that was, in his words, “beyond character.”⁷⁸ But the result, he would later state, did not satisfy, for both practical and aesthetic reasons. “For one thing, the immediate transition from individual, characterized part to membership of a chorus is asking too much of the actors: it is a very difficult transition to accomplish. For another thing, it seemed to me another trick, one which, even if successful, could not have been applicable in another play.”⁷⁹

In this twofold confession, we can see Eliot’s awareness in the theatrical value of the chorus. First, Eliot acknowledges that the choric actor must possess unique talents: the chorus of *The Family Reunion* must take into account the actor’s personal abilities and not merely subordinate her to the will of the text. Secondly, in that nod toward the knights’ “trick” at the end of *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot reveals that the chorus’s relationship to the audience resists a kind of binary categorization, a crossing of the divide between the “actor in history” and the audience of that history. Through the “shock” instigated by the knights’ speeches at the end of *Murder in the Cathedral*, the audience is challenged to reassess the strategies by which they “read” the action of the play: the “trick” Eliot performs draws modes of reception into the play’s frame, and presents an image of the audience itself as it attempts to perform the most common acts of extra-temporal contextualization of the play’s major event, the murder of Thomas Becket. As I’ve suggested above, the knights perform an act of reading made possible by Becket’s death: at the moment that the play’s action is completed and rendered transmissible, the knights move toward interpretive habits that prioritize the abstract integrity of the text over the material presence of the performance.

In *Murder in the Cathedral*, we see the ways that Eliot uses the chorus not to initiate a

⁷⁸ Eliot, “Poetry and Drama”: 88.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

kind of segregation between the performance and the text, but rather to validate the actor's double consciousness, to suspend and dramatize the moment of the saint's death *before* it can be textualized and transmitted. In order to see this, however, we must attend to the problematic historical position Eliot ascribes to the choric actors. As numerous critics have indicated, Eliot's construction of the chorus in this play seems to advertise a kind of patronizing, patriarchal attitude toward "common women" as a kind of trans-historical identity. Exclusively female and relentlessly downtrodden, they confess to a kind of automatism in the first choral ode: "There is no danger / For us, and there is no safety in the cathedral. Some presage of an act / Which our eyes are compelled to witness, has forced our feet / Towards the cathedral. We are forced to bear witness."⁸⁰ In this, they exhibit a strong contrast from the three priests of Canterbury that follow them onto the stage. "This bisection," as Robin Grove has suggested, "leaves the men free to articulate 'higher' needs and fears, those of *ecclesia*, mostly, while to the female chorus who feel 'the strain on the brain of the small folk' falls the job of apprehending death and evil as, more than anything, bodily disgusts."⁸¹ Thus, this chorus seems to dramatize a crucial difference between their own enforced "witnessing" and the kinds of "reading" performed by the priests and the knights. They observe but cannot interpret; their act of witness has no termination in transmission. Where the knights and the priests, upon the death of Becket, make vague attempts at imposing "meaning" upon this action, the chorus simply responds with a recognition of what has happened, and a recognition of who and what they are. "Forgive us, O Lord, we acknowledge ourselves as type of the common man, / Of men and women who shut the door and sit by the fire."⁸² This is, at once, both a romantic and deeply patronizing representation of

⁸⁰ Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*: 11.

⁸¹ Grove, "Pereira and After": 169.

⁸² *Ibid.*: 54.

“small folk” and a very Christian depiction of the inherent sanctity of humble living; but it is also a cautious nod toward the difficulty of initiating this sort of personal recognition onstage. This “type” of individual, by embracing a problematic humility, escapes the “amorphous protoplasm” Eliot condemned in his obituary for Marie Lloyd. She accomplishes that enormously difficult task: “the immediate transition from individual, characterized part to membership of a chorus.”

It was Eliot himself who put this “type” into words. “The chorus in *Murder in the Cathedral* does, I think, represent some advance in dramatic development: that is to say, I set myself the task of writing lines, not for an anonymous chorus, but for a chorus of women of Canterbury—one might almost say, charwomen of Canterbury. I had to make some effort to identify myself with these women, instead of merely identifying them with myself.”⁸³ By specifying this chorus, Eliot meant to avoid the “anonymity” that would lend an “amorphous” authority to their pronouncements. If the knights represent the fallacy of a kind of universalizing perspective, it is only through admittedly narrow view of the chorus that such fallacies can be corrected. Eliot not only used the chorus of *Murder in the Cathedral* to contrast the knights’ presumptive “reading” with an act of pure theatrical “witnessing,” but that he also knew *exactly* what it would mean for an actor to represent, onstage, “a middle-aged woman of the charwoman class,” and the unique, utterly personal talents such an actor would need. After all, he had seen as much in 1922: the sublime “selection and concentration” of such behaviors was “part of the acting in Marie Lloyd’s last song, I’m One of the Ruins That Cromwell Knocked Abaht a Bit.”⁸⁴

⁸³ Eliot, “The Three Voices of Poetry”: 99.

⁸⁴ Eliot, “London Letter” (December 1922): 661.

Sacred Woods: The Eliotic Critical Tradition and the Individual Talent of Marie Lloyd

Those that study history
 Sing and shout a bit
 And you can bet your life there isn't a doubt of it
 Outside the Oliver Cromwell, last Saturday night
 I was one of the ruins that Cromwell knocked about a bit...
 - "I'm One of the Ruins"⁸⁵

Marie Lloyd was one of the luminaries of the London music-hall from the 1890s until her death in 1922. Born Matilda Alice Victoria Wood in 1870, Lloyd grew up in the densely populated Shoreditch district of London, discovering early in life both an aptitude for the stage and a keen awareness of its influence: according to popular legend (spread by Lloyd herself, and picked up by Eliot in that memorial "London Letter"), her performance at a temperance rally at the age of ten caused a man to "hurl a bottle of whisky at his wife, declaring that that was the last time he would ever touch it."⁸⁶ This sort of ironic contradiction (that is, temperance conjoined to marital abuse) would go on to characterize both her audience and her act: onstage, Lloyd's comedy played off of its audience's fixations, offering a spectacle that gently parodied the audience's will to bear witness to its own tragedy. By the late 1880s, she was performing regularly for lower-class audiences throughout the East End; the 1890s saw her fame spread to the major London halls. Her attractions often derived from her careful negotiation of the *double entendre*: like many artists of the late-Victorian stage, Marie Lloyd often ran up against the censors of the Licensing Committee that dictated morality for music-halls across the city. It was said that her unique talents often turned the tables on censors, as she debuted before them supposedly "filthy"

⁸⁵ Qtd. in Gillies, *Marie Lloyd: The One and Only*: 275. Like many music-hall songs, "I'm One of the Ruins" is of questionable origin, and its exact "text" varied according to the performer. In her biography of Marie Lloyd, Gillies offers a reliable account of the version Lloyd used.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*: 9.

songs with all the demure sincerity of a young girl.⁸⁷ This was a line she would walk throughout her career: it was not just her singing voice but rather the remarkable contrast between her words and her actions that brought in adoring audiences.

Lloyd's difficult personal life was an undeniable element of her celebrity, but it never worked in service of a "larger-than-life" persona; rather, what helped her establish her unique rapport with her audiences was her willingness to stay publicly on *their* side of "respectability" and to reaffirm a relationship built on the acknowledgment of shared hardship. By the end of her career in 1922, both Lloyd herself and the institution of the music-hall were in a state of crisis: while Lloyd dealt with marital and financial difficulties, she grew steadily ill (likely from stomach cancer); meanwhile, the music-hall began to succumb to other cheap, common entertainments—most notably, the cinema. Of course, Lloyd's vulnerability was recognized by her audiences, who were well aware of the "real" sources of the characters that she winningly parodied on the stage.

On Wednesday, October 4, 1922, Lloyd insisted on performing in spite of the illness that had left her unable to eat for almost a week. As she staggered onstage, a member of the audience was overheard observing, "She's wonderful, but she's very drunk." When she appeared for "I'm One of the Ruins," she wore a horrid, baggy dress with a battered hat and handbag, a costume in which "she looked only half human: her face was so drawn that she looked like a man in drag and her voice was weak and unfamiliar."⁸⁸ In the middle of the song, she stumbled; the audience is said to have burst into laughter, believing this to be a part of her performance of inebriation. Though she recovered and finished the song, she collapsed again backstage. This time, she did not regain consciousness. She died on October 7.

⁸⁷ Ibid.: 78.

⁸⁸ Ibid.: 274.

The circumstances of her tragic final performance were immediately broadcast in the London daily papers; in the days between that performance and her final passing, the entire city seemed to be in mourning. Her funeral was attended by thousands, tens of thousands if we include the crowds that gathered outside her home in Golders Green and along the nearby suburban streets to witness the funeral procession. It was the sort of event usually reserved only for royalty, and its significance seemed to shock the London world that had so often taken Lloyd's "genius" for granted as an eternal fixture of London culture.

Or, at least, so it seemed to T. S. Eliot, who submitted his final "London Letter" to the New York-published *Dial* as a memorial to Lloyd. "Although I have always admired her genius," Eliot wrote, "I do not think that I always appreciated its uniqueness; I certainly did not realize that her death would strike me as the most important event which I have had to chronicle in these pages."⁸⁹ The essay has long been seen as a provocative outlier in Eliot's critical career, not only because of this professed inadequacy—from a writer whose adoptive authority gave his other critical work the condescending, presumptive air of scholarly precision—but also because it seemed so interested in the low-cultural forms that his more "formal" criticism seemed to eschew. If recent critics of Eliot have sought to centralize the position of mass-cultural entertainment in his early work, it is to the "Marie Lloyd" essay that they have inevitably turned, with somewhat ambivalent results: for at stake in any reading of "Marie Lloyd" is Eliot's aesthetic ideology. Where some have aligned Eliot with the urban *flâneur*, the slumming intellectual observing mass-culture with a voyeuristic glee (not unlike Eliot's Prufrock persona), others have desired to read Eliot's fascination with the music-hall as a more genuine attempt to exploit the idealistic social communion of the music-hall against a bourgeois disintegration of

⁸⁹ Eliot, "London Letter" (December 1922): 659.

culture. Such a reading might bring this essay in line with Eliot's later Christian sentiments, but those sentiments are naturally difficult to reconcile with the dominant social stigma of the music-hall as a den of vice or as an inspiration for an avant-garde political theatre.⁹⁰

In the section that follows, I argue that the true value of Eliot's obituary for Lloyd emerges only when the essay is situated *both* in terms of the tragic circumstances of Lloyd's death and in terms of Eliot's larger critical and artistic goals. It is the contradiction between these two efforts—on the one hand, to pay genuine tribute to an individual life and an indefinable “personality”; on the other, to render that life “meaningful” and transmissible, as a dire warning against the approaching threat of homogenized culture and as a symbol of broader aesthetic project—that indicates Eliot's understanding of the paradox of the actor and the problems of theatricality. Eliot's essay recasts Lloyd as an actor in history twice. First, he makes legible the career of a theatrical luminary who, dependent upon an unwritten repertoire and dying tradition, might otherwise have disappeared: he writes her into the history of actors and of the theatre, even as he calls his own ability to do so into question. Secondly, and much more importantly, Eliot uses Lloyd to enact a broader cultural history: this polemical essay itself forces Lloyd to act far outside of the terms of her theatrical work, to be read on a global-historical scale. Both of these efforts, however, rest uncomfortably alongside the historical work Lloyd herself performed in her final act. The productive friction between these notions of the actor in history—a sense of history at odds both with “personality” and with the codes of the literary “tradition”—mark Lloyd's significance to the development of the models of acting Eliot reveals in *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Elder Statesman*.

⁹⁰ David Chinitz has offered a concise summary of the various critical perspectives on “Marie Lloyd,” concluding himself that the essay merely represents Eliot's desire for a sympathetic identification between artist and audience. See Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*: 101–4.

The attempt to bring the “Marie Lloyd” essay in line with any understanding of Eliot’s critical or cultural attitudes requires that we revisit the premise according to which the essay was written: the idea that Lloyd’s death suddenly “struck” Eliot as “the most important event” that he would chronicle in his “London Letters” to *The Dial*. What is, of course, most surprising about the essay is its pre-meditated quality, which I will confront more at length in the final pages of this chapter. Through its immediate transformation of Lloyd into “the expressive figure of the lower classes,” the essay actually serves as a vehicle for the Eliot’s own expression of long-held beliefs.⁹¹ It is on behalf of a kind of idealistic or romantic notion of an urban “folk” that he seems to write; as the essay moves toward its conclusion, he bemoans a “middle class which is gradually absorbing and destroying” both the cultured aristocracy and this ideal, united and engaged lower-class audience. To witness Marie Lloyd onstage, Eliot implies, was to witness a sort of perfect mirror of this class; where other comedians built their acts upon “grotesque” exaggeration, Lloyd’s act “was all a matter of selection and concentration.”⁹² In the process of this essay, then, Lloyd seems to disappear: this paean to a departed artist is transfigured into a meditation on the “type of the common man.” According to Eliot, Lloyd’s peculiar fascination lay in her ability to replicate this “type” perfectly: moreover, the recognition of Lloyd’s apparent “genius” actually necessitated a prior “knowledge of the environment” in which Lloyd’s characters lived. In Marie Lloyd, therefore, Eliot actually found expression not of the “common man” but of a crucial aesthetic paradox: her “genius” seemed to be an erasure of her own agency in favor of a simple and direct mimicry.

Nowhere is this attitude more clearly represented than in Eliot’s appraisal of Lloyd’s final act. Throughout the essay, Eliot takes little notice of the variety of elements involved in a music-

⁹¹ Eliot, “London Letter” (December 1922): 662.

⁹² *Ibid.*: 661.

hall performance: no mention is made of her singing, nor of her dancing; likewise, he does not discuss the formal structure of a music-hall act, except in noting that the songs offer choruses in which the audience can participate. Instead, Eliot's sole close-reading of Lloyd's performance focuses on her naturalistic acting and upon the spectator's ability to see this as a brand of social *mimesis*. "To appreciate for instance the last turn in which Marie Lloyd appeared, one ought to know already exactly what objects a middle-aged woman of the charwoman class would carry in her bag; exactly how she would go through her bag in search of something; and exactly the tone of voice in which she would enumerate the objects she found in it. This was only part of the acting in Marie Lloyd's last song, I'm One of the Ruins that Cromwell Knocked Abaht a Bit."⁹³

It is uncertain whether Eliot was actually in that audience on October 4; but "I'm One of the Ruins" was a staple of Lloyd's act, and Eliot would undoubtedly have been able to recall another performance that he had witnessed. The song itself, which Lloyd had made famous, operates through one of her characteristic *double entendres*: the singer is a middle-aged alcoholic wandering down a country lane, "Cos I like to study history... / And the pubs along the way."⁹⁴ She comes across a crumbling abbey; when questioned by a "gentleman" passerby, she tells him that "It's a bit of a ruin that Cromwell knocked about a bit." By the end of the song, however, the meaning has shifted: the "Oliver Cromwell" is a pub that she has visited, and she herself is the "ruin." The ironic coincidence of this song's message and Lloyd's final performance is clear. The song, the woman, and the place all perform in double identities: the ruined abbey, a seat of seventeenth-century English "history," is aligned with both the music-hall and the performer, and the song recognizes that this sort of "history" is memorialized only within the failing bodies of the downtrodden and ignored, people to whom "Oliver Cromwell" represents first an alehouse

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Gillies, *Marie Lloyd: The One and Only*: 274.

and second the Lord Protector. Given Eliot's admitted project—to mourn the fall of the music-hall at the hands of the cinema—he could hardly have wished for a more perfect example from Lloyd's oeuvre. The music-hall and its audience are likewise left in “ruins” by 1922, forever jesting at their own demise.

Thus, the song serves Eliot's purpose almost *exactly*: it expresses, elevates, and celebrates a perspective that is generalizable only in its resistance to historical specificity. The singing voice of “I'm One of the Ruins” is that of a “middle-aged woman of the charwoman class,” equally a part of and equally excluded by histories of the twentieth century, the seventeenth century, or—as Eliot offered in *Murder in the Cathedral*—the twelfth century. Undoubtedly, the singer of “I'm One of the Ruins” is precisely what Eliot had in mind when imagining the chorus to his 1935 play: a charwoman who, “living and partly living,” struggles to articulate her own disappearance into a normative “history” of the time. If *Murder in the Cathedral* would seem to validate its chorus as the repository of the play's final “message,” it also acknowledges that this “message” cannot fit within the rubrics of any standardized “history” of Becket's martyrdom. Becket—or the Canterbury archbishopry—is never the real “ruin” that the knights “knock about a bit”: rather, Becket's death in that play only serves to mask the sort of violence that is inscribed on the bodies of the chorus, who—sharing a position and an identity that is allegedly trans-historical—are as common and as innocuous in Eliot's day as they were eight hundred years previously.

This is the sort of violence that can be claimed by and partially redeemed through the comic styling of the music-hall, of course: the singer of “I'm One of the Ruins” winks through her “fallen” state. Likewise, when the chorus of *Murder in the Cathedral* confesses to “consenting to the last humiliation,” their assumption of responsibility for their suffering is no

less productively engaged with the politics of spectatorship implicit in the music-hall performance.⁹⁵ If their “confession” lacks the playful irony of “I’m One of the Ruins” (the speech, after all, ends in a prayer for forgiveness), it nevertheless also recognizes that such suffering can be represented only by the performance of figures who explicitly resist the sort of individuality that is granted by a more verbally articulate accounting. Unlike Becket and the knights, who all offer complex—and variously problematic—“readings” of the paradox between “action and suffering,” the charwomen of Canterbury merely embody that paradox and offer its representation onstage.

It is, of course, such romanticized figures—the marginalized, half-conscious people inassimilable by textualized “civilization”—that inform the final turn of Eliot’s essay. He invokes the recent scholarship of W. H. R. Rivers, the noted psychologist and anthropologist who had achieved fame treating “shell-shocked” soldiers during and after World War I. Rivers had published an essay on the “Depopulation of Melanesia” which suggested that “the natives of that unfortunate archipelago are dying out principally for the reason that the ‘Civilization’ forced upon them has deprived them of all interest in life. They are dying from pure boredom.”⁹⁶ For Eliot, the demise of the music-hall signals the spread of this “disease” into the corners of “civilization,” and his oft-quoted conclusion takes on a tone of apocalyptic prophecy.

When every theatre has been replaced by 100 cinemas, when every musical instrument has been replaced by 100 gramophones, when every horse has been replaced by 100 cheap motor cars, when electrical ingenuity has made it possible for every child to hear its bedtime stories through a wireless receiver attached to both ears, when applied science has done everything possible with the materials on this earth to make life as interesting as possible, it will not be surprising if the population of the entire civilized world rapidly follows the fate of the Melanesians.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*: 42.

⁹⁶ Eliot, “London Letter” (December 1922): 662.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*: 663.

This pronouncement is characteristic of a certain vein of nostalgic modernism: the aestheticist Eliot, deeply invested in “art” and the absolute integrity of its “aura,” decries “mechanical reproducibility” in those hyperbolic acts of rhetorical multiplication. The statement is also, of course, evidence of an even more problematic strain of Eliot’s critical disposition: the patriarchal, imperialist and romantic fascination with an allegedly “primitive” experience of culture. To pronounce this sort of apocalyptic vision is not only deeply condescending toward the Melanesians and their plight; it also undermines the circumstances of its own production, for Eliot would not know of the fate of these people were it not for the instruments of modern communication and for the techniques of a contemporary form of anthropology represented by the seminal figure of W. H. R. Rivers—nor would he then be able to transmit this knowledge or its symbolic value through a trans-Atlantic “London Letter” meant for publication in the New York-based *Dial*. The valorization of local cultural coherence is explicitly at odds with the internationality of this publication.

In turning toward the Melanesians and in articulating his modernist prophecy, Eliot seems to establish the significance of this essay—and, therefore, of Marie Lloyd’s life and death—within a fairly standard narrative of cultural disillusionment in the early-twentieth century, particularly in the years following the Great War. The nod toward Rivers confirms this: no one else had dealt more publicly or “scientifically” with the systemic effects of modernity, from the “lost generation” of English young men, physically and spiritually crushed by newly-mechanized warfare, to the distant island cultures of the Pacific, whose political and economic value (being, relatively, nil) never afforded them the imperial “significance” of, say, England’s colonies in India.

But Eliot is able to reach this point of symbolic, global importance only by denying the

unique legitimacy of the essay's own ostensible subject. Marie Lloyd herself has been lost, buried first beneath the recognizable gestures of a "middle-aged woman of the charwoman class," and then beneath the enormous weight of those symbolic Melanesians, a population whose fate can be so effortlessly mapped on to that of the entire globe. Eliot's act of literary interment for a "great artist" is very quickly transformed into a polemic, as later editions of this essay show. In Eliot's 1932 *Selected Essays* (and thus in the majority of later reprintings), the piece (now titled "Marie Lloyd") ends with that vision of the fate of the "entire civilized world," omitting the sentence that concludes the *Dial* version: "You will see that the death of Marie Lloyd has had a depressing effect, and that I am quite incapable of taking any interest in any literary events in England in the last two months, if any have taken place."⁹⁸ The earlier version, thus, creates a productive irony: there is a wonderful disparity between such a hyperbolic vision of global extinction and the minor "depression" of a man of letters whose proper profession is commentary on England's "literary events" for an American audience whose attachment to English "culture" is notably ambivalent. The contrast is clear: in the earlier version, the death of Marie Lloyd *displaces* London "literary events" of October and November, 1922, overshadowing even Eliot's iconic poem, *The Waste Land*; in the later version, Lloyd's death becomes its own trans-historical "literary event," for that version is enshrined as a crucial piece of Eliot's critical output.

This entire trajectory—which sees Lloyd transformed from a famous performer into a symbol of global collapse—is, in fact, enabled by a pointed misreading of Marie Lloyd's final act. Knowing, as we do, the circumstances of Lloyd's last song—the emaciated figure smothered beneath that de-humanizing costume, the broken voice, and the heartbreaking fall, which offered such a tragic dramatization of the problematic "reality" of the stage—it is impossible to read

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Eliot's assessment as at all accurate or relevant to Lloyd's actual performance. Where Eliot read only that highly-conscious social mimicry, which turned Lloyd into the perfect "expressive figure" of her class, her own audience witnessed the exact opposite: the parody of a "fallen woman," that characteristic "type" that had been ignored and derided for centuries, was replaced by the actual onstage fall of a charismatic theatrical performer, devoted to her audience almost to the point of her final breath. And given the immediate publicity of Lloyd's collapse, it is almost impossible that Eliot would not have been aware of Lloyd's illness and the three-day coma into which she lapsed after that onstage fall. Though Eliot's appraisal of Lloyd is undoubtedly rhapsodic, it is also notably insensitive toward the reality of that final performance.

I want to argue that Eliot's willful ignorance of those circumstances is the key to the broader significance of this essay: Eliot uses the medium and form of the essay itself—and the "close reading" that it so easily performs of Lloyd's performance—in order to highlight the difference between the literal death of the actor, which had shocked all of London and driven to irrelevance all literary events, and the "death of the actor," which is memorialized as a literary event of its own. The "reading" of the stage-performance never captures the significance of the performer's own reading, which uses the words of a text that establishes a homogenizing persona (the "charwoman") in order to celebrate an utterly unique, individual "genius."

In order to understand this move, we must look at last to Eliot's first major critical manifesto: "Tradition and the Individual Talent." That essay, first published in *The Egoist* in 1919, became the centerpiece of his 1920 volume of criticism, *The Sacred Wood*. In it, Eliot articulates the so-called "impersonal theory" of poetry: in a direct attack on the Romantic understanding of poetry as an act of personal expression, Eliot argues that the personal emotions of the poet have little to do with the production of poetry, which rather results from the unique

combination of objective circumstances in the poet's present and his understanding of the literary "tradition" into which he is writing. It is, essentially, a remarkably conservative and scholastic act of literary criticism: Eliot speaks vehemently about the responsibility owed to the poetic "tradition," acknowledging that though his "doctrine requires a ridiculous amount of erudition" it is, nevertheless, "indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year."⁹⁹ Few pieces of writing—especially pieces so brief—have been more influential to the development of English literary criticism in the twentieth century, for better or worse: the New Critical movement that rose to prominence in the middle decades of the century drew much of its methodology (if not its ideology) from Eliot's writing, and those methods—particularly the act of "close reading," which often presupposes the aesthetic unity of the text—have remained a hallmark of critical work even as the ideologies that have defined literary study have undergone continual revision.

What is most important about "Tradition and the Individual Talent" for Eliot's later turn toward theatrical "talent" is its uncertainty about its own audience. What seems a straightforward set of precepts for the aspiring poet—ironically offered by a young poet, one whose legitimacy was actually established in part by the preemptive publication of this essay—actually had its greatest impact on aspiring critics: a set of commandments about how poetry ought to be written became an invitation to read poetry as though it had been written that way. We can see this most clearly in the essay's final paragraph, which vacillates almost transparently between addressing these two audiences.

This essay proposes to halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism, and confine itself to such practical conclusions as can be applied by the responsible person interested in poetry. To divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim: for it would conduce a juster estimation of actual poetry, good and bad. There are many people who appreciate the expression of sincere emotion in

⁹⁹ Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent": 43; 40.

verse, and there is a smaller number of people who can appreciate technical excellence. But very few know when there is expression of *significant* emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living. [Emphasis his]¹⁰⁰

Eliot invokes two different versions of the “responsible person interested in poetry”: on the one hand, there is the person who is devoted to a “juster estimation of actual poetry,” hopefully in terms of its expression of “*significant* emotion” (which is to say, emotion that signifies, emotion that indicates its “objective correlative,” a phrase Eliot coins in another important essay); on the other, there is the selfless poet, who is able to produce “impersonal” poetry by “surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done.” Remarkably, these two figures are almost mutually exclusive; at any rate, there is no necessary correlation between their actions. Poetry produced by “impersonal” poets could still be criticized by those committed to finding some sort of “personal” source of the poetry (a frustration Eliot himself often confronted throughout his life); likewise, “personal” poetry can be read according only to its own structures of meaning, as the New Critics set out rigorously to prove. But by passively shifting between these two figures—by, indeed, never announcing a distinction—“Tradition and the Individual Talent” attempts to perform an extremely problematic move: it asserts that both of these figures could be the same, though they seem to exist on opposite ends of a continuum defined by an “objectified” work of art. In spite of the essay’s significance to a New Critical tradition, its precepts have at least as much relevance within opposing post-structuralist or reader-response definitions of “author” and “reader”: by assuming that the poem has an objective and “impersonal” existence, Eliot transforms “author” and “reader” into nothing more than roles performed in relation to a self-

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.: 49.

coherent “text”—moreover, he suggests that such roles can be (or maybe ought to be) performed by the same person.

Indeed, though “Tradition and the Individual Talent” has cast its lengthening shadow over the whole of *The Sacred Wood*, restoring the essay to its place within the context of that slim volume of early criticism reveals the centrality of such “authorial” and “readerly” role-playing to Eliot’s aesthetic theorizing. The collection begins with a meditation on “The Perfect Critic,” which struggles to articulate a distinction between a “critical” and “creative” disposition, and ends merely with the expectation “that the critic and the creative artist should frequently be the same person,” though he admits that it is “fatuous to say that criticism is for the sake of ‘creation’ or creation for the sake of criticism.”¹⁰¹ This refusal to prioritize becomes a denial of any straightforward causal or even chronological relationship between the acts performed by this “same person”: his subsequent essays on “Imperfect Critics”—which focus on actual people, not idealized constructions—attempt to discern the relationship between “creative” and “critical” acts performed by his immediate predecessors, particularly Swinburne and Arnold. Eliot’s effort produces contradictory generalizations and frustrating tautologies: the assertion that “Swinburne is an appreciator and not a critic” is followed some pages later by the declaration that the “author of Swinburne’s critical essays is also the author of Swinburne’s verse: if you hold the opinion that Swinburne was a very great poet, you can hardly deny him the title of a great critic.”¹⁰² Though Eliot might be using Swinburne’s elite stature to validate both acts of poetry and criticism he is performing—i.e., he might be suggesting that Swinburne is a great poet and a great critic because he is first a great *man*—the motion he makes at the opening of “Tradition and the Individual Talent” would tend to universalize and democratize the act of criticism

¹⁰¹ Eliot, “The Perfect Critic”: 13.

¹⁰² Eliot, “Imperfect Critics”: 16; 19–20.

amongst all people: “we might remind ourselves that criticism is as inevitable as breathing, and that we should be none the worse for articulating what passes in our minds when we read a book and feel an emotion about it, for criticizing our own minds in their work of criticism.”¹⁰³ In other words: criticism is nothing but the act of reading made articulate, and it is the inevitable action of *any* literate (and living—or at least breathing) human being, not just “great men” like Swinburne, Arnold, and (we assume) Eliot himself. By describing this “inevitability,” Eliot indicates a sharp divide between the sort of common, universal act of reading and criticizing and the ascetic, selfless toil of writing poetry within the “tradition.”

Given *The Sacred Wood*'s central tension—the paradox produced by such reciprocal acts of reading and writing—it is therefore unsurprising to find that the collection turns inevitably toward the theatre: for it is here, Eliot implies, that such “impersonal” theorizing meets its most difficult challenge. A brief essay on “The Possibility of a Poetic Drama” uses the united desire of authors and audiences to precipitate an inquiry into that “possibility”: “The reasons for raising the question again [of the possibility of “poetic drama”] are first that the majority, perhaps, certainly a large number, of poets hanker for the stage; and second, that not a negligible public appears to want verse plays.”¹⁰⁴ In the subsequent pages, Eliot makes an admirable attempt to bring this united desire in line with his theory of the objective, “impersonal” work of art, arguing that the decline of poetic drama resulted from the rise of the novel: for in the latter form, that level of “objectivity” is diluted by an inconsistent process of “reflection.”¹⁰⁵ In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot very literally places these attitudes at odds: the objective integrity of Becket's poetic monologue at the conclusion of the first act is countered by the knights' deployment of

¹⁰³ Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: 40

¹⁰⁴ Eliot, “The Possibility of a Poetic Drama”: 50.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*: 54.

novelistic interpretive strategies at the end of the second, and their inconsistent “reflection”—which, much like the novel form, ambivalently situates events in terms of their cultural and historical conditions—must give way to the chorus’s embodied performance of history.

Thus, in the conclusion to “The Possibility of a Poetic Drama,” Eliot makes a necessary turn toward the paradoxes of the performer. After a provocative announcement that great poetic drama ought to exhibit a kind of “simplification” (one which he sees, potentially, in Shaw and partially in Chekhov and Ibsen, but not in Goethe—which suggests a semantic distinction in “poetic drama” irrespective of the divide between prose and verse), he declares:

Finally, we must take into account the instability of any art—the drama, music, dancing—which depends upon representation by performers. The intervention of performers introduces a complication of economic conditions which is in itself likely to be injurious. A struggle, more or less unconscious, between the creator and the interpreter is almost inevitable. The interest of a performer is almost certain to be centred in himself: a very slight acquaintance with actors and musicians will testify. The performer is interested not in form but in opportunities for virtuosity or in the communication of his ‘personality’ ...¹⁰⁶

Unsurprisingly, Eliot invokes the classic terms of Diderot’s *Paradox*: he problematizes a “consciousness” of the division between “creator” and “interpreter,” a division which lies both between the author and the actor and within the actor himself; moreover, he finds his anxiety upon an ambivalent acknowledgment of the material circumstances and “economic conditions” of the stage at a specific moment in history. The temptation is to read this statement in line with the anti-theatricality of Eliot’s contemporaries, and to see resolution only in Craig’s Ubermarionette or Yeats’s Noh-inspired sensibilities.

But not only would this reading stand in stark contrast to the actual progress of Eliot’s career, which, unlike Yeats, “chose the theatre,” as Frank Kermode has told us; it would also contradict the tentative but powerful suggestion that Eliot makes in the essay’s final sentences.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.: 57.

Proceeding directly from the inevitably failure of attempts to “get around” the actor, Eliot resolves not to elide the problems of the actor but rather to embrace a specific sort of actor as an essential medium. The essay concludes:

Perhaps the music-hall comedian is the best material. I am aware that this is a dangerous suggestion to make. For every person who is likely to consider it seriously there are a dozen toymakers who would leap to tickle aesthetic society into one more quiver and giggle of art debauch. Very few treat art seriously. There are those who treat it solemnly, and will continue to write poetic pastiches of Euripides and Shakespeare; and there are others who treat it as a joke.¹⁰⁷

Eliot’s unwillingness to qualify this idea further—to insist absolutely on the “seriousness” of his proposition—is a part of its import, for it is in the music-hall performer’s careful mediation of “comic” tone that Eliot witnesses a necessary supplement to the aesthetic perfection of the text. Eliot is no voyeuristic *flâneur* nor aggressive advocate of Dada or avant-garde performance, hoping to use the music-hall to perform a “desacrilization” of the work of art. What the music-hall represents is an escape from this binary: it is in the body and personality of the performer that Eliot sees the potential to unite “serious” art with the inarticulate desire of that conjoined author-audience. But doing so requires not subjugating the “personality” of the performer, but putting this “personality” in service of something else. And on the author’s own part, this work demands the abandonment of any kind of prescriptive “intent”: the attempt must be made both without solemnity and without joking.

Read together, the essays of *The Sacred Wood* are thus less prescriptive about what poetry is or ought to be than “Tradition and the Individual Talent” becomes when read alone; rather, they represent an attempt to outline a dilemma that their own form cannot address. Frustrated by the issue of “personality” and continually revolving around the communion of author and reader, the essays point inexorably toward the theatre. We see this even in Eliot’s

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.: 58.

comparatively narrower classical criticism. The essay on “Euripides and Professor Murray” devotes most of its text to a detailed analysis of the flaws in Murray’s translation of the *Medea*; these derive largely from Murray’s Pre-Raphaelite conception of the Greek sensibility, which ought to have been wholly overthrown by contemporary revolutions in anthropology, sociology, and psychology—movements which all point to Greek drama’s foundation in fertility rituals. But for all its gestures toward the text in abstraction and its proper sources in a vague, trans-cultural mythic past, the essay is indelibly marked by its immediate theatrical context: before launching his attack on Murray, Eliot notes that the text served admirably onstage in a recent performance, where Sybil Thorndike in the title role “employed all the conventions, the theatricalities, of the modern stage; yet her personality triumphed over not only Professor Murray’s verse but her own training.”¹⁰⁸ Though Eliot then attempts to put Thorndike aside in favor of straight textual criticism, this observation becomes one more provocative outlier in what is otherwise seen as *The Sacred Wood*’s dominant motif: the eradication of “personality” in service of “art.”

I want to argue, therefore, that *The Sacred Wood* points the way to Eliot’s subsequent critical and aesthetic project in the theatre. In fact, these essays outline a potential that Eliot would set out rigorously to fulfill in his next critical project: the “London Letters” to *The Dial*, which would terminate in that memorial to Marie Lloyd.

Originally published in the mid-nineteenth century, *The Dial* was one of the chief instruments of the Transcendentalists in America; when it emerged into prominence again in the early decades of the twentieth century, it became a vehicle for the foremost practitioners of modern poetry. Much of this transformation was owed to the editorial vision of Scofield Thayer, who took over the magazine in 1920; the subsequent years of Thayer’s tenure saw confluence of three “currents of expression” in the pages of *The Dial*: liberalism, cosmopolitanism, and

¹⁰⁸ Eliot, “Euripides and Professor Murray”: 59–60.

aestheticism.¹⁰⁹ The latter values were clearly upheld by T. S. Eliot, who took over as *The Dial*'s London Correspondent in March of 1921. Eliot had been involved with *The Dial*, on and off, for several years, but the magazine would hold an especially vital place in the poet's during the early twenties, for it was here that he first published *The Waste Land* in 1922.

In spite of their ostensibly journalistic "purpose," what is most remarkable about T. S. Eliot's eight "London Letters" to *The Dial* is their self-conscious adherence to a specific critical agenda. He confesses as much in the bluntly antagonistic first paragraph of his March, 1921 debut, which seeks to address the "two stupidities" that define his English and his American audiences, and declares that "if these letters succeed in being written with any competence, I am almost certain to become an object of international execration."¹¹⁰ The majority of this first letter is spent dismantling, with an almost sadistic glee, a recent publication hoping to acquaint the "general reading public" with "some contemporary poets." The focus of Eliot's ire remains upon this "general reading public," which appears to use its untutored reading of poetry to initiate a false class-segregation: "it is that offensive part of the middle class which believes itself superior to the rest of the middle class; and superior for precisely this reason that it believes itself to possess culture."¹¹¹ Thus, the letter ends by laying out Eliot's presumptive proposition for the rest of his letters:

What I propose to myself, in continuation of this tentative essay, is to compare the use of the English language in contemporary English and American verse, a comparison which will probably show a balance in favour of London (or Dublin); and further to institute a comparison of English and American verse with French. There are pitfalls too in the question of the Revival of Criticism in England; I should rightly have discussed the revival of criticism in this letter, as it may be dead before I write again. Again, the Palladium has at this moment an excellent bill, including Marie Lloyd, Little Tich, George Mozart, and Ernie Lotinga; and

¹⁰⁹ Joost, *Years of Transition: The Dial, 1912–1920*: 266–70.

¹¹⁰ Eliot, "London Letter" (April 1921): 448.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*: 452.

that provokes an important chapter on the Extinction of the Music Hall, the corruption of the Theatre Public, and the incapacity of the British Public to appreciate Miss Ethel Levey. Next week the admirable Phoenix Society will perform *Volpone* or the Fox and this requires a word on Shakespearean acting in England. All of these problems are integral to my plan, and I hope can be included before the next visit of M Diaghileff's Ballet.¹¹²

What is intended as a series of comments on developing “cultural” events in England is thus immediately co-opted as a vehicle for Eliot's critical grousing, which seems to undermine the “objectivity” of such correspondence. But already, here, we can detect the trend of Eliot's logic: it bends inexorably from the odious “general reading public”—a version of the “amorphous protoplasm” he condemns in his final “London Letter”—to the “Extinction of the Music Hall” and other forms of performance art, though it never makes that connection explicit.

In the subsequent six letters composed over almost two years, Eliot pursues this object with rigorous discipline. Each of the above-mentioned topics is addressed in turn; and while certain events occur which he had not anticipated in that opening diatribe, these are quickly excused with a dash of caustic wit. (The July, 1921 letter observes, for example: “Einstein the Great has visited England, and delivered lectures to uncomprehending audiences... He has met Mr Bernard Shaw, but made no public comment on that subject.”¹¹³) As a result, Eliot's final letter—which is, again, devoted to that tribute to Marie Lloyd—seems to produce a kind of critical rupture. On the one hand, it fits neatly within his proposed scheme, which planned to devote a comment to the “Extinction of the Music Hall” anyway. On the other, of course, Lloyd's death came as a shock—to Eliot as to the rest of London—and Eliot confesses that he “did not realize that her death would strike me as the most important event which I have had to

¹¹² Ibid.: 452–53.

¹¹³ Eliot, “London Letter” (August 1921): 213.

chronicle in these pages.”¹¹⁴ There is a disappointing and almost tragic coincidence here, one which Eliot is almost powerless to account for: the fact that such an event—the death of a luminous personality—exceeds the use that he nevertheless dutifully makes of it.

As I have already argued, what marks this letter is the ironic disparity between Eliot’s ostensible goal—that fantastic, apocalyptic vision of technological disintegration—and the tragic reality of Lloyd’s death. In the earlier “London Letters,” Marie Lloyd is a constant presence, but even in his discussion of the music-hall she appears only briefly, parenthetically, and—as I have shown in the two epigraphs to this chapter—incorrectly. She is, as Eliot confesses in the opening to that final letter, a performer whose “genius” is taken for granted, whose “uniqueness” is almost invisible, whose “history” initially takes shape as a patronizing attempt to map the cultural transformations of “modernity” through a reading of the “abstract and brief chronicle” of the music-hall. And so in this final letter, Eliot is forced to take measure of his own failure to address Lloyd’s “art,” and to acknowledge that it is only in death that she is able to become fully present for him. In spite of Eliot’s willingness to immediately subjugate her to a version of modernist nostalgia and a sentiment of tragic belatedness, there is also an understanding that the “depressing effect” of Lloyd’s death surpasses both his nostalgia and his hyperbolic paranoia. Its true impact is banal, but irrevocably singular: though Eliot makes gestures toward the eventual extinction of the “middle aged woman of the charwoman class” that Lloyd so perfectly represented, what is mourned is Lloyd and not the idealized charwoman. And if that charwoman again subsides into invisibility, it is not because her gestures will become any less recognizable, but because they will never be subjected to the same type of theatrical specificity, to the “selection and concentration” performed by a figure as uniquely individual as Marie Lloyd.

¹¹⁴ Eliot, “London Letter” (December 1922): 659.

Lloyd's death, in struggling and failing to become a "literary event," crystallizes the problem of "personality" that marks all of Eliot's early criticism: the death of the actor becomes the event through which "art" and "personality" can be reconciled, for it is in the unquestioning assumptions that define the actor's lifetime work—his or her ability to act as an apparently passive medium through the "selection and concentration" of gestures and intonations—that the audience becomes participant in the work of art. If Eliot's theorizing about the "objectified" work of poetry throughout *The Sacred Wood* seems to point inexorably toward the theatre, then it is in the performance of the actor that those roles can be simultaneously inhabited. But the significance of this performance, as Eliot is made aware on October 7, 1922, can only be glimpsed, partially, in the removal and offstage death of the actor: for it is at such moments when that "personality" disappears that the person's life becomes instantly transmissible. In the death of the actor, Eliot recognized an event that literally enacts the conflict between text and performance, between the spiritual and the material, between the author and the reader. This death simultaneously resolves and reinstates these conflicts, and consequently informs Eliot's ensuing exploration in both theatrical and textual media.

In the subsequent plays, Eliot uses explicit meta-theatrical techniques to draw out the significance of these stage-deaths, which—in their banal reality—restore a sense of context and personal involvement to all participants in the work of art. Thus, in *Murder in the Cathedral* we witness not simply the symbolic martyrdom of a saint, but rather a series of attempts to establish that symbolism by negotiating the dilemmas of the "actor in history." Becket's willingness to abdicate responsibility for acting within history—"I shall no longer act or suffer, to the sword's end"—is countered by the knights' attempts to do the same, indicating that the anachronistic logic of written history stands at odds with the interpretive authority of hagiography and with the

basic dramaturgical conditions of “poetic drama” and Aristotelian tragedy. Meanwhile, the chorus—comprised of those “charwomen” of Canterbury—achieves the celebration of personal individuality at odds with the “type of common man” that Eliot recognized in Marie Lloyd, who became such an “actor in history” through the subversive ironies of the charwoman in her own final performance. Likewise, in *The Elder Statesman*’s emphatic and relentless deflation of the *Oedipus at Colonus*, we are made aware not only of the formal demands of the naturalistic stage, but also the ways that these demands are met and often exceeded by the personalities that perform upon them. By reducing its primary figure from the Greek hero-king, to the British retired politician, and finally to the individual “broken-down actor,” *The Elder Statesman* expresses a growing awareness of the immediate present: it duplicates, in terms of the “amorphous protoplasm of the bourgeoisie,” the reduction of history that Henry Irving achieved at the height of his career. Eliot’s theatrical work thus offers a necessary complement to his own definition of the literary tradition: through the work of the actor, Eliot probes alternative ways to confront the articulation of agency and “personality” in the face of such homogenizing and objectifying forces.

And so, as Claverton wanders off to die quietly under a beech tree in the prosaic British rest-home and not within the sanctified grove of the Eumenides, we are made aware of Eliot’s use of the theatre to perform a casual exchange of one “sacred wood” for another—just as that early volume of criticism was inevitably fulfilled by the performance and death of “Marie Lloyd,” the theatrical persona of Matilda Wood.

IV.

**DONKEYS AT DIMBOLA, ACTORS AT POINTZ HALL:
VIRGINIA WOOLF'S UNCOMMON READERS**

It is the fate of actors to leave only picture postcards behind them. Every night when the curtain goes down the beautiful coloured canvas is rubbed out. What remains is at best only a wavering, insubstantial phantom—a verbal life on the lips of the living.

- Virginia Woolf, "Ellen Terry," 1941¹

In the spring of 1941, Virginia Woolf published a brief retrospective essay on the career of Ellen Terry, mistress of the Lyceum Theatre during its apex under the managerial control of Henry Irving. Terry had died in 1928; Woolf's 1941 essay therefore responds not to a sense of immediate loss that upstages current "literary events" but rather to a belated desire to resurrect and restore the actor's presence. At this point in the middle of the Second World War, that "verbal life on the lips of the living" was in danger: nearly fifty years after Irving was knighted, there were already relatively few who could recall Terry's (or Irving's) dominance in the 1890s, and those who could would likely do so with a sense of benign nostalgia after the catastrophes of modern history had overtaken any understanding of the actor's "Victorian curiosity." Woolf's essay recalls the same fears of technologized media voiced by T. S. Eliot in that hyperbolic conclusion to his obituary for Marie Lloyd: the "picture postcards" left behind by Terry are but pale, commercialized echoes of Terry's performances; as she struggles to recall Terry's "beautiful coloured canvases," Woolf finds herself surrounded instead by a mass of mute ephemera. Woolf also invokes a conflicted sense of the actor's "illiteracy" as fostered by Bernard Shaw: her essay begins by recounting a famous anecdote from the production of Shaw's *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* at the Court in 1906, when Terry had forgotten her lines. "But

¹ Woolf, "Ellen Terry": 206.

did it matter?” Woolf asks. “Speaking or silent, she was Lady Cicely—or was it Ellen Terry?”² The actor, Woolf recognizes, stands at an angle from the progress of twentieth-century history. Terry’s ambivalent relationship to mechanical reproducibility and to text—to any sense of permanence or stability—makes her an ideal subject for a reevaluation of the great forces of modernity.

And so Woolf calls up the undead specter of Irving’s paradox—that “wavering, insubstantial phantom”—as she embarks upon an effort to inscribe this actor’s value, re-writing Terry’s legacy in terms of her own ideals of literary art. At the same time, however, Woolf defers to Terry: for she recognizes this work has been attempted before. That “verbal life” had failed Terry as well:

Ellen Terry was well aware of it. She tried herself, overcome by the greatness of Irving as Hamlet and indignant at the caricatures of his detractors, to describe what she remembered. “Oh God, that I were a writer!” she cried. “Surely a *writer* could not string words together about Henry Irving’s Hamlet and say *nothing, nothing*.” It never struck her, humble as she was, and obsessed by her lack of book learning, that she was, among other things, a writer. It never occurred to her when she wrote her autobiography, or scribbled page after page to Bernard Shaw late at night, dead tired after rehearsal, that she was “writing.” [emphasis hers]³

Woolf writing Terry mimics Terry writing Irving, or Terry writing (to) Shaw. For Woolf, this notion of naïve writing—the actor’s attempt to preserve and embody memory—gives way to a kind of historical performance: a self-conscious recapitulation of prior failures that prove, themselves, an authentic representation of the current moment. Woolf’s essay therefore returns us to the “restorative” work attempted by that other naïve writer, the actor Henry Irving, whose letters and lectures struggled between the paradox of the actor and his own irrepressible persona at a crucial transitional moment in English and theatrical history.

² Ibid.: 205. For Shaw’s own understanding of Lady Cicely’s “legibility,” see the final pages of my second chapter.

³ Ibid.: 206.

But Woolf's essay about Ellen Terry also strikes to the heart of her own dominant artistic concerns at this later transitional moment. Produced as Woolf was completing revisions on her great theatrical novel *Between the Acts*, this essay addresses issues that Woolf planned to confront more at length in a new volume of criticism: during that spring of 1941 she had begun to work on an essay about the lost art of "Anon," the theatrical and literary genius who had died out when Shakespeare ushered in a paradigm of authorship that would prioritize the interpretive efforts of the individual reader over the ephemeral work of communal theatrical creation. And by recapitulating Terry's attempt to inscribe Irving's achievement, Woolf also fulfills the injunction she laid down in the essential essay that concludes her *Second Common Reader* (1932), "How Should One Read a Book?": "Do not dictate to your author; try to become him. Be his fellow-worker and accomplice. If you hang back, and reserve and criticize at first, you are preventing yourself from getting the fullest possible value from what you read."⁴ For Woolf, Terry's lifetime work—the collaborative and unwritten work of the actor—becomes a model for engaging with literature both as an author and as a reader: she receives the "fullest possible value" of Terry by becoming Terry's "fellow-worker," re-inscribing Terry in an act of failed *mimesis* rather than an assertion of authorial agency. The actor's work also becomes central to a redemptive engagement with history: by returning, as Irving had, to the influence of the performer on the formation of the English literary canon in the wake of Shakespeare, Woolf also finds the means to express a mode of historical action that remained relevant even as the Second World War began to inscribe itself upon British soil.

Woolf's innovative engagement with literary history has long been acknowledged. Her novels are extraordinary products of intertextual work within the English tradition, responding to the problems of canonicity and anticipating the theoretical paradigms of textuality and

⁴ Woolf, "How Should One Read a Book?": 259.

subjectivity of the generations that followed her. Moreover, her critical essays display a unique interest in historicizing the act of reading, placing modes of textual and cultural engagement in context of their literary and historical antecedents. They reveal not only the ways in which reading has been conditioned by privilege and patriarchy but also how notions of “common” reading developed both in spite of and alongside the institutions that legislated textual authority throughout English history, from the church and the university to the printing press and the publishing house.⁵ Much of the work of the “common reader” culminates in the pastiches Woolf presents throughout *Between the Acts*, which uses an amateurish theatrical response to the canon to subvert and ironize a collective sense of cultural history. At the same time, however, relatively few critics have acknowledged Woolf’s thorough understanding of theatricality, of the craft of the actor, and of theatrical history. Though she published a handful of dramatic reviews, Woolf was not known during her lifetime as a dramatist, and she is rarely associated with the theatre. Her sole play, *Freshwater*—a loosely biographical account of a pivotal moment in the life of Ellen Terry—received only one performance during her life, during a “private theatrical evening” at the apartment of Vanessa Bell in January of 1935, and it was not published until its variant texts were rediscovered and edited in the 1970s.

In this chapter, I argue that Woolf’s response to Ellen Terry and to the paradox of the actor—presented in *Freshwater* and in the critical essays that define “common reading” as an inherently performative act—becomes essential to her reformulation of historical agency in *Between the Acts*. From the beginning her literary career, Woolf displayed a fascination with the idea of the actor, and particularly the actor’s ability to articulate a severance from the values of Victorianism: as early as 1908, years before her own literary work blossomed, Woolf published a critical evaluation of Sarah Bernhardt’s autobiography—and her lifelong interest in the actor

⁵ For a recent and thorough example see de Gay, *Virginia Woolf’s Novels and the Literary Past*.

would be bookended by her 1941 essay on the life of Ellen Terry. But as *Freshwater* developed throughout the course of the 1920s and '30s, Woolf recognized that the actor's abilities supervened this periodizing division. As a result, the paradox of the actor became a means for Woolf both to embody and to critique historical attitudes, for the actor—bound by her own unique subjectivity even as she gestures toward transhistorical ideals—resists the normative effects of historical legibility. As it reflects backward over the series of benign and violent actions that have led Britain once more to the brink of war, *Between the Acts* returns to the work of the late-Victorian actor Ellen Terry—and to her willful and deceptively naïve independence—not as a way to confirm the losses of history but as a means to articulate a measure of historical freedom.

How Should One Read Ellen Terry?: *Freshwater*, the Monologue, and the Mimic

If only I *could* escape. [*She wrings her hands in desperation.*] For I never thought when I married Mr. Watts that it was going to be like this. I thought artists were such jolly people—always drinking champagne and eating oysters and kissing each other and—well, behaving like the Rossettis. As it is, Signor can't eat anything except the gristle of beef minced very fine and passed through the kitchen chopper twice. He drinks a glass of hot water at nine and goes to bed in woolen socks at nine thirty sharp. Instead of kissing me he gives me a white rose every morning. Every morning he says the same thing—"The Utmost for the Highest, Ellen! The Utmost for the Highest!" And so of course I have to sit to him all day long. Everybody says how proud I must be to hang for ever and ever in the Tate Gallery as Modesty crouching beneath the feet of Mammon. But I'm an abandoned wretch, I suppose. I have such awful thoughts. Sometimes I actually want to go upon the stage and be an actress. What would Signor say if he knew?

- Virginia Woolf, *Freshwater*, 1923 version⁶

Woolf held a desire to write a burlesque about her great-aunt, the renowned Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, as early as 1919; by the middle of 1923, this desire had manifested itself in "Freshwater, A Comedy," which she began to write as "a welcome diversion in her struggle with 'The Hours,'" the novel that would become *Mrs. Dalloway*.⁷ The one-act

⁶ Woolf, *Freshwater*: 69–70.

⁷ Ruotolo, Editor's Preface": viii.

play took its title from Freshwater Bay on the Isle of Wight, where the Cameron home of Dimbola Lodge was located—not far from the residences of Alfred Tennyson and G. F. Watts, the poet and painter who complete the play’s circle of Victorian artists. As a result, the 1923 *Freshwater* pitched itself explicitly at the Victorian aesthetic sensibility: within its gently parodic representations of these three eccentric personalities (or four, if we include Julia Cameron’s husband Charles Hay Cameron, the philosopher) is a deeply incisive critique of both their artistic presumptions and the political and economic conditions that permit their articulations of aesthetic authority. *Freshwater* is, among other things, an explicit attack upon Woolf’s historical forebears, on both the most intimate (familial) scale as well as the widest cultural terms.

To draw out this dimension of the play, Woolf used the real-life story of Ellen Terry, who married Watts in 1864 at the age of sixteen only to leave him shortly thereafter. Disappointed and disillusioned with the sterility of the “Freshwater” way of life, Terry went on to become one of the luminaries of the late-Victorian stage: already a notable actor in her own right, she would then join Irving’s Lyceum in the late 1870s, cementing a partnership that would define the London theatrical “world” until the end of the century. But in Woolf’s play, Terry leaves Freshwater for the more mundane “reality” of Bloomsbury: “number forty-six Gordon Square, W.C. 1. There won’t be no veils there!” she declares just before leaving the stage.⁸ The 1923 *Freshwater* thus becomes not simply a satire of Woolf’s peculiar great-aunt but also a document of the shift Woolf perceived in her age’s—and her acquaintances’—political and aesthetic priorities. Like that extraordinary, influential essay begun the same year, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” the 1923 *Freshwater* assumes a fundamental change in the perception of human character between the Victorian age and the Georgian. It is not only a document of a periodic consciousness of art and aesthetics but also a polemic on behalf of Woolf’s incipient “modernist”

⁸ Woolf, *Freshwater*: 83.

sensibilities, using the flowering consciousness of its actor-protagonist in order to enact its severance with the stale prescriptions of a prior generation. In Woolf's early conception of Terry, the actor became a means to enact an anachronistic split: the sixteen-year-old Terry announces the ascent of Bloomsbury in a fictionalized 1865, a full generation before Woolf and her associates would establish that London district as the home of "modernist" aesthetic and philosophical innovation.

However, this version of *Freshwater* was abandoned by the late fall of 1923, when, in a letter to Vanessa Bell, Woolf remarked that "the whole affair will be much more of an undertaking" than her original plan for the play could sustain.⁹ The play was actually set aside for more than a decade; by the time it was finally produced during one of Vanessa Bell's amateur "theatrical evenings" in January of 1935, Woolf had completely revised and expanded the play, transforming that one-act "diversion" into a more full-bodied three-act play. The most significant of the revisions Woolf made to the play concerns the dramatization, in the play's new second act, of the crucial off-stage action of the prior version: Ellen Terry's 1923 monologue about "escape" is refashioned into the dialogue of her romantic rendezvous with the fictional "John Craig," who provides the pretext and means for her removal from Victorian Freshwater into modernist Bloomsbury.

While the later version thus places greater emphasis on the actions of Ellen Terry, it does so at the expense of its own ostensible "purpose." The individuation of Ellen Terry in the 1935 *Freshwater* blurs the clear-cut divisions between Freshwater and Bloomsbury that the 1923 Terry serves to isolate and define, thus calling into question the historical means we use to articulate individual identity. In the end, the 1935 Terry refuses to signify either Freshwater or Bloomsbury, for Woolf erases the division between the off-stage "reality" that Terry desires and

⁹ Qtd. in Ruotolo, "Editor's Preface": viii.

the exuberant fictions that circulate in Dimbola Lodge. And as a result, the play becomes much less a document of Bloomsbury's opposition to Freshwater and much more an attempt to represent a persona whose means of self-representation—the ephemeral art of acting—defy the assumptions of both Freshwater and Bloomsbury. The 1935 *Freshwater* issues a challenge to its own reading of artistic periodicity, using Terry's awareness of her representative capacity to frustrate the unidirectional authority that such a "reading" so often sustains. The twin texts of *Freshwater* thus dissolve essentialist distinctions in media (the novel and the theatre, the page and the stage) in favor of a more thorough critique of the ways in which those distinctions rest upon a mode of interaction with art underwritten by a fantasy of personal and historical coherency.

Woolf's relationship with the Victorians has long been a focus of critical debate, for it isolates the peculiar intersection of social politics and aesthetic theory that is so specific to Woolf's work and her stature within the pantheon of "modernist" writers. A generation of scholarship has done much to debunk the idea—prevalent within the author's own lifetime—that Woolf was an elitist "highbrow," aloof from the public, firmly on the aestheticist side of the "great divide" between modernism and mass culture,¹⁰ and thus, as T. S. Eliot observed in his obituary notice for Woolf, that she maintained "the dignified and admirable tradition of Victorian upper middle-class culture."¹¹ Such illusions have been countered by an oppositionary Woolf, a feminist, progressive, even socialist Woolf who held, in the words of Jane Marcus, a "passionate hatred for the Victorian patriarchal family" and therefore for the social and political values such

¹⁰ Described most clearly in Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*.

¹¹ Eliot, "Virginia Woolf": 316. As my previous chapter indicates, Eliot might once more be performing a deliberate misreading by inscribing Woolf's value in such unilateral terms. Once again, the obituary notice becomes a problematic genre due to the performance of its subject.

families upheld. This is the Woolf that we find expressed, in tones of both blatant outrage and subversive moderation, in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, the most overt interventions Woolf made in social criticism.¹² In recent years, much effort has been spent attempting to disentangle the assumptions that underpin both attitudes, necessarily dissolving the series of binaries that suggests any “great divide”—between the “modern” and the Victorian age, or between the “modernist” and the public, between “art” and popular culture—even exists. The rich ambiguities that Woolf offers in both in her novels and in her criticism have given us the opportunities to view Woolf’s oppositional strategies as more subtle and nuanced than straightforward and polemical. For example, Melba Cuddy-Keane has attempted to differentiate between “popular” and “mass,” “highbrow” and “lowbrow,” “democratic” and “elite” in her recent effort to locate Woolf’s position in the “public sphere,” for such binaries reverse one another when we attend to the sensitivity of Woolf’s critical thought.¹³

Likewise, we have begun to understand not an anti- but a “post-Victorian” Woolf, one whose attempts to salvage vestiges of greatness in Victorian art exist side-by-side with her most vehement condemnations of the attitudes that enabled such work.¹⁴ What is at stake in Woolf’s engagement with the Victorians is not simply the politics of art-making but also those of art-reception: her ability to articulate an opposition to Victorian patriarchy depends greatly upon her own highly-literate upbringing, with the rapidity, the fluency and the breadth of her reading and her education, as informal as it may have been. To be anti-Victorian requires not only that we first have read the Victorians but also that we be aware that it is they who have taught us how to

¹² Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*: 5.

¹³ Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere*.

¹⁴ See especially Ellis, *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians*. Ellis borrows the term “Post-Victorian” from Hermione Lee’s biography. His introduction, which offers a survey of past criticism, notes the ways that any attempt to negotiate Woolf’s attitude toward the Victorians is frustrated by the tendency to map such politicized value-judgments onto a series of relationships that held personal and emotional stakes as well as social and political ones.

read. Thus, indeed, does Eliot's obituary for Woolf note that in Woolf's maintenance of that "Victorian upper middle-class culture," "the producer and consumer of art were on an equal footing."¹⁵ Eliot's implication—that in Woolf we see a sort of generosity toward her audience, an equality that does away with implicit assumptions of authorship and authority—actually rests upon an belief in equal economic *and* intellectual capital: if the consumer of Victorian art is "on an equal footing" with its producer, it is only because both stand upon stable economic grounds, and both hold a united opinion of what it means to read and understand art. If we reject Woolf's "Victorianism," then it is difficult to maintain hold upon this ideal dispersion of authority. The "Victorian," in Eliot's fraught summation of Woolf, comes to represent a position that allows for equality between "the producer and consumer of art" only as long as there is something *else* that unites the two. But when we lose the common assumption of social position, questions of authority return, and ideals of aesthetic communion are sacrificed in the name of social difference.

The 1923 *Freshwater* documents these anxieties. In its vision of the eccentric, oblivious circle of Freshwater artists we are offered a critique of just such a collective: what unites the Camerons, Tennyson, and Watts is precisely the implicit superiority of their social status as well as their united faith in the fidelity of "art"—that is, art's capacity to be made legible as a reflection of purportedly universal truths. Throughout the play, they seem to work at cross purposes, barely registering each other's most earnest efforts: when Tennyson offers to read "Maud" aloud, for example, Julia Margaret Cameron first interrupts and then stalks off-stage in search of her own "art," while Charles Hay Cameron immediately falls asleep. But this image of vital contradiction is immediately undermined by the emergence of Ellen Terry. Indeed, it is Terry's presence within the play that allows us to witness the continuity of the Freshwater circle,

¹⁵ Eliot, "Virginia Woolf": 316.

and it is likewise only through Terry's eyes that we witness the stagnation, the hypocrisy, and the final collapse of the values that they uphold.

To a large extent, this work depends upon Woolf's distinction between the simple, one-to-one correlations in the Victorians' use of allegory and the more problematic doubling of theatrical role-playing, the semiosis of the stage, and the assertion of dramatic devices like the soliloquy and the aside. These stakes are made clear within its first moment of the 1923 play. The scene opens upon a vision of Charles Henry Hay Cameron receiving a head rub from a servant, Mary Magdalen (dubbed so by Julia Margaret Cameron). Grumbling fruitlessly about his wife's plans for their endlessly-delayed trip to India, he declares: "I am a captive in the hands of Circumstance—[MARY *now tugs at his beard.*] Ah! Oh! Oh!"¹⁶

While a clear "conflict" for the play is stated outright—the resolution of the Camerons' plans to leave for India—various metaphorical alternatives are also suggested: namely, those battles between the arbiters of interpretation and the powerless others whose passive actions it is Cameron's prerogative to interpret. Mr. Cameron, seated at center-stage and attended to by a servant, occupies the dominant position, but his first comments bemoan a sort of childish loss of agency. As a philosopher, he seeks an "answer [to] the Eternal Question" denied his wife's insistence that they continue "living this life of poetry, of philosophy, of frivolity."¹⁷ But the climax of his litany of frustrations—that exclamation about "Circumstance"—performs a precise inversion: Charles Cameron replaces a series of real delays with an allegorical figure, a personification not at all unlike the sort of grand symbolic portraits his wife attempts to capture on film. Not at odds with the poetic "frivolity" of his wife, Watts and Tennyson, Charles

¹⁶ Woolf, *Freshwater*: 66.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 65–66. Cameron's "eternal question" echoes Prufrock's "overwhelming" one; Woolf, like Eliot, capitalizes on a distinction between the alleged falseness of theatricality and the "truth" Cameron desires.

Cameron is actually its paragon. It is his intellectual station that grants their work legitimacy: his belief that there *is* an “Eternal Question” ratifies their attempts to pose (in all senses) the same. Meanwhile, that allegorical “Circumstance” finds itself embodied quite literally in two opposing visions of femininity: the “*brown-faced gipsylike-looking old woman*,” his wife, to whose whimsy he is actually captive, and the young, coquettish housemaid washing his head, who also—by virtue of Julia Cameron’s insistent manipulation of her lower-class models—bears the name “Mary Magdalen.”¹⁸ According to the stately, white-bearded old man seated at center-stage, he is himself caught between the crone and the maiden, the mother and the whore.

The 1923 *Freshwater* thus uses Charles Hay Cameron’s hypocritical, embattled Victorian masculinity to draw out a tension between the circumstances and the Circumstances, between “real life” in its historical specificity and the self-conscious adoption of various aesthetic poses by both the artist (Julia Cameron) and the object (“Mary Magdalen”). Charles Cameron is complicit in his own apparent “victimization”: that allegorical gesture—delivered in frustration, and interrupted by its own manifestation—is actually one piece of an essentializing strategy of domination. Beneath the banner of Circumstance run all manner of things, but Charles Cameron has little interest in sorting one from the other. His willful obliviousness—especially to the complicated entanglement of class and gender presented by “Mary Magdalen”—allows him some measure of comfort in his own “persecution.” But by prefiguring his opposition along such stark lines—the unification of all his frustrations under a single title—Charles Cameron negates the possibility for a more subtle articulation of the relationship between life and art. Unable to see the difference between his wife’s “frivolous” photography and his servant’s more complex subjection, Cameron performs a flattening of any such distinctions that actually renders them both impossible and profitless: his insistence upon the solitary reality of philosophical absolutes

¹⁸ Ibid.: 66.

negates any productive interplay of life and art.

Between the two of them, the Camerons thus present the essential difficulty of Woolf's conflicted portrait of the Victorian artist. Though Julia Margaret Cameron's photography seems endlessly inventive, her "art" is enabled only by its foundation in her husband's essentialist philosophy. Their disagreements serve only to indicate a more fundamental agreement: that "reality" consists of abstractions only made visible by a complete, willful ignorance of material facts; that circumstances are merely reflections of an absolute Circumstance. If Julia Margaret Cameron is able to refashion reality as allegorical art, it is only on account of her belief in the greater authenticity of her more permanent art. Indeed, she herself remains entirely oblivious to the effects that she has on *Freshwater's* stage, unable—like the rest of Dimbola's residents—to understand the power of the theatre. The overt theatricality of the play's first moments is made visible only to the play's audience, and not to its participants—at least until the entry of Ellen Terry.

For no sooner has Julia Cameron swept offstage than Charles Cameron has fallen asleep and Tennyson has lapsed into a mumbled reading upstage. And in this first moment of quiet, Ellen Terry enters and says: "O how usual it all is. Nothing ever changes in this house. Somebody's always asleep. Lord Tennyson is always reading *Maud*. The cook is always being photographed. The Camerons are always starting for India. I'm always sitting to Signor."¹⁹ Terry is isolated by this entrance: on a stage that had only moments before played host to the collective's most ridiculous display of eccentricity, Terry's appearance on the stage is granted a buffer of silence and stillness, immediately setting her apart from the rest of play's characters. But if her entrance seems itself an orchestrated coincidence, her first comments serve completely to rewrite the architecture of Dimbola: Ellen Terry assumes the prerogative of the stage,

¹⁹ Ibid.: 69.

delivering a monologue directly to the audience.

Terry's subsequent monologue thus becomes crucial to the operation of the 1923 *Freshwater*, simply because it establishes the most essential frame for the play's action: Terry sets the activity of the Freshwater collective this morning not only in context of their own repetitive behaviors, but also in the context of the broader aesthetic milieu of the later nineteenth century. The Freshwater group, she observes with disappointment, is nothing like her romantic notion of Rossettis—those “jolly people” whose bohemian performances she wishes to emulate. Indeed, in Terry's comments we witness a number of paradoxical assertions: the Freshwater group, by repeatedly staging the exact same scene, day after day, nevertheless fail to *act* like “artists”; and nevertheless, her own desire to “go upon the stage and be an actress” is confessed as a kind of “awful thought” with a conventional, anti-theatrical, moralistic prejudice. These contradictions are sustained by Terry's own rapport with the audience. There is, undoubtedly, a measure of irony in Terry's sense that acting is an immoral profession—a historical irony, given Terry's extraordinary career, and a theatrical irony, for these are lines meant to be spoken by an actress upon a stage—but this irony is over-ridden by the convention that governs the monologue: namely, that words spoken by an actor to the audience, unheard by any other person onstage, have a perfect fidelity within the broader, established conceit of the fiction. Terry's monologue is thus not only the 1923 *Freshwater*'s most obvious use of a quintessentially theatrical effect, but it is also one that legitimizes itself explicitly by contradicting the theatrical scene that has played out just prior to Terry's entrance.

As a result Terry places at stake precisely the values that govern the play itself: the opposition between “art” and “life” conceived through Victorian allegory is here reconfigured as an opposition between *mimesis* and *diegesis*, between the scene enacted onstage, with all its

unfettered chaos of action and oblique flashes of character and motive, and the scene narrated within a broader, established literary context. The fidelity of Terry's monologue does not only trade upon the conventions of the stage; it also grounds itself in the conventions of autobiography. In her monologue, Terry allies herself with the audience—she crosses the “fourth wall” in order to elicit our understanding—but she does so in order to rewrite *Freshwater* as the story of Ellen Terry's personal awakening. The offstage action—for, as Terry tells us, during those opening moments she had been “sitting” for Watts in another room—replaces the onstage action; the tension between Charles Cameron's oblique complaint about “Circumstance” and his wife's more pliable response to the same is replaced by Ellen Terry's more recognizable and sympathetic frustration.

And, finally, the highly vocal rhetoric of Victorian aesthetics—the strained idealism that comes from forcing circumstances into their allegorical roles—is replaced by the “unspeakable,” as Terry confesses her darkest truth: “And, what's so much worse—oh, it's so unspeakable that I can't think how I've the face to go on crouching any longer—somebody *has* fallen in love with me. At least I think so. It happened like this.”²⁰ But—in a startling reversal of that conventional “anti-theatricality”—the moral implications of Terry's confession are replaced by its aesthetic implications: what is “unspeakable” about Terry's unconsummated infidelity is the way it counters her allegorical objectification by Watts as “Modesty.”

Within Terry's monologue, the spoken and the “unspeakable” outline a complex interplay of allegory, autobiography, and dramatic convention: the “unspeakable” becomes speakable through narrative; the idol becomes the individual through autobiographical monologue; and this autobiography becomes “legible” through the effects of performance. Emerging in the play's first moment of silence, Terry represents not only the frustrations of her own gender and her age,

²⁰ Ibid.: 70.

but also Woolf's frustrations with the play's dominant aesthetic regime: a breed of *mimesis* that transforms people into icons. But the theatre itself is an ambivalent part of this tradition, and the monologue contains this ambivalence: it is only through the play's most quintessentially theatrical gesture that Woolf is able to articulate her opposition to the Victorians' patriarchal "theatricality." And so Terry unwittingly becomes the icon for Woolf's own "modernism": as a mouthpiece for the "unspeakable," Terry strives to articulate those flashes of silent sentiment that run in currents around the oblivious Victorians at Dimbola. It is no wonder, therefore, that her rendezvous with Craig occurs outdoors, and offstage: Terry's "escape" is not only an escape from her marriage, or from the walls of Watts's studio at Dimbola, but also an escape from the forms of speakable discourse that are sanctified within the Victorian drama of the 1923 *Freshwater*. Thus, Terry allows us access to a historical reading of the play: "historical" in the sense that she makes us aware that the events we witness are actually an everyday occurrence at Dimbola, and not a singular event in time; and "historical" also in the sense that she views *Freshwater* from the perspective of Bloomsbury, and reflects upon the inadequacy and repressiveness of the Victorians by establishing a sympathy with the moderns.

Terry's true representative weight within the 1923 *Freshwater* appears at the moment she rejects her symbolic "role" within Watt's, Tennyson's, and Julia Cameron's art. As the *Freshwater* collective finally reassembles for yet another reading of Tennyson's "Maud," Julia Cameron spies her "Sir Galahad" outside the window, "kissing; no, being kissed."²¹ When this figure is dragged back inside, the party reacts with inarticulate (and confused) horror, and Watts even falls to his knees, bemoaning the loss of "Modesty." But it is Julia Cameron who actually gives voice to her reaction: "Why, it's Ellen Terry dressed up as a man. How becoming trousers are, to be sure! I have never, never, seen anything so exquisite as Ellen in the arms of a youth

²¹ Ibid.: 79.

among the raspberry canes.”²²

Undoubtedly, it is Julia Cameron’s astonishment that is the least expected and most significant. Rather than expressing a simple moral abhorrence, Julia Cameron’s reaction speaks to a wholesale revision of her entire aesthetic program. The ridiculous attire of her servants (including the handmaid dressed as Mary Magdalen) has always served some higher symbolic ideal, but none of these can match the “exquisite” vision of “Ellen Terry dressed up as a man.” If Julia Cameron has insisted upon viewing people as manifestations of her own aspirations, Terry’s actions have now taught her to view them more simply, as what they are-and-are-not—as actors. And so it is no wonder that she passes her camera to Ellen Terry as she leaves the stage for the last time: “It is my wedding gift, Ellen. Take my lens. I bequeath it to my descendents. See that it is always slightly out of focus. Farewell! Farewell!”²³ This action is symbolic of a breed of matrilineal succession, endorsing Terry—and, thus, Bloomsbury—as the inheritor of at least one part of the Freshwater vision.

Thus the 1923 *Freshwater* ends on a note of difficult ambiguity. As the inheritor of Julia Cameron’s vision and the representative of modernist Bloomsbury, Ellen Terry never quite escapes the weight of her prescriptions. Rather than being read allegorically, she is now read historically, as one link in a chain that marks both the development of “modern,” progressive social sensibilities—as her transgressive, androgynous, off-stage seduction would indicate—and the development of a “modernist” aesthetic sensibility, one which finds value in the day-to-day rather than the eternal, in the real rather than the ideal. The redemptive note in this dawning historical awareness actually comes through Julia Cameron, not Ellen Terry: as it is Julia Cameron who recognizes the “exquisite” in “Ellen Terry dressed up as a man,” so too does Julia

²² Ibid.: 80.

²³ Ibid.: 83.

Cameron offer us an opportunity to “think back through our mothers,” as Woolf describes in *A Room of One’s Own*. Ellen Terry merely facilitates this connection to an unwritten historical lineage. Her own greatest artistic achievement is the most simple expression of herself in that monologue: though she states a desire to “go upon the stage and be an actress,” her real performance is only witnessed by Julia Margaret Cameron, through whose thoughtful, subversive (and, partly, circumstantial) interpretation we finally receive it. The coherency of the 1923 *Freshwater* comes at the expense of Ellen Terry’s own artistic voice: if the play presents the redemptive effects of a theatrical sensibility, it does so only by making its most theatrical character a vessel for transmitting a historical narrative. And as it likewise attempts to renegotiate its own indebtedness to the Victorian age, it does so by enforcing a standardizing “reading” of the actor whose rebellion it represents.

Woolf’s removal of Terry’s monologue from the 1935 *Freshwater* speaks to her awareness of this contradiction. Rather than casting Terry as the early manifestation of modernist, literary Bloomsbury, the 1935 *Freshwater* sets Terry apart by replacing her efforts at private, autobiographical representation with a much more self-conscious social presentation: Terry’s plea to the audience is supplanted a scene of subversive mimicry and manipulation. By interjecting a new scene “between the acts,” as it were, of exposition and revelation, Woolf broadens *Freshwater*’s purview: not only is the play lengthened considerably, but the world it represents now stretches beyond the aestheticized delirium of Dimbola’s interior to encounter the limits of the theatre itself. In the 1935 version, Terry may escape Dimbola, but she never escapes the stage.

Indeed, Terry defines the stage from the very first moment of the play. Where the prior

version had Charles Cameron seated alone at center, the new one offers Terry as competition: parallel to Cameron's stool, Terry is positioned "*on the model's throne posing to WATTS for Modesty at the feet of Mammon.*"²⁴ Meanwhile, Julia Cameron herself has replaced Mary Magdalen, chiding Charles with the very same words she uses upon her own models: "Sit still, Charles! Sit still!" Gone are the references to "Circumstance," and likewise to Charles Cameron's other proprietary discursive gestures; even his first attempt at figurative language is strangled by Julia Cameron's vigorous washing. The play's opening moment thus blurs the straightforward binaries of the earlier version: Terry's "throne" easily trumps Charles Cameron's stool,²⁵ though she herself remains silent; Watts and Julia Cameron maintain similar attitudes, though their objects—the painting of Terry and the washing of Charles—are pointedly contrasted. Terry's silent, still position onstage casts her as an aesthetic object for the audience's consumption long before she articulates any subjectivity of her own. By moving this offstage action from the 1923 version to center stage in the 1935 version, Woolf entirely reverses the effect of Terry's first appearance: the audience's sympathies are immediately aligned with Watts and Julia Cameron, for we see Terry in much the same way they do. Indeed, she appears a much more accommodating, pliable presence than Charles Cameron, who needs to be instructed to "sit still" much earlier, and much more frequently, than Terry.

Terry's emancipation from this position, which remains the focus of the play's plot, is

²⁴ *Ibid.*: 5.

²⁵ Woolf's stage directions offer no explicit references to the position Terry adopts. In Watts's actual 1885 painting of Mammon, it is Mammon himself who is enthroned, and both a young man and a young woman are at his feet. Woolf plays very loose with chronology throughout *Freshwater*, so this date (almost twenty years after Terry left Watts) ought not to trouble us. Of greater interest, however, is the absence of a model for Mammon in this scene. If Terry is seated in the throne, are we to believe that she is modeling both Mammon and Modesty, that Watts has her occupy different positions and roles as he paints? Likewise, does she model both the young man and young woman at Mammon's feet? Woolf may have intended a subtle gesture toward Terry's androgynous role-playing (a major element in the 1923 version) for viewers and readers familiar with Watts's painting—as her Bloomsbury circle may have been.

thus engineered as much against the audience as it is against the Victorian artists onstage. The diegetic is replaced once more by the mimetic, and Terry never attempts an autobiographical narration: the rules that govern Terry's existence within the 1935 play are determined from the start by the frame of the stage, which duplicates, to a limited extent, the frame of Watts's canvas. What makes Terry an individual within the first minutes of the 1935 *Freshwater* is not her desire to escape from that role of the artist's model but rather our awareness that she makes such a *good* model. Terry's silence, like her stillness, is passively presented as an admirable attribute; her very failure to obtrude within the opening moments of the play speaks to one of her most remarkable qualities. If she chafes against her bonds—and, as we discover shortly, the 1935 Terry chafes no less than the 1923 Terry—the play nevertheless notes exactly why and how Terry's frustrations have become invisible: because it is her talent to make them so.

Furthermore, it notes Terry's thoughtful complicity in her modeling. When she finally descends from her throne to stretch, Julia Cameron attempts to photograph her as "the Muse," seated upon Tennyson's knee. Terry's objection—"But I'm Modesty, Mrs. Cameron; Signor said so."—may come across as naïve, but it is also committed: Terry understands the role she is meant to play, and when Julia Cameron implies that she could as easily become "the Muse," she responds like an actor asked to read another's part. Indeed, Terry's frustration with the Freshwater group in the 1935 version comes across as though she is somewhat offended that they fail to recognize her own contribution to their works. It is a rare model that can hold a pose for four hours without word or movement. What makes Terry extraordinary is not that she does not wish to "hold still," but simply that she *can*; she is characterized not by her irrepressible, oblivious "personality," but rather by her ability to control the same.

When we come to the second act, which leaves Dimbola for the "the Needles," a series of

fantastic chalk cliffs that jut out from the ocean off the western tip of the Isle of Wight, what is at stake is not only the play's own form but also the relationship this form holds with by systems of representation valorized by its artist characters. The second act very literally replaces Terry's monologue from the 1923 version, inverting cause-and-effect. Rather than having the characters lapse into silence and somnolence to herald Terry's arrival, the 1935 *Freshwater* uses Terry's departure to signal the collapse of the artist-collective's aspirations: spying a "young man" out the window of the studio, Terry drops her pose and rushes off to meet him.

As soon as Terry is offstage, Julia Cameron encounters a disagreeable donkey outside the window, who refuses to play his part in her allegorical photograph; Tennyson grumbles about a similar unappreciative ass; and Watts himself discovers that he had inadvertently clothed his painted Modesty in a veil signifying "the fertility of fish."²⁶ Each of these images—the donkey, the resistant reader, and the immodest, "fertile" fish—becomes an accidental icon for Terry: by taking action, Terry rewrites the terms of the Victorians' allegory from within.

MRS. C.

A young man! Just what I want. A young man with noble thighs, ambrosial locks and eyes of gold. [*She goes to the window and calls out:*] Young man! Young man! I want you to come and sit to me for Sir Isumbras at the Ford. [*She exits. A donkey brays. She comes back into the room.*] That's not a man. That's a donkey. Still, to the true artist, one fact is much the same as another. A fact is a fact; art is art; a donkey's a donkey. [*She looks out of the window.*] Stand still, donkey; think, Ass, you are carrying St. Christopher upon your back. Look up, Ass. Cast your eyes to Heaven. Stand absolutely still. There! I say to the Ass, look up. And the Ass looks down. The donkey is eating thistles on the lawn!

TENN.

Yes. There was a damned ass praising Browning the other day. Browning, I tell you. But I ask you, could Browning have written:

The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
The murmuring of innumerable bees.

Or this, perhaps the loveliest line in the language—The mellow ouzel fluting on the lawn? [*The donkey brays.*] Donkeys at Dimbola! Geese at

²⁶ Woolf, *Freshwater*: 19.

Farringford! The son of man has nowhere to lay his head!²⁷

Without Terry's own pliant persona sustaining these multiple identities, the party discovers the difficulty of enforcing their aesthetic regime. Terry becomes not the androgynous "young man" who fulfills Julia Cameron's vision, but rather a donkey; and in direct contrast to that extempore motto—"A fact is a fact; art is art; a donkey's a donkey"—these Victorians discover that is impossible to control exactly when a donkey will be a donkey, when art will be art, or when the "facts" and their circumstances will suit their ideas. As Tennyson rages at the "damned ass" and the distracting donkey, we recognize that the contingency of their work is highlighted by Terry's involvement. It is only once Terry has departed the stage that we become aware of such problematic theatrical "facts," which both support and undo the Freshwater collective.

By thus becoming the play's central object, Terry resists identification with Bloomsbury or with the audience, for she no longer inhabits the space "between the acts." And as she resists imposing a reading on the play's meaning, so too does she resist being read into a blunt historical narrative—at least, she will not be read in that straightforward manner suggested by the autobiographical monologue of the 1923 version. The very words she uses to define herself in the earlier version are here deployed to subvert any sense of Terry's unified self, as she flirts with Craig.

NELL

And my name is Mrs. George Frederick Watts.

JOHN

²⁷ Ibid.: 16. Woolf has laid the irony thick, for readers and viewers knowledgeable enough to catch it. Tennyson's boast of his own crowning achievement—"The mellow ouzel fluting on the lawn"—is actually a misquotation. The line, from Tennyson's "The Gardener's Daughter; or, The Pictures," actually reads "The mellow ouzel fluted in the elm." It seems that the donkey on the Camerons' lawn has passively insinuated himself into the poem, as the focus shifts from the "elm" to the "lawn." "The Gardener's Daughter" actually concerns a competition of sorts between various representative arts—specifically, painting and poetry—in their ability to capture the grandeur of Nature. When birds begin to sing—among them that "mellow ouzel"—one of the poem's subjects asks, "Think you they sing/ Like poets, from the vanity of song?/ Or have they any sense of why they sing?" We might ask the same of the donkey, whose braying—like the speech of an actor—displays a problematic level of agency in this scene. (Tennyson, *The Poems of Tennyson*: 513.)

But haven't you got another?

NELL

Oh plenty! Sometimes I'm Modesty. Sometimes I'm Poetry. Sometimes I'm Chastity. Sometimes, generally before breakfast, I'm merely Nell.

JOHN

I like Nell best.

NELL

Well that's unlucky, because today I'm Modesty. Modesty crouching at the feet of Mammon. Only Mammon's great toe was out of drawing and so I got down; and then I heard a whistle. Dear me, I suppose I'm an abandoned wretch. Everybody says how proud I ought to be. Think of hanging in the Tate Gallery for ever and ever—what an honour for a young woman like me! Only—isn't it awful—I like swimming.²⁸

In this form, Terry's revelation loses its personal, confessional tone. The dialogue thus never seeks to establish any "real" Ellen Terry, for she never draws a line between "Modesty," "Chastity," and "Nell" aside from that dictated by the time of day, and even her declaration that she is an "abandoned wretch" loses its self-pitying truth. "Abandoned wretch" becomes simply another role into which Terry can effortlessly slip, as Terry speaks not to a "modern" audience but rather to a specific (though fictional) man.

As a final touch, Terry's "awful" final confession no longer describes that moralizing division between the theatre and the real world: the 1935 version makes no reference to Terry's theatrical aspirations, for to do so would be to suggest a division between the onstage persona and the offstage person. Terry herself rejects this division throughout the 1935 *Freshwater*, for the very simple reason that she is already an actor. That pointed *non sequitur*—"I like swimming"—replaces the expressed desire to go on the stage, and the autobiographical monologue actually gives way to a satirical display of mimicry. In the following lines, Terry impersonates all of the Freshwater collective.

JOHN

What the dickens are you talking about? Who's Mrs. Cameron?

NELL

²⁸ Woolf, *Freshwater*: 26–27.

Mrs. Cameron is the photographer; and Mr. Cameron is the philosopher; and Mr. Tennyson is the poet; and Signor is the artist. And beauty is truth; truth beauty; that is all we know and all we ought to ask. Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever. Oh, and the utmost for the highest, I was forgetting that.²⁹

Unlike the straightforward framing of her monologue in the 1923 version, Terry's account here of life at Dimbola continually breaks and reassesses the position she occupies. By the time she reaches this recapitulation of the collective's vaunted allegorical ideals—the relationship between truth and beauty—Terry has completely undermined their roles. “Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever,” she tells Craig, mimicking the sort of instruction she's been given by the Camerons, Tennyson, and Watts. By translating the 1923 monologue into the 1935 dialogue, Woolf completely reverses the effect of Terry's self-definition: where the earlier version had offered the audience access to the “real” Terry, the later denies that version of Terry any greater authenticity than “Modesty” or “Chastity.” “Dear me, I suppose I'm an abandoned wretch” is no more an expression of Terry's real selfhood than “Oh, and the utmost for the highest, I was forgetting that.” The carefully-laid qualifiers (“Dear me, I suppose” and “I was forgetting that”) imply that Terry's occupation of these positions is as sudden and serendipitous as her first meeting with Craig.

As a result, the Terry of the 1935 play is never used to resolve any of the binary distinctions suggested by the 1923 *Freshwater*. Representative of neither “art” nor “life,” neither *Freshwater* nor *Bloomsbury*, neither the private confessional nor the public act, the 1935 Terry refuses to be identified with any of the broader values—historical or aesthetic—so clearly at stake within the play. Even her crisis of desire in the earlier version is reconfigured into a somewhat beguiling predilection: “I like swimming” is Terry's defense against any attitude that would charge her with symbolic value, a comment as honest as it is unremarkable. Though the

²⁹ Ibid.: 27–28.

rest of the play still engineers her liberation from Dimbola, and from Julia Cameron's and Watts's symbolic portraits, it is much less specific about what she is liberated *to*: she never declares that precise address on Gordon Street, nor that weighted proscription against "veils."

Instead, Terry's declaration remains limited to her own identity. When she returns to the stage at the climax of the play, confounding Tennyson's assumption that she has drowned herself in accordance with a conventional fallen-woman narrative, she offers *Freshwater*'s most direct embodiment of the paradox of the actor:

TENN.

Ahem. I have written the first six lines. Listen. Ode on the death of Ellen Terry, a beautiful young woman who was found drowned.
[Enter ELLEN. *Everybody turns round in astonishment.*]

MR. C.

But you're in Heaven!

TENN.

Found drowned.

MRS. C.

Brandy's no use!

NELL

Is this a madhouse?

MR. C.

Are you a fact?

NELL

I'm Ellen Terry.³⁰

Terry's response to Cameron's question is both an affirmation and a denial: the simple declaration of her name—instead of another reference to an allegorical role—reasserts her unique biographical identity while also conflating this identity with an idea of the actor. The name "Ellen Terry" thus becomes synonymous with "actor": the facts of her life—including her later "resurrection" on the Lyceum stage—compete with the fact of this appearance upon its own stage, in a play that holds the development of a rebellious theatricality as its primary goal. Terry's "value" therefore remains limited to the frame of the play, even as it gestures toward

³⁰ Ibid.: 42.

Terry's later historical significance.

This limitation is, indeed, the most significant of Woolf's revisions to the play, for the emphasis now shifts from who Terry is to what Terry does: in effect, it transforms Terry from a young bride, straining against the bonds of her historical position, into an actor, performing at the peak of her craft, sustaining our interest by denying us "meaning." And as a result, the 1935 *Freshwater* becomes a play not about the competition between two historical periods or aesthetic regimes—Victorian and modernist, that of Freshwater and that of Bloomsbury—but rather about the exuberant circumstances of its own production: at a "private theatrical evening" in January of 1935, when the "fact" of Terry's appearance at the climax of the play transforms into an acknowledgement of the real actor onstage. During that performance, "Ellen Terry" had been played by Angelica Bell, the daughter of Woolf's sister Vanessa, who played Julia Cameron.³¹ The matrilineal succession suggested by the 1923 version is thus ironically reversed in the most literal of ways in 1935: for here, Cameron does not "bequeath" her camera to Terry, and Terry refuses to be written into a standardizing artistic history. Instead, the performance itself becomes an opportunity to "act out" and undo the historical narrative that the text seems to endorse.

Thus, we discover an aside in Woolf's diary a week before the performance that brings *Freshwater*'s subversive engagement with "frivolous" artistic history into direct contact with its more serious political contexts.

L. whose modesty is enough to make me blush, heard from Brace yesterday that they anticipate a large sale for Quack Quack. Some ass wants him to call it—some asses' name. It will be out this spring. This spring will be on us all of a clap. Very windy; today: a damp misted walk two days ago to Piddinghoe. Now the trees are threshing. Nessa & Angelica & Eve yesterday. We talk a great deal about the play. An amusing incident. And I shall hire a donkeys head to take my call in—by way of saying This is a donkeys work.³²

³¹ Ibid.: 1.

³² Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*: 273.

Echoing Tennyson's frustration with the "ass" who prefers Browning in the text of her own play, Woolf condemns the editor at Brace who wants to rename Leonard Woolf's *Quack, Quack*—a vital polemic whose title links the fascist quacking of Hitler and Mussolini to the intellectual quackery of the nineteenth-century English philosophical tradition—in the hope of securing a "large sale." But this editorial "ass" is redeemed by another: in an "amusing incident" during a visit by Vanessa, Angelica, and their friend Eve Younger, Woolf resolves to take a curtain call after *Freshwater*'s performance while wearing the head of a donkey. She thereby embodies the stubborn ass that refuses, like Ellen Terry, to take Julia Cameron's direction at a pivotal moment in the play.

As *Freshwater* achieves its most fantastic and whimsical effects, Terry performs her "donkey's work" by continually undermining and resituating our relationship to its events. The "private theatrical evening"—limited to a single night and a small audience in 1935—also stretches beyond these bounds to confront with curious uncertainty its own historical and political situation. In struggling with Terry's individuality, the dual texts of *Freshwater* actually return us to an awareness of the way acting informs and contradicts our attempts to historicize artistic engagement: as they realize the young Ellen Terry's desire to "go upon the stage and be an actress," they replace the authority of our historical position with the relativity of our "unfocused" inheritance, and swap the "meaning" of Circumstance writ-large for an ambivalent awareness of our own present circumstances.

The Uncommon Reader: Strange Elizabethans, Stranger Georgians

To know whom to write for is to know how to write. Some of the modern patron's qualities are, however, fairly plain. The writer will require at this moment, it is obvious, a patron with the book-reading habit rather than the play-going habit. Nowadays, too, he must be instructed in the literature of other times and races. But there are other qualities which our special weaknesses and tendencies demand in him.... He must make us feel... that he is now ready to efface himself or assert himself as his writers require...

- Virginia Woolf, "The Patron and the Crocus," 1924³³

The curtain rises upon play after play. Each time it rises upon a more detached, a more matured drama. The individual on the stage becomes more and more differentiated; and the whole group is more closely related and less at the mercy of the plot. The curtain rises upon Henry the Sixth; and King John; upon Hamlet and Antony and Cleopatra and upon Macbeth. Finally it rises upon the Tempest. But the play has outgrown the uncovered theatre where the sun beats and the rain pours. That theatre must be replaced by the theatre of the brain. The playwright is replaced by the man who writes a book. The audience is replaced by the reader. Anon is dead.

- Virginia Woolf, "Anon," 1941 (unfinished)³⁴

In the fall of 1940, Virginia Woolf began reading and collating notes for another volume of criticism, which she titled, in a notebook entry of September 18, "Reading at Random." By the time of her death six months later, she had completed drafts of two essays meant for the new book: a largely completed survey of the genesis of English literature entitled "Anon," and a series of fragments for another chapter about "The Reader." The extant copies of the two essays find Woolf attempting to outline a momentous event in English history: the flowering of Elizabethan drama and the advent of Shakespeare, which simultaneously enabled the articulation of new depths of individual thought and ended forever the communal celebration of anonymous artistic creation.

Undoubtedly, the sentiment of both pieces is bittersweet—and it becomes all the more so when read in context of Woolf's death in March of 1941 and the apocalyptic atmosphere of the early years of the Second World War. As Brenda Silver has remarked, "Woolf's inability to see a transition from present to future, connected as it is to the larger question of historical continuity,

³³ Woolf, "The Patron and the Crocus": 208–9.

³⁴ Woolf, "Anon": 398.

surfaces in her struggle to shape her work” in these critical pieces.³⁵ In the presence of another historical calamity, Woolf read the anxiety of her own position back into the history of English literature. The death of “Anon” signaled the demise of a united purpose in the community of artists and the broader public, for “Anon had great privileges... He is not self conscious. He can borrow. He can repeat. He can say what every one feels. No one tries to stamp his own name, to discover his own experience, in his work.”³⁶ By way of contrast, “The Reader” marks the tyranny of those aggressive individual interpreters upon the development of writing. Charting the increasing “specialization” of readers’ habits and proclivities in the present day, Woolf concludes: “[The reader’s] importance can be gauged by the fact that when his attention is distracted, in times of public crisis, the writer exclaims: I can write no more.”³⁷ At this moment in 1940/41, Woolf feared both the influence of her audience upon her own work as well as her work’s ability to intervene successfully during “times of public crisis,” in the absence of that sense of anonymous communion. Though focused ostensibly upon a summation of literary history, these final essays are deeply engaged with the problems of the present. And given the sense of loss and disintegration toward which they bend, Woolf’s eulogy for “Anon” and her ambivalent remarks on the birth of “The Reader” ask, at their most basic level, how to preserve the value of communal engagement under a form—like the modernist novel—that privileges interiority and the “discovery” of one’s “own experience” in the work of art.

In the section that follows, I argue that the answer to this question depends entirely upon Woolf’s ongoing efforts to understand literary history in terms of the theatre and the actor’s art. The exclamation Woolf makes as she faces “public crisis” in “The Reader”—“I can write no

³⁵ Silver, “‘Anon’ and ‘The Reader’: Virginia Woolf’s Last Essays”: 359.

³⁶ Woolf, “Anon”: 397.

³⁷ Woolf, “The Reader”: 428.

more”—is, of course, paralleled by the redemptive exasperation she described in a concurrent work: the literary frustration of Ellen Terry, attempting to “remember” Irving in print, that Woolf had also mimicked in the spring of 1941. Like many of her contemporaries—and most especially T. S. Eliot—Woolf felt an extraordinary pressure to define and respond to the literary tradition through both her own innovations in literary form and her more moderate assessments of others’ literary contributions throughout a lifetime of criticism. But unlike Eliot, Woolf never fully embraced a sense of linear aesthetic continuity in the development of a tradition: where Eliot enshrined the values of the tradition within his *Sacred Wood*, Woolf presented instead the efforts of the “common reader” to circumscribe and intervene within that tradition. And if—as I have argued in the previous chapter—Eliot’s own paradoxical eulogy for the “death of the actor” is what permits the valorization of that tradition, then Woolf’s memorial does something quite different: her attempts to resurrect Ellen Terry and “Anon” in the actions of the “common reader” bring a theatrical consciousness to our perception of literary history. Any reading of the tradition, for Woolf, becomes a self-conscious performance of the same.

Much of this argument depends upon Woolf’s perception of drama as both a literary genre and as a vehicle for alternative, non-literary modes of expression. It also depends her awareness of the purpose of criticism, which often focused upon the isolation and independence of the reader. These two concerns are overtly linked in her construction of “Anon” and “The Reader,” essays that she intended to begin a potential third volume of her *Common Reader* collections. Though Woolf’s notebooks refer to the new critical work under the title “Reading at Random,” correspondence and diary entries between late 1939 and March of 1941 refer to the

new work as another “Common Reader,” or—more compellingly—a “Common History book.”³⁸ To read “commonly,” for Woolf, was undoubtedly a uniquely personal experience, and much of the joy of this process came from the rejection of standardizing prescripts, such as the perception of genre, social position, and historical specificity. In the actions of the “common reader,” Woolf collapses such distinctions: both novels and plays are read against one another in an inherently performative mode. I argue, therefore, that Woolf’s understanding of drama and the theatre exists in a crucial relationship with not only her sense of “modernist” form—with the articulation of new modes of writing and the extraordinary expansion (or explosion) of the novel’s function—but also with the social responsibilities that fall upon the contemporary reader, working in an ambivalent relationship to the various forces that defined the reader’s “role” in the early twentieth century.

Woolf attempted to outline the reader’s collaborative responsibilities in an essential essay of 1924, “The Patron and the Crocus,” which she included the following year as one of the concluding pieces in her first *Common Reader*. The essay is itself an appeal to a dialogic sense of literary creation: the writer, Woolf argues, cannot exist without a reader, and any attempt to do justice to the object of literary representation (such as, for example, a crocus) is indebted in fact to the “patron” for whom one writes. Like T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Woolf’s “The Patron and the Crocus” collapses the distinction between writer and reader. Woolf casts her own readers as writers, advising them: “be sure you choose your patron wisely.”³⁹ This modern(ist) patron is then constructed against an ideal of the theatrical audience: “The writer will require at this moment, it is obvious, a patron with the book-reading habit rather than the play-

³⁸ See Silver, “‘Anon’ and ‘The Reader’”: 356–59.

³⁹ Woolf, “The Patron and the Crocus”: 206.

going habit.”⁴⁰ The implications are indeed “obvious”: the contemporary writer needs an audience of extraordinary personal sensitivity, with sensibility cultivated in silence and in solitude, with a luxury of time and space to assess individual value—with all the qualities perhaps prohibited by the theatre, which requires that the writer conform not only to the demands of a large, popular audience but also to the blunt, obvious restraints of time, for the play must occur within a standardized period (not to exceed, maybe, four hours—the time for which Ellen Terry can hold a pose or an audience can comfortably sit still), must adhere to a set of regular scenic divisions—to “acts” broken by intermissions—and it must therefore produce its “meaning” in a form immediately legible to its audience.

Woolf’s objection is not to the theatre per se; she does not seem to refer to the theatrical avant-garde, or to the extraordinary variety of performances (including, perhaps, popular forms of the burlesque and the music hall) available to a London theatre-goer in 1924. Rather, she objects to a sensibility that has been taught to enforce formalist prescripts within the theatre. Such playgoers are forcibly instilled with the ability to perceive a set of conventions that dictate meaning upon the stage, including the frame-breaking deterministic devices of the soliloquy and the aside—devices used to dictate historical “meaning” in Woolf’s recently abandoned (1923) *Freshwater*.⁴¹ Indeed, the “play-going habit” is not just this ability but rather the necessity of perceiving these conventions: the theatre-taught reader, Woolf implies, cannot read any other

⁴⁰ Ibid.: 208.

⁴¹ This is made perfectly clear earlier in the essay, when Woolf takes a brief shot at “our dramatic critic’ of the *Times*”—who was, in 1924, Arthur Bingham Walkley, whom I have discussed at some length in my chapter on Bernard Shaw. Essentially, Woolf recapitulates the charge Shaw flirted with in the 1903 epistolary preface to *Man and Superman*: Walkley’s habit of declaring what is and what isn’t “a play” has everything to do with genre prescripts and ultimately nothing to do with a sensitive and thoughtful reaction to the contents of the play or its relationship to its historical contexts, intertexts, and paratexts. Thus, for Woolf, is Walkley’s brand of criticism completely useless outside its immediate context, for “Journalism embalmed in a book is unreadable.” Undoubtedly, this sense of what is “readable” and what is “unreadable” depends largely upon the sort of “readers” she goes on to outline, as well as the project of her *Common Reader* volumes, which often repurposed “journalistic” reviews she’d written for other publications.

way.

Many of the assumptions that guide this assertion were developed more fully in an essay for the *Times Literary Supplement* of 1922: “On Re-reading Novels.” Here, Woolf confronts the “failure of the Edwardians,” which has resulted in her own contemporaries—“the Georgians”—returning to the Victorians for an aesthetic reference point. “And so,” she writes, “as likely as not, we shall be faced one of these days by a young man reading Meredith for the first time.”⁴² The astonishment with which Woolf contemplates this activity informs the rest of the essay: for as impossible as it seems to read *Harry Richmond* for the first time, even more forbidding is the idea of re-reading it. Woolf asserts that “to read a novel for the second time is far more of an undertaking than to read it for the first. To rush it breathlessly through does very well for a beginning. But that is not the way to read finally; and somehow or other these fat Victorian volumes, these *Vanity Fairs*, *Copperfields*, *Richmonds*, and *Adam Bedes* must be read finally, if we are to do them justice—must be read as one reads *Hamlet*, as a whole.”⁴³ And thus within this essay circulate a number of conflicting beliefs: first, that a first reading is not really a “final” reading, that any “just” reading is actually a re-reading with a view toward wholeness; second, that “first readings” of the Victorians are impossible in another sense, for any present-day “first reader” actually reads “these fat Victorian volumes” historically and nostalgically, as a reaction not only to Georgian uncertainty but also to Edwardian failure; and finally, that our perception of wholeness in the reading process is actually drawn from the theatre—or, more specifically, from reading Shakespeare. The whole of English literacy in the intervening centuries devolves upon the coherency of *Hamlet*: as Woolf would later announce in “Anon,” the apotheosis of Elizabethan drama—itsself a populist effort—would come to enact a kind of elitist prescription on

⁴² Woolf, “On Re-reading Novels”: 336.

⁴³ *Ibid.*: 336–37.

aesthetic form, prioritizing “completion” over the values of discontinuous and distended ambition with which the Victorian novel is so anxiously engaged.

In other words, Woolf circumscribes precisely the dilemma Irving and Stoker had represented at the end of the nineteenth century: between Irving’s paradoxical embodiment of Hamlet’s advice to the players and the fractured narrative of Stoker’s quintessentially Victorian novel lies an impossible problem of historical reception. And so it is no wonder that this moment in her 1922 essay also signifies Woolf’s first discussion of the “common reader.” Indicating the sublime frustration that we are faced with simply in contemplating a re-reading of a Victorian novel, she writes:

Some such mood of exasperation and bewilderment, of violence, yet of remorse, is abroad at present among those common readers whom Dr Johnson respected, for it is by them, he said, that ‘must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours’. It bodes ill for fiction if the commons of letters vote against it, so let us lay bare our dilemma without caring overmuch if we say some foolish things and many vague ones. To begin with, we have obviously got it into our heads that there is a right way to read, and that it is to read straight through and grasp the book entire.⁴⁴

That quotation from Samuel Johnson’s *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1781) was reproduced three years later as the centerpiece for her opening remarks in the first *Common Reader* (1925).

To find it within this context alerts us to Woolf’s sense of the “common reader’s” historical position—a position that actually severs Woolf’s “common reader” from Johnson’s. The absolute value of Johnson’s “claim to poetical honours” draws from the “common reader” a kind of trans-historical universality: if Johnson’s *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* obviously attempts itself to establish a sense of canonicity, this democratizing gesture toward the “common reader” passes the authority of the canon on to future, unspecialized readers in the

⁴⁴ Ibid.: 337.

faith that such readers locate value outside of historical experience. Johnson's "common reader" in fact ratifies the canon by his inability to perceive it as such, and the "poetical honours" he bestows are given not once but always, with a "finality" that approaches infinity rather than a discrete historical moment. But this is not the case for Woolf's "common reader": by founding her assessment of this reader's sensibilities on a "mood of exasperation and bewilderment," a fraught and anxious perception of an inability to take up or continue the actions of the "common readers" of the prior generation, Woolf shatters this historical continuity. Woolf's "common reader" is specifically a "Georgian," but her use of this title—which, somewhat anachronistically, associates the public with its monarch—actually registers a historical difference: her "Georgians" are not Johnson's "Georgians," for George V is not George III. And as a result, the first fiction her "common reader" must destroy is the sense that there is a "right way to read." Instead, the "common reader" must acknowledge that the sense of authenticity that attends to the reading process is an accident of history, that the absolute fidelity of reading is an illusion, and that we must look to other models—specifically, the difficulty of our relationship with the theatre and with the dramatic genre—to understand our responsibilities.

This is a difficulty that Woolf herself confronts in her few theatrical reviews, crossing from her perception of Shakespearean coherence to her understanding of the new canon of modern drama. A 1933 review of "*Twelfth Night* at the Old Vic" begins by differentiating between different sorts of "Shakespeareans": "Shakespeareans are divided, it is well known, into three classes; those who prefer to read Shakespeare in the book; those who prefer to see him acted on the stage; and those who run perpetually from book to stage gathering plunder."⁴⁵ When we confront Shakespeare in a book, she writes: "The mind in reading spins a web from scene to

⁴⁵ Woolf, "*Twelfth Night* at the Old Vic": 34.

scene... which keeps the play together.”⁴⁶ But after witnessing it enacted she writes that her sense of “continuity was sacrificed. We left the theatre possessed of many brilliant fragments but without the sense of all things conspiring and combining together which may be the satisfying culmination of a less brilliant performance.”⁴⁷ And she has the same reaction when viewing a more contemporary play. Reviewing a performance of *The Cherry Orchard* in 1920, Woolf begins:

Although every member of the audience at the Art [sic] Theatre last week had probably read Tchekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* several times, a large number of them had, perhaps, never seen it acted before. It was no doubt on this account that as the first act proceeded the readers, now transformed into seers, felt themselves shocked and outraged. The beautiful, mad drama which I had staged often enough in the dim recesses of my mind was now hung within a few feet of me, hard, crude, and over-emphatic, like a cheap coloured print of the real thing. But what right had I to call it the real thing? What did I mean by that?⁴⁸

Whether intentional or not, Woolf’s pun performs essential work: when the reader is transformed into the “seer,” illusions of authenticity evaporate; the prophecy of historical and aesthetic fidelity is broken; and the reader is reduced to the opportunistic plunderer, gathering “brilliant fragments” of a shattered aesthetic ideal. Whatever sense of loss this image presents, however, is countered by its close ties to Woolf’s alternative attempts to reassess a novel-reading practice: there, too, we are forced to determine quality based solely upon “fragments” perceived and re-perceived, after the fact, as we attempt to will coherence out of our myriad impressions of those unconscionably long, sometimes bloated works.

For the person with a “book-reading habit,” going to the theatre is an exercise that forces one to reexamine the unspoken faith in “wholeness” that reading carries. An inveterate reader herself, Woolf documented her own experiences at the theatre in such reviews because they

⁴⁶ Ibid.: 36.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Woolf, “The Cherry Orchard”: 246.

returned her to the present conditions of the assumptions she had made about her reading—whether, as in the case of Shakespeare, such assumptions stemmed from centuries of English cultural inheritance, or, as in the case of Chekhov, they came from a belief in the “beautiful, mad” power of a Russian cultural other.⁴⁹ And while Woolf’s instinct might be the same as Shaw’s—to challenge the authenticity of Chekhovian “dramatic realism” onstage—and while her initial reaction also echoes Eliot’s fear of mechanical reproducibility—as the performance becomes “a cheap coloured print of the real thing”—such first responses immediately give way to a thoughtful critique of her own unique position. In going to the theatre, Woolf is able to attend more immediately to the qualifications and complexities of staging her own “beautiful, mad drama” each time she performs a reading.

It is here that the “phenomenology of reading”—the perception of such breaks that return us, inevitably, to ourselves and the individuality of our encounter(s) with literary and theatrical work—intersects with the broader stakes of Woolf’s social project. Once we abandon hope in the “real thing,” we also lose the sense of communality that binds our practices together. Woolf’s “common readers,” it seems, can hold very little in common; twentieth-century Georgians are not eighteenth-century Georgians, and they quite literally cannot read the same texts as their predecessors—or even, perhaps, their contemporaries. For Woolf herself, the theatre presented one possible means to understand and process this dilemma. Performance fractures the illusion of coherence even in the Shakespearean dramatic text, returning Woolf to her own historical and

⁴⁹ For more on Chekhov’s value to Woolf, see “The Russian Point of View” in the first *Common Reader*. Woolf’s interest in Russian literature and culture was extensive and complex, and it has spawned a minor critical industry itself, much of which has focused on essential passages from *Orlando*. I therefore indicate this essay alone because it isolates Woolf’s interaction specifically with Chekhov, whom she reads as a key figure in the development of new forms of literature that lie in specific contrast to the Victorian novel. Her reading of Chekhov is thus “English” in the sense that it brings him into the context of the literary heritage she was herself in the act of defining. “The Russian Point of View” was written specifically for the *Common Reader*, and thus the “uncommonness” of her turn toward the Russians within this context speaks to the real challenges of her project.

cultural contexts and also to her personal limitations. Reversing the assumption of collectivity she ascribes to the recognition of dramatic formal conventions, Woolf's viewing of performance reduces the "large number" of "seer"/readers down to the singular "I" who undergoes an ambivalent self-critique.

In her biography of Woolf, Hermione Lee therefore suggests that the idea of the "common reader" refers to Woolf's conception of her own practice, not her audience's; the difficulty lies in translating Woolf's critical habits into to a generalizable disposition, and in squaring this "hypothetical construct" with the heavy social weight the term has borne for generations.⁵⁰ Attempts to assess Woolf's notions of reading and cultural consumption are inevitably divided into two camps: those that try to describe Woolf's sense of the reading process, in its inevitable singularity and psychological specificity, and those that evaluate on Woolf's democratic sense of the actual readers whose disparate "commonness" and invisible social station severs them from the stream of privileged, scholarly, patriarchal readers created by institutions like Oxbridge and the British Museum Reading Room—the sort of readers that are subject to distinctly unflattering portraits in the opening sections of *A Room of One's Own*. Inevitably, these two efforts intersect.

Thus, for example, does Kate Flint focus upon Woolf's descriptions of reading as akin to the "pleasures of sexuality," and notes that even when Woolf acknowledges the particular economic conditions that permit reading (such as, for example, the luxuries of time and solitude), the act of reading has the personal quality of a "physical craving for the sustenance of print."⁵¹ When discussing the reading of working-class women, Flint notes Woolf's attention to the "indiscriminate greed of a hungry appetite, that crams itself with toffee and beef and tarts and

⁵⁰ Koutsantoni, *Virginia Woolf's Common Reader*: 51.

⁵¹ Flint, "Reading Uncommonly": 187, 189–90.

vinegar and champagne all in one gulp.”⁵² If this reading is tragically “indiscriminate” (a tragedy which is intentionally disgusting, prompting us to weigh our social conscience against our own phenomenological reaction to that gustatory catastrophe), it is also entirely personal, oriented around the satisfaction of one’s own appetites, and its products are lost to the mysteries of digestion. Woolf’s gestures toward a theory of reading, according to Flint, depend greatly upon the reader’s own imagination, and they have their ambivalent inheritors in the “phenomenological” theories of Wolfgang Iser and Walter Ong.⁵³ But linking such personal, imaginative reactions to the habits of *other* readers is difficult, and it requires that we understand the broader consequences of having such material, physical sensations while we are part of a social body. Discussing the ways in which Woolf’s sense of reading engages with “communities of desire,” Pierre-Eric Villeneuve has suggested: “What Woolf seeks in the opening of her essays is to direct our attention to the act of reading as a ritual of sensations conflicting with the Law”—but whether such “indiscriminate” “common readers” are aware of the ways in which the satisfaction of the desire to read helps constitute an ethical response against the “colonizing effect of reading” is open to debate.⁵⁴ Ultimately, Villeneuve indicates the same path Flint has already outlined: understanding Woolf’s description of the reading process as “a threshold of sexual crisis,” he relies upon the reader’s ability to transfer the consequences of such a personal crisis from the psychoanalytic to the ethical plane.⁵⁵

On the other hand, alternative attempts to assess Woolf’s notion of the value of reading have revolved not around what the reader does but who the reader is, performing a demographic

⁵² Qtd. in Flint, “Reading Uncommonly”: 190.

⁵³ Iser specifically quotes Woolf’s reading of Jane Austen in the first *Common Reader* as the quintessential illustration of his “phenomenology of reading.” See Iser, *The Act of Reading*: 168.

⁵⁴ Villeneuve, “Communities of Desire: Woolf, Proust, and The Reading Process”: 24, 26.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*: 26.

analysis that immediately recognizes the difference between an idealized Victorian cultural homogeneity and the immediate dispersion of agency effected within the early twentieth century. What makes any assessment of this idea of the reader, play-goer, or cultural consumer fraught is not only its historical specificity but indeed the unanticipated explosion of competing forces that redefine such acts both in terms of economic consumption and in terms of its ethical consequences during this period—the same forces Shaw critiqued through *Pygmalion*'s education of “uncommon readers” from competing classes, Eliza Doolittle and Clara Eynesford Hill. Since Woolf's time, there have been multiple attempts to chart the extraordinary expansion of literacy in England beginning in the early- to mid-nineteenth century, most notably Richard Altick's *The English Common Reader* in 1957. But Altick's “common reader” was a product of market forces, religious fervor, and educational reform over several nineteenth-century generations, and he acknowledges the invisible series of distinctions that sever bare literacy from a more genuine literary comprehension or appetite for reading, not the least of which is the barrier to comprehension engendered by the moralizing foundations of the educational opportunities offered to the “mass.”⁵⁶ These problems of invisible or illegible distinctions within the demographic data were only compounded during the twentieth century.

During Woolf's life the most significant attempt to chart the growth of a mass reading audience was offered by Q. D. Leavis in 1932, who actually focused attention on her “reading public's” antipathy to Woolf: “All [the average reader] gets [from Woolf's fiction] is an impression of sensuous beauty as his eye helplessly picks out clumps of words without clearly following the sense...”⁵⁷ Leavis thus unintentionally isolates that intersection of phenomenology

⁵⁶ See Altick, *The English Common Reader*.

⁵⁷ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*: 61. Woolf's antagonistic relationship with Q. D. Leavis and her husband F. R. Leavis represents in many ways her opposition to the various sorts of institutional prerogatives developing

and education, as the mass-cultural reader is “helpless” in his response to Woolf’s “sensuous beauty”; but, of course, it is essential to note that Leavis produced her work under the aegis of Cambridge University, and was therefore a representative of precisely the set of sensibilities Woolf constructed her “common reader” to combat. Indeed, what Leavis indicates is the difficulty of differentiating between the set of phenomenological responses we associate with “common” or un-educated reading from our own superior intellectual vantage point and the “meanings” of texts thus analyzed within a sociological context. The more “common” the reader, Leavis seems to assume, the more individual, arbitrary and fragmented the experience of reading is. What makes the reader “common” is precisely what makes his experience inarticulate, incommunicable, and therefore all but invalid as “reading”—such a reader’s habits fail to conform with the set of prescripts such “Oxbridge” scholars hold in common. For Q. D. Leavis, Woolf’s own writing functions as a litmus test for locating the “common reader,” insofar as Woolf is actually illegible to such readers. Woolf’s “common reader” is, quite literally, an invisible demographical construct—at least within the narrow limits of sociological practice in the early 1930s. Once again, we are reminded of Shaw’s hope for a “Monster of illiteracy” to remedy the ills of institutional education: Shaw had deployed the illusion of phonetics and “Higgins’s Universal Alphabet” to indicate how this “illegibility” is created as a performative paratext; for Woolf, on the other hand, the modernist novel itself becomes an opportunity to perform this work, displaying a resistance to standardized reading or cultural consumption as a politically or sociologically visible action.

As a result, more generous assessments of the identity of Woolf’s “common reader” have emphasized the abstract quality of this label: the “common reader” becomes a role for cultural

around literary study in the early twentieth century. Q. D. Leavis’s thesis was actually directed by I. A. Richards; thus, the entire development of “New Criticism” and the disciplinary boundaries of university English stand opposed, in this historical sense, to Woolf’s work.

actors to play, alerting their audiences to the limitations of their historical and social circumstances. Melba Cuddy-Keane therefore describes Woolf's "common reader" as the ideal of a "democratic highbrow," a hypothetical individual whom Woolf desired to bring into being through a thoughtful and complex engagement with the wide variety of cultural institutions that continued to develop throughout her life. Indeed, much of the evidence Cuddy-Keane offers in support of this developing ideal was generated between the publication of Woolf's two volumes of *The Common Reader* in 1925 and 1932; the "common readers" addressed by each volume were, therefore, not quite the same, as Woolf herself acknowledged. Instead, the "common reader" becomes a shifting role, responding to a communal effort throughout history: "The achievement of democratic highbrowism," Cuddy-Keane writes, "would require the collaborative work of a much broader group of readers and writers than the literate intellectual community of [Woolf's] own time."⁵⁸

But though this "achievement" seems aspirational and beyond the limitations of Woolf's time, the role of the "common reader" involves looking back as much as it does looking forward: in the performance of forgotten texts and abandoned modes of readership, the "common reader" activates a new sort of historical awareness. The format of Woolf's two *Common Readers* volumes implicitly acknowledges this tension. Though they both self-consciously focus upon the "obscure" byways of literary history—the neglected texts and their forgotten readers that form the hidden basis against which we have always defined a literary-cultural "tradition"—they also present their "readings" of this hidden tradition *as* a chronological history: the first *Common Reader* moves quite clearly from "The Pastons and Chaucer" all the way through to "How It Strikes a Contemporary," while the second moves more obliquely but no less significantly from

⁵⁸ Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere*: 58.

“The Strange Elizabethans” to “The Novels of Thomas Hardy” until it finally feels itself in a position to ask that crucial, final question: “How Should One Read a Book?” What makes Woolf’s efforts so significant is precisely this awareness: though her interest in the obscure and forgotten rejects the standardizing authority of a canon, the works also acknowledge that a historical consciousness is unavoidable, try as we might to eschew hundreds of years of scholarship and patriarchal valuation. Crucial to Woolf’s design is a desire to outline an invisible, impossible form of history, a history not of literature but of its audiences. In order to achieve this end, Woolf dramatizes the act of historical reading: by (re)covering the same chronology in each volume, Woolf herself offers variations on prior performances.

Significantly, each of Woolf’s critical efforts—from the first *Common Reader* to the draft of “Anon”—revolves around Elizabethan England, for it is the Elizabethans, according to Woolf, who inform whatever crucial values we attach today both to literature (especially via Shakespeare) and to theatre. Indeed, the early essays of that first *Common Reader* makes clear that the Elizabethans derail the “solidity” of earlier literature. Reading Chaucer, Woolf notes, “we notice something of greater importance than the gay and picturesque appearance of the mediaeval world—the solidity which plumps it out, the conviction which animates the characters.”⁵⁹ And likewise does she observe of ancient texts: “It is obvious in the first place that Greek literature is the impersonal literature.”⁶⁰ Such works are reified by their historical distance and perhaps only by this perceived distance, for Woolf makes no claim to ideological severance, or to the formation of “modern” forms of subjectivity that characterizes most attempts to account for literary history or the disparity between the Greek and the “modern” sensibility—attempts that reach from Nietzsche to Lukács to Foucault. Woolf’s essay—ironically titled “On Not

⁵⁹ Woolf, “The Pastons and Chaucer”: 13.

⁶⁰ Woolf, “On Not Knowing Greek”: 23.

Knowing Greek”—instead concludes with a direct acknowledgment of the bias we “moderns” feel when reading Greek literature: “it is to the Greeks that we turn when we are sick of the vagueness, of the confusion, of the Christianity and its consolations, of our own age.”⁶¹ But the work Woolf has already done has erased the possibility of alternative “consolations” in reading the Greeks: our perception of the fidelity of the past is inevitably linked to our own strangeness, and it is in attempting any kind of a standardizing reading that we indeed come into contact with the limitations of our own perspective. Woolf’s alternative literary history in *The Common Reader* thus comes face-to-face with its own motives, and her diagnoses of quality carefully evade attributing anything to the work or the culture. It is not “our age” that is sick, but “we” ourselves; we perform our own uncertainty in turning to the works of the past.

The ease with which Woolf performs these moves when discussing Greek literature is immediately revealed in her turn toward the Elizabethans, which signals the development of that modern “vagueness” and “confusion.” What makes the Elizabethans difficult is not only their relationship to a theatrical tradition of supposed transparency but also the directness with which we view our historical connection to them. As Woolf immediately acknowledges in her “Notes on an Elizabethan Play,” Shakespeare “has had the light on him from his day to ours,” and it is difficult to perceive subtlety and strangeness within the purity of such unbroken attention.⁶² As a result, it is to the “lesser Elizabethans” that Woolf urges we turn.

For we are apt to forget, reading, as we tend to do, only the masterpieces of a bygone age, how great a power the body of a literature possesses to impose itself: how it will not suffer itself to be read passively, but takes us and reads us; flouts our preconceptions; questions principles which we had got into the habit of taking for granted, and, in fact, splits us into two parts as we read, making us, even as we enjoy, yield our ground or stick to our guns.⁶³

⁶¹ Ibid.: 38.

⁶² Woolf, “Notes on an Elizabethan Play”: 48.

⁶³ Ibid.

Woolf advocates the forgotten and obscure not because they reveal the “truth” of any historical reality but, again, because they reveal the partiality of our own habits. And as the essay proceeds, Woolf insists upon reading obscure Elizabethan plays in the context of the late-Victorian novel and its prosaic “materialist” concerns:

At the outset in reading an Elizabethan play we are overcome by the extraordinary discrepancy between the Elizabethan view of reality and our own. The reality to which we have grown accustomed is, speaking roughly, based upon the life and death of some knight called Smith, who succeeded his father in the family business of pitwood importers, timber merchants and coal exporters, was well known in political, temperance, and church circles, did much for the poor of Liverpool, and died last Wednesday of pneumonia while on a visit to his son at Muswell Hill.⁶⁴

As Woolf’s sardonic tone indicates, the essay goes on to reevaluate the notion of “reality” that our reading of the Elizabethans serves to isolate, but it ends upon a note that reaffirms the reader’s “modern” position, perceiving not what is “real” or what is false in Elizabethan literature, but simply what it lacks: “It is solitude. There is no privacy here. Always the door opens and some one comes in. All is shared, made visible, audible, dramatic.”⁶⁵ But this perception of the “dramatic” is founded upon that satirical image of the banal Victorian “Smith,” inhering not to the theatre but rather to the habits of novel-reading.

Reading “an Elizabethan play,” Woolf encounters the strangeness of that desire for privacy and for individuality, and thus, both yielding ground and sticking to her guns, she moves ambivalently onward, noting only that this foundation of English literature—Elizabethan drama—provides her with an unwritten origin point for her own literary history, a quality of commonness that escapes immediate legibility. Elizabethan drama is defined by what it lacks: specifically, ourselves, for even in this common historical reference point we find no image of

⁶⁴ Ibid.: 48–49.

⁶⁵ Ibid.: 57.

Georgian “darkness,” but only the “bright-lit-up surfaces of others.”⁶⁶ Concluding the first *Common Reader* with the impossibility of accurately assessing contemporary literature, Woolf writes that the only “advice” that guides us in reading our contemporaries is “to respect one’s own instincts, to follow them fearlessly and, rather than submit them to the control of any critic or reviewer alive, to check them by reading and reading again the masterpieces of the past.”⁶⁷ Understanding literature becomes a constant oscillation between past and present, a perennial re-reading of “the masterpieces” with a view to their obscured support, and, above all, a persistent performance of the biases that guide our present position.

And so it is no wonder that Woolf returns precisely to this moment of historical alienation at the start of her *Second Common Reader*. Here, in an essay titled “The Strange Elizabethans,” she recognizes that any historical reading requires a theatrical consciousness:

There are few greater delights than to go back three or four hundred years and become in fancy at least an Elizabethan. That such fancies are only fancies, that this ‘becoming an Elizabethan’, this reading sixteenth-century writing as currently and certainly as we read our own is an illusion, is no doubt true.⁶⁸

The *Second Common Reader* returns to the Elizabethans as it attempts, once more, a performance of English literary heritage. But as it does so, it seeks to reassess the bias of Woolf’s prior attempt by turning not to the Elizabethan play but to Elizabethan prose: “And if we ask why we go further astray in this particular region of English literature than in any other, the answer is no doubt that Elizabethan prose, for all its beauty and bounty, was a very imperfect medium.”⁶⁹ Returning to the Elizabethans, Woolf is aware once again of the “strangeness” of this activity—and, in assessing why our Elizabethan imagination is inevitably false, she concludes

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Woolf, “How It Strikes a Contemporary”: 232.

⁶⁸ Woolf, “The Strange Elizabethans”: 9.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

that it is only because their prose had yet to achieve the mundane “perfection” of our own. The double-gesture is crucial: Woolf establishes the legitimacy of our literary history (the development of prose fluency between the Elizabethan and Woolf’s Georgian ages) only by acknowledging that any attempt to read that history is, in effect, a theatrical performance. Recognizing our modern desire for “privacy” when we return to Elizabethan literature, we are forced into the theatre even as we turn to the prose. And this awareness once again rebounds upon us: for, as Woolf acknowledged in her first *Common Reader*, there is no “certainty” in the practices of our modern era, and we must therefore read the Elizabethans “as currently and certainly as we read” the Georgians. Which is to say: we must do so as actors, playing the part of the “common reader” by becoming “in fancy at least an Elizabethan.”

There was indeed no “habit”—play-going or book-reading, lowbrow or highbrow, democratic or elite—that truly characterized Woolf’s “common reader.” Rather, to operate from the position of the “common reader” meant reading with the contingency of a theatrical performance: as an articulation of indivisible selfhood even in service of some greater sense of “wholeness” or “unity,” a communion with the past, with the present, and also with a future ideal of the “democratic highbrow.” Woolf’s strange Georgians—defined by conflict, and bound quite literally “between the acts” of the two great wars of the twentieth century—located themselves only by playing their others, the “common readers” that have defined literary history from the Elizabethan age to our own. As David McWhirter has written: “What Woolf recovers from the Elizabethan past is not a vision of a unity that transcends and denies history, but an image or ‘pattern’ of a culture that she finally saw as celebrating difference and dialogue, and the lineaments of a literary form that might be reinvented in order to voice the multiplicitous

possibilities for rereading, and hence for rewriting, history.”⁷⁰ In “The Patron and the Crocus,” Woolf expressed a desire for a modernist reader “ready to efface himself or assert himself as his writers require,” performing the subversive passivity Woolf dramatized in the actions of *Freshwater*’s Ellen Terry. Returning again to the Elizabethans as she began work on “Anon” in 1940, she found such a reader once more in the anonymous, ambivalent individuality at work in Elizabethan England.

The “common reader,” Woolf wrote in 1925, “differs from the critic and the scholar. He is worse educated, and nature has not gifted him so generously. He reads for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others.”⁷¹ But most importantly, the “common reader” is theatrical: “He never ceases, as he reads, to run up some rickety and ramshackle fabric which shall give him the temporary satisfaction of looking sufficiently like the real object to allow of affection, laughter, and argument.”⁷² Woolf located such an ideal in the frustrated actions of her contemporaries: for the “common reader,” the “cheap coloured print of the real thing” becomes instead a “rickety and ramshackle fabric” that mimics the “real object,” and the threat of static and enervated modern media is redeemed by an ideal of communal performance that terminates not in “knowledge” but in discussion. This effort, Woolf later observed, was undertaken by Ellen Terry, who played the part of the “common reader” as she strove to transcribe and enact Irving’s paradox. According to Woolf, Terry’s method adhered precisely to this opportunistic effort: since Terry was already an actor, “whatever she took up became in her warm, sensitive grasp a tool.... If it were a pen, words peeled off, some broken, some suspended in mid-air, but all far more expressive than the tappings of the professional

⁷⁰ McWhirter, “Woolf, Eliot, and the Elizabethans”: 259.

⁷¹ Woolf, “The Common Reader”: 1.

⁷² *Ibid.*

typewriter.”⁷³ And so, in those despairing first years of the Second World War, Woolf would offer a final portrait of such acting readers, or reading actors—and the “affection, laughter, and argument” they inspire—in *Between the Acts*.

Between the Acts: The Idiot and the Actor in English History

“... He said she meant we all act. Yes, but whose play? Ah, that’s the question! And if we’re left asking questions, isn’t it a failure, as a play? I must say I like to feel sure if I go to the theatre, that I’ve grasped the meaning... Or was that, perhaps, what she meant? ... Ding dong. Ding... that if we don’t jump to conclusions, if you think, and I think, perhaps one day, thinking differently, we shall think the same?”

- Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*⁷⁴

Virginia Woolf’s final novel, *Between the Acts*, documents the author’s growing discontent not only with the social forces that have dragged England once more to war but also with the efficacy of her own resistance to those forces. What lies at stake in this novel is the ostensible pretext of much of Woolf’s prior work: the idea that there is an emotional life that lives in silence and obscurity, that this life can be represented through the flexibility and sensitivity of “modernist” literary form, and—finally, and most significantly—that this life can be accessed and understood only through the actions of the “common reader.” *Between the Acts* betrays its anxiety about habits of cultural consumption by dramatizing the habits of readers and audience members. Set on a summer’s day in 1939 at the country home of Isa and Giles Oliver, *Between the Acts* depicts an attempt to host the amateur historical performance of the dramatist Miss Latrobe for the members of a village community. As the highbrow, literate inhabitants of “Pointz Hall” are made to sit through an exhausting and exhaustive dramatic pageant of English literary history, they are challenged to understand and interpret their experience during both the play and

⁷³ Woolf, “Ellen Terry”: 206.

⁷⁴ Woolf, *Between the Acts*: 199–200.

its intervals in terms explicitly opposed to those of the “book-reading habit.” Their unsatisfying and frustrating conclusion—that they are all actors—indicates both an escape from moral responsibilities and opportunity to resituate the definition of those responsibilities.

As these “patrons” struggle to come to terms with their fatalistic conclusions, Woolf dares us to enact their lessons ourselves: to indulge in distraction, to flout textual cues, and to deny the authority of archetype. Through its multifaceted engagement with the ideals of allegory, *Between the Acts* returns us to the lessons of *Freshwater*: as the community actors of the pageant both complement and resist their historical “roles,” Woolf indicates the actor’s ability both to rewrite history and to unwrite it, dramatizing once more Ellen Terry’s escape from narrative into the paradox of the actor. Returning once more to the “donkeys work” of the theatre, the pageant uses the “common” ground of the Elizabethan fiction and the oppressive historical weight of the Victorian pastiche—the “immediate” forebears of these disbelieving moderns—to activate Woolf’s critique of historical action and historical legibility. And in the actions of one purportedly naïve, illiterate “idiot,” *Between the Acts* undoes its own overt fatalism by embracing the paradox of the actor and by resurrecting the spirit of “Anon.”

The greatest temptation we encounter when reading *Between the Acts* is its implicit teleology: the novel rises to its significance not only as the culmination of its author’s career but also as the culmination of the history described within its own pages. As Woolf’s final work, produced in a climate of mounting despair, *Between the Acts* seems to draw its own power from the apocalyptic conditions of its production; even its final images—“The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks.”—return

us to a vision of the absolute, the alpha and omega.⁷⁵ In this regard, Howard Harper has stated that “*Between the Acts* becomes the mythic drama of the twilight of a culture, and of the dramatist whose destiny it is to try, in the deepening shadows, to reveal that culture to itself.”⁷⁶ And at the same time, the novel’s use of parody serves to challenge the notion of canonicity in its own representation of that cultural inheritance. La Trobe’s effort “to reveal that culture to itself” runs up against one of the characteristic dilemmas of her age: the “modernist” concern for the canon is ambivalently reflected in the novel’s central pageant. In La Trobe’s hands, “The pageant... challenges standing views of literary history through [her] selection of themes,” as Christopher Ames has suggested; the implicit binary of the novel’s title “and Woolf’s method remind[s] us that much that is of value and significance in human history transpires offstage.”⁷⁷ Indeed, the re-ordering of priorities suggested by the novel’s title is actually its most politicized gesture. Though the novel’s events seem to “transpire in a self-insulated and self-enclosed aesthetic scene *outside* or *apart* from history’s battlegrounds,”⁷⁸ it is the novel’s abrupt intrusions of real history—such as the airplanes that interrupt the pageant—that work in concert with La Trobe’s parody in order to challenge how, exactly, that insulation is meant to work: is it La Trobe’s disturbance of the tradition, or history’s disturbance of La Trobe, that holds final authority? La Trobe’s “destiny” may or may not be fulfilled, just as the culture may or may witness its own “twilight”: La Trobe—the icon of the artist as a modern theatrical director—thereby challenges the legitimacy of this sort of “authorial” role.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Ibid.: 219.

⁷⁶ Harper, *Between Language and Silence*: 282.

⁷⁷ Ames, “The Modernist Canon Narrative”: 393.

⁷⁸ DiBattista, *Virginia Woolf’s Major Novels*: 194.

⁷⁹ It has been suggested that La Trobe is modeled on the director Edith Craig, daughter of Ellen Terry and sister of Edward Gordon Craig. (See: Marcus, “Some Sources for *Between the Acts*”: 1–3.). Edward Gordon Craig’s

That *Between the Acts* itself embraces both possibilities speaks to the broader strategy of its own limiting gestures. Reading the novel in concert with *Three Guineas*, Maria DiBattista has argued that it acts as a manifestation of that “adversary, anterior culture,” described by Woolf in *Three Guineas* as “the disinterested pursuit of reading and writing the English language,” and that the novel therefore opposes the pessimism of materialist history.⁸⁰ Against both La Trobe’s play and the British war effort runs the romantic drama that plays literally between the acts of the pageant, involving Isa and Giles Oliver: here, DiBattista finds an “allegory of love” that functions as Woolf’s “aesthetic defense against the demoralizing chronicity of contemporary history” documented ambivalently by the pageant.⁸¹ The politics of reading *Between the Acts* thus force us to decide whether what occurs “between the acts” of English history is the historical or the allegorical; whether we choose to see Harper’s dramatist of destiny or DiBattista’s allegory of love depends precisely on what it means to engage properly in “the disinterested pursuit of reading and writing the English language.” If allegory functions as an aesthetic defense against history, it is nevertheless a strategy of reading ratified by history—and, moreover, a strategy with which the novel’s own allegorical figures are intimately familiar.

It is Isa Oliver in whom both an allegorical role and an allegorical awareness are simultaneously invested, and it is in Isa’s fulfillment of the novel’s allegory that *Between the Acts* produces its characteristic tension. The novel’s final line—“The curtain rose. They spoke.”—offers an explicit counter to the sort of drama La Trobe has staged in the novel’s pageant scenes: in place of a satire of English literary history, engaged with and harassed by the

significance to the development of modern directorial prerogatives—particularly with regard to the symbolic functions of the actor as Ubermarionette—is discussed at some length in my first chapter. Edith Craig’s own goals and methods often explicitly opposed those of her brother; certainly La Trobe—while often frustrated by her pageant’s failures—never strives wholly to submerge her actors’ individuality.

⁸⁰ DiBattista, *Virginia Woolf’s Major Novels*: 193.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*: 212.

“circumstances” of its production, Woolf offers a mythic clash between allegorical forces, a theatre of the archetypal and the essential. Indeed, the novel’s conclusion actually generates a modicum of hope out of its translation of Isa and Giles into their primal roles: once the pageant is over and the audience has left, the married couple is free to argue in privacy.

Giles crumpled the newspaper and turned out the light. Left alone together for the first time that day, they were silent. Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night.⁸²

This vision prophesies conflict but also relief; moreover, it is generated by relief, for it is only once Giles has “crumpled the newspaper” and dispensed with the cares of the social-historical world that the couple is free to enact their primal drama. As the concluding words of the novel imply, this drama must bring certain things to light: they must both assume responsibility for their extramarital affairs, the consummated and the unconsummated. But their assumption of these roles is also an escape from responsibility: they escape not only the political responsibility represented by the newspaper (for the domestic drama can only assume its relative importance if Giles—enraged and distracted by political events throughout the novel’s entirety—forgets about the war), but also the responsibilities that attend to the social nuances out of which their affairs have been generated. Both Isa’s desire for the “gentleman farmer” and Giles’s liaison with Mrs. Manresa are imbricated in a complex net of social forces; to suggest that their conflict is that of the “dog fox” with the “vixen” would be to imply that it is one of purely instinctual sexual energies, and not the product of social and economic concerns.

The reality, of course, is something that the novel’s opening makes abundantly clear. Isa’s sole interaction with the “gentleman farmer” Haines in the novel’s first scene is governed equally by romantic clichés and economic realities. As Giles’s father, the oblivious, elitist

⁸² Woolf, *Between the Acts*: 219.

Bartholomew Oliver, intones quotations from Byron, Isa imagines that she and Haines float “like two swans down stream. But his snow-white breast was circled with a tangle of dirty duckweed; and she too, in her webbed feet was entangled, by her husband, the stockbroker. Sitting in her three-cornered chair she swayed, with her dark pigtailed hanging, and her body like a bolster in its faded dressing gown.”⁸³ In this earlier scene, then, metaphor and simile break uneasily against material reality: Haines’s wife almost escapes notice as a “tangle of dirty duckweed,” but Giles, “the stockbroker,” obtrudes awkwardly into this fantasy, which is itself curated by Bartholomew Oliver’s authoritative deployment of Romantic poetry as cultural capital.⁸⁴ Isa’s imagined swans are discomfited aesthetic models; her escape into the poetry of infidelity is crippled by bonds and stocks. By contrast, the “dog fox” and the “vixen” of the novel’s conclusion are unfettered, and Woolf’s allusion to Conrad resonates quite differently from Bartholomew’s use of Byron. More importantly, the resolution of Isa and Giles’s fight is a foregone conclusion: their assumption of their primal identities allows them to enact a drama whose fulfillment is never in doubt—“Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace.” Woolf’s symmetrical diction binds their drama tightly, and nothing is permitted to interfere with the completed cycle of their plot.

In Isa’s and Giles’s allegorical drama, questions of causality and authority are elided—quite literally, if we look to Woolf’s first typescript for the novel, begun in 1938. Here, Woolf had ended the text with a series of pointed questions:

It was the first act of the new play. But who had written the play? What was the meaning of the play? And who made them act their parts?

⁸³ *Ibid.*: 5.

⁸⁴ For a more nuanced reading of the ironic deployment of Byron in *Between the Acts*, see Fernald, *Virginia Woolf: Feminism and the Reader*: 158. Fernald reads Woolf’s use of Byron throughout her life as a complex engagement with performativity and the politics of fame, and offers a compelling alternative to my sense of how literary history informs Woolf’s sense of performance.

Then, the rage which they had suppressed all day burst out. It was their part - < to tear each other asunder,> to fight.⁸⁵

These questions were revised and expanded in penciled corrections below: “Why must we take our parts in the play? And who has written it? Even there on the sill of the window? Was not night exposed with bareness, in its harshness?”⁸⁶ The oscillation recorded here—particularly into that penciled “we” and into the present tense, which suggests that these questions are asked, in part, by Isa and Giles themselves—was erased in Woolf’s later typescript of November 1940, which opted for the elegant simplicities of the final, published version. As a result, Giles and Isa fall into their roles more comfortably, and more simply. Though open to that apocalyptic sky, the allegorical drama is nevertheless also a refuge from the searching questions of conscious existence: as actors in the new play, Giles and Isa forego the obligation to inquire after the play’s agenda. Someone, it seems, “made them act their parts,” but that authorial genius is treated not with skepticism but with faith; Giles and Isa take to their role-playing in the novel’s final moment with the comfort of necessity, in a time when so much lies in doubt. Acting, this conclusion seems to suggest, means only following the directives of the script, the composition of which must be left to higher minds. Criticism is suspended along with the ethical world: as they become the “dog fox” and the “vixen,” Giles and Isa are absolved of the responsibility and the challenge of being human.

And if we want to find an author for their instinctive drama, we have only to look a few pages earlier, when the dissatisfied La Trobe finds her own solace at the bottom of a pint. Alone in the pub, La Trobe is treated to the same stark, allegorical vision: “There was the high ground at midnight; there the rock; and two scarcely perceptible figures. Suddenly the tree was pelted

⁸⁵ Woolf, *Pointz Hall: The Earlier and Later Typescripts of Between the Acts*: 188.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

with starlings. She set down her glass. She heard the first words.”⁸⁷ La Trobe’s frustration with the pageant’s conclusion is documented throughout the novel’s final section, as she emerges from the bushes and leaves the lawn above Pointz Hall: “Her gift meant nothing. If they had understood her meaning; if they had known their parts; if the pearls had been real and the funds illimitable—it would have been a better gift. Now it had gone to join the others.”⁸⁸ What La Trobe seems to desire in this concluding moment in the pub is the freedom of creating art outside the bounds of any social interaction: her vision of the mythic drama is unattended by an audience, and the blurred outlines of her “scarcely perceptible figures” abrogates the need for costumes and sets. Like Giles’s and Isa’s role-playing, La Trobe’s authorial fantasy represents an escape from the demands of materialist thought: the Brechtian is replaced by the Beckettian as La Trobe abandons English history for myth and minimalism. In these final pages, the aesthetic seems to become as isolating as it is redemptive. And like the chuffing gramophone of the pageant, the novel settles uncomfortably between the “unity” of the aesthetic and the “dispersity” of the aestheticized self.

But this reading of the final scene only pertains if we, like Giles and Isa, believe that the act of reading itself is an act of submission to the anonymous authority of the writer. Through La Trobe—and potentially through La Trobe’s metonymic link to Woolf herself—we witness a common fantasy of “modernist” aesthetic coherence: the anonymous, unacknowledged author of Giles and Isa’s unwritten drama is “refined out of existence” like Stephen Dedalus (or James Joyce) in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, granting fidelity to the work of art through the pervasive but invisible “presence” of the artist. La Trobe’s authoritarianism has presented a

⁸⁷ Woolf, *Between the Acts*: 212.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*: 209.

persistent challenge to critics of the novel, for her “performance” of her own social role (lesbian and vaguely foreign, she is the irrevocable “outsider”) and the unscripted efficacy of her pageant exists in stark contrast to the fascist fantasy of authorial control she often seems to espouse. The fatalistic pageant of history is replaced by the similarly deterministic “allegory of love.”

I argue, therefore, that this conclusion must be read itself in dialogue with the novel’s portrayal of an alternative form of reading and reception, one that acknowledges that any attempt to locate solidity in a final, allegorical “meaning” is itself a contingent act. Like the revised *Freshwater* of 1935, *Between the Acts* engages with the representative values of its focal figures by representing those values as ambivalent performances. In La Trobe’s pageant, the identities of the actor-participants cut productively against the grain of interpretation; the same is true throughout Woolf’s novel, which dramatizes the deceptions and pitfalls of the “book-reading habit.”

Among the many binaries the novel generates is an opposition between the Oliver home of Pointz Hall and La Trobe’s open-air theatre. Oddly, Woolf’s narrator notes in the novel’s opening pages, the architect of Pointz Hall had chosen to build the house in a hollow, leaving the broad terrace on the hillside above (really, the ideal location for a house) open: “Nature had provided a site for a house; man had built his house in a hollow.”⁸⁹ And thus when La Trobe visits to plan the pageant, she realizes that “obviously, the terrace was the very place for a play.”⁹⁰ Pointz Hall is set up explicitly in opposition both to the theatre and to “nature,” as its current patriarch, Bartholomew Oliver, acknowledges: the house was built “obviously to escape from nature.”⁹¹ And central to Pointz Hall’s “meaning” is its most important room, at the “heart

⁸⁹ Ibid.: 10.

⁹⁰ Ibid.: 57.

⁹¹ Ibid.: 8.

of the house”: the library.

But the “meaning” of this location is actually bound up with the identities and the motives of those who would attempt to read such “meaning” there. Entering the library early in the novel, Isa reflects: “A foolish, flattering lady, pausing on the threshold of what she once called ‘the heart of the house,’ the threshold of the library, had once said: ‘Next to the kitchen, the library’s always the nicest room in the house.’ The she added, stepping across the threshold: ‘Books are the mirrors of the soul.’”⁹² Pointz Hall is characterized largely by such clichéd appellations; throughout the early sections of the novel continual references are made to the language of tourists and of guidebooks. Indeed, much of Pointz Hall’s charm to both its inhabitants and its guests is its appeal to the English sense of platitudinous pride. When Giles contemplates with fury English complacency in the face of the approaching war, he nevertheless does so with reference to the “view” enshrined in an 1833 guidebook of the area: “At any moment guns would rake that land into furrows; planes splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens and blast the Folly. He, too, loved the view.”⁹³ What Pointz Hall’s library thus represents is not a seat of abstraction, a home of Knowledge or Learning, or of philosophical reflection, but rather a heart of conventional and sentimental attitudinizing about English identity. Lying at the center of Pointz Hall’s silent heart is an unspoken, secret faith in a mode of understanding its own value: if Pointz Hall represents a pastoral England threatened by war in Europe, then it is a pastoral England that largely exists between the pages of books, and in the minds of young English people taught to read English virtue in English literature.

Isa herself acknowledges this paradox: entering Pointz Hall’s provincial library, she recognizes that the room is as much a product of geography and commercialism as it is one of

⁹² Ibid.: 16.

⁹³ Ibid.: 53.

the pure love of books. If books are indeed the “mirrors of the soul,” then Pointz Hall’s books reflect

a tarnished, a spotted soul. For as the train took over three hours to reach this remote village in the very heart of England, no one ventured so long a journey without staving off possible mind-hunger, without buying a book on a bookstall. Thus the mirror that reflected the soul sublime, reflected also the soul bored. Nobody could pretend, as they looked at the shuffle of shilling shockers that week-enders had dropped, that the looking-glass always reflected the anguish of a Queen or the heroism of King Harry.⁹⁴

For all Bartholomew Oliver’s elitist quotations, much of Pointz Hall’s collection remains decidedly lowbrow. And though Isa herself seems to contemplate a qualitative judgment, the verdict is mixed. Pointz Hall’s library holds both “shilling shockers” and “the heroism of King Harry,” and if the latter forms the heart of English pride then the former speaks more to the fact of English taste: the presence of both indicates, perhaps, a modern(ist) irony about nineteenth-century English culture, which brought together the “shilling shocker” and the heroic king in the partnership between Stoker and Irving.

For Isa, the equation of the act of reading with “being English,” with the celebration of *both* the “heroism of King Harry” and the economics of privilege, travel and boredom in the early twentieth century, produces a notable anxiety. When she enters the library, her feelings toward that “foolish, flattering” visitor are passively transformed into a kind of hopeful mimicry.

“The library’s always the nicest room in the house,” she quoted, and ran her eyes along the books. “The mirror of the soul” books were. *The Faerie Queene* and Kinglake’s *Crimea*; Keats and the *Kreutzer Sonata*. There they were, reflecting. What? What remedy was there for her at her age—the age of the century, thirty-nine—in books? Book-shy she was, like the rest of her generation; and gun-shy too. Yet as a person with a raging tooth runs her eye in a chemist shop over green bottles with gilt scrolls on them lest one of them may contain a cure, she considered: Keats and Shelley; Yeats and Donne. Or perhaps not a poem; a life. The life of Garibaldi. The life of Lord Palmerston. Or perhaps not a person’s life; a county’s. *The Antiquities of Durham*; *The Proceedings of the Archaeological Society of Nottingham*. Or not a life at all, but science—Eddington, Darwin, or

⁹⁴ Ibid.: 16.

Jeans.

None of them stopped her toothache. For her generation the newspaper was a book...⁹⁵

Isa's survey of Pointz Hall's library takes into account a series of implicit assumptions: not only that there is "value" to be gained in reading books, but that such "value" might be literally "prescribed" to treat her ills. And while we might read much into the twin binaries she offers at the outset (Spenser and Kinglake, Keats and Tolstoy), of greater significance is Isa's attempt to break her books into genres. From poetry to biography, history to science, Isa's survey not only suggests an implicit faith in the positivist, absolute value of such categories but also charts the historical growth of that faith, and its final collapse. By occupying the position of that "flattering" visitor, she indulges in a fleeting sense of nostalgia—a desire, perhaps, for a time when knowledge was not so clearly linked to firepower, when reading could provide an escape from the political into the human. But though her eye turns continually toward the past, in search of some irrelevancy—she eschews the biographies of nineteenth-century statesmen in favor of obscure pamphlets about England's archaic history—it also moves inexorably toward the modern, and toward the ambiguous: Yeats emerges ambivalently into her canon of poetry, and Darwin's dispassionate view of species and survival is bracketed by references to twentieth-century cosmologists Eddington and Jeans, whose own work charted the impossible confluence of physics and philosophy after the discoveries of Einstein and Heisenberg. It is Darwin to whom Isa appeals in the novel's problematic conclusion—for behind that reference to the "dog fox" and the "vixen" is a desire to reassert humanity's place in the steady march of materialist evolution—but it is Jeans who curtails her search for meaning, the same Jeans who had argued, in 1930's *The Mysterious Universe*, that matter might be the accident of consciousness, and not the other

⁹⁵ Ibid.: 19–20.

way around.⁹⁶ Isa's survey is ultimately circular: if she comes to the library in search of stability, what she finds is ultimately a reflection of her own (or her age's) uncertainty. Once again, books are mirrors of both the objective reality of their contents and the subjective whims of their readers, for as *Between the Acts* suggests (and as Jeans, asea in a newly-relativistic universe, perhaps argues) there is little difference between the two.

Ultimately, Isa rejects these books in favor of Bartholomew's discarded newspaper. But if Isa rejects the shelves of Pointz Hall's library, what she rejects is not only the history bound within those pages, but rather the very attitude presented above, the sort of reading that has been literally prescribed: if Isa contemplates her cures, this act of contemplation nevertheless suggests that she already knows what benefit these curatives can offer. Her turn to the newspaper is not simply a turn toward the historical present but also toward the present act of reading, toward a sort of reading untainted by prior convictions. Unknowing, she turns to an account of a rape in Whitehall, which she understands piece-by-piece, word-by-word.

... as her father-in-law had dropped the *Times*, she took it and read: "a horse with a green tail..." which was fantastic. Next, "The guard at Whitehall..." which was romantic, and then, building word upon word, she read: "The troopers told her the horse had a green tail; but she found it was just an ordinary horse. And they dragged her up to the barrack room where she was thrown upon a bed. Then one of the troopers removed part of her clothing, and she screamed and hit him about the face..."

That was real; so real that on the mahogany door panels she saw the Arch in Whitehall; through the Arch the barrack room; in the barrack room the bed, and on the bed the girl was screaming and hitting him about the face, when the door (for in fact it was a door) opened and in came Mrs. Swithin carrying a hammer.⁹⁷

The "reality" of the rape is meant to counter the "fantastic" and "romantic" associations earlier suggested, but it also undermines the reality of Pointz Hall's architecture: as Isa reads, the door

⁹⁶ This might also be an ironic commentary on Shaw's "revolution on the shelf": Isa's Darwinist fantasy can be reassuringly nostalgic only after the ethical terrors of "natural selection" have been upstaged by the machinery of twentieth-century warfare, and Shaw's own revolutionary Darwinism seems a quaint Edwardian curiosity by the middle of the century.

⁹⁷ Woolf, *Between the Acts*: 20.

dissolves and is replaced by her vision of the Whitehall barracks. Into Isa's vision intrudes Mrs. Swithin, with the hammer she had used in order to post signs for the pageant. The "truth" of the British army is literally grafted onto Pointz Hall, as if to suggest that the Olivers are also to blame for such violence. In Isa's dawning awareness of such "truths" even the earnest efforts of kindly, "batty" Mrs. Swithin appear like passive endorsements of a horrifying cultural complex. But this horror is itself generated by Isa's own disposition and susceptibility: her initial interest in the "fantastic" and "romantic" aspects of the newspaper tale mimics the deception practiced upon the young woman.⁹⁸ Isa's sympathy for the young woman—like our own—is undoubtedly generated by her method of reading; if the account of the rape feels "real" to Isa, it necessarily generates certain ethical responses which may or may not focus upon Mrs. Swithin and Bartholomew Oliver in the exchange that follows. But in order to have these responses, Isa must make herself the victim of the text. So long as Isa's response mirrors that of the young woman, she remains submissive, dominated by the authority of the reading experience, which is so easily able to supplant the material objects of the world around her, to replace indeed the very things over which she *does* exert control.

If Isa therefore eschews the classics enshrined on the library's shelves for the more immediate "truth" of the newspaper, she does not escape the authorizing gestures of "Englishness" manifest in Pointz Hall's library—for these inhere not just to those books, highbrow and low-, that have accumulated over generations, but also to the attitudes and habits of the English reader. Book-shy and gun-shy, Isa is afraid to be on either side of that explosive

⁹⁸ We must assume, here, that Isa does not read headlines, and that she is unaware of the story's focus before she begins reading. Curious as this is, it speaks to Isa's awkward position between a fragmented modernity and the illusion of a "complete" past: her reading of the newspaper is grounded in nostalgic habits, for she does not—like most "modern" newspaper readers—survey headlines before delving further into articles. Her methods betray a willful ignorance of the visual rhetoric of the periodical, as well as the formal rhetoric of modern newspaper journalism, which always allows the "story" to precede the detail rather than emerge from it.

power, content neither with the humanist gestures of the literary tradition, nor a faith in positivist knowledge, nor a reliance upon the personal encounter with the text. Pointz Hall's literate "heart" is rent in two, divided by readings that either foreclose their "meanings" before the pages are opened or render the reader subject to the dictates of the text, complicit victims to a sort of textual violence. Viewing books as guns, Isa assumes that they operate only in one direction, that the only question is on what side of the event she is to be found. Pointz Hall's library cannot provide a "cure" for its age because it also contains its illness. And if Isa flees from the fraught responsibilities of the reader into the absolved status of the allegorical actor, she nevertheless carries with her an implicit belief in her own inability to reconcile the dilemmas that beset both positions. For Isa, reading and acting are both strategies of disempowerment. To the extent that she exceeds her own individuality—that she represents "her generation" in these attitudes, and not simply herself—Isa becomes the novel's icon for a self-willed iconicity, for a desire to use (or be used by) literature as an effect and not as a cause.

The redemption of this attitude, of course, comes in the novel's central pageant: for as with *Freshwater's* Ellen Terry, the actors of the pageant develop their own separate individuality neither against nor quite alongside their representative value within the play's several pastiches, and—in doing so—they offer another means of engaging with the English literary-historical tradition. The forms of reading that dominate the pageant's audience are visible from the first moments: as they confront the pageant's opening we witness their attempts to impose a common literary standard to the performance they have not yet seen, weighing these attempts at reading the play's "meaning" against their pride and affection in watching members of their own community perform in their roles.

The play begins with a “prologue,” delivered by a young girl “like a rosebud in pink,” made to stand in for the new-born England. In La Trobe’s design, literary convention (the diegetic frame-setting text of the prologue) is wedded to both casting and costume design (the girl whose youth, gender, and appearance conspire to represent the blossoming of a national consciousness in a time before nations) to appeal easily to the audience’s understanding. But this effect is immediately disturbed.

Gentles and simples, I address you all...
 So it was the play then. Or was it the prologue?
Come hither for our festival (she continued)
This is a pageant, all may see
Drawn from our island history.

England am I...

“She’s England,” they whispered. “It’s begun.” “The prologue,” they added, looking down at the programme.

“*England am I,*” she piped again; and stopped.

She had forgotten her lines.

“Hear! Hear!” said an old man in a white waist-coat briskly. “Bravo! Bravo!”⁹⁹

It is the task of the prologue not only to outline the task of the pageant—the representation of scenes from English history—but also the position of the audience: “gentles and simples” are addressed together, and “all may see” the self-evident pageant of English history. That “all may see” is both a democratizing gesture—suggesting the pageant is open to all viewers—and a prescriptive one, for it suggests an obviousness to the pageant’s proceedings: even before the scenes have begun, the audience is meant to agree to their historical validity and allegorical significance. From this moment onward, each actor’s entry is accompanied by a simultaneous acknowledgment of both the actor’s role and the actor’s own identity, and what becomes the pageant’s first, most jarring interruption quickly becomes its dominant method. The audience’s “understanding” of the pageant is happily complicated by the total opacity of its actors’

⁹⁹ Woolf, *Between the Acts*: 76–77.

portrayals: their comfort with the certainty of allegory is what sustains their applause at its failures.

Naturally, this effect reaches its pinnacle as the pageant enters its pastiche of Elizabeth I's reign. After the prologue, the pageant lapses into a brief attempt at summarizing English literature before Elizabeth, but the results are mixed: a series of villagers moves in and out of the trees on the terrace, which the audience recognizes as "the Canterbury pilgrims"—but their words are carried off by the wind, suggesting that the continuity we perceive is an accident of what is lost in that historical chasm. But this is not the case when Elizabeth takes the stage:

From the bushes issued Queen Elizabeth—Eliza Clark, licensed to sell tobacco. Could she really be Mrs. Clark of the village shop? She was splendidly made up. Her head, pearl-hung, rose from a vast ruff. Shiny satins draped her. Sixpenny brooches glared like cats' eyes made of cloth of silver—in fact swabs used to scour saucepans. She looked the age in person. And when she mounted the soap box in the centre, representing perhaps a rock in the ocean, her size made her appear gigantic. She could reach a fitch of bacon or haul a tub of oil with one sweep of her arm in the shop.¹⁰⁰

Eliza Clark—who, coincidentally, shares even a name with her character—appears strangely augmented by her portrayal. As she grows "larger than life" in her fantastic costume, this stature is read back into her more everyday actions. A giant behind the counter, Eliza has her arm extended by her illustrious namesake, effortlessly wielding the objects of her narrow dominion: bacon, oil and tobacco.

Though "she looked the age in person," her representation of this "age" is something quite different from Isa's identification with her own "generation," and—ridiculous as Eliza may be—there is something redemptive about this portrayal. As the audience cheers, they celebrate not only their recognition of the play's first clear nod to its form (for, setting aside that ambiguous Chaucerian beginning, English literature properly begins under Elizabeth), but also

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.: 83.

their recognition of Eliza Clark, tobacconist. It is impossible to disentangle their glee at knowing their history and that at knowing themselves, but the narcissistic, self-affirming, almost propagandistic element of this celebration is undercut by the severe irony of Eliza's portrayal. In this actor's performance, Elizabeth's reach is limited to the door of a general store, even if Eliza's is extended to the same. Instead of the either/or of the performance's "failure" to sustain the audience's "suspension of disbelief," Eliza Clark offers a both/and: she expresses both the glorification of her own role in their provincial life as well as the necessary parody of a broader, standardized English "history," and if England's imperial dreams begin with Elizabeth then they also find their end in Eliza, who is no tool of history but rather an actor undermining it from within. In Eliza's portrayal, there can be no "anguish of a Queen"; the tastes of this English audience refuse to distinguish between highbrow and low-, for the pageant collapses the distinctions that rend the library in two. Standing upon "a rock in the ocean"—not unlike *Freshwater's* Ellen Terry suspended on "the Needles" off the shore of the Isle of Wight—Eliza Clark sees her representative capacity challenged by her performance, for this "rock" is no pedestal, and this actor no icon.

And if Eliza Clarke outlines the dilemmas of "enacting" English literature by uniting the present individual with the historical role, her potential is fulfilled only by Albert, the "village idiot," who appears twice during the show: first during the Elizabethan pastiche and later during the Victorian. His first entrance inspires both laughter and discomfort: "ambling across the grass, mopping and mowing," Albert appears, "acting his part to perfection."¹⁰¹ His leering performance as an Elizabethan jester produces more than a few awkward reactions: Mrs. Swithin murmurs a hope that he "don't have a fit," and others cringe in fear that he will do "something dreadful." But Albert's performance turns the tables on these assumptions: as he gambols across

¹⁰¹ Ibid.: 86.

the stage, he sings a song that embodies their anxieties: “*I know, I know—/ What don’t I know?/ All your secrets, ladies,/ And yours too, gentlemen...*” Albert’s “I know... I know...” becomes a recurrent refrain, for it is precisely the impossibility of fathoming what he truly does know that produces their discomfort. During the first interval, William Dodge responds to the objection voiced by a “Mrs. Parker” to Albert’s performance:

“The idiot?” William answered Mrs. Parker for her. “He’s in the tradition.”

“But surely,” said Mrs. Parker, and told Giles how creepy the idiot—“We have one in our village”—had made her feel. “Surely, Mr. Oliver, we’re more civilized?”

“We?” said Giles. “We?” He looked, once, at William.¹⁰²

What makes Albert so problematic for the viewers of La Trobe’s pageant is precisely the ease with which they can “read” his representative value. Having accepted the conventions of signification on this stage, they are challenged by an actor who reduces his “historical” role to his “present” one. Not only is the “village idiot” a historical phenomenon true to the period La Trobe had tried to dramatize—the sole blemish upon this fabricated image of Elizabethan splendor—but the “village idiot” also remains a present-day social role about which Mrs. Parker is justly embarrassed. Her ignorant comments reinforce the Elizabethans’ historical distance while also expressing a certain disappointment in the fact of this distance: if Albert’s presence reminds her that they are “more civilized” now, this reminder is tragic, for it casts Elizabeth’s glory as “stranger” than a contemporary pride in English history would make it out to be. And ironically, her confession—“We have one in our village”—is actually proof that she has not moved beyond the Elizabethans’ purported barbarity; though she objects to making a spectacle of Albert, she is also willing to view him as no different from any other “village idiot,” like that “one” from her own village. Mrs. Parker’s desire to remove Albert from the stage is also

¹⁰² Ibid.: 111.

a desire to flatten his individuality, and if she is too embarrassed to laugh at him, she is also too willing to doubt his ability to perform in the very role into which she has cast him. Unlike the other performers, Albert never drops a line or stammers awkwardly, but his ability to follow La Trobe's script so faithfully creates unease, for it violates one of the formal prescripts of the theatre: Albert inverts their notion of "dramatic irony" and "dramatic realism," for his own problematic claims to "knowledge" undermine the superior claims of the audience. In the absolute fidelity of Albert's performed reading of La Trobe's script, the audience witnesses the disintegration of any "common" meaning that such faithful reading often entails.

As a result, the "perfection" of Albert's performance, which elides the historical barriers between the Elizabethan age and our own, produces a schism in the audience. Mrs. Parker appeals to Giles Oliver on behalf of a presumed (if hypocritical) ethical response to Albert's performance, but she is immediately rejected. The solidarity she hopes to generate is both historical and economic; she turns from William Dodge to Giles Oliver in hopes of eliciting the well-bred liberal sentiments of the pageant's upper-class host, as though "civilization" is the product of both historical "progress" and material worth. But Giles's rejection fractures any semblance of solidarity, construed across any lines. He aims that offended "*We?*" at both William Dodge and Mrs. Parker: at Dodge, because Giles's homophobia finds evidence of the decay of "civilization" even in Dodge's presence; at Mrs. Parker, because his political sensibilities are disgusted by her complacent appeals to "civilization" in face of the approaching war. Albert's performance—whether or not he is aware, whether or not his "acting" is intentional—forces the audience to reassess the terms by which they construe the "civilization" that the pageant allegedly celebrates. In Albert's performance, even La Trobe's potential for parody fails, for the "perfection" of his reading forbids any unilateral agreement on the object of

satire. Are we to laugh at the Elizabethans or with them? Does the fool represent our critique of the past or the past's critique of us? Unable to answer these questions, the audience is sundered not only from the aesthetic continuity of their theatrical heritage, but also from one another.

Indeed, it is Albert's "perfection" that destroys the efficacy of a dominant notion of "performance" as that which divides the "real" from the fictive. If Eliza Clarke's regal aspirations underscore the way "acting" enables another form of literary-historical continuity, this logic is taken to an extreme in Albert's case: the authenticity of his performance both asserts an unbroken heredity of "Englishness" that pervades the pageant and also breaks whatever assumptions continue to bind its participants to one another. Albert's "perfect" performance ultimately outlines the hazards involved in "being English" and acting historically: the celebratory mood of the pageant can only be sustained if its audience refuses to engage more specifically with one another. What occurs "between the acts" of this pageant is, ultimately, the difficulty that lies at the center of the pageant: the impossibility of creating a consensus of about the pageant's "meaning," for such consensus must, necessarily, impose a "reading" atop the performance that it fits too perfectly. It is thus not La Trobe's subversion of England's literary history but rather her adherence to it that proves most problematic. In the performance of such problematic identities as Albert the "village idiot," our reading of history is revealed as a fictive performance, even as such fictive performances assume a total "reality" of their own.

For Woolf, the limitations of historical performance reveal themselves both within a belief of Elizabethan genesis and the act of Victorian severance: by returning to a presumed origin point for English literary culture, she is able to articulate her own moment's resistance to and nostalgia for Victorian values. Thus, Albert's second performance during the Victorian pastiche returns to the terms of *Freshwater's* historical indebtedness: just as Ellen Terry

eschewed her “role” both as a modernist progenitor and as a Victorian icon, Albert provides a measure of relief from the weight of aesthetic and cultural history inscribed upon the audience during the Victorian act. The pageant’s Victorian pastiche presents the most direct parallels to the pageant itself, reflecting the habits of the Olivers’ guests. Entitled “The Picnic Party,” it presents a pastoral scene in which members of a single community come together to engage in light refreshment and to witness brief performances by members of the group. But it is also the most scathingly critical of the pageant’s three major scenes: the opening monologue, delivered by the constable “Budge,” enumerates the fantasies of the British Empire, culminating in a vision of a police-state dominated by surveillance and ruthless repression—which is, according to “Budge,” the “price of empire,” and the “white man’s burden.”¹⁰³ As the pastiche unfolds, the audience is challenged to assess the ways in which these values uphold the sterile afternoon pleasures that follow, which reflect their own so pointedly. The elderly and dictatorial “Hardcastles” appear onstage astride a donkey in order to critique and control the community performers, offering an unflattering portrait of the privileges of the audience.

And so it is no wonder that the pastiche ends with an impromptu sermon by “Mr. Hardcastle,” who prays for the continued peace that their enlightened ways have brought to the earth. Surrounded by the young and the old, standing amidst the ruins of a feast, attended by birds and beasts, Mr. Hardcastle clutches a “fossil” as he expounds Victorian dominance over Nature and history. But the pageant’s audience itself is distracted in the middle of the prayer by a familiar image:

Here the hindquarters of the donkey, represented by Albert the idiot, became active. Intentional was it, or accidental? “Look at the donkey! Look at the donkey!” A titter drowned Mr. Hardcastle’s prayer...¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Ibid.: 163.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.: 171.

“Mr. Hardcastle” is unable to contain his subjects within his vision of unity; the prayer for peace is disturbed by the unruly actions of the donkey. One way to read this, of course, is as a failure of the Victorian fantasy: the notion of dominion over Nature that “Mr. Hardcastle” articulates is undone by this act of minor rebellion from that commonplace “beast of burden,” the most literally subjugated of Nature’s creatures.

But this “meaning” fails to resonate with the pageant’s audience, which is not only so distracted by movement that they fail to hear the rest of “Mr. Hardcastle’s” prayer (or, one assumes, to “read” its content alongside the donkey’s rebellion) but is indeed provoked to a different conclusion altogether: that the donkey is no donkey at all, but rather a pair of actors; moreover, that one of them is Albert “the idiot,” who proved such an extraordinary performer earlier in the show. In the face of the unity espoused by “Mr. Hardcastle” and reiterated by Reverend Streatfield, the audience achieves a “common” vision of disunity: of two actors literally playing the same role, but unable to bring their actions in line with one another. The audience draws its own conclusion: the hindquarters of the donkey—insofar as they fail to conform with the rest of the performance—must be “represented by Albert the idiot.” It is Albert himself who comes to “represent” the element within the performance that cannot be tamed by the performance’s own dicta; whether or not Albert himself is actually visible (unlikely, if he is wearing the back half of a two-person costume), such acts of rebellion are inevitably linked to his identity. Like *Freshwater’s* Ellen Terry, Albert is both intentional and accidental, both a donkey and not a donkey, both a “fact” and not a “fact,” both art and not art. Albert focuses the audience’s attention because of his irreducibility, and thus the most distracting element in La Trobe’s scathing indictment of Victorian presumption also suggests that it is only in such distraction that meaning and identity are revealed.

Albert's presence in both the Elizabethan and Victorian scenes thus returns us to the ideas of reading and of acting Woolf develops in the form of the "common reader," as well as her multiple attempts to represent Ellen Terry in *Freshwaters* and her critical essay. The difficulty of reading modern literature, Woolf suggested, is bound to the transparent ease with which we have codified the values of literary history especially within these two "periods," transforming a variable, obscure and unwritten series of accidental and circumstantial events into a belief in necessity and a standard of teleological literary "meaning." Albert "the idiot" functions not as an index of historical continuity—the single element that we hold in common with the Elizabethans and the Victorians—but rather a manifestation of the way such problematic "asses" always obtrude, an acknowledgment that any coherent "reading" requires both distraction and forgetting, returning us to our present circumstances. As a result, the first tentative attempt to understand the performance flounders in facile platitudes. When the performance is concluded, La Trobe remains hidden, leaving the Reverend Streatfield to suggest one interpretation: "To me at least it was indicated that we are members one of another. Each is part of the whole... We act different parts; but are the same. That I leave to you. Then again, as the play or pageant proceeded, my attention was distracted. Perhaps that too was part of the producer's intention?"¹⁰⁵ Streatfield founders in discerning between the fatalism and uniformity of that singular meaning—that we "are the same," and that we have our roles inscribed upon us by history—and his own distracted reaction to the performance.

And so, as the members of the audience leave the Olivers' home, Woolf presents snatches of their conversation: "Take the idiot. Did she mean, so to speak, something hidden, the unconscious as they call it? But why always drag in sex.... It's true, there's a sense in which we

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*: 192.

all, I admit, are savages still.”¹⁰⁶ The pageant’s hyper-literate audience is equipped with the most modern tools of analysis, and they are more than ready to delve into the psychoanalytic and the phenomenological as they attempt to deduce La Trobe’s conflicted “meaning.” But such reflections on the way that Albert “represents” the unknown core of “savage” humanity that unites them all ultimately gives way to more progressive notions of performativity:

He said she meant we all act. Yes, but whose play? Ah, that’s the question! And if we’re left asking questions, isn’t it a failure, as a play? I must say I like to feel sure if I go to the theatre, that I’ve grasped the meaning... Or was that, perhaps, what she meant? ... Ding dong. Ding... that if we don’t jump to conclusions, if you think, and I think, perhaps one day, thinking differently, we shall think the same?¹⁰⁷

That desire to “feel sure... that I’ve grasped the meaning” is challenged by a performative engagement with democratic dialogue, as the “book-reading habit” is challenged by the “play-going habit,” and as the reader is challenged by the actor. Leaving the pageant with such displays of “affection, laughter, and argument,” the “common readers” of *Between the Acts* are united only in this: that their essential difference, from their past and from one another, can be represented only by acting.

In that 1941 retrospective essay, Woolf recounts that Ellen Terry’s frustration with the attempt to inscribe Henry Irving necessarily reproduced itself in Terry’s own autobiography, which counters its moments of vibrant life with odd silences and contradictions. Echoing the “restoration” performed by Mina Harker, Woolf attempts to collate the scattered documents of Terry’s life, “a bundle of loose leaves upon each of which [Terry] has dashed off a sketch for a portrait.” But this effort is itself a failure. “It is difficult to assemble them. And there are blank

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.: 199.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.: 199–200.

pages, too. Some very important features are left out. There was a self she did not know, a gap she could not fill.”¹⁰⁸ One of these “blank pages” appears when Terry decides to leave G. F. Watts, rejecting pre-Raphaelite ideals and the stale values of Victorian Freshwater: “But somehow—here a blank page intervenes—she was an incongruous element in that quiet studio,” Woolf writes.¹⁰⁹ Another appears when Terry resumes her career as an actor, appearing again on Irving’s Lyceum stage:

At this point a very blank page confronts us. There is a gulf which we can only cross at a venture. Two sketches face each other; Ellen Terry in blue cotton among the hens; Ellen Terry robed and crowned as Lady Macbeth on the stage of the Lyceum. The two sketches are contradictory yet they are both of the same woman.¹¹⁰

And so it is no wonder that Woolf herself attempts to access that “self she did not know,” and to fill those “blank pages.” One of these attempts took the form of *Freshwater*, which dramatizes that crucial—if unwritten—moment in Terry’s career. In the silence and obscurity of the actor, Woolf found an essential aspect of an illegible life, of a life that resists the certainties of allegory and the pressures of literary history.

As a final turn in the novel’s engagement with its own coherence, this ability manifests itself as well in *Between the Acts*’ Isa Oliver, who is oppressed by history and allegory in the novel’s early sections. An aspiring poet, Isa is—like Terry—capable of writing “*nothing, nothing*”: her poetry remains unwritten in a “book bound like an account book in case Giles suspected,” and she pronounces it instead to the empty air, where it is caught only on the pages of Woolf’s novel.¹¹¹ Late in *Between the Acts*, Isa seizes on that “common” image to represent

¹⁰⁸ Woolf, “Ellen Terry”: 207.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*: 208.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 209.

¹¹¹ Woolf, *Between the Acts*: 15.

her own experience as a historical actor shortly before Albert's final performance:

On, little donkey, patiently stumble. Hear not the frantic cries of the leaders who in that they seek to lead desert us. Nor the chatter of china faces glazed and hard. Hear rather the shepherd, coughing by the farmyard wall; the withered tree that sighs when the Rider gallops; the brawl in the barrack room when they stripped her naked; or the cry which in London when I thrust the window open someone cries...¹¹²

Eschewing the normative narratives of "leaders," Isa gives voice instead to those ignored and violated by more conscious historical actors through the performative utterance of her own unwritten poetry.

The "blank pages" of the actor's life remain unfilled: for, as Woolf herself acknowledged, the true value of *Freshwater* lies not in its "authentic" representation of Terry's biography but rather in its paradoxical enactment, which constantly unwrites its own foundations. And so the conclusion of Woolf's essay on Ellen Terry likewise reverses its own suggestion that Terry's life was characterized by a "gap she could not fill." Expressing her final realization, Woolf writes:

How are we to put the scattered sketches together? Is she mother, wife, cook, critic, actress, or should she have been, after all, a painter? Each part seems the right part until she throws it aside and plays another. Something of Ellen Terry it seems overflowed every part and remained unacted.¹¹³

Moving from a notion of the "gap" to a celebration of the "overflow," Woolf also provides a final revision of Irving's paradox of the actor. Where Irving's influence seemed to help Stoker "make manifest in the reading" the scattered fragments of his work, Terry's seems to eschew this effort, to capitalize on the potentials of illegibility and the misreading of the "tradition" in order to achieve a new sort of historical freedom. And while Irving's personal celebrity and immortal fame—as the first actor ever knighted in England—provided one version of a "once and future"

¹¹² Ibid.: 156.

¹¹³ Woolf, "Ellen Terry": 212.

ideal, Terry restores us to another: for the potency of Woolf's abbreviation captures not only anonymity but also the singular virtues of intermittency and discontinuity, a paradox that reveals itself ever and "anon."

CONCLUSION

Leave it to P. G. Wodehouse.

In the early 1990s, ITV began airing television serials adapted from Wodehouse's satirical short stories about the foppish and foolish Bertie Wooster and his staid and knowledgeable "gentleman's gentleman," the iconic valet Jeeves. Wodehouse's stories were produced over the course of sixty years, between 1915 and the author's death in 1975. They are the products of a quintessentially modernist sensibility about culture and class, particularly in their use of gentle anachronism: throughout the twenties and into the fifties, Bertie remains an impervious relic of a collapsing aristocracy and sense of elite culture, even as he absorbs all manner of low-cultural habits, ironic colloquialisms, and thoroughly banal tastes; meanwhile, Jeeves continually subverts the power-dynamic between himself and his comically inept employer while also reaffirming the conservative values their relationship relies upon. The stories themselves, however, are hardly "modernist" in form or function: rather, they are the product of Wodehouse's relentless and skillful marketing and his immediately accessible prose. Extraordinarily prolific and enormously successful within his lifetime, Wodehouse spread his properties and his talents across every medium available: by the time of his death, Bertie and Jeeves had appeared in print—in serialized magazines, in novels, and in lavish edited collections—as well as on radio, film, stage, and television. And they have continued to surface ever since: the internet search engine and archive Ask.com was founded as "Ask Jeeves" in 1996; and in spite of the company's collapse and subsequent renovation in recent years, Jeeves remains stubbornly emblazoned as the icon of the site in the United Kingdom.

The 1990-93 *Jeeves and Wooster* starred Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie as Jeeves and Bertie, respectively. Already a popular comic duo, Fry and Laurie were launched into a wider

public consciousness by *Jeeves and Wooster*; their performances in the show remain a memorable point of reference even as both actors have gone on to achieve considerable success in separate ventures over the past two decades. In one episode, Bertie winds up sharing an awkward meal with Lord and Lady Glossop and their daughter, Honoria. Struggling to find a topic of conversation suitable for the occasion, he settles upon a feigned love for Shakespeare.

BERTIE: Not that I've got anything against Shakespeare myself, no! Never happier than when curled up with the collected works of the old chap.

LADY GLOSSOP: Well! Are you a theatre lover, Mr. Wooster?

BERTIE: Oh, rather.

LADY GLOSSOP: One of my most treasured memories is of Irving playing Hamlet at the Lyceum.

BERTIE: Really? Who won?¹

Bertie snickers at his own joke as Laurie, exercising perfectly-tuned comic sensibilities, glances gleefully around the table for support. He is met only with a confused silence.

Who won? Clearly—given the appearance of this knowing nod nearly one hundred years after he achieved the knighthood in 1895—Irving “won.”

The reference is deployed as a signifier of Lady Glossop's age and cultural sensibilities, fixing the time of this scene to an ambiguous period of the 1920s or '30s, to a fantasia of elite culture between the wars, when the elderly woman could look back on the Lyceum with a fond nostalgia. For a broad television audience in the early 1990s, it may have been illegible: Irving had been supplanted in the popular consciousness, perhaps by other Hamlets, perhaps on film—from Laurence Olivier (1948) to Mel Gibson (1990). And so we greet Bertie's joke with a similar silence and confusion, uncertain just how to understand his glee, or at whose expense the joke is made. At the same time, however, Bertie's joke performs *exactly* the most authentic memory of Irving, far more than Lady Glossop's rapturous comment. Bertie casts Irving and Hamlet as opposing forces in a kind of athletic competition: Irving plays Hamlet in the same

¹ “Pearls Mean Tears.” *Jeeves and Wooster*.

manner as, say, Roger Federer plays Raphael Nadal. He therefore reproduces the terms of attack deployed against Irving by his most pernicious critics back in the 1890s: the allegation that Irving crafted his performances at the expense of the dramatic texts, and that Irving's Hamlet could only exist in opposition to Shakespeare's (or, more accurately, to Shaw's). And he does this by feigning a preference for the closet reading of a literary monolith—expressing that he is happiest when “curled up with the collected works of the old chap”—only before professing to be a “theatre lover” and, thus, giving way to a kind of sportsman's curiosity about the competition. While Lady Glossop casts Irving only as a “treasured memory” to be contemplated with a sense of cultural and temporal superiority, Bertie brings Irving's own presence to life once more, setting him to work at this awkward gathering: he invokes a kind of “anti-theatricality” even as he becomes a “theatre lover” by enacting Irving's paradox as a low-cultural lover of sport. And the joke continues to echo outward: Bertie Wooster, that multimedia literary icon, ever impervious to the effects of time, is momentarily upstaged by the comic talents of Hugh Laurie. Who won? Even in the 1990s, the mere voicing of that question proves that Irving's paradox was alive and well.

More recently, the paradox has been invoked by another “Wooster” altogether. Over the past several years, a New York-based performing arts company called the Wooster Group has mounted a renovation of *Hamlet* based on the 1964 film and stage production starring Richard Burton and directed by John Gielgud. The new production aims explicitly at restoring the great memory of a lost theatrical performance and performer by reconstituting it through multiple media. According to the notes offered on the Wooster Group's website (which are accompanied by “behind the scenes” digital videos and photographs):

The Burton production was recorded in live performance from 17 camera angles and edited into a film that was shown for only two days in 2,000 movie houses

across the U.S. The idea of bringing a live theater experience to thousands of simultaneous viewers in different cities was trumpeted as a new form called "Theatrofilm," made possible through "the miracle of Electronovision." The Wooster Group attempts to reverse the process, reconstructing a hypothetical theater piece from the fragmentary evidence of the edited film. We channel the ghost of the legendary 1964 performance, descending into a kind of madness, intentionally replacing our own spirit with the spirit of another.²

The Wooster Group's production induces "a kind of madness" by a descent into multimedia anachronism: invoking the failed, dated neologisms of "Theatrofilm" and "the miracle of Electronovision," they fix their target as "hypothetical" performance in the 1960s even as they aim at resurrecting a "legendary" actor, performing an Irving-like "restoration" to the stage of an experience that was actually defined by an edited film and by Burton's movie-star status. The production therefore evokes a genealogy of *Hamlet* that tracks the role backwards from our mediatized moment to the time of the heroic stage actor, using Richard Burton as a theoretical fulcrum in the same manner as I have used Henry Irving throughout this dissertation. And, ironically, the Wooster Group's production on stage—that ephemeral medium—has proved far more enduring than the two-day limited engagement of the film: between its first rehearsals in 2005 and the time of this writing, it has been revived many times, in multiple venues, from New York to Athens to (most recently) São Paulo. Just as it had for Irving, Hamlet's advice to the players, those "abstract and brief chronicles of the time," provides an ironic mirror for the Wooster Group and for Richard Burton, reflecting the ways the paradox of the actor crosses boundaries of time and space—bridging the gaps between performers and media—even as it attempts an ineffable, singular *mimesis*.

To extend this dissertation past its current boundaries in the mid-twentieth century would necessarily involve such encounters, as the problems of modernist textuality confronted here—and the modes of historical "reading" they involve—are displaced by alternative dilemmas and

² "Hamlet." *The Wooster Group.org*.

cultural formations. In this sense, both Bertie Wooster and Richard Burton (or P. G. Wodehouse and the Wooster Group) would offer a number of opportunities for reconceptualizing the “paradox of the actor” in terms of a winking parody of cultural elitism over the course of the twentieth century or the rise (and fall) of a kind of Hollywood “royalty.” Burton’s notorious relationship with Elizabeth Taylor might be used to bookend a very different kind of work, paralleling my use of Irving and Terry. It was Burton and Taylor, after all, who would ask on film that overwhelming question of modernist literary celebrity: “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” And in this case, J. G. Ballard’s *Crash* would offer a shocking take on a post-modern encounter with the “death of the actor” within the spaces of the novel form.

A much more immediate follow-up to the studies I offer here, however, would involve the work of Samuel Beckett. Beckett’s reputation has in many ways been determined by the dictatorial control he continues to exert over performances of his plays, now decades after his death: the priority of the page is enacted by Beckett in an essential display of modernist “anti-theatricality.” And at the same time, Beckett continued to engage with actors throughout his career, and he often designed his plays and their performances explicitly around the unique capabilities of certain actors. The development of *Not I* around Billie Whitelaw and the conception of *Krapp’s Last Tape* around Patrick Magee would offer a number of entry-points for a longer discussion of fragmentary media, the priority of text, the assertion of time and context, and the singularity of the actor’s performance. Krapp, made self-consciously “theatrical” by clownish costume and exaggerated gestures, encounters a “naturalistic” version of himself in the form of Magee’s disembodied voice, which crosses time to re-confront itself in the singularity of the staged performance and the unity of the actor. Both tragic and foolish, proudly egotistical and

delightfully absurd, Krapp offers yet another vision of the ways authority and acting meet and diverge, producing a peculiar paradox of personal situatedness.

Such work, however, is beyond the current scope of this dissertation. It will have to wait for another performance: on another night, in another time.

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