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Other as Self: Identification as Recognition and Defamiliarization in Drama¹

In an earlier study which focused on the lyric (see Eoyang), I explored three notions in the study of identity: (1) quiddity — a deictic thusness of being; (2) propinquity, a relatedness, in time, place, or association; and (3) oddity, a discreteness, involving particularity and originality. With drama,² these three notions operate in tellingly different ways. Whereas in lyric, the relationship between reader and poet is one of identity during the process of reading the text, in drama, the relationship is more in terms of identification, where the psychological difference between a reader who is a personified *I*, as in lyric, is replaced by (1) an audience which constitutes a real community, and (2) actors on the stage, which constitutes a vicarious community. Together, they represent an actually as well as a virtually present *we*. But, whereas the pleasures and the effect of the lyric involve intense subjectivities, drama entails a heightened sense of objectivities, third-person observations, or alienation effects, rather than first-person symbioses.

In drama, the relationship across the proscenium is not an I-I relationship, but a we-them relationship, for the audience has dominion over the actors, even, ultimately, over the playwright, for it is the audience that ratifies a play as a successful construct of the imagination. It is the audience

1 Presented in absentia to the conference on "Subjectivity/Cultural Identity in an Age of Globalization," 26-27 May, 2001, in Taipei. I am indebted to Professor Andy Leung Yiu-nam for presenting this paper in my absence.

2 I restrict myself, for the most part, to modern Western drama, because the aesthetics of other traditions—Chinese, Japanese, Indian, etc.—involve different paradigms that would require a different line of analysis.

that confers reality to the play. What happens on the stage involves a different kind of quiddity than we encountered in the lyric, for the quiddity is not, as it is in the lyric, imaginary or abstract, but palpable and real, in the form of the performance, and in the presence of the actors. (The reading of a play is a more inadequate exercise than the reading of a poem, because the reader needs to imagine him- or herself as an audience rather than as a surrogate author.) Drama involves not so much shared subjectivities between author and reader as shared communal experiences, which, when codified and repeated, attain the status of ritual. What is witnessed on the stage is not a surrogate *I*, but a distanced and alienated if individualized *them*. Where lyric creates a psychological intimacy, an ontological equivalence between the lyric voice of the poet and the lyric sympathies of the reader, drama creates a buffered reality, a reality which is virtual rather than real. It is precisely the ontological gap represented by the proscenium that enables the audience to project itself into the action. Otherwise the enjoyment of a tragedy would border on sadism, and the enjoyment of comedy — relishing the misfortunes and misunderstandings of others — would be meanspirited. Laughter, it has been maintained, is the sense of relief that something painful or unfortunate is happening to somebody else. In the theatre, since what is presented is an illusion and professedly unreal, one can indulge in mirth without ethical guilt and one can absorb oneself in tragedy without morbidity.

If the notion of quiddity, the deictic thusness of the performance, both acted and witnessed, provides a measure of heightened excitement to the experience of drama (in contrast to the circumstances of reading poetry, where the time *at which* one reads and the place *in which* one reads, is, for the most part, immaterial), it is partly because the second factor in identity — propinquity or relatedness — enhances the immediacy prompted by the first. But it is an ambivalent, protected relatedness, as if those present — actor and audience — shared two halves of the same temporal space: the first offering a virtual depiction of reality, the second responding with real emotions to the performance. If Marianne Moore could refer to poetry as “imaginary gardens with real toads in them,” drama can be likened to the depiction of imaginary events that elicit real emotion. The ambivalence creates a tension of verisimilitude, where the lifelikeness of what is happening on the stage declares that it is an imitation, however realistic or unrealistic, and therefore not life itself. If it were life, and not a virtual version of it, the audience would have the moral responsibility to intercede in any act of cruelty or malice. Mere witness to an impending tragedy is morally indefensible if the

bystander can prevent a fatality: that is the point posed at the beginning of the movie *Medium Cool* (Haskell Wexler's first film), in which a photographer stops at a car accident, and instead of helping the victims to secure first aid and medical treatment continues to photograph the scene as the life of the casualties peters out. The same moral crime was committed by the genre of “snuff” movies of the seventies (which may be urban myth), when film actresses were not told that their rape and their killing depicted on screen were going to be real rather than virtual. Hardcore pornography also suffers from this confusion between actual and virtual because in physiologically authentic sexual intercourse there can be no “acting.”

The strength of drama is not that it is realistic, but rather that, realistic as it may or may not be, it is *not* reality: it only alludes to reality. The dynamics of the experience of witnessing drama constitutes both an *othering* of the actors on the part of the audience, and, at the same time, an identification on the part of the audience with each character. We might say that our relationship to the performing actor is a kind of “propinquitous alienation” — where we feel at the same time very close (physically and phenomenologically) to the actor, yet very distant (psychologically), for we are reassured by the fact that we are not the actors on the stage. In drama, the “othering” of the performers is as important for the audience as the identification of each self in the audience with each character on the stage.

The third factor in identity — oddity, with its emphasis on particularity verging on originality — is equally complex in the dynamics of the theater. For there is a normative impulse in theatrical writing, where the words and gestures of the performers must be immediately recognizable to the audience. If there is originality in a production or in a script, it must not lie in a uniqueness so opaque, so eccentric that the audience can take no part in certifying it as familiar and lifelike. If the play conjures up nothing that the audience has previously experienced or imagined, the reaction is likely to be befuddlement, resentment, or boredom.³ Yet, if the entire production is altogether familiar and mundane, it descends to the dubious level of soap opera, where ordinary experience is presented pretentiously as worthy of theatrical notice. Here, the originality of the writing and the production must lift the drama from the doldrums of melodrama, yet it cannot be absolute or arbitrary, but must ingeniously surprise and delight at the same time, as if what

3 I am concentrating here, of course, on the realist theater and excluding the pre-modern tradition of heroic or religious drama.

is being discovered was there all the time, but previously unnoticed. This is a different form of the *Verfremdungseffekt* that Brecht advocated, underlining the fictiveness of the theatrical presentation; it is, rather, a defamiliarization of banalities carried to unexpected but logical extremes, whether it is the doddering folly of a King Lear, the self-destructive hubris of an Oedipus, or the neurotic indecision of a Hamlet.

The third component of identity, what I have characterized as “oddity,” particularity, or originality, plays perhaps the most complex role of all in any generic analysis of drama. For if, as we have suggested, drama must be constructed out of elements that the audience can both recognize and identify with, wherein lies the compelling interest in a play, when our own real lives elicit only indifferent attention? If the constituents of dramatic writing in the realist theater derive from ordinary experience, then (1) where is the originality in the play, and (2) how does the uniqueness of each member of the audience relate to the action on stage? The particularity in a play must proceed out of the unique alchemy that the playwright creates out of mundane materials. The familiarity of the content solicits our assent, but it is the uniqueness of its vision, not to mention the idiosyncratic imagination that each play demonstrates, that inspires admiration. In this sense, each play must, like us, resemble all other plays generically, yet, again like us, it must differ from each other instance, and retain its unmistakable individuality. As for the phenomenon of audience identification, a successful play cannot merely mirror familiar content: it must reveal an aspect of quotidian reality that we might not have noticed before, or an insight into experience which has eluded our intelligence. A successful play creates a heightened sense of its own character (its originality) as well as of our own (our identity), both as individuals and as part of a community.

Let us explore these perspective in three very different plays, one a classic realist period piece, the second a modern lyrical drama, and the third an eerie contemporary work of postmodern symbolism: Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and David Henry Hwang's *The Sound of a Voice* (1983).

Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is by now a museum piece as well as a monument to the struggle for equal rights for women. Though separated from modern audiences by over a century, it has an uncanny relevance to today's feminist movement. Nora's departure — the now historic slamming of the door with which the play ends is echoed in Mrs. Kramer leaving an ordinary marriage to pursue her own identity in Robert Benton's 1979 academy Award movie,

Kramer vs. Kramer. Yet, it is interesting that, unlike Shakespeare, for whom countless versions in modern dress have been mounted, Ibsen is almost always played in period costume and period sets. Of course, from the modern perspective, the ornate Victorian aesthetic partly symbolizes the oppressive atmosphere — gilded cages — in which women of the Victorian period lived. Yet, one should not forget that in Ibsen's time, this decor was contemporary, even modern, and would not have been considered by Victorian audiences as anything but a neutral and natural background. What, in other words, is distant, even strange to us, was neither distant nor strange to Ibsen or to his audiences.

Yet, what is remarkable about Ibsen's plays — which reflects both his genius and the lack of social progress in the issues he raised — is how contemporary they are for us. That contemporaneity lies neither in the social background evinced in his text, nor in the historical background implicit in his drama: it lies in his remarkable ability to address profoundly complex social problems, and his uncanny insights into human nature.

Torvald Helmer's opening reference to Nora, “Is that my little sky-lark chirruping out there?” finds resonance in current English slang for one's girlfriend, now streamlined to “Bird.” And Nora's spendthrift ways seem unabated after a century in our consumerist, shop-until-you-drop society. Christmas is, if anything, more commercial than it was in Ibsen's day: its depiction in *A Doll's House* seems very *au courant*. Nora's sensible declaration in Act III still rings true today, and is still very much in need of being said: “I believe first and foremost I am an individual, just as much as you are — or at least I'm going to try to be. . . . I'm not content any more with what most people say, or with what it says in books. I have to think things out for myself, and get things clear.” Nor is the generic male chauvinist selfishness of Torvald Helmer a thing of the past, as we can verify in contemporary experience with the legions of young males in relationships who are reluctant — as the saying goes — “to make a commitment.” Countless women have “slammed the door” on relationships where the male partner was no better than Torvald Helmer in expecting a “trophy wife,” or as Nora says to Torvald, “your doll wife.” And when Nora leaves Torvald, not out of resentment, nor out of revenge, but for the sake of equality, she is espousing an ideal which, to this day, has not been entirely achieved: “Listen, Torvald, from what I've heard, when a wife leaves her husband's house as I am doing now, he is absolved by law of all responsibility for her... You must not feel in any way bound, any more than I shall. There must be full freedom on both sides” (Act III).

The psychodynamics between the audience and the performance involve an expanded notion of psychological projection. As with anything fictive, the audience must not limit itself to literal realities, and males in the audience must respond to Nora's plight just as much as females. In that perspective, the sense of one's own identity must be capacious, and on an imaginative level, it must approximate the "negative capability" (in Keats' phrase) of the playwright. The individual member of the audience must recognize Nora's plight as authentic, and part of that authenticity is evinced by the just characterization of the actors on the stage. To the extent that each member of the audience can privately certify the versimilitude of each character in the play, the impact of the play will be that much greater. But there is yet another factor, which is the audience's response not to the character on the stage, but to the actor's performance in each role. The pleasure derived from the performance also depends on the aptness of the acting, and its cogency, both technical (the effectiveness of the delivery) and psychological (the persuasiveness of the portrayal). There is, in this dynamic, a rich and complex interplay of identities: the identity of each individual member of the audience, the identity of the role as depicted in the script by the playwright, and the identity of the actors performing in each role in the play.

What is purveyed is, in the end, not a perception of each character in the play so much as multiple versions of a central character (the witness to the play): one is not obliged to identify subjectively with each character or to sympathize with each actor equally, but one is obliged to sense the "otherness" not only of the performers on the stage, but phenomenologically, to sense the "otherness" of each character to the other characters. This appreciation for the "otherness" in dramatic performance enhances not only the spectacle of the experience (watching experience from the outside), it also enriches an expanded experience of the self, for in appreciating the "loneliness" of each character on the stage (the Japanese would call it *mono no aware*), the witness to a dramatic performance shares in a common experience of individual loneliness, which involves the realization not only that one routinely suffers from being "othered" by others, and, more self-critically, that one is often guilty of "othering" others advertently or inadvertently. These forms of the subjective alienation of others includes, but is not restricted to, prejudice.

The effect of drama on the audience is ambivalent: it requires the audience to identify with the characters in some measure, but it always interposes a phenomenological buffer, the proscenium, which "alienates" the viewer from what is viewed. What one identifies with appears in an "other"

— one's own feelings are now represented in a different skin, in a third person, the actor. It is not so much the self that is projected on the stage, but an "otherized" version of the multiple facets of the self, set at arm's length, so to speak, in order to be objective about what is too often opaque when it is too subjectively close. (This recalls the phenomenon, familiar to parents with children too much like themselves, in which it is easier to punish one's own faults in one's offspring, than to address those faults directly.) Drama has a way of providing, not a mirror, but a panopticon ("an institution for...promoting discoveries...") in which one sees oneself in others.

The realist theater focuses, of course, on reality, but later traditions of the theater (partly initiated by Ibsen himself in his later plays) use symbolism to explore the illusions in life, as well as realities as illusions. No play explores this theme more tellingly, or movingly, than Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. The contrast — or contiguity — of illusion and reality is particularly apposite to concerns about the self as other, because there is implicit in the notion of the subjective I that the only "reality" is what the self experiences (the view of phenomenologists), yet the same notion can be controverted by the idea that "reality" is anything that exists outside the subjective I (the view of positivists). Williams's notes on the characters at the outset of the play sets up this theme: of Amanda Wingfield, he writes, "She is not paranoiac, but her life is paranoia...having failed to establish contact with reality, [Amanda] continues to live vitally in her illusions." Note the deliberate conflation of reality and illusion in such oxymorons as "She is no paranoiac but her life is paranoia" and of Amanda living "vitaly in her illusions."

Williams' dramaturgy is expressly designed to downplay the claim to objective reality, for what unfolds is not what happened, but rather what, in the recollection, Tom imagined as happening. We are dealing here with reality interpreted through memory rather than reality unfiltered and raw, presented as if it were the *Ding an sich*, the thing itself. "I am the narrator of the play," Tom Wingfield says at the outset, "and also a character in it." He is claiming both a position as a "self" in one of the characters involved in the action, and a position as outside observer, a narrator of and witness to the events, one who is not involved in the action. He is both the "self" who is the central intelligence in the play, and a third-person party in the play, an "other" who is observed at a distance, from an objective stance rather than from a subjective perspective.

That the performance on the stage is "bracketed" as "recollected events" rather than as slices of life can be demonstrated by reference to the "Screen

Legends” which are interspersed throughout the script. As the action begins, the first Screen Legend reads: “Où sont les neiges” and François Villon’s memorable lines of existential nostalgia are projected on a stage wall, as if in wry and Olympian comment on the travails that are about to be depicted. When Amanda is recalling the gracious manners practiced when she was young, an image is flashed on the screen showing “Amanda as a Girl on a Porch Greeting Callers” — as if this were a genre scene, not personal memorabilia. Sometimes these screen legends assume a parodic function, as when Amanda says, “As you know, I was supposed to be inducted into my office at the D. A. R. this afternoon.” The legend flashed on the screen at this moment shows “A Swarm of Typewriters.” And when the sentiment threatens to get too thick, as in the following sequence, a Screen Legend intercedes to dispel the flatulence of the moment:

Laura: Mother, when you’re disappointed, you get that awful suffering look on
your face, like the picture of Jesus’ mother in the museum!
Amanda: Hush!
Laura: I couldn’t face it.
Pause. A whisper of strings.
(Legend: “The Crust of Humility”)

These ironic commentaries serve the purpose of framing the action as objects of derision and sarcasm, deliberately discouraging the audience from too close an identification with each character. Indeed, we are invited to see them as part of an object lesson, like viewing the characters as a human menagerie rather than empathizing with their pain and loneliness. These “subtitles” are reminiscent of the rubrics that interspersed episodes in silent movies, and are doubtless an allusion in dramatic form to the movies that Williams frequented in his youth. By adopting an omniscient narrative stance, these subtitles confer on the audience an air of sophisticated omniscience, as if the action before us were merely the playing out of a predetermined sequence of actions. (By disabusing the dramaturgy of any pretensions to verisimilitude, these verbal underpinnings of the performance allow the actors to adopt a broadly theatrical acting style, since thespian exaggerations will only enhance the parodic humor implicit in these editorial deflations.)

In going to the theater, the first two emphases in our definition of identity — quiddity and propinquity — are emphasized, while the third — oddity (or difference) — is usually de-emphasized. Our sense of the deictic

moment in the experience of watching a play is strong; so is our sense of relatedness to the audience of which we are a part, as well as to the characters being portrayed on the stage. But our sense of identity as unique, as individuals, is submerged in the playgoing experience, which is what enables us to participate in the proceedings. The contrast of lighting, dark where the audience sits, bright where the actors perform, reinforce this suppression of the subjective I, and encourages us to bridge the gap between the nominative self and the predicate other, in favor of experiencing the play through the other.

This diminution of self generically in drama receives a resonant echo in *The Glass Menagerie* in Amanda’s diatribe against Tom: “Self, self, self is all that you ever think of!” (Scene IV). The communal mode of participating, the imaginative projections on the part of the audience in drama, the absorption of the subjective imagination in the spectacular and specular activities on the stage all converge to take us “out of our selves” as we watch drama. Drama seduces ourselves away from a preoccupation with self, or at least that part of the self which differentiates itself from others, even while it encourages a sense of identity as sharing the same time and place (quiddity), as well as the same human nature (propinquity). The familiar form of over-preoccupation with the self — selfishness — comes in for attack at the end of *The Glass Menagerie*, when Tom rebukes Amanda by saying, “The more you shout about my selfishness to me the quicker I’ll go...” (Scene VII). Yet, the ending of the play is a triumph of compassion over selfishness and self-absorption. Tom’s speech at the end is soliloquy (self-centeredness) overcome by capacious sympathy (selflessness):

Tom:... Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be! I reach for a cigarette, I cross the street, I run into the movies or a bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger — anything that can blow your candles out! (*Laura bends over the candles.*) — for nowadays the world is lit by lightning! Blow out your candles, Laura — and so good-bye... (Scene VII).

The insistent iteration of “I” at the beginning of this passage seems desperate, as if the self were concentrating only on itself, resisting the impulse towards concern for the other. The will to annihilate the instinct for concern and compassion is symbolized brilliantly by the phrase, “. . . anything that can blow your candles out,” which has a sense of the self wishing to eclipse the other. Yet, in a subtle mini-*anagoresis*, or dramatic turn, the import of the same

image is reversed, and Tom (self), far from eclipsing Laura (other) at the end, encourages her the way a loving parent encourages a child to blow out all the candles on a birthday cake, and, partaking of the same poignant denouement as the play ends, Tom says to her, affectionately: "Blow out your candles, Laura."

The three components of identity I have focussed on can be understood in more familiar existential and psychological terms: "quiddity" — a deictic sense of here and now — can be recognized as a sense of identity, as a present that is both immanent and imminent; propinquity can be understood as a shared intimacy, a communal commitment which often takes the form of humanity or humanitarianism; and oddity may be apprehended as a sense of individual distinctness, a sense of being apart from anything or anyone else in creation. All of these notions are manifest in David Henry Hwang's short play *The Sound of a Voice*.

As it is not as well known as *A Doll's House* or *The Glass Menagerie*, a brief synopsis may not be entirely amiss. A wayfarer, a swordsman, drops in an unfrequented dwelling, and is first entertained, then seduced, by a woman who may be a witch. He stays with her for a period of time, noticing that she appears to have an eerie ability to cultivate flowers, but in time, he makes preparations to leave. Failing in her attempts to keep his company, she withdraws to her garden, where, in the end, he finds her hanging from a tree, with the petals of the garden flowers strewn at her feet. Any summary of the plot in the play misses the uncanny effect of Hwang's dramaturgy. Two extra-literary props play crucial roles in the effect of the drama: a scrim-screen that divides the downstage from the upstage area where the magical garden is represented; and a *shakuhachi*, the traditional Japanese flute, which the woman plays off-stage, and which represents a surrogate "sound of a voice."

The setting is simple, and generic: "Woman's house, in a remote corner of the forest." "This is a remote corner of the world," Woman tells Man, "Guests are rare" (Scene I). Notions of time and place are stretched in the desolate loneliness of Woman's existence: "I don't consider time when there is no voice in the air." "Time begins with the entrance of a visitor," she asserts, "and ends with his exit" (Scene I). The *shakuhachi* which Woman taught herself to play is a surrogate for human company: its reedy, breathy sound the plaintive substitute for conversation.

Woman: I developed it — all by myself — in times when I was alone. I heard nothing — no human voice. So I learned to play *shakuhachi*. I tried to make these sounds resemble the human voice. The *shakuhachi* became my weapon. To ward off the air. It kept me from choking on many a silent evening. (Scene V)

The *shakuhachi* is companionship disembodied, both comforting (when compared to silence) and inadequate (when compared to speech).

Hwang's script is cleverly ambiguous: even his stage directions resonate. Scene IV begins, "*Night. Man is alone. Flowers are gone from the stand.*" But the specific stage direction is precisely the overall theme of the play: Man is alone. Even his body is a separate being: Man jests with his belly, and addresses it: "You're okay, sir. You hang onto my body like a great horseman... You're also faithful. You'll never leave me for another man" (Scene IV). Of course, Man is, unlike his belly, not faithful, and despite his being touched by Woman, and despite her persistent attentions, he decides to leave, not out of fecklessness, but because he has been bested by her, because Woman has diverted him from his original objective, which was to kill her.

In the end, she achieves his objective by killing herself, and the stage dims as he tries, falteringly, to learn the *shakuhachi*.

Hwang's beautifully spare imitation of the Japanese Noh play captures some of the main threads of our construction of identity. In our allegiance to the present as one constituent of identity, the physical presence of another reassures us of our own existence, for, as Woman says, time out of mind does not exist, time is palpable only when measured against the reference of the other. The deictic notion of here and now makes no sense without a backdrop of there and then to compare with. It is the other who certifies the self's existence. Our quiddity is asserted by the fact of the other. In our dependence on community for our self definition, whether it's our race, or our home, or our species, we participate in a common humanity. Our relatedness, not to speak of our ability to relate — to other people (as in Confucianism), to all living creatures (as in Buddhism), and to all creation (as in Taoism) — constitutes an important part of our sense of being, of being alive and involved. The "we" that contributes to our sense of belonging, our sense of solidarity is a combination of the self and the other. And finally, in our resolute insistence on our individual uniqueness, we pay an enormous existential price: we conceive of the self as isolated from all context of meaning, of creation, of existence.

Each of these perspectives are manifest in David Henry Hwang's powerful depiction of human loneliness, which he conjugates in three ways, in its particularity of time and space, in the elusiveness of sustaining human relationships, and in the inescapable insularity of our individual lives. No matter how social and gregarious we may have been in our waking lives, in the

end, each one of us dies alone. We insist on our identity at the peril of our security.⁴

In the end, the *shakuhachi* in *The Sound of a Voice* haunts us, because it represents an eerily present and yet absent human discourse. Perhaps like Man in David Henry Hwang's play, we, too, need to learn how to play the *shakuhachi*, so that we might hear what Emmanuel Levinas has explored exhaustively as "the voice of the other."

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4 A political version of this perspective is available in Maalouf.