

Magdolna Jákfalvi, ed. “A performativitás mint fordulat” (Performativity as a Turn). *Filológiai Közlöny* (Philological Review) 62.4 (2016): 261-445.

Mária Kurdi

Since the “performative turn,” which dates back to the 1960s following John L. Austin’s presentation of findings about the performative power of speech acts in 1955, this phenomenon, Magdolna Jákfalvi claims in her preface as editor to this journal issue, has been the object of ongoing research and became an effective tool of literary interpretation, and later a norm of analysis (262). Indeed, while they have been in use for a considerable time, the terms performative and performativity are somewhat protean, their meanings likely to change when applied to the study of different aspects and domains of cultural life and practices. Most of the essays collected here under the title “Performativity as a Turn,” Jákfalvi adds, draw on a conference held in Budapest in May 2016, which purported to explore manifestations of the performative as well as to demonstrate the visibility and test the uses of the term in critical discourse. Understandably, a reconsideration of the meanings of performative and performativity is spreading, overtly or covertly, and to varying degrees, as a kind of *fil rouge* across the essays of the collection. Jákfalvi has divided the remarkable wealth of the material, altogether thirteen essays to be included in three groups, which are provided with the headings “Performatív elméleti paradigmák” (Theoretical paradigms of the performative), “Performatív realitás” (Performative reality), and “Performatív textualitás” (Performative textuality) respectively.

In the first group of two essays, Enikő Bollobás’s “Képlet–kiterjesztés–gyakorlat: a *performatív* elméleti paradigmái és alkalmazásuk Ignótus, Nádas, Galgóczi, Márai és Kertész szövegeinek vizsgálatában” (Formula–extension–practice: theoretical paradigms of the performative and their deployment in the investigation of texts by Ignótus, Nádas, Galgóczi, Márai, and Kertész) builds up, as is usual in Bollobás’s critical work, a broad, thorough-going framework of theoretical paradigms enabled by the performative turn before she discusses their use in the interpretation of some Hungarian literary texts. The essay has a structure which guides the reader from the primary, “strong” paradigm of the performative as a formula to the secondary paradigms which issue from the extension of the primary one, including the application of performativity in theories of the subject, intersubjectivity, gender performativity, and body studies. Bollobás clarifies that this extension is possible because the “performative” functions as a “reflexive” verb in poststructuralist thinking, which constructs the subject as an agent through speaking and doing

(269-70). Among the texts chosen for interpretation the only drama, Péter Nádas's *Encounter* (*Találkozás*, 1979), is discussed by Bollobás as an example of creating intersubjective space, in this case by the middle-aged female protagonist, which enables the son to recognize his dead father, the one-time lover of the woman. Reading the drama with theorists of intersubjectivity such as Jessica Benjamin and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Bollobás concludes that in *Encounter* a mutual recognition of the other takes place, also facilitating the son's emotional bonding with the memory of his father whom he used to hold in contempt for being a secret police officer during the communist era.

Under the title "Performative reality" seven essays appear in the collection interrogating the realm of theater, led by the editor, Jákfalvi's "Vér, vizelet, verejték: A performatív realitás" (Blood, urine, sweat: Performative reality). Here the author is concerned with performance and performativity, understanding these as creative forces that challenge the canon of realist forms that have been so central to the art of theater for a long time (316). Drawing mainly on theater scholar Richard Schechner's ideas and practice, the author offers a detailed introduction of *Dionysos 69* directed by Schechner, which enacted a re-creation of Euripides's *The Bacchae* in 1969. The strikingly novel element of the performance, Jákfalvi reminds us, was transforming it into an event that re-imagines the ritualistic basis of the action along with its communal nature by involving audience members besides the actors and emphasizing movements and the body. In her essay, Jákfalvi takes account of the practices which contributed to the achievement of the heightened performativity characterizing *Dionysos 69*. Also, she suggests that in this kind of performance, the audience members experience their own embodied reality together, in fact, the ultimate "truth" of the senses and the flow of body fluids which binds them/us as humans (320). In our era of privileging the cerebral in most areas of life, feeling togetherness as embodied beings organized through performative acts from time to time is both invigorating and transformative by involving "liminal experiences," as Fischer-Lichte identifies the source of changes, for the self-(re)creation of individuals (196).

The arrangement of the essays does not seem to be thoughtfully considered in the case of the first two groups of them. After Jákfalvi's in the second group, there follow two essays, written by Gabriella Kiss and Vera Kérchy respectively, which had better have been put into the first block since they are mostly theoretical and do not discuss particular events or phenomena in the theatre world. Kiss's paper, under the title "(Színház)tudománytörténeti közhelyek egy kulcsfiguráról: A performativitás fischer-lichtei fogalmáról" (Clichés of theatre historiography about a key figure: On Fischer-Lichte's concept of performativity), is all the more impressive as it is written by a scholar of theatre studies who is also the Hungarian translator of Fischer-Lichte's *Ästhetik des Performativen* (2004) (*A Performativitás esztétikája*, 2009) at the same time. The Hungarian publication of this significant work, Kiss argues, was a significant step in the process of identifying the key issues to be addressed in writing the history of Hungarian theatre by regarding them as theoretical questions at the same time. Also, she devotes some space to addressing the development of the rarely examined sub-discipline of applied theatre studies in Hungary, pointing to its experts' benefiting from the "eclecticism" of Fischer Lichte's *Ästhetik* (334-35).

Indeed, eclecticism in the positive sense also comes to mind while realizing the thematic diversity of this collection. Suffice it to refer to two more essays that analyze the working of performativity in dramaturgies and devices of narrative technique. Vince Muntag, in “‘Semmit nem lehet újrakezdeni?’: Az önértelmezés performatív eljárásai Molnár és Nádas közös szövegterében” (“‘Can nothing start again?’: Modes of performative self-interpretation in the shared textual space of Molnár and Nádas”), draws a parallel between the ways in which performative dramaturgical means in Ferenc Molnár’s *Játék a kastélyban* (*Play at the Castle*, 1924) and Péter Nádas’s *Temetés* (*Burial*, 1980) challenge the respective theatre and interpretative traditions to which these plays are usually related. Importantly, the metadramaturgical levels they create performatively establish a connection between the two works, Muntag argues. In this regard Beckett is evoked as a point of reference: his abstraction of time and space, for instance, has a powerful echo in *Temetés* whereas Beckett’s clowns are anticipated by some characters in Molnár’s *Játék* (382).

In “Hasonmások és performativitás: A fantasztikum jelentésaspektusai James Hogg és Umberto Eco egy-egy szövegében, illetve a *Harcosok klubjában*” (Doubles and performativity: aspects of meaning called forth by the fantastic in respective texts by James Hogg and Umberto Eco as well as in *Fight Club*) András Wirágh explores the paths of performative readings by looking at three canonical works. His analysis is convincing, especially in the case of the Scottish Hogg’s *The Private Memoir and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), a remarkably experimental novel which encodes the performative response of the reader in the text by various doublings and devices of ambiguation. The doubling of the author is a notable example; Wirágh observes that the narratives of the editor and the author of the memoir in Hogg’s book contradict each other, and thus the fantastic is evoked through the effect of their competing juxtaposition (439). In other words, the fantastic is produced in the reader’s mind whose initial confusion about which narrative to believe may incite his/her performative act of recognizing the subversive flight from realism by the text and has the potential to allow meaning to emerge (see Bollobás 2335).

In sum, by providing a spectrum of the ways and modes in which the terms performative and performativity can be re-read, understood and utilized as tools of critical analysis and education, this collection maps and negotiates the permeable boundaries and interfaces of theory, theatre, narrative and performance studies, the latter being a discipline called to life in the context of the “performative turn.” Organizing the conference from which the present essays have derived was undoubtedly a performative act that generated dialogues and has resulted in this selection. The issues the authors directly or implicitly raise and scrutinize here might enable some readers to achieve new, if at times seemingly minor “turns” in scholarship and criticism which, under the right circumstances, could inspire the reconsideration of acts and values in the field of cultural and theatre practices.

Works Cited

- Bollobás, Enikő. "Performing texts/performing readings: A pragmatic understanding of the revisionist interpretation of American literature." *Journal of Pragmatics* 39 (2007): 2332-44.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Transformative Power of Performance*. Trans. Saskya Iris Jain. New York and London: Routledge, 2008.

