

Editorial?

PAUL RAE

‘In the humanities, journal decisions usually arrive by post.’ So wrote Wendy Laura Belcher in *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks*, a guide otherwise full of good sense, and published as recently as 2009.¹ It is easy to scoff at such anachronistic information. But to do so would be to overlook all the seemingly outdated practices and conventions involved in publishing an academic journal, not the least of which is the inclusion of an editorial such as the one you are reading. The majority of *TRI* articles are accessed online, a process that almost inevitably involves bypassing the editor’s introduction, let alone appreciating the order of the articles’ appearance within the print copy, or allowing their ostensibly diverse concerns to resonate with and inflect each other. Just before I took over the senior editorship of this journal, I discussed the viability of the editorial with my predecessor, Charlotte Canning, questioning its relevance and necessity. Charlotte rightly pointed out that to give up the editorial would be to relinquish the opportunity to introduce each of the articles in their own right, as well as a platform from which the editor can frame the issue and provide a rationale for decisions made along the way.

Underpinning this thinking is something of a paradox, namely that even if journal content is increasingly accessed (in both the practical and interpretive senses) diachronically, as it were, the integrity of each individual article is at least initially reliant on its synchronic appearance alongside a select number of other articles and materials. Accordingly, I wrote my first editorial in the expectation not that it would be read, but that it would be *there*, in the archive: an exercise in due diligence, available for consultation by my successors as I, in preparation for the role, had read the editorials of those who preceded me. I was pleasantly surprised to discover from personal comments and correspondence that the editorial did indeed have a readership. I subsequently asked a member of the journal’s editorial board, Liz Tomlin, to read and review the first issue published under my editorship. Tellingly, the resulting report took the claims and intentions for the issue outlined in the editorial as a way into its wide-ranging reflections and recommendations. Liz took the fact of the editorial to raise questions about how readers access the journal, wondering whether innovation in this area – say, an editorial distributed interstitially between articles to encourage readers to read through from one article to the next – could enhance the integrity of the issue as a whole. And she used the relationship between the editorial and the articles as an opportunity for constructive criticism, noting where greater editorial guidance might have been given to authors, taking issue with some of the claims made in the editorial for those articles, and considering alternative structures to, and rationales for, the issue as a whole.

In other words, the editorial renders the editor accountable for their decisions because it is available as an object of critique. And while this is a general observation,

the reason I was prompted to focus on it in introducing this issue of the journal is that, while not built around a particular theme – something *TRI* tends to do once every couple of years – the connections between the articles are, in my view, especially rich and fine-grained. This means I have been particularly aware, in working on this issue with a group of generous and committed authors, of the importance of thinking about the whole of something that will be read by few, if any, from cover to cover. A powerful – and often troubling – set of concerns arcs through these articles, including the uses and abuses of the past by the present (and, arguably, vice versa); the role of performance in the enactment of, and reckoning with, violence; and the place of performance within a wider economy of cultural practices and the circulation of artefacts, their meanings and effects. On top of that, there is a notable density to the argumentation and analysis here, born of the detailed, attentive and critically informed working-through of complex, multifaceted material.

We begin with Rashna Darius Nicholson's 'From India to India: The Performative Unworlding of Literature', which tells a fascinating story about the fate of a particular passage from the *Mahābhārata* in the hands of European and Indian orientalists and theatre-makers, and in the process makes an insightful argument about the fate of 'performance' under the rubric of 'world literature'. Drawing on extensive archival research in multiple European and Indian languages, Nicholson pieces together a complex network of patronage and influence amongst a cosmopolitan group of orientalists in the second half of the nineteenth century. She does so by tracing the multiple translations and iterations of *Savitri*, an episode from the *Mahābhārata* in which a wife shows such devotion to her husband that she ultimately sees him raised from the dead. The subject matter was at once ripe for European enthusiasts to render as spoken drama in order to exemplify an idealized Indo-Aryan culture, and riven with sufficient demotic potential, sexual allusion and theatrical derring-do for the commercial theatre in India to stage as a spectacular – if inadvertent – rebuke to such pieties. By locating these developments in relation to a variety of intellectual, commercial and political imperatives of the time, Nicholson pursues a contemporary argument about the ways in which the resurgent interest in 'world literature' has carried over some of the nineteenth-century elisions of performance. This development, argues Nicholson, comes at the expense not so much of the term 'literature' in the phrase 'world literature', as of the less thoroughly theorized, but all-important, 'world'.

Orientalism also features in Joanna Mansbridge's 'The *Zenne*: Male Belly Dancers and Queer Modernity in Contemporary Turkey', though here it takes on an intriguingly recent inflection. Mansbridge contextualizes her article with an account of the historical role of male belly dancing within the Ottoman Empire, a practice that went into decline with the end of that empire and the rise of secular modernity, but which has seen a recent resurgence for nuanced and apparently contradictory reasons. The sexually ambiguous figure of the *zenne* – as male belly dancers are known today – appeals to an urban middle class, and can be seen as expressing a growing acceptance of queer culture in some parts of Turkish society: Mansbridge's evocative descriptions of several individual dancers' distinctive styles highlight the nuanced ways in which the form allows for an ebulliently performative play of identification and desire. But the increased popularity of

the *zenne* has also coincided with the rise of the Islamist AKP party. Socially conservative and with an authoritarian bent, the AKP has sought to recover a nostalgic sense of the Ottoman Empire as a means of offsetting westernized modernity, and Mansbridge suggests that the *zenne* has also found acceptance within this discourse, reflecting a situation where it may be more acceptable for conservative men to watch men dance than to watch women. Mansbridge goes on to analyse two recent artworks featuring *zenne*, a film and a play, treating their ambivalent narratives as symptomatic of the ambiguities and tensions, risks and potentialities, that the *zenne* embodies in Turkey today.

The performative recovery of the past in service of the nation state is also at the centre of Daphna Ben Shaul's 'Restating the Scene of Foundation: Establishing Israeli Statehood and Culture in *National Collection* by Public Movement'. As the title suggests, Ben Shaul's focus is on a performance by the Israeli company Public Movement, whose works often take the form of disciplined group actions that critically investigate the formal choreographies and official narratives of Israeli culture and society. *National Collection* (2015) began with a march from the site of the 1948 Declaration of Israeli Independence to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, with the group carrying a reproduction of one of the paintings that formed the backdrop to the declaration. At the museum, the group then conducted tours for audience members that took in many aspects of the collection, and intervened theatrically into the venue in order to disclose some of the themes, assumptions and elisions that undergird the institution and its relation to the state. By beginning – both practically and thematically – from the site and event of the Declaration of Independence, argues Ben Shaul, Public Movement underscored the contingencies of nation formation, with *National Collection* serving as the latest iteration of an act whose foundational force by no means exempts it from both the necessity and the vicissitudes of repetition. By taking a self-consciously theatrical approach to the topic, notes Ben Shaul, Public Movement complicate Diana Taylor's influential distinction between the archive and the repertoire by bringing to light the repertoire of the archive – in this case, of a national art collection.

Repetition is an important motif, too, in Ed Charlton's 'Apartheid Acting Out: Trauma, Confession and the Melancholy of Theatre in Yaël Farber's *He Left Quietly*'. Charlton presents a detailed and precise interpretation of the 'confessional' performance *He Left Quietly* (2002), which featured Duma Kumalo, a South African man who had narrowly escaped execution under apartheid as a member of a group of protesters known as the Sharpeville Six. In Charlton's view, the repeated performances of the play (building on Kumalo's involvement in other public accounts of his experiences) point to the role that theatre can play in the expression of traumatic experiences. But he rejects the idea that this can thereby resolve the trauma, either at the individual or the social level. On the contrary, through a close reading of aspects of the performance, Charlton demonstrates that the nightly summoning of Kumalo's traumatic experiences can be interpreted as having reasserted their force, in so doing not only holding Kumalo in suspension between past and present, but also marking an excess of suffering that exceeded the capacity of state-mandated initiatives, such as the highly theatrical Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to salve.

Traumatic events may or may not have taken place at the Ring of Brodgar, a stone circle off the north coast of Scotland that, along with this ambiguity, is the object of Jonathan W. Marshall's 'Absence, Presence, Indexicality: The *Mise en Scène* of "the Heart of Neolithic Orkney"'. Marshall notes that the stones, along with other nearby monoliths and their distinctive surroundings, were almost certainly the site of ritual and other kinds of performance, whose precise form and nature remain unknown. Marshall instead concerns himself with responding to the site as it presents itself today, and he builds on his experiences as a visitor there to present an analysis that is at once an account of a 'theatre without actors' and a wider set of reflections on the key terms of his title. While some might note the indecent haste with which many in the critical humanities have dropped a semiotically informed post-structuralism in favour of new materialism and its associated realisms, Marshall demonstrates that the ideas of Derrida, Barthes and others still have much to contribute to the performance analysis of objects and matter. By combining an attentive response to his experience of the Brodgar site with a series of extended reflections on a range of twentieth-century artworks and ideas towards which his attention is associatively directed, Marshall summons an account of the stone circle that hovers, as his argument has it, between its imposing material presence and an absent past of usage and signification. This grants it an indexical quality – at once object, representation and trace – which, as Marshall puts it, 'generates within the viewer an oscillation between an interpretation of real material effects in the now and the momentary acceptance of the fantasy of actually being in the presence of anterior conditions and phenomena'.

Settling on this particular selection of articles and working simultaneously on them in the run-up to publication underscored the curatorial dimension of editing and prefigured, I hope, the associative, cumulative process of reading them. Each stands alone; each joins a conversation with the others; all commit to, and sustain, the durability and distinctive force of performance over space and time.

NOTE

- 1 Wendy Laura Belcher, *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2009), p. 290.