New Challenges from the Lost Unity: Shakespeare, Performance and Difference

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Having produced his work in a thriving but turbulent age of revising and appropriating the past into early modernity, Shakespeare has always faced, particularly as regards his plays, a recurring challenge: the search for a more or less ideal unity that is unattainable in itself. As Terry Eagleton explains:

> Shakespeare's utopian solution to the conflicts which beset him – an organic unity of body and language – is by definition unattainable. For the body can never be fully present in discourse: it is part of the very nature of a sign to 'absent' its referent. (. . .) A 'linguistic body' would thus seem something of a contradiction in terms: the solid, unified entity we call a body is fissured, rendered non-identical with itself, by the language which is its very breath.
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> (Eagleton 97 and 101)

Changes from early modernity into later modernity with its post-modern trends have shed light on difference as the main means of past revisionism. As a consequence, the challenge in Shakespeare has doubled itself: it has existed, since Shakespeare's age, as an unresolved impossibility, and, now, exists also as the twofold difficulties of avoiding the problem by merely ignoring it (as though problems of early modernity or modernity would simply not matter to post-modernists) and, more importantly, of understanding how Shakespeare contributes to the very notion of post-modern difference. This is, indeed, a contribution that proves foremost with the Shakespearean portrayal of the impossibility of unity in the chore of his plays, an element both potential and effective of coexisting differences simultaneous on the stage. The challenge goes further in demonstrating that, paradoxically, post-modern readings tend to be unaware of these Shakespearean contradictions, perhaps because of the very carelessness in assuming that the remaining challenges need to be target at synchronically as well

as diachronically, or, even better, by assuming essential questions with combined theoretical efforts detached from mere ideological motivation.

In this paper, I will describe how the unattainable unity which Shakespeare failed to reach can be read against the post-modern context of difference, thus reinstating a previous, but still prevailing, challenge, besides identifying, in it, the birth of a new challenge. Besides, I aim to further evidence for how the never-existing unity in Shakespeare (the ghost of which has harrowed many minority critics driven solely by ideological passions) gives room to a crossing of linguistic (speech act) and literary (performative identity) theories. I will proceed with an analysis grounded on the concept of performance that will allow me a further crossing between literary and linguistic theories in an effort to elucidate different aspects of a far-from monolithic unity that Shakespeare shows to be shattered before the very eyes of his audience/readers.

The relation between the Shakespearean text and its context has been accessed by Terry Eagleton, who performs most of the postmodern intention of appropriating and 'negotiating' so-called differences. Unlike most postmodern critics, however, he does not separate politics from aesthetics, whereby he proceeds with 'an exercise in political semiotics, which tries to locate the relevant history in the very letter of the text' (Eagleton ix), thus eschewing the use of the literary text as a mere <u>pretext</u> to argue problems of some in a certain context.

According to Eagleton's reading of several Shakespearean plays with textual examples fitting the literary analysis praxis, Shakespeare aims at an 'organic unity' (Eagleton 97 and 101) in his plays, which is unattainable, since it would require that language and the body would be united on the stage as one and only thing. The effort for doing so leads Shakespeare to the most extreme use of the potentialities of language, while, on the other hand, it only shows the unity of body and language as an impossibility. On the stage, this can be observed from the assumption that language in Shakespeare means '. . . material power, an active inter-

vention into the world at least as real as a blow on the head' (Eagleton 9), which would make characters on the stage have some sort of 'linguistic body' (Eagleton 97). This search for an unattainable unity has been identified and/or analysed in particular Shakespearean plays, such as what Tricomi spots in <u>Titus Andronicus</u> as the effort '. . . to unite language and action in an endeavour to render the events of the tragedy more real and painful' (Tricomi 32).

This points out to a major challenge in Shakespeare: the quest for a representational unity that would cross the boundaries of representation itself and become some sort of totalitarian monolithic unity: a unity of language and thing, of speech and the body. The conclusion is that 'the complexity of Shakespeare's ideological dilemmas', Eagleton explains, 'arise from the fact that they do not take the form of 'simple' contradictions, in which each term is the polar opposite of the other; on the contrary, in 'deconstructive' fashion, each term seems confusingly to inhere in its antagonist' (Eagleton 97-101). Thus, reshaping new challenges and open to readings which, besides not solving those, are prone to new problems, Shakespeare has come to the 21st century.

Some recent essays and articles published both in the <u>Cambridge Quartely</u> and in <u>The British Journal of Aesthetics</u> have reassessed postmodernism through readings with twofold aims: i) to locate features now considered postmodern in classic texts, thereby assuming their existence before the postmodern concept itself; ii) to demonstrate that, while profitable as a landmark of difference, postmodernism criticism can be lost in its playfulness and cover misreading caused by lack of erudition of interpretative skills to be accepted and legitimated by some sort of widespread trend. Of these texts,[1] the most direct in dealing with the second point seems to be Paul Crowther's 'Defining Art, Defending the Canon, Contesting Culture', in which he puts himself against 'a fashionable cultural relativism that is sceptical about the

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[1] Amongst which, David Roberts 'Sleeping Beaties: Shakespeare, Sleep and Stage'. <u>The Cambridge Quarterly</u>. Vol. 35. n3. 231-254; Stephen Davies' 'Authors Intentions, Literary Interpretation, and Literary Value', <u>British Journal of Aesthetics</u>. Vol. 46. n 3, July 206, 223-247.

objectivity of aesthetic and canonical values' promulgated by 'that transdiciplinary mélange sometimes called 'theory' (…) inspired in general terms by Foucault' (Crowther 362). Crowther locates the origins of such procedure in a globalisation context through 'discursive practices' that '(…) are presented as a general way of understanding all cultural products. Every activity ─ including artifice and representation ─ is cleansed of its concreteness and/or physicality and repackaged as a mode of meaning or signification' (Crowther 365), which leads artwork, literature being an example of it, to be intepreted from this 'consumerist' viewpoint within strict social readings – for which an example of my own might be the overuse of the terms 'negotiation' and 'negotiating' in recent literary studies.

Crowther argues that differences can be better understood when different aesthetic principles are considered in relation to the respective cultures in which they are produced, for a manifold of aesthetic understandings and judgements would be underlying these cultures in several modes. He proceeds with an example of Indian art in relation to its embodiment of rhythmic and abstract content aspects of the Hindu tradition, to which I would add Soyinka's profound reading of Yoruba mythology in contrast to Nietzschean philosophy in his essay 'he Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy'.

Perhaps, the cause of the birth of this new challenge is the playfulness which, as instated in post-modern literature, reaches the critical work as well. By playfulness I mean to the commonplaces of postmodernist literature (multiple endings, lack of plot, etc.) which can be either profitable as used, for instance, by John Fowles, Angela Carter or Salman Rushdie. Indeed, in Rushdie the label 'postmodern' is not seldom closer to Renaissance serio ludere than to Ovidian 'enigmatic distancing of feeling which is the consequence of consummately witty artistry' (Lyne 202), whereas, regarding critics, it tends to lead to literary interpretations or appropriations into a void in which the lack of intellectual and/or academic rigour accepts anything as valid and legitimates it with a 'playful' smile.

It is within this context that I intend here to cross two contemporaneous theories, one from linguistics, the other from literary criticism. As widely known, the theory of the speech acts was first conceived, under the Wittgenstein's direct influence, as part of J. L. Austin's concern with philosophy of language, as observed particularly in his 1962 book titled How to Do Things with Words. Austin analysis acts in terms of their verbal performance by means of what is known as utterances. Thus, by naming a ship, for instance, occurs by the utterance of a sentence with the name of the ship which has as its effect that ship being named as such. Austin's first division of speech acts into three categories has been to some extent undermined by a broader post-structuralist abhorence of classifications, not to say, perhaps, by some impossibility, intrinsic to Austin's theory itself and its limitations, of applying the three cases to real life examples. Originally, Austin divided speech acts into locutionary acts (or utterances), in which performances would have no truth value, but a legitimate one in relation to individuals as speakers (e.g. if an ordinary person says 'I dub thee a knight of the British Empire', the person 'knighted' will be henceforth called a 'knight' according to the utterance, which is legitimate as a verbal performance, regardless its being untrue due to the identity of the speaker), illocutionary acts (which occurs discursively only) and perlocutionary acts (those occurring through or from speech). The following example suffices here for my present introductory aim:

> Suppose, for example, that a bartender utters the words, 'The bar will be closed in five minutes,' reported by means of direct quotation. He is thereby performing the locutionary act of saying that the bar (i.e., the one he is tending) will be closed in five minutes (from the time of utterance), and what is said is reported by indirect quotation (notice that what the bartender is saying, the content of his locutionary act, is not fully determined by the words he is using, for they do not specify the bar in question or the time of the ut-

terance). In saying this, the bartender is performing the illocutionary act of informing the patrons of the bar's imminent closing and perhaps also the act of urging them to order a last drink. Whereas the upshot of these illocutionary acts is understanding on the part of the audience, perlocutionary acts are performed with the intention of producing a further effect. The bartender intends to be performing the perlocutionary acts of causing the patrons to believe that the bar is about to close and of getting them to want and to order one last drink. He is performing all these speech acts, at all three levels, just by uttering certain words. (Bach <u>Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy</u>)

In his book <u>Speech Acts</u>, as widely known, the philosopher of language John Searle carried on Austin's work again incurring in the risk of classifications, since he divided speech acts into representatives, directives, comissives, declarations and expressives. Regardless of the classificatory tightness, the use of the theory of speech acts in linguistics and literary theory allowed the focus on discursive elements indicative of attitudes and actions as well as their contexts in terms of their recognitions. This is of value for interpretation, since both linguistics and literary theory for, dealing with the text, critics do not have to stick themselves to loose, abstract ideas merely to be fit into any kind of text.

Austin's concept of the actual power of words in interfering with reality finds in the Shakespearean plays a realisation that dangerously reminds one of the notions of 'literalness', which, if impossible in itself, allures as a stalking ghost. For Austin, within a particular context, an utterance like 'close the door' has an actual impact on reality, for it triggers the action of closing the door which arranges the physical environment in which the utterance was made ─ which makes Austin describe it, therefore, as the <u>performance </u>of an act. We could think of other examples like the somewhat tacky request 'give us a kiss' (or, say, 'kiss me, Kate') and,

why not, the blunt 'let's make babies', which would entail some corporal fluid exchange, thereby proceeding with biological processes from a verbal utterance.

In turn, in the fantastic realm of literature, particularly on the 'fanciful' (in the Elizabethan meaning of 'fantastic', 'imaginative') stage of The Tempest, Prospero's use of his books leads to speech acts which, within the Shakespearean search for unity, tend to go beyond a cause-effect relation of the close-the-door kind and make of the word and action one. Magic is, after all, putting words and deeds on the same plane, making of them undifferentiated elements of reality, and Prospero's interference with the environment, either causing the tempest or imprisoning. And in Titus Andronicus, the realisation of speech acts is blatantly radical. An utterance of the kind 'stop her mouth', which is expected, according to Austin's examples, to trigger the action of another character who approaches the one to be silenced and simply gags her, entails the actual severing of her tongue, as observed in Lavinia. As I explain elsewhere:

> Body parts with violence, as well as words and action, start being increasingly united in the play. Following the lines above, references that associate body parts and violence begin to be recurrent, as observed in Aaron's declaration that 'Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand,/Blood and revenge are hammering in my head' (II. iii 38-39). (…) The rhetorical effect suggested in Aaron's line above surpasses the limits of dramatic conventions and, unexpectedly, silence and physical mutilation are united in a performance that does not separate words from action. (Ramalho 85-86).

A fashionable term in postmodern studies, the crossing of boundaries can be observed in Titus Andronicus, for no limits between fiction and reality seem to exist, which, on the one hand, turns real objects into props (like the copy of Ovid's Metamorphoses taken onto the stage), and, on the other hand, leads to the shocking awkwardness in the play that, so real-like, becomes indistinctly unreal, and, as Harold Bloom (77) notices, no one knows exactly where

to laugh and where to feel consternate during its staging. Hence the proven assumption that, in <u>Titus Andronicus,</u> Shakespeare discloses the '(. . .) struggle to turn the language of words into the language of action' (Danson 51) (. . .) which, therefore, discloses an effort '(. . .) to unite language and action in an endeavour to render the events of the tragedy more real and painful' (Tricomi 32). As a consequence, the flux of reality changes in its never-fixed performance and Lavinia is

> . . . like the subject of a Renaissance anamorphic painting, which can be seen from one point of view as a vital, dynamic figure, and from another point of view as a decaying corpse, Lavinia is indeed a 'changing piece', a cipher and repository of meaning continually reinterpreted through the observations and voices of others. (Cunningham 70)

This is a privileged example of performative identity on stage. Lavinia <u>is</u> not necessarily anything pre-determined that would <u>exist</u> invariably as such, but symbolises ways of being (Greek <u>ethoi</u>, characters and also manners of subjectivity in their natural and/or social disposition) ever changing itself as she is gazed at by her fellow characters, that is to say, as she performs a social role in relation to social conventions with which she may or may not agree. As a potential reservoir of meanings, Lavinia does not expose any sort of 'essential' monolithic identity which would be glanced at in its different appearances. Instead, she performs simultaneous aspects of a multifaceted being whose identity only exists in this very performance

Instead of having an identity, which would consist of a set of essential characteristics attached to the subject, the individual enacts in a flux of living never to be fully captured by representation which can be located in simultaneously different places of the flux of reality itself, in which other individuals are at the same time putting their own identities in performance. The world as a stage would, therefore, be an ever changing setting of fluxes of identities

whose particular performances would lead discursively to situations in which the individuals are not predetermined but rather in constant change.

Thus, the lack of unity that allowed multiple interpretations in Shakespeare's text itself is, therefore, come to new realms and new challenges in relation to which the lost unity, already a problem in the past, not matter how reshaped, continues to defy interpretation with its difficulties. This has already been hinted at in previous studies, such as Catherine Belsey's assumption that the performance of identity on early modern stage foregrounds in linguistic usage a broader flux of contextual reality, the soliloquy being of particular relevance:

> . . . when the soliloquy is all in the first person, when the subject defined there is continuous and non-fragmentary, the occurrence of 'I' in speech is predicated on a gap between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the utterance, the subject who is defined in the speech. Since the subject of the enunciation always exceeds the subject of the utterance, the 'I' cannot be fully present in what it says of itself. It is this gap which opens the possibility of glimpsing an identity behind what is said, a silent self anterior to the utterance. (Belsey 48-49)

But, fortunately, things are not as simple as that. Belsey's notions of utterance and silence, as well as of identity, get dangerously linear with her assumptions of a silent self <u>before</u> the word uttered or an identity <u>behind</u>. What is shown in Shakespeare's plays is that silence is not before or after speech merely, but, in its most particular occurrences, silence is within the word that carries it to its realisation as an extreme speech act performed, not to say perpetrated, in the human body as observed in the severing of Lavinia's tongue. Silence can in itself indicate a performative act, as can be observed in Cordelia's lack of words before Lear, and the latter's inability to understand the feelings regarding him that she conveyed with such performance.

This is to be found within a deeper reading of the Shakespearean conception of the play within the play as part of the <u>theatrum mundi</u>. A play enacted by the characters of another play is not simply theatrical action watched at once by the group of characters on the stage (e.g. King Claudius, Queen Gertrude and their attendants and subjects watching the 'Mousetrap') and the audience that sees both, but also, the members of the audience, while playing themselves the role of an audience, are watched by each other and by the actors from both the play and the play within the play. Thus,

> Shakespeare's theater appears to sustain a multiplicity of social and cultural functions in the light of which principles of homogeneity, 'closure', and authority in representation are constantly undermined and subverted. If 'representation' is said to homogenize textual production, stabilize hierarchies and privileges (and so void the text of contradictions and interrogations), the, indeed, dramatic representations of Shakespeare may well be shown not to exhaust their mimetic potential under these modes of closure and plenitude. On the contrary, although the specular reading or viewing of the plays can of course fix the reader or viewer in the plenitude of some false consciousness, there is ample evidence that, over and beyond its stabilizing functions, Shakespearean mimesis comprehends a self-conscious subversion of authority in representation. (Weiman 276-7)

This breaks the monolithic unity of gender, sex, race and gives room not to a pointless cry of minorities, but to a diversified and multiple view of reality in its flux, in which all external characteristics are performed while socially veiling an enacted essence that is merely human to which all other differences (sex, gender, etc.) are performed in society –or socially built– not essential. The enactment of speech acts in search of unity is simultaneous with performative identity, thereby giving room to their theoretical analysis, which, if otherwise un-

aware of the non-existence of monolithic unities in Shakespeare's text itself, leads to the superficial view that, ignorant of ironies, takes characters as still creations of stereotypes rather than moving instants of personified reality in its ever challenging flux not yet fully understood by any of us.

In conclusion, the new challenge brought about by fresh approaches to the problem has itself produced twofold complications: the rereading of the old challenge of unity ranges from postmodern viewpoints and their shared emphasis on difference (and the theoretical appropriation of traditional criticism) to the approach of the (lack of) unity desired by Shakespeare. I have, in turn, described the background to this problem by overlapping traditional and contemporaneous approaches and, also, by showing how this very entanglement makes itself defying to literary theory, particularly to reading Shakespeare, in whose work the problem is constantly at stake and blatant on the stage. Through a further entanglement ─ that of Austin's theory of speech acts and the postmodern readings of gender, race, post-colonialism and the like ─ I have demonstrated that the lost unity remains a fertile ground to assessing otherness and difference within the flux of reality portrayed in his plays. And the challenge remains thriving and provoking in wait for further proper discussion.

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