

Polyphiloprogenitive: Towards a General Performativity

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1. Performans and Performand

I want to distinguish two understandings of performance.

Generative performance is epitomised in the idea of the Artaudian performance without original, that aims to repeat nothing, to come from nowhere, to be a pure and absolute 'event' or emergence ex nihilo. Less absolute understandings of performance, for example as the simulation or remaking of the real, or the setting of experience beside itself, will nevertheless often depend upon the idea that performance is to be distinguished from other kinds of thing by the fact that it provides access to open or undetermined possibility.

Genitive performance would be performance that, in the fashion of Harvey's *omne vivum ex ovo*, actualises and insists not on what performance opens, or on what opens up in it, but on what it unfolds or actualises. Genitive performance is performance in the genitive case, performance of something, and that keeps that of-ness in play. Generative performance appears unanchored by its past, and orientated towards an undetermined future; genitive performance always looks to its past.

I hope this is a familiar and obvious distinction, the kind of distinction we do not think very much about, because there is so much work to be get on with by thinking with it. However, I want to move that performativity in fact always in fact twists and glues the two understandings together, like a Möbius strip. On the one hand, the genitive twists into the generative. This is the easy one, and we will all be familiar with the sophomore insistence that there is no fully faithful performance, that there is bound to be newness, contingency and unpredictability in every acting out of every script. The fact that we live onwardly in irreversible time means that even the playing out of a recording of a performance will inevitably encounter some difference, if only in the fact that screening two will take place a little later than screening a), the shadows will be longer, and its audience an hour or two closer to their ends. Performance here seems identical with the impossibility of repetition, and the defeat of origin and sameness. This principle is evoked so often that we may even call it the foundational or governing ideology of performance.

The reciprocal claim, that the generative twists into the genitive, is perhaps a little more counterintuitive. This is the claim that, no matter how free, spontaneous or undetermined a performance may seem to be, there must always be genitivity, there must always be, or, in the end must have been, some performing, or acting out of something. On the model of the relation between the *explanans* and the *explanandum*, the explanation and what it explains, set out by Carl G. Hempel and

Paul Oppenheim (Hempel and Oppenheim 1948, 136-7), we might say that a *performans* or performance always actualises and explicates a *performandum* (or *performand* for short), the gerundive form signifying ‘that which is to be performed’. Just as you cannot have an explanation that is not an explanation of something, so you cannot have a performance that is not a performance of something. The point of this short piece of writing is to convert you all, with the minimum of confusion and dismay, into people like me, who assume that all the things we may reasonably call performances are in fact alike in this. So, when it comes to performance (and I am going, by the way, to have to persuade you that it almost always does), genitivity is general, which makes the distinction between ungoverned performings and indentured performances rhetorical rather than theoretical, those agreeable almost-anagrams of each other. One of the few things you can safely bet your house on, in a world where such rigorous certainties are in such lamentably short supply, is that a performance that set out to be free of constraining rules could never succeed in fulfilling its intention, and not just as a matter of regrettable, slip-twixt-cup-and-lip contingency, but as a remorseless necessity, precisely because such a performance would have set out to be a certain kind of performance, one that would be free of constraints, and that setting out would have been, or have had to have been able to become, a performand. Only a performance that came about entirely by accident, or a performance that set out to be free of rules, but, by some complete fluke, turned into a word-perfect performance of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, could possibly count as a performance that had been true to its aim of being unconstrained.

2. What Will Have Been Performed

If this general condition of genitivity has not appeared up to this point to be perfectly apparent, it is perhaps because of a wrinkle of tense-structure. What most of us will understand by a performand is something that exists in advance, like a score or a play-script. In this case, the performand takes the form of a blueprint, or simulacrum, that invites or even exhorts the text to mimic it in every particular. But it is not necessary for there to be such a detailed blueprint for there to be a relation of genitivity. Much more often, there is a general intention or disposition to bring about a particular kind of action, which need not have a specific or determinable form. A much better example of a performand than a script is a set of rules or conventions, or an algorithm, which regulate in general terms rather than prescribe in every particular how something is to be done – like the rules of a game, or the conventions that apply in a courtroom or meeting, or even a conversation. The performand here is not all in place in advance (though something of it has to be) but, by the time the game, meeting, or conversation has got under way, and has, in fact got to the point where, were it to be suddenly interrupted, it would be recognisable as *having been* a game, meeting or conversation, a relation between a performand and its performans will have been established. This relation must remain a relation, that is, it will never settle or collapse into an identity; the *performans* will never coincide with or fit snugly over the *performand*, for it will always have actualised more potential than it can in fact already have made actual.

Hence the temporal fluster to which I just referred. The potential that is made actual by the performance is potentiated by it: so time does not move just from potential to actual; it also moves in the other direction, from actual to potential, since the actualising produces the potential of which it then (but when exactly does this ‘then’ occur?) is the making actual. All performance is governed by what Jean-François

Lyotard once said of the works that would end up being called ‘postmodern’, namely that they are ‘working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done’ (Lyotard 1979, 81). In English, the tense that refers to what will have happened is called the future perfect but in French is known as the future anterior. The fact that the genitivity of a performance may relate lie as much in its future as its past is the reason I prefer the term ‘performand’ to ‘source’ or ‘original’. The performance presumes what it produces, as it produces what it presumes. It looks as it will have to be said to *prosume*, or perhaps *preduce*, its performand.

This Möbius relation of twisted suture between past and future has been given other names, such as Freud’s ‘Nachträglichkeit’, usually rendered in English as ‘deferred action’, or, more recently, the principle of ‘retroactivity’ that Slavoj Žižek describes, in which ‘[e]very authentic act creates its own conditions of possibility’ (Žižek 2012, 649); Žižek attributes a peculiar autogenic authority to political forms of this retroactivity, such that only a political project that makes itself up as it goes along, as opposed to cravenly carrying out some kind of plan based on some explicit principle, could be regarded as truly ‘radical’. The appellation *Theotokos*, bearer of God, given to the Virgin in Eastern Christian churches, gives evidence of a similarly self-forming structure, for, as Michel Serres notes, it names Mary as the mother of her father, one who gives birth to the one who gives her being (Serres 2001, 175).

3. Towards a General Performativity

So I would like to propose the idea of a general performativity that a) enjoins the enquiry into the putting into practice of things, such that b) the practice generates its own genitivity, that is, gives rise to what gives rise to it, and I would recommend to performance studies the enquiry into how this circularity comes about.

A general performativity of this kind should have traction in many areas where it may not immediately seem or even wish to – not just in music, dance and drama, but in literature, law, sport, religion, economics, politics, philosophy, mathematics and surgery, not to say across the life sciences: evolutionary theory seems to be almost impossible to make any sense of without some such idea of performativity, and nor, of course, is genetics – the unfolding of proteins is the best demonstration one could wish for of the generality of performativity. Indeed, to say that there were some area that did not have a performative modality would be to have identified an instance of pure chaos – a system absolutely incapable of any compression or economisation, incapable of yielding any structure that could be discerned in or abstracted from its pure performing, an action, therefore, that could never be seen as the making actual of anything at all, *not even of itself*.

The principle of general performativity might also mean that what is called ‘performance’ would lose much of its distinctiveness. Performance would no longer be a specific area of literary studies, or of artistic practice, and there would be no ‘performing arts’, if by this were meant kinds of art that are performed in distinction from kinds of art that are not performed. For a similar reason, one might add, there could really, from the point of view of general performativity, be no ‘practice-based research’ if by this sorry phrase one meant to mark off some kinds of research from others which involve no kind of putting into practice, or relation between conception and action. Performance is an aspect of all art, exceptionlessly (and many other things besides). There is nothing in literary studies, for example, that does not

require to be performed – that is, to be produced, instanced, enacted, made actual, put into practice. Guided by the principal of general performativity, the kind of performance studies I have in mind, if that expression may be permitted in this context, would not study certain kinds of action, but rather the action of putting into action in general, how an object of attention is made substantial through ‘practices’ that perform the object as preformed, which is to say performable, the syntax of the movements between idea and actuality. Taken in this way, performativity might also be related to Peter Sloterdijk’s notion of *explizieren*, or ‘explicitation’, ‘the making explicit of the implicit’, and his proposal that ‘[t]he real, foundation of modernity is not revolution, but explicitation. Explicitation is for our time the true name of becoming’ (Sloterdijk 2004, 87; my translation).

4. Practice Makes Future Perfect

If a general performativity may be thought to have the advantage for performance studies of increasing the trading value of its governing idea, it might also have the disadvantage of making the traditional objects of performance studies (the performing arts, so-called, of dance, music, theatre) only the most elementary and perhaps therefore the least interesting forms of performance. One might, however, if only at the weekends, imagine a performative understanding into the way in which performance studies itself generates its object.

Every discipline is centred on and formed around an object – an object of attention, or study. But that object is a fantasy, for there is no greater fantasy than the fantasy of a knowable object. An object is that which has nothing to do with us; it is a rent in the subject’s smooth uniformity, somewhere the subject cannot reach. But it is also that around which the subject is organised: *das Ding*, as Lacan calls it. It is for this reason that the defining object is also always a fantasy. The object is always the object of a fantasy as it is the fantasy of an object. An object is the occasion of the taking-to-be objective of an ‘object’. If we can satisfactorily maintain the givenness of an object, we may precipitate as subjects around it, as raindrops condense around specks of dust.

Literary criticism has for its fantasy object the text. History has as its fantasy object the past, but, perhaps more specifically, the archive. Geography centres on space and place. Physics, which is often taken to be the most objective discipline, is the discipline that is most riven by and riveted around the fantasy of the object. The work of a discipline is not to investigate its object, or only accidentally so. Rather it is to form itself through the perfecting of its fantasy of an object.

But this never succeeds, or persists, since the fantasy of an object must always be of that which impedes or exceeds, insofar as it is a matter of an object at all – since, in order to be an object, the object of our attentions must always object to those attentions. As soon as a discipline has formed itself around its object, it begins to cease to be an object for it, inducing the need for a revival of the fantasy of the unassimilable object. The effort to prove the object, and to prove oneself about it, inevitably begins to consume that object, and, oneself along with it. This cycle of growing tractability and renewed recalcitrance is seen in the ways in which disciplines renew themselves through the identification of new objects of attention, new ways of enlarging themselves by means of objects against which they can productively come up short.

Perhaps this is to say that the relation of a discipline to its object is a performative one: a discipline is the performance of the probation of its signature object. But what if the object of a discipline were 'performance' or 'performativity' itself? What kind of 'object' might 'performance' tend or need to be? Are there special difficulties or maybe even special dividends in reflecting on the way in which performance studies might perform its own relation to its fantasy-object?

Disciplines are always instances of the question begged, in the rapidly-expiring original sense of that term – the *petitio principii*, whereby, as John Stuart Mill put it, one 'smuggles the explicandum into one's own explanation' (Mill 1910, 2.92). But disciplines have a performative relation to their objects of study and this not just because they must act out that relation, in the sense that they must suppose, or assume that they have a relation to an object with which it is possible to have a relation. For there is another sense in which disciplines are performative, namely that they must give rise to things, must actualise, must, as we say, put into practice. And this 'practice' is the fantasy object of performance. Performance studies must continuously put into practice the idea of putting into practice, in order to produce it as something reproduced and reproducible. So the relation of performance studies to its own object is itself an instance, if admittedly a rather esoteric one, of a more general performativity. But, if I am right, it would be, wouldn't it?

5. Back of Beyond

Within every performance, there is a second performance – the drama of the relation, of compliance and betrayal, between the performing and its performand.

A performance goes 'beyond' the text that initiates it. It must – it is a kind of law. But it also, and with equal necessity, shows that its transcending of that occasioning text is not merely allowed but also enjoined by it. Texts demand to be gone beyond as well as followed. The law of performance, which perhaps resembles what Derrida calls 'the law of the law of genre' (Derrida 1980, 59) is that there is a law that there can be no absolutely binding law. A performing cannot but comply with the law that both demands and forbids absolute compliance with its performand. A text requires its own necessary adulteration or abandonment as part of its injunction on performance. In the case of improvised performance, the drama of dependence and independence will be internal to the work, but structurally just as insistent. Just as, when I say 'I', I both institute and represent an internal split between enunciation and enunciated, so there is an internal division in a performance between the performed and the performand.

A performance goes beyond a performand, but into finitude. A performance can only itself be gone beyond if it first hardens into a performand. So the 'open' performance hardens into finitude, whereas the hard or 'objectified' performand allows for and keeps open potential. Every performance of *Hamlet* is different, which makes the text of *Hamlet* infinite, and the infinity of possible performances all ways of finitising that text. So the truth is the opposite of what we tend to think. In seeming to bring a text to life, performance puts it to death, the death of the choice irrevocably made, the potential assassinated into the actual. Precisely because they are fixed, texts are nonfinite, for they must fail to exhaust their own possibility.

The performance does not liberate itself from its performand – quite the contrary. By shrinking its performand, which must of necessity continue to be open to multiple manners and occasions of performing, into finitude, it must annihilate it. Or it must do so unless it internally reproduces it *as* the performand, as that which may continue to be able to be performed otherwise. So, in instituting its internal division between itself and its performand, the performance liberates its performand from itself. The performance escapes the performand, but in doing so ensures that the performand is kept intact. The performance must keep open the performand as the possible. It must produce its performand in order to preserve it from its own death-dealing work of performance.

Conclusion

Let me summarise my claims.

1. There is always a text, if only a pretext, for every performance. Performance requires a performand.
2. This text is sometimes prior to and external to the performance, but it is often also internal and posterior to it.
3. There is, or could very well be, a general performativity, that pays heed to acts of acting out, or making actual, in general. It would pay particular attention to performances that produce or presume their performands, producing in practice the very things they ‘put into practice’.
4. A discipline may have this performative relation to its object, that is to say, it may produce the object on which it presumes.
5. A performance can only ‘go beyond’ by itself producing what lies behind it. It must obey the law of performance which requires that it both annul and preserve the potential of the text it produces.

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