Performing History: The Importance of Occasions

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This article identifies what it calls a ‘performative turn’ in historical studies, as in the humanities more generally. It traces the rise of the notion of performance out of the dramaturgical model of the 1940s and 1950s (associated with Kenneth Burke, Erving Goffman and Victor Turner), linking the new idea (developed by John Austin, for instance, and Pierre Bourdieu) to the rise of ‘postmodernity’. Turning to historical studies, the article analyses the role played by the concept of performance in recent studies of ritual, festivals, identity, gender, and even emotions, architecture and knowledge, noting the shift from the assumption of social or cultural fixity to that of fluidity, from scripts to improvisations, from mentalities to the habitus. The new approach has generated problems, notably the over-reaction against the idea of social constraints, the danger of circularity and the over-extension of the central notion of performance. A stronger and a weaker sense of ‘performance’ need to be distinguished. Despite these problems, the performative approach has foregrounded important and neglected issues, notably that of differences between cultural or social domains. The article concludes by considering the methodological consequences of the approach, in particular its implications for source criticism and historical explanation.

Keywords: Occasion; Performance; Situation; Historical method; Drama analogy; Theatre model

Today, we are witnessing what might be called a ‘performative turn’ in historical studies, as in cultural studies—alongside so many other turns, linguistic, cultural, visual and so on. To be more exact, the idea of culture as performance developed out of an older idea of society as theatre, but has gradually diverged from it. This article will trace the history of the
performative turn, link it to a quiet revolution in the practice of some historians and social scientists, and comment on its strengths and weaknesses.

Most obvious in linguistics, sociology, anthropology, the trend has become visible in one domain or discipline after another (Barwise and Perry 1983; Meyrowitz 1985, pp. 23–34; Mitchell 1987). However, as often happens in the history of knowledge, scholars who have been pioneering in one field are often unaware of parallel innovations elsewhere. Hence the revolution does not seem to have received the general discussion it surely deserves. It does not even have a name.

The obvious term, ‘situationism’, has already been employed in a very different context, that of the ‘Situationist International’. ‘Contextualism’, another possibility, has the disadvantage of suggesting a focus on the interpretation of texts rather than of actions. Hence to christen this trend I propose to adopt and adapt a philosophical term that was originally used by Kant to refer to followers of Descartes: ‘occasionalism’. The basic point is that on different occasions (moments, locales) or in different situations (in the presence of different people) the same person behaves in different ways. The point may appear banal but its implications have not yet been explored by historians in the detail that they deserve.

The Dramaturgical Model

In the humanities and social sciences, the dramaturgical model has been in regular use for more than half a century. In the 1940s the literary scholar Kenneth Burke was already expounding what he called the ‘dramatistic approach’ (Burke 1945). In the 1950s, the French anthropologist Michel Leiris discussed theatrical aspects of possession by spirits, the Englishman Victor Turner launched his idea of ‘social drama’, and the American Erving Goffman presented his ‘dramaturgical’ approach to everyday life (Goffman 1959; Leiris 1958; Turner 1957). It was also at this time, in his Oxford lectures, that the English philosopher John Austin put forward his idea of ‘performative utterances’, words which make things happen, from launching ships to declaring independence. Since Austin’s day a number of philosophers have refined and developed this idea (Butler 1997).

The dramaturgical model has spread to many intellectual fields or disciplines. Politics, for example, is viewed increasingly as a form of symbolic action, as spectacle or as ‘the performance of power’ (Edelman 1971; Soeffner and Tänzler 2002). Linguists as well as philosophers use the vocabulary of speech ‘acts’ to emphasize that language creates—or destroys—class or ethnic or gender identities (Le Page and Tabouret-
Keller 1985; Butler 1997). In anthropology, Clifford Geertz, who has acknowledged his debt to Burke, first discussed the Balinese cockfight as drama, and then turned to what he called the ‘theatre state’ (Geertz 1973, 1980).

Intellectual historians have found the dramaturgical model appealing. Hayden White introduced the concept of ‘emplotment’ into historiography, suggesting that—consciously or unconsciously—leading nineteenth-century historians were thinking of their narratives as dramas, whether tragic or comic (White 1973). Quentin Skinner, following Austin and the American philosopher John Searle, began to view the history of political thought as the study of ‘speech acts’ (Skinner 1978).

Historians of culture and society moved in the same direction. Michel de Certeau, for instance, wrote of the possession of the nuns of Loudun by devils as ‘spectacle’, ‘le théâtre des possédées’ (Certeau 1970, pp. 9, 129–160). In similar fashion, Michel Foucault wrote of executions as a ‘theatre of terror’ (Foucault 1975, pp. 9–72, at p. 53). Across the Channel, Douglas Hay, developing Edward Thompson’s notion of ‘the theatre of Tyburn’, wrote of ‘managing hangings, arranging backstage the precise moment of the emotional climax’ (Hay 1975, p. 52). Riots too were analysed in this way, from the ‘rites of violence’ in the French religious wars to a lynching in the American South described as a drama or ‘moral scenario’ (Davis 1975; Wyatt Brown 1982). Historians of art, especially students of portraits, have found the ideas of Goffman on self-presentation to be of use in their work (Smith 1986; Burke 1987).

However, in the past thirty years or so (so far as anthropology is concerned) or the past twenty (in the case of history), a gradual, subtle, collective shift has occurred in the use of the dramaturgical model. One of the most obvious signs of the shift is the increasing popularity of the term ‘performance’.

From Drama to Performance

Although Austin’s concern with ‘performative utterances’ goes back to the 1950s, a collective interdisciplinary turn only became visible in the 1970s, when a few anthropologists and folklorists began using the term ‘performance’ in their analyses of gossip and ritual, in some cases inspired by Austin’s work (Abrahams 1970; Ray 1973).

The broad range of meaning of the term ‘performance’ encouraged its spread across the disciplines. For linguists such as Noam Chomsky, who replaced Ferdinand de Saussure’s distinction between langue and parole with one between linguistic ‘competence’ and ‘performance’, as for music
critics and psychologists studying learning processes, the term is linked to evaluation. Their notion is not far removed from that of the economists who attempt to measure the performance of certain industries or even that of the engineers who test the performance of ships, cars or aircraft.

On the other hand, the members of the departments of ‘Performance Studies’ in American universities that burgeoned in the 1980s were interested in performance in a more theatrical sense. They attempted to break down traditional distinctions between ‘art’ and ‘life’, for example, by discussing the demonstrations of Argentine mothers on the Plaza de Mayo, or even the ‘Dirty War’ of 1976 to 83 as a kind of drama (Taylor 1994). In this respect their concerns run parallel to those of historians and anthropologists (notably Victor Turner, who had a strong interest in the theatre).

It would of course be a mistake to present the interdisciplinary ‘breakthrough’ into performance as if the aims of all its practitioners were identical. Folklorists and musicologists, for instance, wish to shift their emphasis from texts to communicative events, their context and their reception (Hymes 1971, 1975; Fulcher 2000). Historians of political thought, on the other hand, are attracted by the vision of their texts as themselves a kind of action (Skinner 1971, 1978). The turn to performance is perceived in each academic discipline as a solution to its own internal problems.

All the same, there are common concerns, a convergence revealed by some of the definitions offered by participants in the movement. Dell Hymes, whose interests straddle anthropology, folklore and linguistics, defines performance as ‘cultural behaviour for which a person assumes responsibility to an audience’ (Hymes 1975, p. 18). Diana Taylor, who works on theatre, insists that performance is not opposed to reality but rather ‘suggests a carrying through, actualizing, making something happen’ (Taylor 1994, p. 276).

The performance movement is also unified by the common use of a few key texts. As a participant from the 1970s onwards, I can testify to the impact on my own thinking of the work of Goffman, Geertz, Turner, and also that of Pierre Bourdieu (who will be discussed below). Future historians will need to ask why texts such as these (or those of John Austin and Kenneth Burke) had such an appeal across the disciplines in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The cultural context for the performative turn is surely the rise of postmodernity.

The term ‘postmodernity’ is used here to refer not to a philosophical or literary movement (better described as ‘postmodernism’), but to a more diffuse sense of fragility or fluidity (‘liquid modernity’, in the vivid phrase
of Zygmunt Bauman). This sense of fluidity goes with a sense of freedom from social determinism or even social constraints, expressed in academic language as the ‘invention’ of traditions, the ‘construction’ of culture or the ‘politics’ of identity. In everyday language, this sense of freedom takes the form of a new emphasis on doing (from ‘doing drugs’ to ‘doing lunch’).

**History as Performance**

As so often in the history of history, the changing problems of the present are encouraging historians to try out new approaches to the past.

The obvious question at this point is, What is supposed to be performed? Historians have been studying the performance of rituals, gender, nobility, memory and knowledge. Political historians have examined the performance of liberalism (Joyce 2003). Historians of science have analysed experiments, debates and lectures as so many kinds of performance (Biagioli 1993; Rauch 2003).

Historicizing Austin, scholars have studied certain kinds of performative utterance in considerable detail, notably insults, words that wound. The rise of a considerable secondary literature on insults, which would once have been dismissed as unworthy of historical attention, reveals a turn towards an interest in performance as well as in everyday life in general. Some studies interpret these ritualized aggressive gestures as demonstrations of masculinity as well as attempts to destroy the honour of the victim (Burke 1987c; Cohen 1992). Others discuss female performances in this domain (Gowing 1996). The social history of language has also been extended to courtroom performances (St George 2000).

The study of rituals and festivals has boomed, partly as a result of the performative turn. Some of these events have been interpreted as performances of consensus, as in the case of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, others as performances of national loyalty, as in a study of the ‘festive state’ in Venezuela, or as performances of memory, in the case of Orange Order parades in Northern Ireland (Guss 2000; Jarman 1997, pp. 1–21; McIntosh 1999, pp. 103–143). A study of processions in eighteenth-century Montpellier emphasizes what might be called ‘the performance of hierarchy’ (Darnton 1984, pp. 107–144).

The notion of ‘performance anxiety’ has been introduced into a discussion of a Renaissance court (Cashman 2002). A recurrent and revealing new phrase in studies of ritualized behaviour is ‘the performance of metaphor’ (Fernandez 1977). The enactment of metaphors of purity, from ethnic ‘cleansing’ to political ‘purges’, makes an obvious and all-too-familiar example.
However, the concept of performance has been extended well beyond these obvious examples. The history of identities in particular has been studied in this way. A study of thirteenth-century Iceland, for instance, discusses honour as something to be performed (Bauman 1986, pp. 131–150). A study of literature in early modern Europe focuses on the ‘performance of nobility’ (Posner 1999). In similar fashion, recent sociological and historical studies have spoken of the performance of ethnicity, paying particular attention to the negotiation of identity and to attempts at ‘passing’ (Sollors 1989; Lesser 1999; Sánchez and Schlossberg 2001).

It is in this context that we should place some recent studies of impostors such as George Psalmanazar and William Morrell, who have become an object of interest today essentially because their unusual careers reveal something of the rules of performance that were dominant in certain places and times (Swiderski 1991; Hug 2003).

Other studies treat gender as something to be performed (Butler 1990; Ditz 1994). An ethnography of a village in Crete makes the point with unusual clarity, not to say drama, describing the local coffeehouse as a stage for the daily performance of masculinity through ritualized aggression (Herzfeld 1985). Again, the wearing of veils by Muslim women used to be interpreted by Western anthropologists as the following of a fixed rule, but it is now seen by some as both voluntary and ‘situational’ (Abu-Lughod 1986, p. 159).

Emotions too are viewed increasingly as being performed. Theatrical metaphors pervade recent discussions of emotions; the ‘emotional repertoire’, for instance, the ‘emotional scripts’ available in a given culture, and the emotional ‘scenarios’, in other words associations between particular situations and particular emotions. Drawing on the work of Austin and on anthropologists inspired by him, the language of emotions has recently been discussed in terms of performance by a number of scholars (Wierzbicka 1999; Bound 2000; Reddy 2001, pp. 51, 59, 96–111). A declaration of love, for instance, has been interpreted not as an expression of a feeling but rather as a strategy to encourage, amplify or even transform the feelings of the beloved.

The term ‘performance’ has even been applied to architecture, developing an older idea of buildings or squares as stages. In the time of Pope Alexander VII, who commissioned the construction of St Peter’s Square in Rome, the square was described as a ‘theatre’. The idea of performance seems more appropriate here than in the case of painting or sculpture because architecture is a collective art in which the design is a script that allows for improvisation on the part of the craftsmen (Krautheimer 1985, pp. 4–6; Heuer 2004).
In short, we see an increasing emphasis on the performance of culture, or a view of culture as a series of performances.

**From Fixity to Fluidity**

What is the significance of the rise of the concept of performance? It reveals a re-interpretation of the old dramaturgical model. Instead of drawing analogies between society and the theatre, the new approach dissolves the boundaries between them. Views of the nature of drama have changed. The notion of a fixed cultural ‘script’ is on its way out, to be replaced by the idea of improvisation or, better, ‘semi-improvisation’. No wonder then that dance history, once left to the musicologists, is now taken seriously by historians as well (Braun and Gugerli 1993; Tardif 2002), as is the history of conversation (Burke 1993).

One of the chief initiators of the change in approach—although he rarely if ever used the term ‘performance’—was the late Pierre Bourdieu. Trained in philosophy, Bourdieu was one of the first Frenchmen to take seriously the ideas of Austin on performative utterances, to which he gave a sociological twist in a little book on the symbolic power of language (Bourdieu 1993; for a critique, see Butler 1999). His notion of ‘symbolic violence’ is also linked to the idea of performance. Still more important, Bourdieu introduced his central concept of the ‘habitus’, the principle of regulated improvisation, in a reaction against the structuralist notion of culture as a system of rules, a notion he had come to regard as too rigid (Bourdieu 1972).

Ritual and festivals are now being approached in a more open way. Older studies of rituals and festivals often assumed that they followed scripts, literally as well as metaphorically (descriptions of festivals were often published at the time of the event, whether they were intended as programmes or as souvenirs). By contrast, recent anthropological studies of ritual emphasize that ‘performance is never mere enactment’ or expression, but has an active role to play (Kapferer 1983, p. 7; cf. Geertz 1980, p. 104). We see a shift from the study of ‘ritual’ as a separate category of human action to the examination of all human behaviour as more or less ‘ritualized’ (Bell 1992; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994).

Scholars increasingly prefer to stress the multiplicity and even the conflict of the meanings of a given festival, a religious feast, in South America, for instance, that may evoke Catholic associations for some participants but traditional African religious associations for others (Guss 2000, p. 7). What used to be treated as the ‘same’ ritual is now regarded as varying significantly on each new occasion of performance.
Hence the increasing emphasis on the part of historians on what went wrong, what ‘misfired’, as Austin used to say. Of course, if meanings are unstable and contested, if there is no ‘correct’ interpretation, terms such as ‘wrong’, ‘misfire’ or even ‘misunderstand’ become inappropriate. However, they can be reformulated in terms of divergences from tradition, from the official point of view, from the intentions of the organizers of a particular ritual and so on. The strategy of studying the gap between ‘script’ and practice remains a valuable one.

A vivid example of the trend comes from a study of executions that criticizes both Foucault and Hay for their emphasis on ‘judicial dramaturgy’, the view from above. In contrast, the author focuses on the reactions of the crowd and the ‘unexpected turns’ which produced ‘a theatre of far greater fluidity’ (Laqueur 1989, p. 309). In similar fashion, some studies of processions have noted how people might come to blows on the most solemn occasions because they held incompatible views of their place in the community, each one claiming that he or she had precedence over the other (Kettering 1978, esp. ch. 1).

In the case of performance in everyday life, one focus of attention has been the expression of attitudes which the performer does not really hold or feel. Thus displays of submission to masters by slaves and to the English middle class by members of the working class have been interpreted as performances, as exaggeration, as ‘putting on’ (Genovese 1974, pp. 609–612; Bailey 1978). As for the masters, ‘If subordination requires a credible performance of humility and deference, so domination seems to require a credible performance of haughtiness and mastery’ (Scott 1990, p. 11).

Problems Arising

The shock value of the performative turn, at least in some instances, deserves to be stressed. The idea of deference as performance is both disturbing and perceptive. The idea of emotions as theatre is scandalous and penetrating at the same time. The idea of violence as performance is even more shocking, since real blood flows, but it is surely illuminating nevertheless, in the case of the terrorism of our time as much as—or even more than—in earlier riots or pogroms.

Problems remain, and it may be useful to point to at least three of them.

In the first place, the postmodern reaction against social determinism is in danger of going too far and denying the cultural or institutional constraints on effective performances. After all, some people have been unsuccessful in their attempts to pass for noble, white, male or whatever. The construction of individual or collective identities is not the work of
insiders alone, performing the persons they wish to be, but of other social
groups as well, including hostile ones. For example, anti-Semites have
contributed to the formation of Jewish identity (Gilman 1986).

Bourdieu was well aware of the importance of social constraints. For
example, he stressed the need for collective recognition to make
performative utterances work. Some discussions of ‘invention’ and
performance, by contrast, appear to take their efficacy for granted.
Ironically enough, this is to deny the importance of occasions, which may
be unfavourable to different types of performance, or produce con-
sequences that the performers never intended.

In the second place, there is the danger of over-extending the idea of
performance. A recent important book on the rituals of the Russian tsars
constantly uses the term ‘scenario’, distinguishing the scenarios of
domesticity, dynasty, enlightenment, friendship, happiness, reform and so
on, all of them viewed as ‘the individual modes of performance of the
imperial myth’ (Wortman 1995, p. 6 and passim). It is surely necessary to
ask what in social life does not count as a scenario or a performance. The
problem is analogous to that of the concept ‘culture’. So much is now
described as ‘culture’ that the term is in danger of losing its meaning
altogether.

In the third place, there is a danger of circularity and of taking
stereotypes for reality. Primed by Goffman, despite the fact that his theory
is ahistorical, a number of historians of the seventeenth and eighteenth
centuries in particular have been impressed by the many metaphors of
theatricality to be found in their sources. The idea of the world as a stage
was a commonplace in the work of Renaissance playwrights from
Shakespeare to Vondel. The fit between sources and concepts is a good
one but it may actually be too good, in the sense that it encourages
historians to accept uncritically the views of themselves that were expressed
by contemporaries.

A way to avoid these problems may be to distinguish two senses of
performance, even if they are two ends of a spectrum rather than two
distinct categories. In the stronger sense of the term, ‘performance’ refers to
formal rituals and festivals, ‘framed’ events that are deliberately set apart
from everyday life. When it is employed to refer to the informal scenarios of
everyday life, on the other hand, the concept is being used in a weaker
sense. The contrast between the two kinds of performance is partly
disguised by the ambiguity of the recurrent term ‘actor’ to refer to the
protagonist of either an action or a play.

Again, distinctions need to be made between the different uses and
meanings of terms such as ‘script’ or ‘scenario’ in different types of
situation—a ritual, a display of emotion, and so on. We surely need to recognize variations between different ‘genres’ of performance (Kapchan 1995), whether or not the differences were recognized by participants (an important matter for empirical investigation in each case).

**The Rise of Occasionalism**

Despite these problems, the concept of performance has the advantage of raising important issues that historians have not yet discussed often enough. The main point to emphasize is the fact that the same people behave in different ways, whether consciously or unconsciously, according to the occasion, situation or, as linguists often say, the ‘domain’ in which they find themselves—public or private, religious or secular, formal or informal. Examples from five domains may be sufficient to develop and illustrate this point: language, art, writing, time and religion.

1. Sociolinguists have long been concerned with what they call ‘code-switching’ and ‘diglossia’, in other words, sudden shifts between one language or one variety of language and another (Ferguson 1959). More recently, historians of language have begun to do the same (Burke 1987b, pp. 6–8). A recent study of the social history of Catalan rejects the traditional argument that Catalonia was simply ‘castilialized’ in the early modern period. Complicating the conventional story, the author speaks of the ‘diglossia’ of Catalans who were bilingual, and who used Castilian on certain occasions and for certain purposes (Marfany 2001).

2. Art historians have been coming to think of style in relation to occasions as well as periods or individuals. As one of them has remarked, artists used different languages in different situations (Marias 1989). Students of the Renaissance, for instance, have noted shifts from Gothic to classical—and back—in the work of sculptors such as Veit Stoss or Tilman Riemenschneider, according to the demands of either the genre or the patron (Kaufmann 1995). Again, in a pioneering study of baroque art, the late Francis Haskell pointed out that a seventeenth-century Sicilian patron, Antonio Ruffo of Messina, asked both Rembrandt and Guercino to paint works in their early styles (Haskell 1963, pp. 209–210). Where their predecessors saw stylistic evolution as part of personal development (*le style, c’est l’homme*), art historians now see code-switching.

3. Writing is often associated with particular situations or occasions. Today, we tend to think of handwriting as the expression of the
individual personality or the culture of a social group. However, it has been argued that in sixteenth-century France, for instance, the handwriting of the same person varied in style according to the occasion (Michaud 1967, p. 308). Styles of handwriting—court hand, secretary hand, merchant hand and so on—were associated with particular functions such as keeping accounts or writing letters to friends. Whether the ability to write one’s name was used at all also depends on the occasion, as a recent study of literacy in early modern Hungary has demonstrated. Some men who were able to sign their names made a cross in the marriage register, probably in order not to embarrass their brides, who were illiterate (Tóth 2000, pp. 61, 69, 106).

4. The social history of time is currently being reinterpreted along similar lines. Where earlier scholars had noted that the perception and experience of time varies in different cultures or in different social groups (peasants, merchants and so on), a few historians, anthropologists and sociologists have recently turned to describing different temporalities in an individual life, in different domains such as work and leisure. Thus a recent study of Trinidad distinguishes ‘multiple routines’ for different activities such as work, school, the home and so on, and redefines punctuality to mean arriving at an appropriate moment for a given activity. ‘Each time has its own form of punctuality’ (Birth 1999, p. 141; cf. Burke 2004).

5. The last domain to be discussed here is that of religion. A generation ago, Clifford Geertz argued that individuals move ‘more or less easily and very frequently between radically contrasting ways of looking at the world’ (Geertz 1973, p. 120). At the time the idea seemed disturbing, but now it is widely accepted. Since then, historians of religion, particularly historians of missions, have gradually abandoned the idea that missionaries simply ‘converted’ people from one religion to another. Some historians now speak in terms of syncretism or hybridity, while others place more emphasis on pluralism, in other words the practice of worshipping different gods on different occasions, such as the Brazilians who go to Mass on one day and to candomblé on another, who honour the Virgin Mary and also her African equivalent, Iemenjá. In similar fashion, historians of medicine have noted the pragmatic pluralism of sick people who seek a cure from different kinds of healer professing different systems of medicine.

Certain kinds of locale encourage or at least facilitate switching between different roles and performances. The city is an obvious instance. In his
book *Soft City*, the writer Jonathan Raban has described the way in which the Kray twins, confidence tricksters, took advantage of the London environment to appear in different roles to different ‘audiences’. He went on to suggest that this plasticity, or ‘softness’, is a feature of life in the large city, because anonymity allows the individual to ‘pass’ for what he or she is not by moving from one locale to another (Raban 1974).

Urban historians have begun to pay attention to this topic, notably for the nineteenth century, discussing, for instance, women who dressed as men in order to walk the streets of the city, among them George Sand and Flora Tristán (Nord 1995, pp. 117 – 120). However, much remains to be done. In the case of early modern Spain, for instance, the rise of the picaresque novel, in which urban settings predominate and the rogue hero or anti-hero adopts many roles in the course of the story, suggests that some contemporaries at least were already aware of the softness of the city. I discuss the linked questions of anonymity and performance in the early modern city in a forthcoming article.

Prolonged cultural encounters, such as the encounters between Europeans and the inhabitants of other continents in the past five centuries, also encourage this kind of switching. The Japanese, for instance, sometimes use the phrase ‘the double life’ to describe the way in which they have managed to participate, since the mid-nineteenth century, in Western culture while maintaining their own traditions in food, clothes, housing, reading and so on, often segregating the two cultures rather than mixing them (Witte 1928; Seidensticker 1983, pp. 90, 109).

In short, former assumptions of cultural fixity have been replaced by assumptions of individual and group flexibility. Hence the growing popularity of the term ‘negotiation’ among scholars with very different interests, from translation to religion and from politics to science. Recent discussions include the negotiation of fatherhood, sanctity, national identity and the language of chemistry. This emphasis on flexibility is obviously related to the rise of micro-history, in particular to the variety of micro-history practised by Giovanni Levi. Levi defines micro-history more precisely, indeed more narrowly than most practitioners, in terms of the capacity for ordinary individuals to find or make spaces for themselves in the interstices of social systems, spaces that are visible only under the historical microscope (Levi 1991).

**Consequences**

In one field after another, the occasionalist turn has provided new interpretations of familiar material. It remains to ask, first, whether there
are any general methodological consequences of this turn, and second, whether occasionalism, like so many solutions to intellectual problems, has produced new problems itself.

At least four points about historical method need to be made. The principal moral of the story told here is obvious enough. The concrete examples discussed in the last few pages provide a good deal of ammunition for attacks on simple linear accounts of social or cultural change, whether they are couched in terms of the modernizing, the Westernizing or the civilizing process. Thus the Japanese did not so much shift from indigenous tradition to Western modernity as add modernity to their repertoire, while conserving tradition as an alternative available for use on particular occasions (especially private occasions in what Goffman calls the ‘back regions’).

In the second place, the performative turn implies that attention may fruitfully be given to the study of the history of objects or activities that were long dismissed as trivial, including clothes, everyday language, dancing and gesturing. Clothes, for example, may be viewed, as they are by Daniel Roche, as accessories or ‘properties’ that enhance particular performances of identity (Roche 1989). Speech, gesture and dance are forms of performance that reveal a great deal about the culture of the performers (Bremmer and Roodenburg 1991; Braun and Gugerli 1993).

In the third place, it is worth emphasizing that the concepts ‘performance’ and ‘occasion’ undermine, or at least have the potential to undermine, traditional forms of historical explanation. In the past, it was common to assume consistency in the behaviour of individuals. Historians used to explain many actions in the form of the statement ‘A did B because he or she was a C’ (a bourgeois, a Puritan, a Balinese, or whatever). A performance-centred approach, on the other hand, encourages us to offer explanations of the form ‘A did B because he or she was in a situation which required C’ (confrontation, say, or compromise).

Fourth and finally, the occasionalist turn has serious implications for source criticism. Many historical sources might be described as ‘snapshots’, taken from a certain viewpoint at a certain moment. Even if they record accurately what was visible in that situation, which is not always the case, generalizing to other situations in the same culture is fraught with difficulties. This point deserves to be borne in mind not only in the case of photographs (or more generally, of visual representations), but in that of literary sources as well.

Take the case of foreign travellers, for instance, their eyes sharpened by the exotic setting but at the same time innocent in the sense that visitors are generally unfamiliar with the cultural conventions and unaware of what is
happening back stage. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century a Frenchman in Brazil observed an upper-class child dressed as an adult. A historian using this source drew conclusions about the brevity of childhood in that milieu, without asking whether the same child might have worn different clothes in the house and in the street, on weekdays and Sundays, and so on. A fluid situation has been presented as if it were frozen (Freyre, 1936, pp. 68–69, 92; cf. Aries 1960, passim).

There can be little doubt that the occasionalist approach has revealed problems that were not taken seriously enough before. There is a good case for saying that the approach has also solved some problems. Has it also produced new problems of its own? It may be argued that the last question is premature, an attempt to go beyond a particular approach before that approach has been fully developed or theorized. On the other hand, it is never too early to be self-critical, and some of the examples cited above certainly raise problems.

One of these examples is the so-called ‘double life’ of the Japanese. It is necessary to ask who lived this life, a minority or a majority of the population. What is more, a historical answer to the question would have to stress the change between the late nineteenth century, when a minority participated in Western culture as well as their own, and our own time, when traditional Japanese culture has become the concern of a minority. There has been a shift from Japanese houses with a Western room to Western apartments with a Japanese room. Only for a brief moment does the cultural life of some Japanese appear to have been genuinely double.

More generally, we might ask whether historians or sociologists should treat all occasions and situations as equal, or whether their relative importance for individuals and groups should be one of the problems to investigate. As in the case of performances, we might distinguish different kinds of occasion: ordinary, formal (requiring choices from the special repertoire of ‘best’ behaviour), and extraordinary (events such as wars, revolutions or disasters demanding responses that are not in the repertoire).

Questions that might be asked, and surely will be asked in the near future, concern possible compatibilities and incompatibilities between the behaviour expected in different situations; definitions of the situation, whether or not they are contested; and frontiers between locales, the relative ease or difficulty of cultural segregation. After all, in many places and in many periods there is abundant evidence of cultural mixing as well as cultural apartheid.

The purpose of this article is not to present occasionalism as a panacea, but simply to note some convergences between research in different
domains and to attempt to draw out some of the implications of the performative turn. It should be read as an invitation to further discussions and debates.

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