the changing profession

Performance: The Blunders of Orpheus

JOSEPH ROACH

Thou shalt not sit
With statisticians nor commit
A social science.
—W. H. Auden, *Phi Beta Kappa Poem*

PERFORMANCE IS AN IDEA THAT BECAME A FIELD. FOR IDEAS TO MATTER TO THE FIELD OF PERFORMANCE STUDIES, HOWEVER, THEY MUST take the form of action—a play, a rite, a dance, a game, a parade, an utterance. The action of performance may be practical or symbolic, but it is "always a doing or a thing done" (Diamond, *Performance* 1). In this essay, I assess the idea of performance, the field of performance studies, and their common relation to action by reopening the question of mimesis, the venerable doctrine that art imitates life. I also provide a preliminary sketch of a practical poetics of performance, defining it as Orphic (of or pertaining to the mythic figure of Orpheus). The action that the Orphic plot imitates—moving forward while glancing back—recapitulates the risky act of performance itself, for the performer typically feels the urge to look back, despite the prohibitions and costs, because performance always seems to be authorized by something prior, even when it isn't. Not restricted to dead Europeans or any other limited constituency, popular Orphism embraces all the lively arts, but it is most intensely concentrated in poetry meant to be spoken aloud, from Homer to hip-hop, and in lyric drama. "The story of Orpheus underlies every poem," Susan Stewart writes in *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, and she might have added, "every performance": bereft of Eurydice from the moment of his fatally forbidden turn, when he dooms her to be his inspiration, "he must attempt to fill her absence with compensatory song" (256). So Eurydice stands in for Orpheus, punished for his transgression, and he for her, making art out of her fate. Across the gulf of time and the river Styx, she prompts him, as he keeps looking back to her.

In the work of its most accomplished practitioners, performance theory distinguishes between the "repertoire" of performances in a

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given culture and that culture's "archive" of written materials, resisting the overemphasis on "the world as text" in literary study (and to a large extent in cultural studies) and foregrounding instead the "scenarios" of action and behavior that living performers execute (Taylor). A blunt summary of this argument was heard in a paper delivered in 1999 by the late Dwight Conquergood, the gifted ethnographer at Northwestern University who was mainly responsible for the change of his department's name from Oral Interpretation of Literature to Performance Studies. Practicing what he preached, Conquergood did not waste words, nor did he commit them to print as often as scholars of comparable influence usually do; thus, the loss of his presence is all the more consequential: "Only middle-class academics could blithely assume that all the world is a text because texts and reading are central to their life-world, and occupational security" (qtd. in Taylor 27). Such a corrective, in rightfully attempting to do justice to the neglected repertoire of oral and kinesthetic performances, goes too far in shaming the archive. Despite assurances that there is nothing inherently ahistorical about performance studies (12), the problem that arises from privileging the living repertoire to the extent that much current work in the field does is that performances are experienced as adrift in the present, unmoored from prior iterations of them that might be imagined, if not known, like the actions and events reconstructed partially but with forensic conclusiveness at an archaeological site or crime scene (Pearson and Shanks).

It is often true that performances descend from the past, and sometimes even from the deep past, transmitted from generation to generation in mimetic genealogies—dance, cooking, death ways, manners—but how are witnesses in the present to know anything in meaningful detail about their provenance? Oral testimony may be the best evidence in some circumstances (and the only evidence in others), and it has been traditionally undervalued by historians, but it has self-evident limitations. Mimesis, millennially testing the relation between representation and reality, has flourished in numberless texts and scores of genres, inscribing a record of human actions considered worthy of imitation at different times and in different places. This archive of imaginative testimony may be corroborated with other evidence—archaeological or textual—but it can also speak for itself. Admittedly, the philological project of recovering this literary past has often been a Eurocentric one, which contemporary scholars ought to challenge and amend; no one should forget how widely the imitation of perceived human differences has taken the form of "mimicry" (Bhabha 86). Mimicry can be the most insidious of arts, but more might be expected from mimesis, with its stubbornly old-fashioned empiricist attachment to the representation of reality. Performance studies, however, by neglecting the most influential historian of the mimetic repertoire—Erich Auerbach, author of *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*—has also furthered the neglect of literature, its principal archive of inspiring prompts. The territory that *Mimesis* surveys is a source of some of the most animating provocations for performance and is a record of performance's most expressive successes in transmuting human imagination into embodied practice. But Auerbach's book has fallen into partial disuse for reasons, some plausible, that in the end work to sever the temporal phenomenon of performance from its abundant history, including its social history.

The two books in performance studies that have most prominently engaged the question of mimesis, Michael Taussig's *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* and Elin Diamond's *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater*, share an affinity with the Frankfurt school's "mirroring of the knower in the unknown" (Taussig 45) and Walter Benjamin's categorization of mimesis as a human faculty that "enables

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alienated subjects to experience the other/the world" (Diamond, *Unmaking* 153–54). By grounding the mimetic faculty in social imagination and embodied experience, Taussig and Diamond strive to unknot mimesis from its entanglements in philosophical idealism and theatrical realism. In these endeavors, they succeed admirably. There remains, however, an important lacuna in their otherwise expansive ranges of citation. Neither Taussig nor Diamond substantially engages Auerbach's *Mimesis*: the former omits mention of it entirely; the latter incorporates it into a note on Bertolt Brecht's aphorism "art follows reality" (184n26). The widening gap between performance studies and literary studies is the source of a number of missed opportunities, large and small, and this particular omission by two of the most influential theorists in the field highlights them. Eschewing *Mimesis* in order to make mimesis suitable for performance studies lets slip Auerbach's prolific integration of Romance philology and social history.

Deriving his first principles from Giambattista Vico's pioneering insight that human beings own their history because they make it, Auerbach grounds his analysis of the modes of representation in the social differences of these modes' objects—high and low, aristocratic and popular, "foreground" and "background." At least one early critic deprecated Auerbach's methods as "sociological" (*Mimesis* 570), and in important ways they are. In the oft-reprinted opening chapter, called "Odysseus' Scar," Auerbach writes that the literary representation of reality is determined by two "styles," the ancient Homeric and the Old Testament biblical. The first keeps classes of people and their behaviors isolated in discrete genres; the second mixes and matches to complicating and deepening effect:

> The two styles, in their opposition, represent basic types: on the one hand fully externalized description, uniform illumination, uninterrupted connection, free expression, all events in the foreground, displaying unmistakable meanings, few elements of historical development and of psychological perspective; on the other hand, certain parts brought into high relief, others left obscure, abruptness, suggestive influence of the unexpressed, "background" quality, multiplicity of meanings and the need for interpretation, universal-historical claims, development of the concept of the historically becoming, and preoccupation with the problematic. (23)

The neglected message for performance studies in Auerbach's formulation is the depth of the literary resources that stand behind the critique and representation of social differences. For Taussig, though no binary is simple, the "dance" between sameness and difference asymmetrically juxtaposes a "white world" of anthropological representation, bristling with phonographic recorders and other modern instruments of what Auerbach might call externalized description, against the Cuna Indians of the Panamanian isthmus as the problem-producing background, all light and shade, fecund subject of multiple meanings and of the "suggestive influence of the unexpressed" (129). For Diamond, though every position is dialectical, mimesis is "impossibly double": "On the one hand it speaks to our desire for universality, coherence, unity, tradition, and, on the other, it unravels that unity through improvisations, embodied rhythm, powerful instantiations of subjectivity, and what Plato most dreaded, impersonation, the latter involving outright mimicry" (*Unmaking* v). Put more bluntly, "impossibly double" mimesis oscillates from the oppressively phallic theater of Platonism at one extreme to the subversively multiple "womb/theatre" of French feminism at the other (Luce Irigaray, qtd. in Diamond, *Unmaking* xi). Unavailable to Taussig and Diamond, even as they complicate their terms through a series of brilliant readings of particular performances, is the incremental account in *Mimesis* of the histor-

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ical intermingling of different styles—Dante's incarnation of the sublime and the demotic, for instance, or Shakespeare's "multilayered" characterization of "the weary prince," Hal (Auerbach 174–202, 312–33). The contrasting styles figure one another, as in the Christian doctrine of the interpenetration of flesh and the spirit, accumulating a vast, world-historical figuration of social performance.

Performance unmakes and remakes mimesis by blurring the boundaries between art and life. Performance may or not be conventionally artistic, but it is always social, and often it is inventively so: the smallest practical unit of performance is two, and much can be done even with that—no more than the minimum but nothing less than the fundamental. This definitional truth has made some version of the social sciences central to the self-conceptions of many performance theorists and researchers in recent decades. By and large, this interdisciplinary cross-fertilization has been most productive on the social sciences side: anthropology, ethnography, and sociology have taken a "performative turn" on their own (Carlson 11–55); ethnolinguists have independently elaborated an impressive "poetics" (Bauman and Briggs); and cultural sociology has reclaimed as prodigals such important progenitors of performance theory as Erving Goffman and Kenneth Burke (Alexander, Giesen, and Mast). Meanwhile, performance studies has in many respects moved away from its earlier association with theater, de-emphasizing what it once called drama, even though few of its PhDs find jobs in the social sciences. The field has also moved away from literature, through the partial evolution of the discipline formerly known as the oral interpretation of literature into ethnography of performance and critical studies of popular culture, media, and performance art. These developments have generated exciting new opportunities, but they have also foreclosed others prematurely. Here the greatest loss has been the diminution of the Orphic—the poetic dimension of performance in its many genres, emanating from the embodied practices that serve to express the otherwise inexpressible. Literature, like Eurydice, has slipped away into the shadows, because performance scholars looked back too soon. As a countermove, thinking about *mimesis* as a linking term across these different fields, the superannuated as well as the timely, produces a more synoptic view of their most prominent common concern: imitative behavior.

At the crux of the matter is the elusive question of what it is that imitative behavior imitates. That question will be answered differently by social scientists and poets, but their experience will be rooted in one phenomenon: reiteration, the imaginative substitution of a current action for a prior stipulation. Theorists want to claim certain forms of performance art as nonmimetic, but no one can perform without imitating something, even if it's only a trace or an echo, and that is often all it is. Such fugitive prompts are generally poetic and best accessed for purposes of performance by a figural poetics. Speaking of the self-fulfilling prophecy of a "figural schema," Auerbach writes, "[F]igure and fulfillment—although the one signifies the other—have a significance which is not incompatible with their being real. An event taken as a figure preserves its literal and historical meaning. It remains an event, does not become a mere sign" (*Mimesis* 195–96). This pattern underlies the preferred definitions of performance in the field of performance studies, no matter how fragile the authorizing figure may seem in relation to the concreteness of its fulfilling reiteration. As "restored behavior" (Schechner 32), "repetition with revision" (Gates 63–64), or "the actualization of a potential" (Bauman 262–66), performance is the embodied copy of an original that may exist principally as a retrospective understanding or prescient expectation. Often beginning only with a memory and ending in a wish, performance creates and executes an implicit compact between the performer and the

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spectator but one that can be renegotiated in a heartbeat. From time to time and in the fullness of time, the execution may fail to fulfill the social compact, and the regulations defining success are subject to conflicting interpretations. Because performance is a copy without a stable original, the executive process tends to elaborate the idea of an original after the fact, compelled by the consequences of the action that the original seems to have instigated. Performance thus always involves a looking back as well as a movement forward, often in that order, like Orpheus's turning around unbidden during his ascent. Motive follows action as belated retrospection. Counterintuitive as such an inversion of the presumptive relation of cause and effect may seem, this phenomenon is precisely what allows sober interpreters of British law and custom to cite the provisions of an unwritten constitution and still make persuasive sense. Similarly, practitioners in the field of performance studies can speak of feminine masquerade and mimicry as "attempts to reproduce what is not there" (Phelan 450). The historical success of such attempts (when the thing missing seems to have been there all along) has burdened the world with constructions like race, class, and gender, which have dominated the deconstructive agenda of cultural studies over several decades of extensive critique, and appropriately so. But the concentrated form of the same process of imaginative substitution has also produced the great figural representations of poetry and drama, the deepest repositories of memory and invention.

Edward Said, in his introduction to the fiftieth-anniversary edition of *Mimesis*, highlights the importance of the *figura* in Auerbach's conception of the mixed mimetic tradition (xx–xxii). Most clearly in evidence when the Old Testament prophetically prefigures the New Testament or when pagans prefigure moderns, the *figura*, like performance itself, embodies both fulfillment and retrospection. Figural interpretation interprets one event through another that follows it, the first signifying the second, the second fulfilling the first (Auerbach, "Figura"). The *figura* par excellence in the history of performance, anciently prefiguring the charismatic powers vested in the performer's art by premodern and modern theater and especially by opera, is Orpheus. Ubiquitous through a large repertoire of stageable retellings, including at least sixty operas, by composers from Jacopo Peri to Ricky Ian Gordon, the tale of the heart-melting singer and his snake-bitten bride imitates the action of figuration itself: looking back while moving forward. When Orpheus sets out to bring the dead Eurydice back from the underworld, his plea moves the bloodless spirits and makes even the furies weep, but in a memorable figural trope, Hades agrees to release Orpheus's wife on the condition that the singer will not look back at her during their ascent. As in Auerbach's scheme of the two styles, the figural prompt "Don't look back!" has both classical and biblical versions. In the Bible, the story of Lot's wife contains a similar divine imperative, "Look not behind thee" (*Teacher's Bible*, Gen. 19.17). Lot's wife, like Orpheus, disobeys, so she is turned into a pillar of salt. In the classical story, Eurydice dies twice, first by accident, when she is bitten by a snake, then apparently by mistake, when Orpheus looks back at her prematurely. Stricken, Orpheus forswears all women, enraging the female Thracians, who tear him limb from limb. So Orpheus blunders twice, once by commission, then by omission—that is, first by looking back too soon, then by not moving on soon enough. The blunders of Orpheus should remind practitioners and theorists alike that every moment in live performance is created by trial and error, which is why performers frequently refer to their actions and even their impulses as choices.

Choosing the right moment to look back or to move forward is the key to any successful performance, which must combine invention and memory: invention without memory is irresponsible; memory without invention

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is deadly (Moten). Figure and fulfillment are dynamically recursive (Auerbach, *Mimesis* 73–76), like the relation of ritual and play in performance. Across the range of activity that counts as performance, play and ritual stand at opposite poles, yet both are imitative, replacing expectations with actions. Play often takes the form of an extreme version of moving forward, while ritual is more about looking back, though they uncannily resemble each other at the extremes and though ritual might attain its greatest efficacy when it admits elements of play (Drewal 3–5). Acts of substitution may be discerned in any performance, and even the fundamental elements of production, called into being by the ritual of repeating a story or put into play more serendipitously, are stand-ins for something else. The creative act of choosing substitutions happens memorably, for instance, in literary adaptations for the stage. In the Orpheus and Eurydice scene of the director-adaptor Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses: A Play*, the stage directions enact the blunders of Orpheus. These prompts have the lovers moving away from each other ritually, forward into the future of their separation, and looking back at intervals across the widening gulf of the river Styx, their behavior an embodiment of the forward-backward action of performance itself. The set description calls for the stage to be flooded with water: "All scenes take place in and around the pool, with shifts between stories, scenes, and settings indicated by nothing more than a shift in light or merely a shift in the actors' orientation or perhaps a music cue" (3). In performance, however, water is not just water; it is water standing in for other water—the sea, the womb, the infinite. Choosing particular myths from the Ovidian originals, Zimmerman selected the ones that enabled her to use water in their telling. She explains her figural technique as substitution:

> Water is apt for *Metamorphoses* not only because the culture that produced these stories was fundamentally maritime, but also because water is an ancient and cross-cultural symbol of transfiguration. It is an element that transforms almost anything that is left in it too long, and is itself subject to change: it can easily freeze into a solid or evaporate as steam. Perhaps because it is so transformative and mutable itself, water easily takes on a wide variety of symbolic resonances.

Transfiguration is the fundamental action that the stories imitate; it is the doing and the thing done. But in each metamorphosis the water pretends to be another water: "a very modern Phaeton," in Zimmerman's words, "floats on a sun-colored raft, describing his troubled relationship to his absent father to a psychotherapist who sits on the deck of a swimming pool" ("Archeology" 312). The chain of substitutions onstage, as actors stand in for characters by means of Zimmerman's exploratory casting practices, which allow the actor to create the character before it goes into the script, is a process of imitation in which the successor stands in for an incumbent who never disappears. This process of imitation by substitution is the model for performance generally, consistent with Auerbach's account of succession in the interpretation of the literary *figura*: the first signifies the second, the second fulfills the first. In Zimmerman's retelling of the blunders of Orpheus, in which Eurydice is shown as complicit, the lovers experience water as a medium, an obstacle, and finally a void: having brought them together, water becomes a gulf that opens up between them, lover and beloved, life and death; the lovers constantly move away from each other because they are always looking back. Water, with all its accreted symbolic power, finally stands in for the prohibition against looking back itself, as well as for the momentous consequences of defying it.

Dilating on several epigraphs culled from *Mimesis*, Martin Harries, in *Forgetting Lot's Wife: On Destructive Spectatorship*, focuses on Auerbach's insight that the "Scripture

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stories do not, like Homer's, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels" (Auerbach, *Mimesis* 15). In Auerbach's schema, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* more closely resembles the works of Homer than it does scripture stories. However, as Harries underscores, there is a moment in Ovid's version of the Orpheus story that bears a suggestive resemblance to the story of Lot: immediately after Eurydice's death, Orpheus turns temporarily into a statue (115n4). Once revived, he moves forward again to meet a harrowing yet more poetic fate at the hands of the Thracian women. His body violently dismembered and its pieces scattered, the poet's severed head still sings beautiful laments for his lost love, filling her absence (and his own) with his song. The dark beauty of that fate figures the perils of looking back too soon and moving on too late, but it also immortalizes Orpheus as the heroically embodied singer-poet, the avatar of both literature and performance.

Putting his body in play, Orpheus does not so much imitate reality as stand in for it, as substitute, as surrogate. He becomes not the shadow of nature but its voice: "At Orpheus's death, nature herself learns the lament with which the poet had previously charmed all savage things" (Stewart 256). Orphic sonority reminds theorists that *poetry* and *performance* are cognate linguistically (as makings) and ontologically (as doings). Orphic performance requires a voice, in at least one meaning of the word (but usually more). Distinctively particular to each of us, the physical voice, shared by all vertebrates, is the capacity to produce sound by action of the lungs, larynx, and resonators. Voice is also what lucky poets find when they become most unlike other poets (Wheeler). The latter voice is cognate to invocation, evocation, and, most urgent, vocation. Voice is thus a call, drawing people together, and a calling, drawing them individually along their chosen or fated paths. In an old locution, voice is also something that can be deputized, as in "lending a voice" to a cause. Orpheus lent his voice to the cause of poetry, and his heirs are those who likewise give voice.

The reconciliation of the Orphic voice of expressive performance with empirical social inquiry is not impossible. E. Patrick Johnson reconciles them on behalf of performance studies in *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*. Also circulating as a one-man show called *Pouring Tea*, Johnson's regional ethnography is based on oral histories the author took from sixty-three informants. The informants consider themselves members in one way or another of "racialized sexual minorities in the South" (3). But it is Johnson's voice—his physical voice in performance and his poetic voice in narration—that makes the aggregated voices of his informants Orphic. Johnson defines the Orphic voice when he modestly puts in his own terms a regional trait that he and his informants share, "the gift of gab and graciousness" (7). The "tea" of the title is figurative as language but figural as action. It means the highly sweetened beverage that is ubiquitous in the South, but at the same time, and often in the same breath, it is a euphemism for sharing gossip, and "pouring tea" is a black, gay, southern circumlocution for what elsewhere would be known as "dishing dirt." It is one compelling utterance among many in the reliably poetic language of hidden transcripts: "dropping pearls" means signaling by sexual semaphore to a clued-in interlocutor; "beating face," applying powder vigorously; and "spilling tea," gossiping rudely and indiscriminately (550–58).

The action of the stories Johnson retells often turns on looking back (to moments of self-discovery, to moments of loss) and moving forward (to finding a voice, to finding a lover) with a heightened sense of self-expressiveness or assertion. Shadowy prohibitions against looking back may be no less stringent in local myth than they are in classical or bibli-

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cal prompts, but they ultimately do not deter the speakers who agree to tell their stories to Johnson any more than they deter Johnson himself. To perform this popular Orphism, he lends them his voice as they lend him theirs, as if pouring tea for one another, as well as for the auditor or reader. Johnson explains:

> Listening to their stories not only grounded me; it also took me back to divinely remembered places in my own history. They were telling *my* story while narrating their own—stories that took me back to the foothills of western North Carolina, sitting on the front porch of my family's public-housing apartment, watching the sun go down on a hot July evening. As the male cicadas would raise the call to Jesus, Mama and our neighbor Miss Isabelle would gather empty flower pots along the porch our apartments shared and stuff them with rags to burn to keep the mosquitoes away. When their gossip echoed the sound of cicadas, that was my cue to put away the canning jar lids I used to create my mud pies and go into the house and "wash-up," only to rejoin Mama and our neighbor for a nightcap of ice-cold sweet tea. It is this memory, and this memory alone, that keeps me longing for home again and again. (23)

Vividly evoked (and invoked), like the scene in *The Odyssey* where Penelope bids Euryclea wash the feet of Odysseus, and the old nurse knows him immediately by his scar, while Athena diverts the wife's attention for a moment to delay her recognition, the digressive particulars of Johnson's representation of reality in western North Carolina do no disservice to Auerbach's in *Mimesis*. The humble properties of domestic life are "divinely remembered," and they serve to set up the stories to come by positing what Auerbach calls "two styles," one with the linear clarity of the "foreground," the other, the "background," pressing on the edges of consciousness with the "suggestive influence of the unexpressed." Johnson's prose, like James Agee's in *Knoxville: Summer 1915*, wants to be set to music. So do a number of passages in Johnson's interviews with the informants, in which Johnson stands in for them by lending his voice. His work is popular Orphism at its most contemporary, supplementing a social science without committing one. It is also Orphism at its most traditional, looking back while moving forward. Johnson demonstrates the relevance of literary study to performance: the myth of Orpheus, not in spite of his blunders but because of them, redefines mimesis in performance as a particular kind of action that, if one follows Auerbach's lead, is not mere imitation but a figural substitution.

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