

INTRODUCTION: PERFORMATIVITY, MEDIA, IDENTITIES

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J.L. Austin, who coined the term “performative” and founded the theory of speech acts,¹ as well as his immediate followers did not consider language as a medium functioning in a particular social and cultural environment. In spite of attempting to examine performative utterances with respect to their possible failures – described, rather vaguely and unsystematically, as “infelicities”² – Austin abstracted away from their contexts. He also excluded fictional uses of language in literature, particularly onstage, calling them “parasitic” or “etioliations.”³ Thus, the only criterion of the objectivity of his theory was a questionable claim of the truthfulness or falsity of the utterance and the real existence of its circumstances.

Following Austin, John Searle tried to avoid the debatable moments in his approach and emphasized the functional aspect of performatives, their dependence on the “rules of use,” claiming that “meaning is a matter of rules of use.” In his view, performativity was reduced to “a rule-governed form of behaviour.” The limited number of rules (typical of structuralist notions of systems) was divided into “regulative” and “constitutive,” the latter having the

¹ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

² Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 14: Austin’s list of events requiring specific forms of social communication is random and incomplete: “the act – marrying, betting, bequeathing, christening, or what not – is [...] a failure.” His description of the failures of communication is then vague, since it tries to avoid references to the social and cultural conditions of speech acts: “the utterance is then [...] not indeed false but in general *unhappy*. And for this reason we call the doctrine of *the things that can be and go wrong* on the occasion of such utterances, the doctrine of the *Infelicities*.”

³ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 22: “performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be always understood as issued in ordinary circumstances.”

capacity “to create or define new forms of behavior.”⁴ In this way, performativity was enclosed in a system with a limited number of rules directing, as well as generating, not only speech acts but also social and cultural activities, such as games: “The rules of football, for example, do not merely regulate the game of football but as it were create the possibility of or define that activity.”⁵ As a result however, linguistic discussion of performativity was detached from its vital environment constituted by media.

Nonetheless, almost simultaneously with the rise of linguistic research of performativity, a modern theory of media was inaugurated in a groundbreaking work by Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964). Crowning the decades of research of the Toronto school of communication theory, McLuhan reconnected media studies with the European philosophical tradition. As Dieter Mersch has summarized, McLuhan’s book is

the first systematic attempt to discuss in a comprehensive way the influence of communication media on the forms of perception, political systems and cultural formations. As a result, McLuhan’s concept of the media achieves an anthropological as well as transcendental bias. Media represent indispensable conditions of human life and determine human experience, thought, knowledge and behaviour. They are universal formats, whose form permits to integrate the concept of media into the classical discourse of philosophy.⁶

McLuhan has shown that “the ‘content’ of any medium [...] is always another medium” and “blinds us to the character of the medium,”⁷ implying that performativity does not primarily depend on “constitutive” or “regulative” “rules,” let alone on “ordinary circumstances,” but on the power of media of which most participants in the communication process are blind. According to McLuhan, quoting the pope Pius XII,

the future of modern society and the stability of its inner life depend in large part on the maintenance of an equilibrium between the strength of

⁴ John Searle, “What Is a Speech Act?” in *Philosophy in America*, ed. Max Black (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965), 228-29.

⁵ Searle, “What Is a Speech Act?” 229.

⁶ Dieter Mersch, *Medientheorien zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2006), 108 (this and subsequent passages from Mersch are translated by Martin Procházka).

⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 8-9.

the techniques of communication and the capacity of the individual's own reaction. Failure in this respect has for centuries been typical and total for mankind. Subliminal and docile acceptance of media impact has made them prisons without walls for their human users.⁸

From a contemporary perspective, it appears as if Pius XII and McLuhan were anticipating the present triumphs of algorithms and "recommendation engines"⁹ moulding political life with disinformation and pushing it towards a disastrous global disequilibrium.

Evidently, it is impossible to explore performativity without studying its relationship to media, which, according to McLuhan and Mersch, are not only represented "by the existing medial structures, but also by specific ordering of their environments" produced by technologies like "the printing press, television, electric light or transport."¹⁰ Not surprisingly as well, media, in Mersch's idiom, "[d]etermin[e] environments unobservedly."¹¹ As a consequence, exploring performative aspects of identities and their conflicts is impossible without considering the power of individual media (those discussed here include poetic language, theatre, film, the Internet and artificial intelligence) and their transformative influence on social, political and cultural environments, as well as social, artistic and intercultural communication. The research presented in this journal issue starts from examining the power of dramatic speech and settings, manifested, for instance, in what Pavel Drábek terms "dramaturgical translation."¹² We further explore the performative power of the camera in feminist film and the stereotyping of cultural identities and their conflicts in commercial television dramas. The research focused on the Internet deals with the problems of "protocological management"¹³ and the effects of algorithms,

⁸ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 20.

⁹ See Michael Schrage, *Recommendation Engines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).

¹⁰ Mersch (commenting on McLuhan), *Medientheorien*, 115.

¹¹ Mersch, *Medientheorien*, 115. An evidence of the "unobserved" functioning of media is, for instance, Erika Fischer-Lichte's identification of performativity and performance as well as her conflation of the people in a given situation with a community: "A performative utterance always addresses a community, represented by the people present in a given situation – it can therefore be regarded as a performance of a social act." *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (*Ästhetik der Performativen*, 2004), trans. Saskya Iris Jain (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 25.

¹² See Pavel Drábek, "Curating Intercultural Action: Agency between Epistemologies," this issue, 85-87.

¹³ Alexander Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2004). For a discussion of Galloway's concept, see Martin

profiling or “recommendation engines,” and their significant influence on the control of individuals and societies. We also discuss the operations of AI in theatre, intercultural studies and recent works of fiction. Finally, the argument returns almost to its point of departure in order to explore the power of poetic language, which generates resilience capable of overcoming a spiritual and existential crisis.

This intermedia movement of our argument opens another potential trajectory, offering to trace and compare the ways different media shape collective identities and perform intercultural communication, while exercising significant political and cultural power. The first model on our trajectory is theatrical and has two different aspects: the dramatic conflict with its dominant feature of “(ant)agonism” and the audience’s response to the fictional world onstage creating communal bonds.

According to Chantal Mouffe, “antagonism proper – which takes place between enemies, that is, persons who have no common symbolic space” – can be transformed into “agonism, [...] a relation not between enemies but between ‘adversaries’ [...] defined in a paradoxical way as ‘friendly enemies,’ that is, persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way.”¹⁴ The problem of this model, called “agonistic pluralism” and based on a traditional notion of the individual derived from the principles of liberal democracy (chiefly from the theory of social contract), consists in its failure “to construct a ‘we,’ a collective identity that would articulate the demands found in the different struggles against subordination.”¹⁵ In consequence, the collective identity in liberal democracy may degenerate into “antagonisms” resulting into “a war between enemies [...] jeopardizing democracy.”¹⁶

This is a situation of a “double bind” or an “impasse,” typical of present-day European and U.S. politics, and discussed in this issue in detail by Alice Koubová. Although the “double bind” is a symptom of a serious crisis, which is difficult to

Procházka, “Performativity on the Net: ‘Protocological Management’ and ‘The Society of Control,’” this issue, 176-77, 183.

¹⁴ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 13.

¹⁵ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 20.

¹⁶ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 31. In another book, Mouffe condemns “the politics played out in a moral register,” showing that it “reinforc[es] the antagonistic model of politics that it has declared obsolete.” The grave problem of this new antagonism marks the return and reinforcement of the “antagonism proper,” which nowadays, contrary to Mouffe’s expectations, is proving extremely difficult to counter by “mobilizing affects and passions towards democratic ends.” Chantal Mouffe, *Politics and Passions: The Stakes of Democracy* (London: Centre for the Study of Democracy, 2002), 15-16.

overcome by agonism or deliberation, Koubová's article points out a possible solution. It describes two recent experimental projects using stage action as a means of dissolving the "double bind" by "a performative reframing of the impasse" in order to enable "affirmative and agonistic participation in social reality."¹⁷

The power of theatre to contribute to the rejuvenation of democracy by means of issuing an agonistic impulse is discussed in the following articles. In "Theatrical Responses to Wall Building," Ondřej Pilný argues that the political dramas by David Hare, Robert Schenkkan and Stacey Gregg using the wall performatively as a symbol of an ultimate social disintegration highlight the need to understand and include extreme passions and political positions in an agonistic debate. However, Pilný emphasizes that political theatre should be aware of what Jacques Derrida has called the "originary performativity," which is not only inherent in "an injunction that comes from the wholly other"¹⁸ but also inaugurates a future that is unforeseeable.¹⁹

Performativity and agonism in contemporary theatre are discussed as well by Clare Wallace in her article "Tragic Replay: Performativity, Myth and Reality in Milo Rau's *Medea's Children*." Focusing on this recent "reimagining of the Medea myth" in a present-day setting, Wallace uses Derrida's theory of iterability and Judith Butler's concept of performativity to demonstrate how the "traumatic events of the performance," can destabilize "the boundaries between reality and fiction, [...] presenting the myth as a living, polymorphous structure." Describing the performance of Rau's play in relation to "agonistic pluralism," she contends that it works like "a performative act of resistance, questioning the narratives of power and victimhood, and inviting the audience to weigh the complex interplay of personal and political struggles within the mythological and contemporary contexts."²⁰

Valeriya Sabitova's article, "Olga Ntenta's *Greek Precarious Body*: The Body in the Costume of Conflict," analyses the importance of costumes in another "reimagining" of Ancient Greek myth and drama: the story of Oedipus and Sophocles' tragedies drawing on the Oedipus myth. Showing "how performance

¹⁷ Alice Koubová, "Performativity of Socio-political Double Binds," this issue, 13.

¹⁸ J. Hillis Miller, "Derrida's Special Theory of Performativity," in *For Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 155, 152-53. Miller comments on Derrida's *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

¹⁹ Ondřej Pilný, "Theatrical Responses to Wall Building: David Hare, Robert Schenkkan, Stacey Gregg," this issue, 47.

²⁰ Clare Wallace, "Tragic Replay: Performativity, Myth and Reality in Milo Rau's *Medea's Children*," this issue, 50, 52.

and scenography stage the embodied experiences of vulnerability and agency," Sabitova argues that the performance transforms vulnerability from a precarious condition into "a generative force," thus "enacting social and political transformation beyond conventional oppositions, offering possible lines of flight from entrenched binaries and fostering richer modes of collective engagement."²¹

The second theatrical model on our trajectory derives collective identity from the responses of theatre audience. In contrast to the model based on the dramatic *agōn*, which, from the times of the Old Greek Comedy, consisted in the struggle of two individuals (a protagonist against an antagonist), or a contest between a protagonist and a chorus, this "dramacentric model" of "intercultural action" is "experienced collectively" on the basis of the "human capacity to *mentalise*," as Pavel Drábek suggests.²² Although the notion of "mentalisation" was developed in religion studies, there is a good reason to believe that the "collective rituals of culture," and theatre in particular, invite individuals to experience not only social reality but also fictitious worlds of art as "heterotelic models" performed to elicit collective responses.²³ This notion of collective identity can also be developed in intercultural activities beyond theatrical performances or communal festivities – for instance in the project of the "Book Industry Forum" transforming not only the patterns of intercultural exchange but also those of economic transactions in the book trade.²⁴ However, as much as the "dramacentric model" appears relevant in the wider context of globalized consumerist society, the collective identities it produces are bound to face problems in environments shaped by other media than theatre or print.

Hana Pavelková's article "Performing Queerness through Translation and Adaptation" is a detailed case study of "dramaturgical translation," discussed in

²¹ Valeriya Sabitova, "Olga Ntenta's *Greek Precarious Body: The Body in the Costume of Conflict*," this issue, 66.

²² See Drábek, "Curating Intercultural Action," 95. For the theory of "mentalisation" see Robin Dunbar, *How Religion Evolved: And Why It Endures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

²³ Pavel Drábek, "Heterotelic Models as Performatives: From Speech Acts to Propositionality," *Litteraria Pragensia* 31, no. 60 (2021): 100-17. According to Drábek, "heterotelic models" are "shifting in their purpose between models-of and models-for, and are always put to uses outside the epistemological system that created them" ("Heterotelic Models as Performatives," 100). For further developments of this theory, see Pavel Drábek, "Performative Models and Physical Fictions: Dialogic Performance as Social Coevolution. A Case for Arcadian Theatre (Modelling the World through Play)," *Litteraria Pragensia* 32, no. 64 (2022): 8-36.

²⁴ On the Book Industry Forum see Drábek, "Curating Intercultural Action," this issue, 97-99.

the preceding contribution. It shows how this translation strategy performs intercultural communication between social groups of different gender and sexual orientation. A renowned translator of contemporary Anglophone drama, Pavelková describes the process of the Czech translation and adaptation of Charlie Josephine's *I, Joan* (originally produced by the Shakespeare Globe in 2022), focusing on the function of "linguistic, cultural and theatrical contexts," and reflecting on her "dual role as a translator and a collaborator of the creative team" in a project involving a target language that does not lend itself easily to gender neutrality. Drawing on the theory of "agonistic pluralism," Pavelková demonstrates "how translation, adaptation, and productive contestation can together generate new forms of queer agency and expand the expressive limits of language."²⁵

Although modern theatre has been using and even revolutionizing technologies, it is not, unlike other media discussed in this issue (film, television, the Internet and AI), primarily technological. According to Martin Heidegger, technology is not only connected with creation (*poiēsis*) but it also "reveals" and "uncovers" vital truths of human existence.²⁶ This important existential aspect of technology appears especially in technological media, which can transform human senses (cinematography), stereotype and dissociate identities (film, television, the Internet) or supplant the human mental processes (AI). All these media can be said to fragment individual identities and transmute collective ones.

Performative work with the film camera (typical of feminist films of late Modernism by Laura Mulvey or Věra Chytilová) reveals the "reality" represented in conventional movies as "an expression of the prevailing ideology."²⁷ While commercial filmmaking tends to fulfil – in Libuše Heczková and Kateřina Svatoňová's words – a "desire for completion, wholeness, perfection and functionality," performativity allows us to "dismantle [the illusion], and to replace it with a potential understanding of [...] technologies [...] in] our interaction with them."²⁸ This entails discovering their capacities to disrupt not only their own "operative" regimes and functions, but also stereotypical representations of gender identities.

²⁵ Hana Pavelková, "Performing Queerness through Translation and Adaptation," this issue, 107.

²⁶ Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977), 5-6, 11-19, 24-28, 33-35.

²⁷ Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," in *Notes on Women's Cinema* (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973), 24.

²⁸ Libuše Heczková and Kateřina Svatoňová, "The Camera's Performativity as an Emancipatory Gesture," this issue, 139.

The critique of filmmaking along these lines has been extended to deconstruct the stereotyping of race and culture in globally popular works of commercial televisions. A good example is the huge global influence of “K-dramas,” products of the “Korean Wave” of television films and series, emerging as moments on “a way to counter the threat of the Western-dominated media market.”²⁹ The concept of “gaze,” used, among others, in feminist approaches to film (e.g., Laura Mulvey, Lisa French, bell hooks), race and post-colonial studies (e.g., James Wright, or E. Ann Kaplan’s notion of “the imperial gaze”) inaugurates the methodology of analysing ideological and racial stereotyping responsible for the intercultural success of K-dramas. This is demonstrated in the article “The Korean Gaze: K-Dramas and Re-Orientalist Representations” by Hazel T. Biana. Biana argues that the Korean television films “perform popular imaginaries across Asia,” offering “alternative narratives,” which, although contesting “Western hegemony,” simultaneously introduce “new hierarchies” offering “insights about inter-Asian representation, cultural imperialism, and the construction of regional identities.”³⁰

While the media of film and television perform the transformation of identities chiefly by visual or narrative means, the Internet accomplishes a much deeper transmutation of individuals and social cohesion. Although believed to generate a new form of life, described by Alexander Galloway as a “cybernetic system of man and machine,”³¹ the “distributed management” that is supposed to characterize the functioning of the Internet³² produces a new model of collective identity, referred to as “the society of control” by Gilles Deleuze.³³ The operation of “collaborative filtering” typical of “recommendation engines”³⁴ dissociates individuals into “dividuals,”³⁵ clusters of profiles and datasets resulting chiefly

²⁹ Youna Kim, “The Rising East Asian ‘Wave’: Korean Media Go Global,” in *Media on the Move: Global Flow and Contra-flow*, ed. Daya Kishan Thussu (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 121-22.

³⁰ Hazel T. Biana, “The Korean Gaze: K-Dramas and Re-Orientalist Representations,” this issue, 143.

³¹ Galloway, *Protocol*, 106: “This historical moment – when life is defined no longer as essence, but as code – is the moment when life *becomes a medium*.” Evidently, the confusion of “life” and “medium” goes against the assumptions of media theory.

³² Galloway, *Protocol*, 8. See also Sanford Kwinter, “Introduction: War in Peace,” in Branden Hookway, ed., *Pandemonium: The Rise of Predatory Locales in the Postwar Period* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 10.

³³ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (1990), trans. Martin Joughin, *October* 59, no. 4 (1992): 3-7.

³⁴ Galloway, *Protocol*, 113; Schrage, *Recommendation Engines*, 109-48.

³⁵ Deleuze, “Societies of Control,” 5.

from the manipulation of social platforms by dominant political and commercial players and power structures. This process has deep impact on communication on social media platforms. Their functioning may be described as that of the “plateaus of intensity,” which construct continuums of intensity³⁶ out of the affects, emotions and desires of their users, who have become “dividuals.” Unlike in Deleuze and Guattari’s theory, these plateaus of intensity enable the operation of markets, both economic and political, to function as an instrument of social control.

In contrast to the Internet, which shapes the “dividuals” as the basic units of the “society of control,” creating a new collectivity out of the “continuums of intensity” on social media platforms, generative artificial intelligence offers “dividuals” a new illusion of the freedom of choice. According to Michael Schrage, it accomplishes a “transition from ‘deity-driven’ to ‘data-driven’ recommender systems,”³⁷ transforming human choice and endorsing the illusion of “individual agency.”³⁸ Moreover, generative AI models and operations do not facilitate but rather disrupt intercultural communication, obstructing transformations of cultural identities driven by the interfacial nature of the communication process. As Martin Štefl argues in his article, “Managing Cultural Identities in the Age of AI Ethics,” they foster an “overtly pragmatic, instrumental or managerial approach to culture,” which creates an illusion of “comprehensibility and availability of the end-product (a culture as expressed through a model)” but, “paradoxically,”³⁹ offers the “dividuals,” under facile schemes, merely opaque and incomprehensible views of cultural otherness.⁴⁰

All this is by no means intended to demonize generative AI: in the article entitled “A Second Language Actor’s Schizo-affect Training Using AI: *The Human Voice*,” Bogdan Florea shows how AI can successfully contribute to theatre performance, social and intercultural communication. He focuses on the production of individual identity in Jean Cocteau’s monodrama *The Human Voice* (1930), staging a telephone conversation of a young woman with her lover who has abandoned her, and the performance of this play using actors who are non-

³⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 69-70, 157-58, 251-52, 254, 506-508.

³⁷ Schrage, *Recommendation Engines*, 40.

³⁸ Schrage, *Recommendation Engines*, 8. Schrage as well as Martin Štefl (“Of Technology, Yeats, and Automatic Writing: Managing Cultural Identities in the Age of AI Ethics and Beyond,” this issue, 187-207) may be too optimistic as regards the role of individual agency in combating the manipulation of “dividuals” by powerful political and economic forces.

³⁹ Štefl, “Managing Cultural Identities in the Age of AI Ethics,” this issue, 204.

⁴⁰ See Štefl, “Managing Cultural Identities in the Age of AI Ethics,” this issue, 199, 204.

native speakers of English. The analysis of the performance techniques shows how a “targeted engagement with AI” can make the actors “explore internal auditory models, isolate and manipulate idiosyncratic pronunciation, and cultivate a unique vocal identity, while simultaneously aligning schizo-affect with character creation.” Combining the art of stage-acting and theatre-directing with media theory and the “schizo-analysis” of Guattari and Deleuze,⁴¹ Florea persuasively argues for “a rethinking of second language acting pedagogy, emphasizing expressive experimentation, individuality, and the cultivation of non-standard voices as aesthetic and performative resources.”⁴²

Both the destructive and the creative potential of AI have naturally incited a critical discussion of its impact on art and politics, which in fact started a long time before the beginning of its experimental development and deployment in social and cultural processes. Already in the 1990s, science fiction, and, most famously, the “steampunk” novel *The Difference Engine* (1990) by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, dealt with the possible disastrous effects of AI on “post-truth” societies. Closer analysis of this and other novels points out the limits of collective identity models based on the medium of drama and theatre. As Mirka Horová argues, “[q]uestions arise” whether “agonistic pluralism” emphasizing “the value of disagreement as opposed to striving for consensus [...] applies to AI development, specifically the ethics of algorithmic design, content generation and user interaction.” Instead of developing “productive disagreement” as the major agency restructuring collective identities, “Western societies struggle with the limits of democratic debate,” having “little control over [...] both public and private arenas of digital communication, with limited accountability, controlling and feeding off so much of the global flow of online interaction.”⁴³ However, it is important to remember that AI itself is not to blame, since it only materializes the dynamic of the society, where liberal democracy appears to be at the end of its tether and authoritarian regimes gaining in corruption and destructivity certainly pose no alternative. As Deleuze maintained, machines only express “those social forms capable of generating them and using them.”⁴⁴

The concluding article of this issue returns to poetic language, an important component of the dramatic and theatrical medium, where our consideration of

⁴¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 256.

⁴² Bogdan Florea, “A Second Language Actor’s Schizo-affect Training Using AI: *The Human Voice*,” this issue, 161.

⁴³ Mirka Horová, “What Wondrous New Machines Have Late Been Spinning! Probing AI in Postmodern Byronic Metafiction,” this issue, 223.

⁴⁴ Deleuze, “Societies of Control,” 6.

performativity started. Tim Noble analyses the “terrible sonnets” of the English Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins bearing record of a deep spiritual and existential crisis and demonstrating the restorative power of poetic language, style and imagery as well as their capacity of building individual resilience against the forces of mental fragmentation, despair and death. The article persuasively shows – with reference to Mouffe’s concept of “agonistic pluralism” – that the resilience produced in literary creation does not amount to a reconciliation with the destructive forces but consists in “a re-visioning (therefore re-mediatising) of the possibility of human existence, which finds its home in language.” As Noble demonstrates, “Hopkins works between sound and sight and places a spiritual dimension into the political conversation about the task of being human.”⁴⁵ Reminding us of the importance of the links between performativity, media, individual identity and the building of resilience in the process of literary creation, Noble’s article is an apt coda of the trajectory of our explorations of performativity, media and identities.

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⁴⁵ Tim Noble, “Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Performance of Resilience in the Face of Inner Conflict,” this issue, 226.

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