



PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## DRAMATURGICAL POTENTIAL: IS IT NECESSARY?

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It seems to me that what is wanted, in art, is to harness the power of the unfinished.  
Louise Glück (1993, n.p.)

The effect comes about without making a name for itself.  
François Jullien ([1994] 2004, 94)

What is actually hard to shake off is the classical terminology that turns the power of tradition into aesthetic norms.  
Hans-Thies Lehmann ([1999] 2006, 28)

The title question of this essay is itself a kind of manifesto, suggesting a particular way of thinking through the appeal of and to dramaturgy—as between its necessity and potential, where this may indicate the “power of the unfinished” (Glück 1993). After all, the “it” in question is, perhaps, not “dramaturgical potential” but an indeterminate reference—any element in a performance—for which this very potential concerns the necessity of what is questionable. To ask of any such element “is it necessary?” is not to define it in terms of a design or plan (which it is understood to serve) but, indeed, in terms of its potential. The question (of this necessity) is not simply applied to a particular element but arises from it—beginning, then, not with “why” it is necessary but, rather, “how”. While the sense of *why* can be addressed endlessly at the level of an idea, the sense of *how* concerns what is to be learnt from material presence in action through a manifold sense of the “pragmatic”. As will be explored in this essay, the relation between action and potential in an understanding of dramaturgy concerns the translations (or translatability) through which the question of necessity may itself be explored in its potential as distinct, for example, from an appeal to the “power of tradition” (Lehmann [1999] 2006)—whether philosophical or theatrical.

Informed by my teaching experience, this title question is both practical and conceptual; not least, in terms of the translatability of the very word, *dramaturgy*, where the resonance of the Greek, in its vernacular assimilation, lends a canonical aura to its (being) thought.<sup>1</sup> This appearance of a “classical terminology” for performance making in modern European languages—as if *theatre* means the same thing today as in ancient Athens—easily becomes (as Hans-Thies Lehmann notes) an idiom of and for the unthought or the “applied”, as if referencing something already known. Even as it echoes the terminology of the European philosophical tradition (not least, that of “the philosopher”, as Aristotle was called in the Middle Ages), *dramaturgy* raises its own questions for thinking through the theatrical. Here the question of necessity broaches that of its own potential in (and as) the work of translation, framing the encounter in teaching with the material(s) of students’ practice.

While *dramaturgy* might seem at times to be as exhausted as claims to “aesthetic norms”, Lehmann is himself the author of one of the more successful attempts to breathe life back into its European practice, with the advocacy of what he identified as “post-dramatic” theatre or performance (Lehmann [1999] 2006).<sup>2</sup> It is in relation to this terminology that the epigraphs to this essay (which function, perhaps, as elaborated keywords) are cited as a chance to explore a sense of the “unfinished” in questions of (and for) the potential of *dramaturgy*, as the work (verb) in and of a work (noun) or “drama”. (This relation might also be explored through what distinguishes “process *dramaturgy*” and “production *dramaturgy*”). With respect to its terminology, this essay is concerned in particular with the translation of Greek terms (as indexing potential concepts) in which the very word “*dramaturgy*” is itself inscribed. More specifically, how might such terminology admit the translatability of certain Chinese terms for thinking (through) *dramaturgy*; not least, then, as a reflexive concern with the potential of that translatability? Translation here works to indicate the “limits” of a practice that may be understood in terms of the incomplete or “unfinished”, as putting in question an appeal to “classical terminology”.

As an example of a broader conceptual “turn”, the contrasting “logic” of Chinese terms brings into focus the classical terminology of European *dramaturgy*, where the translatability of the former requires critical reflection on the very terms through which they might be translated (or thought translatable). The French Sinologist, François Jullien introduces the “illuminating logic” (1995, 13) of the Chinese term *shi*, for instance, as an indication of “perceiving reality as a process of transformation”, with the mutual potential (or “efficacy” [1995, 16–17]), rather than opposition, of the static and dynamic. He observes that:

The logic of *shi* could even pass beyond peculiar cultural perspectives and thereby illuminate something that is usually difficult to capture in discourses: namely, the kind of potential that originates not in human initiative but instead results from the very disposition of things. Instead of always imposing our own longing for meaning on reality, let us open ourselves to this immanent force and learn to seize it. (Jullien 1995, 13)

It is this orientation by (and towards) “the disposition of things” that informs the particular sense of “pragmatics” (*how*) in the question of (and for) dramaturgical potential here (distinct, at least in the first instance, from *why*).

This term *shi*, Jullien (1995, 13) notes, “does not figure amongst the major concepts (the “Way”, *Dao*; the “organising principle”, *li*; etc.) that provided themes for Chinese thinking”, and its very ambiguity in and for translation unsettles the system of categories (particularly of binaries) with which the classical terminology of European philosophy is traditionally thought. Jullien reviews the use of *shi* in different fields of action—from military strategy to calligraphy—to elucidate its manifold efficacies, which is to be explored here as a question of and for the “necessity” of dramaturgy. The limits (or limitations) of classical (Greek) terminology are tested or experimented with by a question of the translatability of *shi*—where, precisely, this *potential* is not reducible to European discourses of “power” and its enactment, still less the “completion” of its idea(l). As we shall see (with Roland Barthes), this becomes a question of what it means “to breathe” in the work of dramaturgy.

In the unfolding (or translation) of potential, how might evoking the “power of the unfinished”—as the Nobel Prize winning poet Louise Glück does—offer an occasion for thinking anew about the “work” or “task” of drama (dramaturgy [*drama-ergon*])? That is, working on or with “drama” or dramatic action(s); on or with the structures that render action(s) “dramatic”; not to mention their translation into gestural, scenographic, *theatrical* action(s) or performance(s).<sup>3</sup> What is “unfinished” in this work (as in its concept), played out between (its) theory and practice; that is, in the translatability between the one and the other? In exploring the potential (or power) of the “unfinished” or incomplete(d), how might dramaturgy be reconceived when it does not aim, for example, to align relations between elements and structure with those between means and ends, as this “classically” orients expectations of a performance’s intelligibility? (After all, this model of intelligibility need not, as Lehmann recognised, be one to which any particular performance aspires.) The sense of the whole as a condition of and for the potential or “propensity” (*shi*) of any part would aim at a dynamic conception of production rather than a static closure or completion of this (mutual) relation. As Jullien writes of Chinese landscape painting: “It is crucial to achieve *shi* because the reality of things only exists—and thus only manifests itself—in a totality, through the force of propensity that links its various elements as a whole” (1995, 99).

How, then, might this “power” open up, for example, a question of “chance”—that is, in the potential of its very necessity (Twitchin 2020; 2018)?<sup>4</sup> And how might “potential” (indeed, the potential of potential; or the work of a work) offer a key to practising dramaturgy—not as the application of a theory, but rather (with the experimental sound-artist Pauline Oliveros) as a chance for practising practice, for the practising of (a) practice? After all, the very task of dramaturgy involves the question of what may be understood by “drama”, rather than supposing it as already the idea (*eidos*), or aim (*telos*), of that very task (*ergon*). The potential of the work (*ergon*) broaches the question, then, of “performance philosophy”, the manifold of which gives its name to this journal, after all.

While it may be said of a performance that “it has potential”, this is usually to say that its potential is as yet unrealised. Indeed, to say that a work is “unfinished” is often a way to damn it with faint praise. This is to re-affirm the Aristotelean entelechy as the “proper” (or “actual”) understanding of a work (in its dramaturgy), as if this were the necessary vector of its translation from “idea” to “production”. (As we shall see, such an “end” is not a condition of and for understanding in the *Tao*.) There are, of course, material conditions that all too often make the potential of performances unrealisable or ineffective (not least, in their idea); but this may also indicate something that remains un compelling or unconvincing in the work. I would like to suggest that this concerns a failed sense of necessity, of what is necessary to the action(s), both in their composition and in their very performance; that is, in recognising their potential. How, then, might questions of dramaturgy (presupposed by those of its translatability) pre-empt (or even preclude) simple necessity—in exploring, precisely, that potential?

Taking up the theme of Roland Barthes’ 1977–78 course at the Collège de France ([2002] 2005), the latent “of” in practising practice would here be *neutral* between the terms it connects, whether of (that is, between) theory and practice; or verb and noun. As a question of and for exposition, Michael Taussig (2020, 12), for instance, makes the neutral (with reference to Barthes’ seminar) a point of orientation for the paradox of a “mastery of non-mastery”: “But doesn’t outsmarting mastery perpetuate mastery, if only in another form? This is what leads Barthes to say that *the neutral* refuses to dogmatise because the exposition of the non-dogmatic cannot itself be dogmatic. This poses the problem of exposition.” This neutrality between both senses of its “subject” in practice is, then, distinct from being a fulcrum between (or even a diagnosis of) one term that is primary and another that is secondary.<sup>5</sup> In this context, Oliveros’ (2022, 58) acute formulation is resonant: “The practice generates theory. Theory is perceiving structure—analysing and explaining structure so that testing and experiment (practice) can be done. Theory directs practice and creates culture to practice practice.” “Theory” and “practice” are themselves vernacular assimilations of a “classical terminology”, of course, with changing meanings such that they cannot be taken simply as translations of *theoria* and *praxis* or *techne*. What kind of *poetics*, after all, is already supposed in and by the manifold translations of *dramaturgy*, as this may be exposed by a reading with, for instance, the *Tao*? Indeed, what kind of exposition is necessary to the manifold potential of such (a) reading?

Distinct from the title of a career path within (or even outside of) institutional theatre making, how might dramaturgy realise this neutrality (with Barthes) in becoming an effect “without making a name for itself” (as Jullien suggests)? Or, perhaps, in the thinking (practice) of such dramaturgy: “How, we may ask, can the neutral be detectable, how can it manifest in a particular way?” (Jullien 2008, 49). How might the particular remain potential (rather than “finished”) in this sense of “testing and experiment” (Oliveros), where dramaturgy touches on the agency of “nonaction” (*wu wei*) in the *Tao*, in the “way” that is evoked by both Jullien and Barthes, as also by Martin Heidegger? Heidegger (1982, 92), for instance, evokes the translatability of the *Tao* (as both “way” and “saying”) in contrast with the expectations of “reason... meaning, logos”: “Perhaps the mystery of mysteries of thoughtful Saying conceals itself in the word ‘way’, Tao, if only we will let these names return to what they leave unspoken, if only we are capable of this, to allow them to do so.”<sup>6</sup>

Might the sense of continuous transformation (or “propensity” [*shí*])—distinct from an applied purposiveness—offer the seeming paradox of a dramaturgy without “drama”? Neither “post-dramatic” nor “undramatic” (in the sense of something lacking, as Lehmann already exposed it), but as a kind of “wisdom”? Indeed, risking the ignorance of appropriation, rather than the questioning of translatability, is this to engage with what one might, perhaps, call the *Tao of dramaturgy*? Such a “challenge... to the Aristotelean rules of structure” is, indeed, proposed by Barthes ([1982] 1991, 185) in a discussion of Cy Twombly, through an analogy between painting and theatre in the name of the “wisdom” of art. Barthes writes, “I should like to question Twombly in relation to the Event” (177)—which he parses in five instances of a “classical terminology” that leads on to an invocation of the *Tao* and an ethics of “non-mastery” at the end of his essay.

Exploring the contemporary resonances of these five instances, which Barthes gives in Greek, for addressing “the event” (at least, with respect to Twombly’s analogical “theatre”), Barthes speaks of what animates the artwork through, precisely, the framing of this very analogy: “What happens on the stage [*sur la scène*] proposed by Twombly (canvas or paper) is something which participates in several types of event, which the Greek vocabulary clearly distinguished: there occurs a fact (*pragma*), an accident (*tyché*), an outcome (*telos*), a surprise (*apodeston*), and an action (*drama*). (Barthes [1982] 1991, 177). No one term in this constellation of “occurrences” is privileged over the others (presenting a dramaturgy of, or as, “the event” in its various “kinds”), where the appeal of (and to) *drama*—still less that of and to *telos*—neither explains, nor is itself explained by, any one of the other terms. The theoretical aim to explain is not then complete(d) in practice, but rather admits the potential of and for chance (*tyché*); or what one might call the motive or potential of the “unfinished” (or, indeed, surprise [*apodeston*]), in its “challenge” to an Aristotelean terminology. In terms of the latter (as the premise of that “challenge”), this entails de-coupling *energeia* from *entelechy*; as also a formal cause (*eidos*) from its final cause (*telos*). This gives a dramaturgy of what matters (*pragma*), of material practicalities, rather than (“necessarily”) ideas or forms. The fact of an action becomes a matter—a question—of its necessity, rather than its idea (or explanation).<sup>7</sup>

Reference to any particular element in or of a “drama” or action—distinct from acting (*mimesis praxeion*)—is neutral as to the work (*ergon*) of its event when conceived of in terms of assemblage, rather than the traditional, hierarchical ordering of such elements. Indeed, as Jane Bennett (2010) notes, introducing the Chinese sense of *shi* (with reference also to Jullien), “[a]n assemblage owes its agentic capacity to the vitality of the materialities that constitute it” (34); where “*shi* names the dynamic force emanating from a spatio-temporal configuration rather than from any particular element within it” (35). Admitting this “configuration”, even in its latency, rather than attempting to pre-empt the sense of “any particular element” by design (as if it should be already manifest), is key to a neutral dramaturgy; one that does not try to pre-determine what is necessary (in the sense of and for the “agential”) but which allows for its processual manifestation or emergence. The “vitality of the materialities” (of “elements” in their relation), even if parsed in terms of Barthes’ five categories or distilled into the singular question of necessity (*Ananke*), remains *potential* (or “unfinished”). The translation of this in practice is the concern of a *way* of understanding (or practicing) dramaturgy in its neutrality. Bennett continues her evocation of *shi* by making an association with the idea of “adsorbsion” from Gilles Deleuze, as an occurrence or “a gathering of

elements in a way that both forms a coalition and yet preserves something of the agential impetus of each element" (35). Here the dynamic of assemblage finds a "formal" materiality, for instance, in the work of collage.

While the terminology of Barthes' analogical dramaturgy is introduced in the "classical" language of the Western philosophical canon—Greek—it serves to displace the question of the artwork from, precisely, the canonical sense of the "complete(d)"; that is, from the traditional form of its *telos*, its "dramatic" purpose(s) or end(s). The sense of what the work is supposed to be (usually as a means of understanding what it is "about") pre-empts, precisely, what remains potential. In "classical" Western drama (whether tragedy or comedy), this famously takes the form of a "catastrophe", an ending in which structure and morality are intertwined to evoke a sense of the inevitable consequence of actions or of a protagonist's destiny. The paradoxical "surprise" (commented on by the chorus in ancient tragedy) is "classically" due to a background "drama" between the gods that defines the protagonist's field of action. (As the blinded Gloucester says in *King Lear* [IV.i.36–37]): "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport.") And in the Christian era, it is the background consequences of original sin that are manifested through the "example" of what is enacted as the dramatic failure of (a) "character".

The necessity revealed by the agential in "classical" drama concerns motive rather than material. Here the dramaturgical work evokes character—*ethos* (in Greek)—rather than the vitalities (or chance) of an assemblage of actions in their potential (*shi*). The story of exemplary death (however attenuated) retains the fascination of a "character" flaw (*harmatia*); of something (or someone) that is "unethical" in action. Here aesthetic and moral norms are intertwined in a residual Aristotelean poetics that can often still be seen in newspaper obituaries of the famous. (Unfortunately, students of the *Poetics* today are rarely tasked with also reading the *Nicomachean Ethics*; even as, paradoxically, they may be expected to read Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* or *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*.)

In contrast to this heritage of explanatory "reversal" in the dynamic of Aristotelean dramatic form, Barthes' essay on Twombly ends—without concluding—by citing the *Tao*. This opens up what might be thought of as familiar (even in reference to ancient Greek) towards what may be thought of as philosophically unfamiliar, even as it is written into the essay, by contrast, in French (or here in English) rather than the literal "characters" of Mandarin (Tsu 2023; also John Wu's translation [1989] of the *Tao* with the Chinese text facing the translation). The relation between translation and transliteration in this conceptual dramaturgy attests to the occlusion of writing at the heart of logocentric questions of "drama"; not least, in reflecting on the concept of dramaturgy itself (in its potential translatability). Concerning the non-appropriative ethic of Twombly's work (addressing the art not the artist), Barthes' "unconcluding" essay proposes:

If we wanted to situate this ethic, we could only go looking for it very far away, outside painting [as also, then, outside theatre], outside the West, outside the historical period [that is, the Western paradigm of classical-and-modern], at the very limit of meaning... with the *Tao Te Ching*. (Barthes [1982] 1991: 194)

As noted at the start of this essay, with Jullien, one such “limit of meaning” (whether in French or in English) is that of the translatability into—and, indeed, of—an understanding of both “potential” (*shi*) and the “neutral” in the *Tao* for a Greek-derived conception of dramaturgy (as the work of drama); as if the “ethical” question could be abstracted from that of *pragma* (or of metaphor from materiality); at least, in “post-dramatic” performance.<sup>8</sup> Here it is important to keep in mind that the proposed “challenge to Aristotelian structure” is articulated through an insistence on (and of) Greek terms, as Barthes evokes this “limit” and an “outside” within their European understanding, including (here) in the translatability between French and English. The non-appropriative ethic of the incomplete(d), or unfinished work, entails a dramaturgy that is also, as it were, “inapplicable”. Just as theory is not applied to practice, as if it were an explanation (or even a prescription), nor is dramaturgy (in the *Tao of dramaturgy*) an applied practice (as distinct from an example of practicing practice).

In reply to an observation made by Nadine Savage, in 1979, that he “often use[s] Greek words or neologisms with the accompanying comment that the French language needs ‘supplementing’”, Barthes explains:

I don’t have in mind the French language in particular... language forces us to speak in a certain way and stops us speaking in another [and] if I feel a French word doesn’t fully express what I want to say—being deficient in its connotations or cultural richness—then at that point I use a foreign word—a Greek one, for example—a word that’s relatively freer and less compromised by use. (Barthes 2023, 118–19)

Introducing the idea of Greek words as an example of the “supplementary” (as well as of the “foreign”)—lifting the language of analysis out of being simply an instrument of and for an explanation of its subject (when the very language of that analysis becomes its own subject)—is perhaps not as obvious as it might seem, even in the context of “performance philosophy”. Behind such (“less compromised”) use as neologism, the Greek terms (transliterated into Latin script) offer an interruption of the expected meaning or usefulness of a word (in French or English), “challenging” its everyday communication by not relying simply on what is supposed to be already understood by it. In another register of this “supplementing”, however, the attempt to engage the translatability of Chinese terms does perhaps remain “less compromised by use” (at least, currently); not least, in association here with questions about how we learn to think of performance making through a European (or “classical”) understanding of dramaturgy.

In the same interview with Nadine Savage, for instance, Barthes replies to her question, “Can you talk a bit about your interest in oriental cultures?” by observing that:

Factually speaking, it’s absolutely clear that a Westerner can’t have genuine access to Far Eastern cultures for linguistic reasons... The East functions, then, as the Other of [our] thought, and we need (at least it’s necessary in my intellectual life) a sort of oscillation between the same and the other. What I’m able to glimpse of Eastern thought, through very distant echoes, gives me a chance to breathe. (Barthes 2023, 123–24)



This metaphor of a “chance to breathe” is oriented, then, by the potential of translatability from the Chinese, touching on a non-appropriative (“inapplicable” or “undramatic”) ethic. All this concerns a conception of dramaturgy (as neutral) that is not already “compromised” by a means-ends schema, with its corollary ideas of action (“drama”)—represented in logocentric “acting” (as *mimesis praxeon*, the imitation of actions)—and the associated organisation (practices) of theatrical work, with its standard division of labour between actors, designers, directors, writers, and even dramaturgs. This set of technical “applications”, some of which are attributed, in the embarrassing “professional” jargon, to “creatives” or to the “creative team” (which does not usually include philosophers or theorists), aims to contain or channel the potential of assemblage, diminishing the surprise (or even wisdom) of not (already) knowing the whole of a production. Institutionally, the “power of the unfinished” (coded as “failure”) becomes effectively taboo; or, at least, unthought as accident rather than chance (Twitchin 2018).

The question of translation here concerns not simply the “foreign” words (and their concepts) to be translated, but the potential understanding of the language into which they are being translated—that is, the displacements that admit that translatability in the self-understanding of (in this case) a contemporary European language (in relation to both ancient Greek and Chinese).<sup>9</sup> The work (*ergon*) of translation (*metaphorein*)—concerning what “drama” might mean—evokes the metaphors that spin out from, but are also knotted into, a concept that is always “unfinished”. Translation, after all, offers the potential of thinking through the sense of assimilating or appropriating meaning(s), while holding open a simultaneity that allows for “testing and experimenting” (Oliveros), without one possibility “necessarily” precluding another. This is key to collage and, then, fundamental to concern with the potential of the neutral for re-thinking dramaturgy in the name (or translatability) of its concept, as it is addressed in the work of reading the *Tao* in the West (beyond the now canonical reception of, for example, John Cage and Merce Cunningham [1988]).

Regarding the understanding of what is “potential” (in regard, for instance, to “Aristotelean rules of structure”), François Jullien (2004, 1) poses the question: “To what extent have we ever stepped outside that European schema or are we even able to—can we even question it (‘we’ within the European tradition who still perpetuate those early Greek categories)?” The question is indicative of the “chance to breathe” evoked by Barthes, unsettling a conceptual schema that is “so thoroughly assimilated that we no longer see it” (ibid.). Crucially, Jullien explores how the Greek schema (that of and for dramaturgy in this essay) construes the sense of “potential”, where our “classical terminology”

set[s] up an ideal form (*eidos*), which we take to be a goal (*telos*), and we then act in such a way as to make it become fact. It all seems to go without saying—a goal, an ideal, and will: with our eyes fixed on the model that we have conceived, which we project on the world and on which we base a plan to be executed, we choose to intervene in the world and give a form to reality. And the closer we stick to that ideal form in the action that we take, the better our chances of succeeding. (Jullien 2004, 1)



As already observed, in the West, “potential” is often registered simply in the sense of what is lacking to the “[un-]finished” work. Potential is latently manifest in the “unfinished”, in the sense of the work not (yet) being good enough—where the goal (*telos*) of its form (*eidos*) remains unrealised or ineffective. In “what seems to go without saying”, dramaturgy is often seen, then, as a handmaid to the supposed “success” of a performance, understood as a relation between (ideal) form and (its) aim or goal, as this is invested in the recognition of a “finished” production—distinct from “the chance to breathe” (or, as I have discussed elsewhere, the chance to fail [Twitchin 2018]). Such an understanding (made manifest in dramaturgical judgment) is reconceived in the “inapplicable” way (*Tao*) of a relation between the theory and practice “of” each term, understood not through their abstraction but in the fact (*pragma*) of their “necessity”.

Such practicing practice—a theoretical practice and a practical theory—is undefined by appeal to a “method” (or a prescriptive “poetics”). As Jullien (2004, 33) writes: “The ‘way’ itself (the *dao*), as conceived traditionally in China, is a far cry indeed from our Western method (*methodos*, which is a ‘way’ to be ‘pursued’ that leads ‘towards’ something)”. In this context, it is interesting to note that the observation previously cited from Heidegger (1982, 92) concerning the translatability of the *Tao* (or way) continues: “Perhaps the enigmatic power of today’s reign of method also, and indeed preeminently, stems from the fact that the methods, notwithstanding their efficiency, are after all merely the runoff of a great hidden stream which moves all things along and makes way for everything. All is way.”

The neutral is not, then, a dramaturgy that could be applied; nor a technique that measures its own effectiveness by defining the work in terms of that very applicability—but, rather, one that admits (or works with) surprise (*apodeston*) in the acknowledgment of chance (*tyché*). As Jullien, again, writes:

Instead of constructing an ideal Form that we then project on to things, we could try to detect the factors whose configuration is favourable to the task at hand; instead of setting up a goal for our actions, we could allow ourselves to be carried along by the propensity of things. In short, instead of imposing our plan upon the world, we could rely on the potential inherent in the situation. (Jullien 2004, 16)

It is this potential (recognised through a neutrality “of” dramaturgy) that re-orientes the question of necessity as to the “matter” of drama (or of “actions”).

When something doesn’t matter in a performance, after all, it remains inert, merely ornamental (or even didactic), whatever the claims about the (supposed) idea that it represents or enacts. If there is no (“pragmatic”) use for an element then it is dramaturgically redundant (or unnecessary), present without potential (“the chance to breathe”). Here one could make a comparison with puppetry or object theatre, where precisely the question of animation concerns that of the necessary potential of “breathing” with regard to the relations between the elements in performance. The latter are understood as literal “characters” in a pragmatic assemblage distinct from a logocentric interpretation of acting and the classical “ethics” of its dramaturgy. A neutral dramaturgy, by contrast, attends to the significance of the fact (*pragma*) as much as the

signification of the idea(l) (*eidōs*). Here the question of form is no longer addressed as if it were beyond (as an explanation of) the sensible—as if this were a condition of and for rendering the latter intelligible.

What “matters”, then, is to admit or to recognise what is *pragmatic* in performance making, as the necessity—the potential—of its *eidōs*. To explore or discover what matters in and by means of dramaturgy (its work) concerns the paradox of an incomplete(d), unfinished, “telos”. This is characteristic of that seeming oxymoron, the “theatre-idea” (Badiou [1998] 2005), an idea that is effectively the drama (or event) of performance *making* with the “wisdom” of the neutral. The practice is understood, precisely, in its practice—not in an application from outside itself (as “theory”), mistaking its necessity with what is normative (as “drama”). How many times has one heard the judgment (criticism) that a work is not (yet) “a play”, “dramatic”, “finished”, where the question of the pragmatic is transformed into that of an idea(l) rather than being held open to wonder what the work is potentially? As Deleuze (1997, 135) acutely observes, regarding the difference between judgment and (new) modes of existence: “What expert judgement, in art, could ever bear on the work to come?”

A neutral dramaturgy, then, would engage with the principle (posed here by Alain Badiou) that “theatre-ideas” are essentially realised “on stage”—and not in the minds of performance makers (or dramaturgs): “To establish—as we must for every art—that theatre thinks.... Theatre-ideas arise in and by the performance... and do not pre-exist [their] arrival ‘on stage’” (Badiou [1998] 2005, 72). Understanding that performance is not secondary to another source that is primary (traditionally, a dramatic text to be “interpreted”) is, of course, fundamental to the “post-dramatic”—as thus to the neutral as a “way” [*Tao*] of understanding or working with a “post-dramaturgical” practice, as (of) performance making, in its potential “necessity”.

“Dramaturgical potential” here concerns assemblage as a displacement of the authorial by the question of what is *necessary* in and for a performance. What holds attention rather than distracts it—in practice (“on stage”), rather than in its being explained (off stage)? The question of “necessity” reorients a sense of the *what* of a performance in terms of *how* it is performed, exposing the dynamics of, for instance, vulnerability or resistance in the materials, as a question of what *matters* (“pragmatically”) in and for the attention of both performer and audience. What is necessary in telling a particular story, then, is specific to that very “telling”—the agential emerges through the refraction of each by the other. In making a performance, for instance, what is specific to a glove used (to evoke, for example, an experience of touch), whether made of latex or cotton, a surgical or knitted glove; or, perhaps, a marigold? Or the kind of glass placed on a table—a champagne flute, an ordinary wine glass, a tumbler, a schooner or a shot glass—as they associatively evoke a location or an event, whether a restaurant or a home, a gathering or a solitary scene? What are the properties (or pragmatics) of these elements (to unravel, to break, to tear, to shatter) in their affordances for the hands or as a source of sound? The telling detail is already the potential of what is to be told. Material and metaphor offer their mutual potential in any particular instance, rather than the one necessarily subsuming (“explaining”) the other.

The question of “the event”, as the scene of and for Barthes’ “non-appropriative” poetics with the *Tao* (in the analogy between Twombly’s art and theatre), is the occurrence of the “theatre-idea” (rather than the dramatic text). Evoking again that key term for a neutral dramaturgy—*assemblage* (as a “configuration” in which “*shi* names the dynamic force” [Bennett])—and summarising all that has been historically recognised as “post-dramatic”, Badiou ([1998] 2005, 72) specifies that “[theatre] is the assemblage [*agencement*] of extremely disparate components, both material and ideal, whose only existence lies in the performance [*représentation*], in the act of theatrical representation.” As a final example here of the inscription of translation in the “limits” of its concept (“dramaturgy”), this last phrase is the translator’s interpolation to gloss the manifold sense, philosophically, of *représentation*. In this understanding, not only is “the performance... evental” but—particularly as concerns the “art of theatre”, rather than simply commercial entertainment—it is “an event of thought”; that is, of the necessary potential of translation or translatability in thinking through (practising) dramaturgy.

As the *Laozi* remarks (section 41), ‘A great work puts off completion’ (a better reading than ‘happens in the evening’). As we have seen from modern painting, setting a high value on a preliminary sketch makes it possible for *what appears to be lacking in it* to allow the work to continue to evolve and to produce an effect; the unfinished element is what keeps the effect active. (Jullien 2004, 108–09)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A brief account of this teaching, from which I have been privileged to learn, is shared in Anna Furse’s *Performance Making* (Furse 2025, 99–102). In this book, Furse reflects on the project of her MA Performance Making course at Goldsmiths, University of London, and I am very grateful for having had the opportunity, over many years, to contribute to it. This began at a time when universities were not as ruthlessly managed as they are today in terms of a politically mandated marketisation. As Furse trenchantly observes:

Across the UK, the cost of refashioning universities into businesses has proved disastrous for creative disciplines. For all the ‘values’ cited to support and justify restructured and leaner/ fitter institutions, the jargon promoted by university managements against which academics are expected to measure and justify ourselves speaks explicitly of an identity crisis: the university is no longer defined by its educational expertise and research-rich orientation, but is now understood as a management-defined body, demonstrated in a wholly new insidiously euphemistic vocabulary seeping into paperwork, together with the augmentation of the administration on university payrolls.... (Furse 2025, 11–12)

<sup>2</sup> As will be seen later (with Alain Badiou) the term “performance”, as an index of and for the translation of key terms between Anglophone and other European research, is part of the background of these reflections. It should be stressed, however, that my essay does not seek to offer a review of works in which the manifold potentials of dramaturgy have been discussed (even by Lehmann)—and in relation to which the thoughts here may sound like a rather weak echo.

<sup>3</sup> It is notable, for instance, that in his entry on dramaturgy in the *Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, Eugenio Barba (1991, 69) refers to “actions at work” without using the term “drama” at all, even as he carefully distinguishes between “written text” and “performance text”—or what he calls “scenic bios”.

<sup>4</sup> This is already to displace the question of natural and accidental causes in Aristotle, for example, to a comparison

oriented rather by the sense of “dynamic” manifest(ed) in the *Tao Te Ching*.

<sup>5</sup> The neutral was recently adopted by Will Daddario and Harry Wilson (2023) for a reading of Barthes and I am grateful to them for giving space to my earlier reflections on this theme, as an exploration of the Barthesian “oblique” (Twitchin 2023a).

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger’s interest in working on a translation of the *Tao Te Ching* with Paul Shih-yi Hsiao in the 1940s is discussed in the latter’s essay in a volume on “Heidegger and Asian Thought”, where the contrast with “Aristotelean logic” is again remarked (Hsiao 1987, 99).

<sup>7</sup> I have explored this in an exposition of “a dice thrower” as a figure of and for performance philosophy (Twitchin 2020).

<sup>8</sup> I have discussed this material-metaphor relation in the example of costume in the work Tadeusz Kantor (Twitchin 2023b).

<sup>9</sup> I have discussed elsewhere the parable of this given in Jorge Luis Borges’ story, *Averroes Search* (2000), regarding the translation of, and commentary on, Aristotle’s *Poetics* from Greek into Arabic in the context of “making” performance (Twitchin 2019).

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