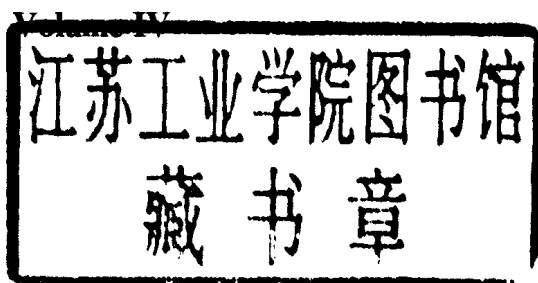


PERFORMANCE

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Part 1

IDENTITY AND THE SELF

THE PERFORMING SELF

Richard Poirier

Source: Richard Poirier, *The Performing Self*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, pp. 86–111.

In illustrating what I mean by “the performing self” I’ll be concerned mostly with Robert Frost, Norman Mailer, and Henry James. I could almost as profitably consider the self as performance in Byron, in Yeats, or in Lawrence, and I’ll have something to say about Andrew Marvell as well as Thoreau. So that I’m less sure of the significance of all three of my principal illustrations being American than of the fact that each of them is of an extreme if different kind of arrogance. Whether it be confronting a page of their own writing, an historical phenomenon like the assassination of Robert Kennedy, a meeting with Khrushchev, or the massive power of New York City—all three treat any occasion as a “scene” or a stage for dramatizing the self as a performer. I can’t imagine a scene of whatever terror or pathos in which they would not at every step in their account of it be watching and measuring their moment by moment participation. And their participation would be measured by powers of rendition rather than by efforts of understanding: since the event doesn’t exist except in the shape they give it, what else should they be anxious about? It’s performance that matters—pacing, economies, juxtapositions, aggregations of tone, the whole conduct of the shaping presence. If this sounds rather more brutal than we imagine writers or artists to be, then that is because performance partakes of brutality. As Edwin Denby points out, dancing on points is an extraordinarily brutal—he uses the word *savage*—business, regardless of the communicated effect of grace and beauty. We can learn a great deal about art by telling the dancer from the dance. Dancers themselves do; and writers are always more anxious than are their critics to distinguish between writing as an act and the book or poem.

Indeed, each of the three writers I’ll be mostly discussing admits with unusual candor that what excites him most in a work is finally himself as a performer. Performance is an exercise of power, a very curious one. Curious

because it is at first so furiously self-consultive, so even narcissistic, and later so eager for publicity, love, and historical dimension. Out of an accumulation of secretive acts emerges at last a form that presumes to compete with reality itself for control of the minds exposed to it. Performance in writing, in painting, or in dance is made up of thousands of tiny movements, each made with a calculation that is also its innocence. By innocence I mean that the movements have an utterly moral neutrality—they are designed to serve one another and nothing else; and they are innocent, too, because contrived with only a vague general notion of what they might ultimately be responsible for—the final thing, the accumulation called “the work.” “The bridge spans the stream,” as Henry James puts it, “after the fact, in apparently complete independence of these properties, the principal grace of the original design. *They* were an illusion, for the necessary hour; but the span itself, whether of a single arch or of many, seems by the oddest chance in the world to be a reality; since actually the rueful builder, passing under it, sees figures and hears sounds above: he makes out, with his heart in his throat, that it bears and is positively being ‘used.’”

If James wants to believe that “they”—the original design and the acts of the builder prompted by it—prove in the end to have been an “illusion” when measured against the reality of the finished structure, then it has to be said that his Prefaces are given almost wholly to an account of such “illusions.” Perhaps it would be better to say that their relationship is a dialectical one, that there exists a perpetually tensed antagonism between acts of local performance, carried out in private delight and secretive plotting, and those acts of presentation when the author, spruce, smiling, now a public man, gives the finished work to the world. The gap between the completed work, which is supposed to constitute the writer’s vision, and the multiple acts of performance that went into it is an image of the gap between the artist’s self as he discovered it in performance and the self, altogether less grimy, discovered afterward in the final shape and the world’s reception of it. The question, responded to quite differently by the writers I’ll be looking at, is simply this: which kind of power—of performance or of the contemplable visions that can be deduced from their end results—is the more illusory when it comes to understanding a literary work? There is no answer to this question. Rather, it posits a condition within which any writer, and any critic, finds himself working. It is a question not of belief in meanings but of belief in one kind of power and energy or another—one kind in the supposed act of doing, the other in the supposed result.

Frost was as obsessed with power in its public and in its private forms as any writer in this century, which is why he kept pretending he wasn’t. It made him resist, to the point of meanness, the weakening pulls of liberal humanitarianism. In a letter written three weeks after Roosevelt defeated Landon in 1936, he feels compelled, by the nature of a personal confession, to assure Louis Untermeyer, that “I don’t mean it is humanity not to feel the suffering

of others,” and he then proceeds to talk about the election and the metaphors that governed it: “I judge half the people that voted for his Rosiness were those glad to be on the receiving end of his benevolence and half were those glad to be on the giving end. The national mood is humanitarianism. Nobly so—I wouldn’t take it away from them. I am content to let it go at one philosophical observation: isn’t it a poetical strangeness that while the world was going full blast for the Darwinian metaphors of evolution, survival values and the Devil take the hindmost, a polemical Jew in exile was working up the metaphor of the State’s being like a family to displace them [Darwinian metaphors] from the mind and give us a new figure to live by? Marx had the strength not to be overawed by the metaphor in vogue. . . . We are all toadies to the fashionable metaphor of the hour. Great is he who imposes the metaphor.”

Over against any such conviction about the historical reverberations of “working up the metaphor” has to be placed Frost’s own disavowals of any desire to be thought a poet of Western civilization. “Eliot and I have our similarities and our differences,” he once wrote. “We are both poets and we both like to play. That’s the similarity. The difference is this: I like to play euchre. He likes to play Eucharist.” When he talks about “working up the metaphor” in his own poetry, he seldom betrays any fantasies about the effects of such work upon the direction of civilization or even upon the consciousness of his own times. If poetry is an act of power for him, then it’s of a power that claims a smaller sphere of influence than that claimed by Yeats or Lawrence or James, the manipulator of continents, or Mailer, whose body, one gathers, is the body politic of America. “I look upon a poem as a performance,” Frost avows in the *Paris Review* interview. “I look on the poet as a man of prowess”—but he then adds a clarification which is also a brake on self-aggrandizement—“just like an athlete.”

Not surprisingly, and with consequences for his poetry that I’ll return to, Frost speaks of this prowess in ways as nearly sexual as athletic and that insist, in their freedom from metaphysical cant, on a difference crucial to my argument: a difference between the mood or meaning that may be generated by the theme of a poem, on the one hand, and, on the other, the effect of the energies expended by the writer in his acts of performance. In the same interview, he talks about the first poem he ever wrote and then, more generally, about writing poetry:

“ . . . I was walking home from school and I began to make it—a March day—and I was making it all afternoon and making it so I was late at my grandmother’s for dinner. I finished it, but it burned right up, just burned right up, you know. And what started that? What burned it? So many talk, I wonder how falsely, about what it costs them, what agony it is to write. I’ve often been quoted ‘No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.’ But another distinction I make is: However sad, no grievance, grief without grievance. How could I, how could

anyone have a good time with what it cost me too much agony, how could they? What do I want to communicate but what a *hell* of a good time I had writing it? The whole thing is performance and prowess and feats of association. Why don't critics talk about those things—what a feat it was to turn that that way, and what a feat it was to remember that, to be reminded of that by this? Why don't they talk about that? Scoring. You've got to *score*. They say not but you've got to score, in all the realms—theology, politics, astronomy, history and the country life around you."

In his list of "realms" wherein poetic "prowess" or "scoring" is exercised, there is conspicuously a division rather than any confusion among them, and this self-restraining kind of discrimination extends even to a division between the effect of the poem and the effect of writing it. If the poem expresses grief, it also expresses—as an *act*, as a composition, a performance, a "making,"—the opposite of grief; it shows or expresses "what a *hell* of a good time I had writing it." This is a difficult distinction for most critics to grasp, apparently. It is what Yeats means when he says that "Hamlet and Lear are gay"—"If worthy their prominent part in the play," Hamlet and Lear, either on the theatrical stage or the historical one, "do not break up their lines to weep." Frost would not have needed Yeats since he had Emerson, who could write in "The Poet" that "an imaginative book renders us much more service at first, by stimulating us through its tropes, than afterwards when we arrive at the precise sense of the author." This is the same Emerson whose comments on human suffering were sometimes tougher than anything even Frost could say. Emersonian idealizations of human power and energy in action, like any fascination for the purity of human performance, tend to toughen artists far more, I suspect, than we'd like to believe. "People grieve and bemoan themselves," he writes in "Experience," "but it is not half so bad with them as they say. There are moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that here at least we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth. But it turns out to be scenepainting and counterfeit. The only thing grief has taught me is to know how shallow it is. That, like all the rest, plays about the surface, and never introduces me into the reality, for contact with which we would even pay the costly price of sons and lovers."

An equivalent toughness, along with some of Emerson's faith in human enterprise, informs a letter from Frost to an obscure American poet named Kimball Flaccus. An indifference, even a disdain for any preoccupation with social conditions, co-exists in the letter with a concern for the primacy of personal performance. It is significant that Frost at the same time recognizes that nothing he can do as a "performer" can have much relevance to the shape of society. His seeming callousness, like James's persistent relish for the "picturesque" (often meaning human misery under glass), is in part, at least, derived from a feeling about the essential irrelevance of literature to the movements of daily life, much less those of large social organisms. Which takes me for a moment to a more general point, namely, that literary teachers

and critics should stop flattering the importance of their occupations by breast beating about the fact that literature and the humanities did not somehow prevent, say, The Bomb or the gas chambers. They had nothing to do with either one, shouldn't have, couldn't have, and the notion that they did, has been prompted only by self-serving dreams of the power of literature or of being a literary critic: the dream of the teacher who gradually confuses his trapped audience of students with the general public. The value of a letter like Frost's is that it helps cleanse us of pretensions and vulgarities about the political power of literature, even while affirming the personal power that can be locked into it.

"My dear Flaccus: The book has come and I have read your poems first. They are good. They have loveliness—they surely have that. They are carried high. What you long for is in them. You wish the world better than it is, more poetical. You are that kind of poet. I would rate as the other kind. I wouldn't give a cent to see the world, the United States or even New York much better. I want them left just as they are for me to make poetical on paper. I don't ask anything done to them that I don't do to them myself. I'm a mere selfish artist most of the time. I have no quarrel with the material. The grief will be simply if I can't transmute it into poems. I don't want the world made safer for poetry or easier. To hell with it. That is its own lookout. Let it stew in its own materialism. No, not to hell with it. Let it hold its position while I do it in art. My whole anxiety is for myself as a performer. Am I any good? That's what I'd like to know and all I need to know."

Frost's distinction—between those poets who want to make the world poetical and those like himself who are content to reform it only on paper—suggests why he calls Marx a "polemical" and not a "poetical" Jew for "working up the metaphor" that transformed the political life of the twentieth century. As a poet, Frost comments on the "poetical strangeness" of Marx not having been "overawed by the metaphor in vogue," and this is, not accidentally, what Frost often felt about his own career. But the analogy between Frost and Marx would hold in Frost's mind only for comparative performances, not at all for comparative results. You do *not* "score" in one realm by "scoring" in another, and the presumption that you do may mean that you truly "score" in none at all, as some of our currently distinguished topical novelists will eventually discover. This tough self-knowledge makes Frost watchful of himself as a performer *in* his poetry and wry about himself as a sage for the world—as someone who can rest on the *results* of performance. Leaving the world to stew in its own materialism doesn't mean that he won't use the world; it means that he sees no way it might use him. Hence, his reticence and contempt, his playfulness about worldly wisdom or even other-worldly wisdom.

In his skepticism about the power of literature and his delight in his prowess as a writer, Frost represents a complicated aspect of the self as a performer which can be further elucidated by comparing him with Thoreau

and with Andrew Marvell and by then contrasting all three to a type differently illustrated by Norman Mailer and Henry James (I take it as understood that I am trying to describe instances of a problem rather than trying to write any kind of as yet recognizable literary history.) Frost, Thoreau, Marvell, Mailer, James—all of them are preoccupied with the possible conjunctions of acts of poetic with acts of public, sometimes even political power. But in Mailer we have the case of a writer who really believes that when he is “working up the metaphor” he is involved in an act of historical as well as of self-transformation. “I am imprisoned with a perception,” he has told us, “which will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time,” and it is indicative of what I’m saying about him here that he is not “imprisoned *in* a perception,” for so a mere mortal would ordinarily put it, but “with” one, both lodged in a prison that must be as large as it is mysterious in its location. In his desire to literalize his own hyperboles, Mailer is less a twentieth-century than a Renaissance character, a Tamburlaine, a Coriolanus, even Milton’s Satan.

As Thomas Edwards lucidly demonstrates in his new book *Imagination and Power*, all these figures have some difficulty distinguishing the energy of their personal performance as shapers of a world in words from that energy we might call God, the difference being that God got there first and is stabilized in forms called reality, nature, the world. To help distinguish between Satanic performers, on the one hand, and performers like Frost, on the other, think of the matter of staging. For the one, all the world is literally a stage and all the men and women merely players or, if you’re a writer of this disposition, directors. Some critics are of this disposition, too, speaking of all things as fictions and thereby questioning the legitimacy of distinguishing novels from history, as if history were equally fictive. For the other, the type of Frost, Thoreau, or Marvell, the world and its people do not as often seem a specie of fiction; they seem, to use an old-fashioned word, “real”, and even when they do seem no more than fictions then the fictions are of a different status than those endowed by literature or by writers. At the very least Frost’s kind of writer wants to make a distinction between the stage which is the world and those other stages that take up some space on it, with curtains and covers, under the names of plays and poems and novels.

Marvell is especially sophisticated about these matters. He announces himself as an actor and scene-maker within a poem designed also to excite the envy of those actors trying to “make it,” in quite another sense of the term, on the stage of the world. He seems to say to them: since you are looking for “the palm, the oak, or bays,” unless of course I take you too literally (or you take yourself too literarily), come to the garden, where you can find all these and more, “all flowers and all trees.” For an analogous performance, there is Thoreau in his American garden, the bean field, where, “determined to know beans,” and making a profit which he can itemize out to \$8.71½, he tells us