S K E N È

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Preface

It must have been in 2007, at the Casa della Poesia in Milan, where Alessandro Serpieri and I had been invited by colleague and poet Tomaso Kemeny to talk about our recent translation of John Donne's poems for Rizzoli, when I saw Serpieri's perhaps most gratified reaction ever to a comment on his work as a critic. That comment had been made by Kemeny who had introduced him to the audience. 'Transitions' was the word he had used. After the talk, Serpieri told me why he was so pleased with it: because that word had beautifully caught the sense of movement, transformation, translation, interpretation, discovery that was at the basis of what he liked to call 'adventures' of the mind, a synonym for critical enquiry.

Adventures: he often enjoyed to repeat that all critical *élan* originates in one's need to recover a lost sense of wonder, and that interpreting and letting the text speak to us was a way, perhaps the best way, to recover that wonder, while responding to a deep existential tension towards always new trajectories and possibilities of sense. Only by feeling that urge could criticism be 'adventurous' – and wondrous. This is perhaps one of the first teachings he imparted to many of us, passing down to the younger generations the idea that our critical job was not a 'job' at all; it was a continuous response to that original need. Establishing a dialogue with great literary works and letting different voices and imaginations talk to each other through time was our privilege. He was extraordinarily and painfully aware of the passing of time, and to it he devoted seminal studies: to Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest* and, before then, to Eliot's *The Waste Land*, to name but a few. But he was also amazingly capable of neutralizing time imaginatively – himself remaining forever young, as he was to write in his novel *Mare Scritto* (2007b).

Transitions: the title of this Special Issue is meant to suggest ideas of movement and exploration of texts, languages, modes and genres and the investigation of their connections across time. It also wants to keep a dialogue alive with Alessandro Serpieri on some of the main fields of his research in drama and theatre studies: transitions from sources to texts and genres, from page to stage, from one language to another, from poetry to

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drama, or drama in poetry, from deep to surface structures, finally, from criticism to creative writing. This special Issue collects articles from colleagues and friends who in different ways have collaborated with the Journal and the *Skenè* research group. From the editorial board and staff and from the contributors to this Issue, our gratitude for his unstinting intellectual generosity towards us all.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

In 2015 Alessandro Serpieri published his most recent collection of studies, *Avventure dell'interpretazione*. In many ways, it synthesizes the critical approach he developed in the course of his career, spanning poetry and drama as well as critical theory. This Preface does not wish to talk *about* Serpieri's work but to continue to talk *with* him on some of the issues that, as that book shows, stand behind his critical approach, investing the problem itself of criticism as interpretation. On 9 and 10 May 2018 a Conference was held in his honour in Florence and was entitled *Avventure dell'interpretazione*, recalling the title of that book which I had the honour of including in the *Anglica* Series (ETS) I am co-editor of. This Preface will offer only a few notes on the same topic, which I happened to discuss with Alessandro Serpieri in 2015 on the occasion of my presentation of the book at Gabinetto Viesseux in Florence.

My starting point are two quotations from two essays on Shakespeare:

> Editing means also interpreting, and interpretation is the first job of any reader, and most of all of the translator who has to cope with the variant readings transmitted by the early texts, to distinguish misreadings, to consider emendations, and finally to choose or to establish one's text. At least on a theoretical basis, the translator should have an adequate grounding in textual criticism. (Serpieri 2014a: 167)

> It is an *imagination in action* in that it does not follow a linear progression of meaning, but rather develops according to a serpentine, dynamic movement that produces sense both expanding the previous one and contracting it in order to release new unexpected sense. The dramatic discourse unfolds itself according to the circumstantial standpoints of characters who, at the same time, think, feel and act. (Serpieri 2007a: 165)

When in his essay on the Shakespearean translator as editor (2014a) Serpieri connected the act of reading with interpretation, he was not voicing a truism, nor was he entirely uncontroversial. With the advent of deconstructionism, cultural studies, and performance studies, to name but a few critical approaches in various ways contesting the idea of text, the very concept of interpretation has become debatable. If writing is the locus of

the absence of the author-god and of original meaning, all textual interpretation is a 'theological' concept contrary to the infinite possibilities of *différance* and of free play within a context where centres may be substituted and meaning made endless (Derrida 2005: 278). Derrida picked play texts, and their theatrical mounting, as a paradigm of what he stigmatized, and condemned, as false representations. For him a 'theology of the stage' defined a series of surrogate representatives of the absent author, emblematic of all signifying processes activated by the written word as well as by a text-oriented theatre. Theatre (and the world-as-theatre) was thus criticized for being dependent upon

> an author-creator who, absent and from afar, is armed with a text and keeps a watch over, assembles, regulates the time or the meaning of representation, letting this latter *represent* him as concerns what is called the content of his thoughts, his intentions, his ideas. He lets representation represent him through representatives, directors or actors, enslaved interpreters who represent characters who, primarily through what they say, more or less directly, represent the thought of the 'creator'. Interpretative slaves who faithfully execute the providential designs of the 'master'. (2005: 296)

As is well known, this critique, which in fact subsumed a precise hostility towards an ideology of power inscribed within the logos, was not limited to theatre but invested the whole universe of texts and signs, discovering the existence of a chain of signifiers devoid of stable signifieds, a series of shifting meaning(s) inhabited by *différe/ance*. From such a resistance to all deferred interpretation and representation of the absent author, and consequent suspicion about the authority of texts, a new emphasis originated on the 'democratization' of critical, performative, as well as translational practices. At the same time, a reconfiguration of culture as performance was ready to embrace ideas of cultural variables and collaborative activity within both special contexts and our everyday life, making for a (claimed) horizontal, 'democratic' relation between interacting people, in place of a 'vertical', hierarchical textualized culture. As Schechner wrote in his 2002 introductory volume to performance studies, all this took place "during the last third of the twentieth century" when the world changed its configuration and "no longer appeared as a book to be read but as a performance to participate in" because of new types of knowledge and the "new means of distributing [it] via the internet" (21). Thus understood as an integrating and collaborative form of meaning-making, the word 'performance' has come to be applied to our way of inhabiting the world precisely in the same way as it has been used in the context of theatre, where it has implied the dissolution of the subject/object opposition and emphasised

"the bodily co-presence of actors and audience" creating "a relationship between co-subjects" (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 32).

These cursory references to a much more complex picture than I can draw here,[1] testify to why pairing reading and interpretation, in the first quotation above, is not wholly indisputable. They suggest that the use of the word interpretation itself requires that one takes a stand with regard to its meaning in relation to an idea of text.

In that 2015 volume on 'adventures of interpretation' Alessandro Serpieri did so, starting precisely from the Platonic episode from *Phaedrus* on which Derrida (1982) too relied to uphold the ingrained ambivalence of writing as *pharmakon*, or the locus where antinomies undecidably co-exist.[2] Although discussing the same Platonic passage, their paths radically diverged. Contrary to Derrida, Serpieri contended that it is precisely the written text that triggers its dialogue with the reader, as it is the origin and the foundation of the hermeneutic process it elicits; a process based upon an idea of presence, rather than absence, as guarantor of meaning, and of a centred structure allowing for an interpretative play within the boundaries of textual centredeness. It is in this perspective that 'editing' in the quotation above means interpreting, and interpreting, in its turn, translating, as traditionally in Latin, where *interpres* literally meant (intralingual) translator. That is why translators, Serpieri claims, should be textual critics too. This means possessing (with regard to Shakespeare) "a profound knowledge of the early modern period and the dramaturgical and theatrical structures and conventions"; command of early modern English and of Shakespeare's canon, but also "a theoretical competence in the peculiarities of dramatic discourse in order to render the virtual theatricality of speeches for delivery of stage" (2014a: 167-8). And here the second quote above becomes relevant.

In that essay (2007a), significantly entitled "Poetry in Action", Serpieri commented on Coleridge's definition of Shakespeare's imagination as based on transitions and creations out of created images that translate in-

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[1] Including cognate debate on suspicion of theory alongside a still ongoing confrontation between continental and analytical positions within a context of opposing cultural stances, New Formalism, and the free co-creative subjectivism of performance studies. For a recent reassessment of this critical panorama, see Serpieri (2014b), Bigliazzi and Gregori (eds. 2014), Bigliazzi (2014).

[2] This is the episode when Socrates tells about the Egyptian god Theuth's proposal of writing to king Thamus as a "remedy to help memory" and the king's subsequent rejection because he only considered it as an instrument of passive imitation, thus unable to guarantee knowledge.

to a serpentine style, "for ever twisting and untwisting its own strength".[3] "Such a mobile, restless, and inventive, imagination", he remarked, "often forces language to new modes of expression, in terms both of neologisms and of original syntactical constructs, and thus provides an endless hermeneutic challenge for critics and translators". Thus, rhetoric becomes central to literary studies, and especially to drama studies, for the performative energy it inflates into speech acts.

All this is key for an understanding of Serpieri's own interpretative theory. In the 2015 volume, interpreting entails a dialogue with the literary work in terms of the performance of its "implications and overdeterminations" (2015: 8).[4] These require from the reader (and spectator) "active and problematic comprehension . . . destined never to pacify itself in definitive knowledge" (ibid.). The text as a signifying system awaits to be activated along trajectories encoded within the textual fabric. This suggests that all interpretation is geared to the inexhaustible resources of the text, and yet it is not endlessly open. It is limited by the dialogue with what Umberto Eco called *intentio operis* (see 1979, 1992), and Jonathan Culler "the legible and the illegible", "the role of gaps and silence, opacity" (2008: 304), and Serpieri considered as the internal cohesion of the text in its continuous exchange with the cultural codes and other texts (2015: 51). In this regard Serpieri writes in this book:

> The artist devises beyond a programme or rational design, beyond what he already knows, in order to grasp his own real-symbolic-imaginary world, transposing and reconfiguring it in textual worlds. The reader, or the professional critic, is called to go all the way back: from the manifest linguistic structures, whose configuration is not erasable, to the identification of the imaginative-imaginary *energy* that deeply holds together the expressive articulation of the work. This articulation is the energy that presides over the literary texture and is re-activated by each reading – past, contemporary or future. There are many ways to respect the revelations and secrets of a text: many, yet not infinite. (2015: 10-11)

[3] "In Shakespeare one sentence begets the next naturally; the meaning is all interwoven. He goes on kindling *like a meteor* through the dark atmosphere . . . Shakespeare's intellectual action is wholly unlike that of Ben Jonson or Beaumont and Fletcher. The latter see the totality of a sentence or passage, and then project it entire. Shakespeare goes on creating, and evolving B. out of A., and C. out of B., and so on, just *as a serpent moves*, which makes a fulcrum of its own body, and seems for ever twisting and untwisting its own strength": from *Specimens of the Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (2nd edition, London 1836), 7 April 1833 and 5 March 1834, qtd in Serpieri (2007: 165).

[4] All translations of the excerpts from Serpieri (2015) are mine.

The assumption is that literary meaning offers itself through a cyphered language which turns the text into "a sort of oracle – yet a very peculiar one, since, at the same time, it allows interrogation and interrogates on its own meaning" (10). Within this 'oracular' context, literary interpretation shapes itself as a form of intellectual adventure, involving the pleasure of discovering possible secret meanings in a continuous dialogue with the 'other', that is, the author-text. It is a dynamic process consisting in the performance of a signifying subtext or intratext that awaits to be disclosed: a 'music score' whose aesthetic and informative import resides in the precarious balance between the norm and its subversion, the known and the unexpected, order and disorder (52).

Thus, Serpieri refuses the idea of the death of the author, while rejecting critical biographism as a hermeneutical prop. In such cases as Wordsworth's *Prelude*, which constitutes a sort of palimpsest risking drastic reduction when limited to only one of its witnesses, Serpieri interrogates the radical inconclusiveness of the process of composition and assimilates to it his own experience as reader, himself in his turn author of a critical palimpsest:

> If, therefore, in its various redactions the narration strives to achieve the objectivity of the past but discovers *varied representations of the self*, why should the reader concentrate on *one* version only, and would it not become inevitable to offer a comparative reading of all the redactions of the poem? On the other hand, my own critical reading, belonging to various periods in the course of more than twenty years, constitutes in some way a palimpsest, because, like autobiographic writing, which variously focuses on the past, interpretation shows adjustments depending on the autobiographical perspective of the same interpreter. However, this does not mean that the text has lost centre stage; in fact, it is perhaps even more central since it revolves around its inventive variants. (95)

The same applies to the playtext, and to the particular case of unstable non-authorially transmitted ones. In this regard (reference is to Shakespeare's plays),

> [i]f we puristically choose one redaction without accepting any plausible or functional variant from any other redaction, there will always remain a *squinty* effect of interference of one or more other discarded versions. If instead we collate one or more redactions, according to a declared philological and critical criterion, we will create a conjectural stereoscopic effect. (99)

However, "may we be sure that by collating two redactions on the basis of a philologically argued selective criterion we may not get closer to the *fluidity* of the text itself, and possibly to one of its redactions that has not

been transmitted to us, standing *between* the quarto and the Folio version?" (99). From a theoretical point of view, these few examples confirm the centrality of the text in the interpretative process, even when its intentionality is fluid and mutable in time (as in the case of Wordsworth's *Prelude*), or when the text appears unstable.

To return to where we started from: in the third part of that 2015 volume, Serpieri discusses a particular type of interpretation: translation. The emphasis is on the textual signifying devices rather than on the verbal material, which inevitably gets lost in the process (140). If "poetry lies in the body of words, in the rhythmical scansion", Serpieri argues, it "also lies in the nexuses and disjunctions, in the argumentative and rhetorical articulation, in the 'figures' of speech and in the 'figures' of thought, and so on" (ibid.). This texture, involving both semantics and syntax (Serpieri 2013), is more or less reproducible in a different language, at least more reproducible than the rhythmical sequences and sound patterns. Therefore,

> a regular metre, such as the Italian hendecasyllable, where to locate – who knows how – the English iambic pentameter (an entirely different metrical-rhythmical and sound material), in my opinion is a bad bet from the start, unless we aim at a version rather than a translation. Whoever presumes to rewrite in a different language a sonnet by Shakespeare as if Shakespeare were to rewrite it now in that language is a victim of an illusion that aims at exercising its own poetic taste. (145)

That is why it is necessary to let the energy of the text migrate into the new text as a continuous passage, and tension, between the known and the unknown. That original energy should be recreated in the target text within the target culture, hybridising it, while not recreating it, in ways that risk "homologating the original text to the poetic models and to the horizon of expectations of the target culture" (145). Thus, the drama text should be interpreted in its scenic virtuality, both proxemic and deictic, by exploring a precise performative subtext. After all,

> The translation of drama may always get lost, being caught between the ambition for high decontextualized literature and the need for the theatrical functionality of the language of drama – which, conceived for the stage, hosts all its performative energy in connection with the extralingual codes, and does so *by subtraction* of the lingual-literary 'fullness', that is, of that semantic autonomy which can be found in the other literary genres. (155)

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This Issue is divided into three main sections. The first one includes two articles by the editors who originally embarked on the *Skenè* 'adventure' with

Alessandro Serpieri. Their two essays, on Euripides' *Electra* and Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, share memories of collaboration and exchange of ideas with him on interdisciplinary approaches to textual and philological studies of playtexts and in relation to stagecraft and issues of performance. These two articles are meant to be a tribute to that memory.

The essays collected in the second section tackle questions of literary theory and cognitive studies through a comparative approach to transitions between Shakespeare and Philp H. Dick's posthumanity (Angela Locatelli); an uncanny construction of femininity in *The Duchess of Malfi* and related cultural transitions from stage to Court (Clara Mucci); the reshaping of gender subjectivities in Felicia Hemans's *The Vespers of Salerno* within national and transnational contexts (Lilla Maria Crisafulli); the survival of the figure of Ophelia in Italian male-chauvinist Fascist culture as an "erased or grotesque figure" and Alba De Cespedes' subsequent treatment of the Ophelia-subtext (Maria Del Sapio Garbero); Carmelo Bene's rewritings and adaptations of *Hamlet* (Fernando Cioni); a contemporary 'dark' reinterpretation of *The Merchant of Venice* in the 2015 Globe production, with a focus on its added performative paratexts (Roberta Mullini); and, finally, Beckett's challenging revision of the idea itself of tragedy – and the tragic – in *Not I*, and his raising radical questions for a rethinking of the Aristotelian precepts (Carla Locatelli).

The Special Section opens with three contributions devoted to various aspects of generic, textual, rhetorical and philological transitions: the first one discusses Thomas Nashe's move from drama to pamphlet writing on the occasion of the composition of *Lenten Stuff* (Valerio Viviani), while the following two deal with *Hamlet*, offering some reflections on the Prince's textual encoding of a pretence of madness (Guido Paduano) and on the category of 'origin' from both a philological/textual perspective and an authorial one (Rosy Colombo). The next two articles shift the attention to Alessandro Serpieri's work on Shakespeare as both editor and translator, focusing on his latest parallel edition of *Re Lear* (Claudia Corti) and on the performative potential of his translations of *The Tempest* and *Richard II* once brought on stage (Eric Nicholson). The final three pieces are translations of a critical chapter on Shakespeare and Eros co-authored by Alessandro Serpieri and Keir Elam, an imaginary 'Interview with Prospero' co-authored by Alessandro Serpieri and Pino Colizzi, and, to conclude, the translation of the closing page of Serpieri's *Mare Scritto* novel: *Ouverture*. A last tribute of deep friendship and gratitude is Tomaso Kemeny's final "Words for Sandro". We would all like to join Tomaso in that address, with the same friendship and gratitude.

Our deepest thanks go to Alessandro Serpieri's family. To Chiara Serpieri, who supported us in this 'adventure' with constant advice and precious

suggestions, goes our warmest gratefulness. It is thanks to Chiara if this Issue closes with Sandro's extraordinary *Ouverture*: his invaluable testimony that after all we can only start again.

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