

MARIA GRAZIA GUIDO

The Acting Interpreter: Embodied Stylistics in an Experientialist Perspective

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In her 2013 book, *The Acting Interpreter: Embodied Stylistics in an Experientialist Perspective* – the latest in a series that have analysed respectively the discourse of poetry, of metaphysics and of television comedy (Guido 1999, 2005, 2012) – Maria Grazia Guido develops further the theory of experiential schemata, turning to the genre of poetic drama. This book constitutes an excellent study into a neglected area of stylistics and would be of interest to academics and scholars in the field and also to university students of both linguistics and those from literature who would also find it very relevant to their field.

Hers is a subtle and intricate theory that focuses on the particular quality of poetic dramatic discourse, namely of having a literally physical effect on the interpreter, which is to say that, through its particular structural characteristics, the poetic dramatic text gives rise to bodily and/or emotional sensations in its interpreters. The central claim, as she says in her introduction, is “that to achieve a total experience of poetic drama interpreters need to engage their own schemata in their experiential entirety.”

In this insightful and innovative book, she draws on research from one-to-one interviews between her and well-known theatrical figures from London, namely Derek Jacobi, Judi Dench, Peter Hall, Fiona Shaw, and Richard Olivier as well as Franca Rame from Italy. The last to whom the book is dedicated provides in the final case study an interesting “Continental” and pronouncedly feminist counterbalance to the “Anglo-Saxon” voices, even if it is difficult to pigeon hole such heavyweights as these. From these conversations, Professor Guido extracts some fascinating and highly informative observations on the nebulous relationship between author, text and reader, and from these insights is able to construct a model which should be of interest not only to all those engaged in the genre of verse drama, but to students of stylistics everywhere, in particular those keen to find out more about figurative or ‘imaginative’ language and also other scholars eager to investigate the cognitive or psychological effects of language on receivers.

Maria Grazia Guido’s focus is poetic language, seen as “emblematic of the process of experiential embodiment of poetry”. Her central thesis, drawn out from her discussion with figures from the world of theatre, is that the iconic and representational language of such discourse, which, due to its being divorced from ‘real’ contexts of everyday communication, needs “to be appropriated into the identity of the readers who, in interpreting it, authenticate it by means of their own subjective background experience, or ‘schemata’”. In this view, the illusive poetry of the text is the product of interaction between the same text’s formal organisation and the schemata that the interpreters of it use to appropriate it. Such a realisation leads to a complete re-evaluation of the role of author and audience, to say nothing of the performer: an idea which the various interviewees all seem to confirm, in different but complementary ways.

The embodiment aspect of Guido’s theory is in the experientialist tradition of such scholars as Johnson (1987), Lakoff (1987) and Langacker (1991), working in the field of cognitive linguistics and stems from the realisation that schemata are not merely abstract cognitive structures but – due to the fact that the human body acts as an interface between

the mind and the physical sensory world around it – can also be manifested in a way often found in metaphors as physical, bodily constructs. That is to say, our bodies are not only the way that we interact with the world *physically* but also profoundly inform the way we conceptualize and understand it *mentally*.

This simple truth is an aspect of schema theory that is often neglected, and too often phenomena such as schemata and other mental models enabling the interpretation of texts are seen as somehow unrelated to the physical reality of the interpreter's emotional response and their bodily reactions to discourse. For Maria Grazia Guido, a poem is a poetic utterance and as such functions as a direct speech act which interpreters can appropriate by “imaginatively displacing their own individual, experiential schematic system of symbolization into textual semantics.”

As regards poetry, a genre that she sees as inherently dramatic in nature, Professor Guido advocates a response that entails the realisation that poetry has a physical and vocal dimension. Because of this, to be *conceptually* receptive to poetry, interpreters must be prepared to interpret also on a *physical* level. The interpreter must thus be willing to react actively with the text, to feel it and to live it and not just to sit back, so to speak, and submit to it passively, or silently (hence the term *acting* interpreter). It is this appeal for audiences to participate and engage with what they are witnessing which is very much in evidence in the comments of the theatrical figures who Maria Grazia Guido talks to. What she advocates is then a model of poetic discourse that empowers the interpreter and has obvious and exciting implications on teaching methodology, which she explores in her seventh chapter (discussing a workshop with Richard Olivier, the theatre director, son of the legendary Sir Laurence).

Professor Guido, with her highly effective research method, combining discussion with leading figures in the performance of the genre with academic enquiry, is also able to see different sides of the problem, where many other scholars restrict themselves to the familiar conventional wisdom of their field, and therefore puts herself in a position to make some insightful observations grounded not only in a detailed grasp of the theory but also a deep understanding of the practicalities of the genre. She thus takes on the guise of both the impartial observer and also a connoisseur of the genre: a difficult balancing act which she manages to achieve showing both objectivity and also genuine appreciation of the art.

In particular, Guido advocates that interpreters enact or give voice to the effects of the poetry that they have been exposed to. In this way the different interpreter's ‘individual voices’ recreate the ‘poetic voices’ of the text giving rise to a full exploration of its discursive potentialities. As regards the differences between scholars and performers, she reduces them to the allied but distinct processes of acting out and of analysing.

The chapter reporting on a drama workshop carried out with university students illustrates the techniques which may be used to adapt this theory to teaching. It is shown in particular how participants were able to develop embodied spatial metaphors that corresponded to those of the text and also how vocal renderings, expressions of the individual's own interpretation, could themselves be the source of further re-interpretations. In such a way one can see how the techniques proposed by Guido give new life to the text.

Given the nature of this view of poetic discourse, Professor Guido adopts a broadly ethnographic approach through a series of case studies, presented usefully as separate chapters (seven in all) with a theoretical introduction and a conclusion, whereby she reports at length the first person observations of her famous interviewees, providing an informed commentary on the complex theoretical implications of what she is being told

and also what she can observe. This dialogical technique makes parts of this book a pleasure to read and the mix between anecdote and theory works well. There is a natural progression in the themes of the chapters, which encourages a cover-to-cover reading, but equally some of the chapters, in particular Chapter 7, describing the student workshop, could be read alone. The organisation of the individual chapters would assist such an approach as Guido wisely adopts a similar structure for each chapter, with a theoretical introduction and then the case study itself, followed by a summary.

It goes without saying that, with such an interesting range of interviewees, consisting of such prominent theatre personalities (as well, in some cases, as cinema stars), many of the interviews would be of interest even to a general reader, interested not in the linguistic or stylistic side, but rather merely curious of the views of such artists about the poetic drama with which they deal and how it should be interpreted. Rarely, indeed, does one have the opportunity to compare so many prominent figures speaking about a common theme, as one gets in a book such as this. That Maria Grazia Guido is able to combine such material with informed and instructive academic research is a major success in its own right.

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