

Congreve's *Incognita*: Romance, Novel, Drama? Kristiaan P. Aercke

William Congreve's only novel, *Incognita; or: Love & Duty Reconcil'd* (1692), is often mentioned in studies that undertake to trace the origins of the English novel.¹ The action or "contrivance"² of *Incognita* involves several days and nights of confusion in the carnivalesque setting of Renaissance Florence and the ultimate union of the young aris-

1 The titles of studies that incorporate *Incognita* are often indicative of the way criticism considers it primarily as an anticipation of eighteenth-century fiction. *Incognita* has been discussed by John Richetti, *Popular Fiction before Richardson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969); by Maximilian Novak, "Fiction and Society in the Early 18th Century," in H.T. Swedenberg, ed., *England in the Restoration and Early Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 51-70; by Frederick Karl, *A Reader's Guide to the Eighteenth-Century English Novel* (originally, *The Adversary Literature*) (New York: Noonday Press, 1974); by Walter Reed, *An Exemplary History of the Novel: The Quixotic versus the Picaresque* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1981); by Brian Corman, "Congreve, Fielding, and the Rise of Some Novels," in Shirley S. Kenny, ed., *British Theatre and the Other Arts, 1660-1800* (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1984), pp. 257-70; by Paul Salzman, *English Prose Fiction 1558-1700* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); and by Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). One of the few recent major studies on the apparently inexhaustible topic of "the origins of the English novel" that does not even mention *Incognita* is Lennard Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); but then, Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957) did not refer to Congreve's novel either. Helga Drougge's dissertation *The Significance of Congreve's "Incognita"* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1976) is a book-length study devoted exclusively to the novel. Article-length studies of note are E.S. De Beer, "Congreve's *Incognita*, the Source of Its Setting, with a Note on Wilson's *Belphegor*," *Review of English Studies* 8 (1932), 74-77; Maximilian Novak, "Congreve's *Incognita* and the Art of the Novella," *Criticism* 11 (1969), 329-42; and Aubrey Williams, *An Approach to Congreve* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 91-106.

2 See Congreve's "preface" to *Incognita* in *The Complete Works of William Congreve*, 4 vols, ed. Montague Summers (London: Nonesuch Press, 1923), I, 111-12. References are to this edition.

toocrats, Aurelian and Hippolito, with the *belles*, Incognita-Juliana and Leonora. Congreve's preface has attracted more critical attention than the novel itself. Some critics have even called this document "the critical *locus classicus* in English"³ for the crucially important end of the seventeenth century, when novelists were striving to replace "improbable," "marvellous" romances with more consistently authenticated and psychologically developed fiction.⁴

Students of the early modern novel are likely to be introduced to Congreve's text in fragmented quotations from the preface, which Ernest Baker had good reason in 1929 to call "oft quoted":⁵

Romances ... elevate and surprize the Reader into a giddy Delight, which leaves him flat upon the Ground whenever he gives of Novels are of a more familiar nature; Come near us, and represent to us Intrigues in practice, delight us with Accidents and odd Events, but not such as are wholly unusual or unpresidented Romances give more of Wonder, Novels more Delight Since all Traditions must indisputably give place to the Drama, and since there is no possibility of giving that life to the Writing or Repetition of a Story which it has in the Action, I resolv'd in another beauty to imitate Dramatick Writing, namely, in the Design, Contexture and Result of the Plot. I have not observed it before in a Novel. (preface to *Incognita*)

The main reason for scholarly interest in the preface was Congreve's separation of "romance" and "novel," which critics interpreted as a convenient transitional distinction between two chronologically distinct species of fiction: on the one hand, the loosely structured baroque novels (written mainly after French models from the middle of the seventeenth century), and, on the other hand, the more formally realistic English novels of the early eighteenth century. Although this critical view was based on hindsight and has been challenged lately, recent studies still tend to discuss

3 Richetti, p. 174.

4 This reorientation of the novel is discussed in most of the studies listed in n. 1. Of related interest, see also Benjamin Boyce, "The Effects of the Restoration on Prose Fiction," *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 6 (1961), 77-82; Laura Brown, *English Dramatic Form 1660-1760: An Essay in Generic History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Gary Kelly, "'Intrigue' and 'Gallantry': The Seventeenth-Century French *nouvelle* and the 'Novels' of Aphra Behn," *Revue de Littérature Comparée* 218 (1981), 184-94; and Rose Zimbaro, *A Mirror to Nature: Transformations in Drama and Aesthetics 1660-1732* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986).

5 *The History of the English Novel* (1924, reprinted, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), III, 103.

Congreve's programmatic preface rather than his novel.⁶ In fact, some critics do not seem actually to have read the novel *Incognita* itself.⁷

The very fact that Congreve's preface is taken at face value is surprising; after all, a great many seventeenth-century prefaces are disingenuous and intentionally unreliable texts.⁸ Contrary to what the preface says, for example, the young lovers of *Incognita* have no genuine obstacles to overcome save their own adolescent social ineptitude. Moreover, the last sentence of the preface quite bluntly contradicts the first.⁹ Considered in the larger context of seventeenth-century prose fiction, Congreve's basic claim to innovation seems historically untenable; the abundance of bold and absolute terms and his fairly intolerant tone are therefore all the more remarkable: "I think it necessary," "all Traditions must indisputably give place to the Drama," "there is no possibility of giving that life to the Writing ... of a Story which it has in the Action," "I have not observed it before," "for 'tis but reasonable," "the design ... is obvious."

In fact, Congreve's claim to innovation in his distinction between romance and novel rests less on the emphasis on verisimilitude proper (as the critical consensus suggests) than on his concern with the means

6 Both Corman and Salzman offer a more balanced historical perspective. A thorough reading of the novel rather than the preface is provided by Helga Drougge.

7 Such appears to be the case with Frederick R. Karl's *A Reader's Guide to the Eighteenth-Century English Novel* (New York: Noonday Press, 1974). Congreve or *Incognita* is mentioned on pp. 29-31, 47, 298-99.

8 Most seventeenth-century novel prefaces offer only vague claims to verisimilitude, moral instruction, or entertainment. See Frederick Green, "The Critic of the Seventeenth Century and the Attitude toward the French Novel," *Modern Philology* 24 (1948-49): 283-93. CHARLES SORÉL'S extravagant preface to *L'Histoire comique de Francion* (1623) is surely one of these. Few prefaces were written for purely programmatic purposes or were interpreted as such. Some of the more influential and interesting programmatic prefaces are Georges de Scudéry's preface to his sister Madeleine's *Ibrahim ou l'illustre Bassa* (1641), which defined the nature and structure of the long epic-historical novel. Jean Segrain's proem to the *Nouvelles françoises* (1656) formulated the standards for the shorter and more realistic *nouvelles*. Some interesting English prefaces are collected by Charles Davies in *Prefaces to Four Seventeenth-Century Romances* (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1953) (i.e., prefaces to Boyle's *Parthenissa*, 1655 and his *Theodora and Didymus*, 1667; Mackenzie's *Aretina*, 1664), and Ingelo's *Bentivoglio and Urania*, 1660). Eighteenth-century prefaces, too, must be approached with caution. Is Defoe really serious, for instance, in the preface to *Moll Flanders*? Moll's ultimate success contradicts much of the moral pretence presented in that document.

9 "Some Authors are so fond of a Preface, that they will write one tho' there be nothing more in it than an Apology for its self. But to show thee that I am not tho' of those, I will make no Apology for this, but do tell thee that I think it necessary to be prefix'd to this Trifle. ... I have gratified the Bookseller in pretending an occasion for a Preface; the other two Persons concern'd are the Reader and my self, and if he be but pleased with what was produced for that end, my satisfaction follows of course, since it will be proportion'd to his Approbation or Dislike" (I, 111-12).

of achieving verisimilitude.¹⁰ The preface is not in the least interested in the semi-journalistic techniques of authentication (pseudo-historical evidence, sources, eyewitnesses) that writers such as Aphra Behn had already experimented with, and that would contribute much to the formal realism of the next century. Instead, the preface claims that *Incognita* is the very first novel to pursue verisimilitude by dramatic means, that is, by transposing the unities of place, time, and action into "a Unity of Contrivance."¹¹ In the quest for verisimilitude, narrative techniques of authentication are thus secondary to an altogether different, dramatic form for fiction, namely, "the Design, Contexture and Result of the Plot." The critical tendency to focus on the preface's rather trite distinction between romance and novel on the one hand, and to ignore the essential concern with dramatic form on the other, has allowed the fallacy of Congreve's claim "I have not observed it [dramatic form] before in a Novel" to remain undetected.

Throughout the seventeenth century novelists very often wrote also for the theatrical stage.¹² In an attempt to create verisimilitude they often introduced what may be called a dramatic "subtext of performance" in

10 Verisimilitude is obviously a well-elaborated topic in seventeenth and eighteenth-century studies on French and English drama and novel. All of the studies quoted in n. 1 contain interesting remarks on the subject. Additional texts, dealing with French attitudes, are those of the abbé d'Aubignac, *Pratique du Théâtre* (1657); Pierre Corneille, *Trois Discours* (1660); Daniel Huet, *Lettre à M. de Segrays de l'Origine des Romans* (1670); Charles Sorel, *De la Connaissance des bons livres* (1671); and Du Plaisir, *Sentiments sur les lettres et sur l'histoire* (1683). Among the most recent studies are Jacques Schérer, ed., *La Dramaturgie classique en France* (Paris: Nizet, 1968); Françoise Siguret, *L'Oeil Surpris* (Paris: Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature, 1985); Selma Zébouni, "Classicisme et Vraisemblance," *Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature* 8 (1977), 66-73; Philippe Sellier, "Une Catégorie-clé de l'esthétique classique: Le 'Merveilleux vraisemblable'," in Louise de Donville, ed., *La Mythologie du XVII^e Siècle* ([s.l.]: Centre Méridional de Rencontres sur le XVII^e Siècle, 1982), pp. 43-48; Marie-Thérèse Jones-Davies, ed., *Vérité et Illusion dans le théâtre au temps de la Renaissance* (Paris: Touzot, 1983); and especially Bernard Tocanne, *L'Idée de Nature en France dans la seconde moitié du XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1978). English attitudes towards verisimilitude are expressed by Dryden in his "Of Dramatick Poesy" (1668), and by Rymer in the preface to his translation of René Rapin, *Réflexions sur la Poétique d'Aristote* (1674), a piece praised by Dryden.

11 "The design of the Novel is obvious, after the first meeting of Aurelian and Hippolito with Incognita and Leonora, and the difficulty is in bringing it to pass, maugre all apparent obstacles, within the compass of two days. How many probable Casualties intervene in opposition to the main Design, viz. of marrying two Couple so oddly engaged in an intricate Amour, I leave the Reader at his leisure to consider: As also whether every Obstacle does not in the progress of the Story act as subservient to that purpose, which at first it seems to oppose. In a Comedy this would be called the Unity of Action; here it may pretend to no more than an Unity of Contrivance" (I, 112).

12 In seventeenth-century France, plays as well as prose fictions were written, for example, by Cyrano de Bergerac, Gombauld, La Calprenède, Mareschal, Scarron, Georges de Scudéry, Tristan L'Hermite, Théophile de Viau, Mme de Villedieu, the abbé d'Aubignac, Marie-Anne Barbier, and Catherine Bernard. Across the Channel, such dual activity was performed, for example, by

their narratives.¹³ This subtext put into narrative discourse such theatrical devices as character movement and gesticulation, the representation of background and speech, the functional and symbolic value of properties, and the emotive and three-dimensional effects of sound and light. In the course of the century novelists and narrators became increasingly interested in creating scenes of showing that turn the reader or the narratee into a spectator by means of a stream of detailed information: a subtext of performance, about who is doing what with whom and where and in what costume and against what background.¹⁴ In most novels this attempt at dramatic verisimilitude is limited to the scenes of showing; it is the task of the narrator to chain such dramatic scenes together by means of often lengthy digressions of telling.¹⁵ Such a dualistic struc-

Nicholas Breton, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Deloney, Robert Greene, Thomas Lodge, John Lyly, George Peele, Robert Baron, Roger Boyle (First Earl of Orrery), Margaret Cavendish (Duchess of Newcastle), Francis Kirkman, Elkanah Settle, Aphra Behn, and, of course, William Congreve.

- 13 For historical discussions of such epic, historical, gallant, and adventure novels and their techniques of "historical verisimilitude," see L. Charlanne, *L'Influence française en Angleterre au XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Société française d'imprimerie et de Librairie, 1960); Maurice Magendie, *Le Roman français au XVII^e Siècle* (1932; Genève: Slatkine, 1970); Maurice Lever, *La Fiction narrative en prose au XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Editions du Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, 1976); Georges Molinier, *Un Roman rare: un roman baroque* (Toulouse: Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, 1981); Percy Adams, *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983); Paul Salzman, *op. cit.*
- 14 The most important innovations and developments in the representation of reality and verisimilitude on the seventeenth-century stage introduced into the craft of fiction, are (briefly): in matters of background and setting: the introduction of perspective and three-dimensional architectural settings, with a neutral "chambre à quatre portes" and, related to this, the disappearance of the medieval mansion stage; in matters of speech representation: the gradual disappearance of monologue, soliloquy, and *récit* (which were replaced in fiction towards the last decades by indirect speech), and the rise of dialogic discourse; in matters of properties: the gradually more refined psychological use of objects based on the distinction between their exchange value and use value; in matters of stage directions and gesticulation: the adaptation of choice, frequency, and explicitness of each of the three main types of stage direction (purely deictic, "conscious acting," and "spontaneous acting") according to the mode of the text in which they occur (tragic, comic, or tragicomic); in matters of references to dress and clothing: the gradual rise of interest in clothes adapted to mood and emotion, or in order to highlight baroque themes and motifs; in matters of effects of sound and light: the manipulation of sound and light to suggest or influence moods and emotions and to further the plot. Similar to the novelistic "subtext of performance," the more or less precise directions supplied in promptbooks (prompter's notes), or the stage directions in play-texts in general, have been undervalued as sources of meaning. On stage directions see Peter Holland, *The Ornament of Action: Text and Performance in Restoration Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
- 15 Among the French novels constructed in such fashion and in which the "subtext of performance" plays a vital role are not only the "romans de longue haleine," but also such diverse texts as Sorel's *Nouvelles françaises* and his *Histoire comique de Francion*, Claireville's (?) *Le Gascon extravagant*, Scarron's *Roman comique*, Madeleine de Scudéry's *Céline*, the anonymous *Elise*, Lafayette's *Princesse de Clèves*, Le Noble's *Zulima*, and countless others. The same thing holds true for such English texts as Nashe's *Unfortunate Traveller*, Forde's *Ornatus and Artesia*, most of Behn's romances, and Congreve's *Incognita*.

ture resulting from the dichotomy of showing and telling is precisely what Congreve's unity of contrivance, announced in the preface, wants to avoid, and in this sense the contrivance may indeed be considered an innovation. The contrivance must produce a unified dramatic narrative of showing, conceptualized in the neoclassical interpretation of drama as a system of unities-for-the-sake-of-verisimilitude.

So far, so good. But in spite of all this theory, and also in spite of some general analogies to Restoration comedy (and to some of Dryden's plays in particular), the novel *Incognita* is not particularly dramatic.¹⁶ For example, there is not much dialogue and the loquacious, extradiegetic narrator is quite untheatrical. His digressions effectively destroy any effect that the contrivance might otherwise achieve. Much has been written about this narrator, who has been associated in particular with the rather old-fashioned techniques of authentication of French comic-realistic romance.¹⁷ Rather, we should probably consider him "self-conscious" in the most literal sense: Congreve's narrator is a heckler who is condoned in the text in order to sabotage the grand designs of the dogmatic preface.

This interpretation considerably alters our view of the preface; we can no longer say that William Congreve is simply developing a program for the craft of fiction. Rather, I propose to read the preface as a text that is quite as fictional as *Incognita* itself, a mask before the face of the novel, hiding it and allowing it to remain "incognito." This analogy of form and content, incidentally, reinforces the novel's general themes of masking and unreliability. I also want to suggest that the text *Incognita* is interesting not so much because of the rather silly plot of adolescent adventures, but because of an implied philosophical-epistemological debate on the means of achieving verisimilitude between the antithetical voices and interests of the preface and the narrator.

Judging from his interventions, the voice of the self-conscious narrator represents a baroque epistemological scepticism. Characteristic of the baroque writers following Montaigne is the fundamental anguish caused by the realization that the senses are unreliable mediators in

16 The correspondences with and parody of Restoration comedy are discussed by Drougge. Montague Summers pointed out some close similarities to Dryden's *The Assignation* and *Marriage-à-la-Mode*. See his Introduction to *The Complete Works of William Congreve*, I, 4-5.

17 For example, by Drougge and Corman. Michael McKeon relates the narrator of *Incognita* to Scarron's narrator in *Le Roman comique* (p. 62). The "Histoire de l'amante invisible" inserted in Scarron's novel (I, ch. 9) is probably the main single source of *Incognita*. On early self-conscious narrators, see Wayne Booth, "The Self-Conscious Narrator in Comic Fiction before *Tristram Shandy*," *PMLA* 67 (1952), 163-85.

the quest for Truth, and that even the very objects of knowledge are transitory. Such a realization can develop the equation "verisimilitude = probability = observation of phenomena in Nature," but cannot carry it further, because observation breaks down in the face of a multiplicity of phenomena that allows no conclusions and no doctrine. Baroque drama and narrative often testify to the creative impact of the scepticism that results from this anguish. The plot of *Incognita*, which the narrator must convey, stimulates this scepticism and presents many variations upon the dichotomy—of reality and appearance, of being and seeming, of essence and existence—that is the quintessential paradigm of baroque epistemology.¹⁸ At the heart of *Incognita* we find such topoi as the impossibility of describing adequately, the problematics of knowledge, diversibility, reversibility, changes, incognitos, masks—all of them indications of the transitory nature of the objects of knowledge.

The baroque epistemological concerns found in the novel *Incognita* were interpreted rather differently by later seventeenth-century "classicism," which the voice of the preface reflects. The neoclassical view does allow for a doctrine; that is, the equation "verisimilitude = probability = observation of phenomena in Nature = rational analysis of these phenomena in terms of the universal and the general." This doctrine claims to combine pleasure and instruction, on the assumption that we only learn from and delight in what is probable, verisimilar, universal, and general.¹⁹ One of the functions of the unities is precisely to emphasize the universal and the general in the common existential experiences by allowing a problem to be examined in depth through the presentation of types. The neoclassical concerns voiced in the preface of *Incognita* include structural tidiness, the formal presentation of a doctrine, the reference to Horace (ultimately Aristotle), the desire to teach and delight,²⁰ the need of the unities and regularity for the sake of verisimilitude, the hostility towards (obviously baroque) epic fiction ("Some [novels] I have

18 See Jean Rousset, *La Littérature de l'âge baroque en France: Circé et le paon* (Paris: Corti, 1954).

19 Adapted from Zébouni, pp. 68–69.

20 "I will make no Apology for this [preface], but do tell thee that I think it necessary to be prefix'd to this Trifle, to prevent thy overlooking some little pains which I have taken in the Composition ... ; the other two Persons concern'd are the Reader and my self, and if he be but pleased with what was produced for that end, my satisfaction follows of course" (I, 111–12). Congreve's famous distinction between romance and novel is actually based on reader's response (I, 111), which anticipates his later fascination with the spectator's response to his plays and their language.

seen begin with an unexpected accident"), and a confidence in mimesis as the imitation of Nature ("the copy which I imitate"). The preface shows familiarity with Corneille's programmatic *Trois Discours* (1660).²¹

We can now reconstruct a significant manifestation of these clashing views on verisimilitude in *Incognita*. The preface proposes the unity of contrivance to cast the "stuff" of fiction into the tightly organized container of a unified play. This formal restriction prohibits digressions, which, however, are not only the life and blood, the pleasure, the *raison d'être* of a seventeenth-century narrator, but also the typical literary expression of baroque scepticism (as in Montaigne, Burton, Browne), the expression of the individual mind at work, and hence the expression of the particular. Thus, to digress is to contradict the laws of the universal and the general that mimetic systems require. Digressions also destroy the illusion of mimetic realism by pulling the narratee/spectator into the extra-diegetic frame. Hence, a verisimilar, unified, and regular text (play or narrative) does not tolerate digression.²² It is especially in matters of digression that Congreve's two voices are in conflict. In the opening pages of the novel, the narrator, irked by his lack of freedom, says testily:

Now the Reader I suppose to be upon Thorns at this and the like impertinent Digressions, but let him alone and he'll come to himself; at which time I think fit to acquaint him, that when I digress, I am at that time writing to please myself, when I continue the Thread of the Story, I write to please him; supposing him a *reasonable* Man, I conclude him satisfied to allow me this liberty, and so I proceed. (I, 116, emphasis added)

Digression (a narrator's *Lust und Leben*) is now transgression, an impertinent pursuit of personal pleasure, an activity counter to the neoclassical form of reasonable verisimilitude. The narrator uses the term "impertinence" no fewer than three times in similar digressions, for he is aware

21 In fact, the preface's desire to create a text that is "regular" and yet "delights" seems to combine the views of Dryden's *Lisideius* and Neander ("Of Dramatick Poesy," 1665, published 1668). *Lisideius*, who champions French neoclassical drama, virtually reduces the role of drama ("to teach and delight") to the observance of dramatic unities, decorum, and verisimilitude. Neander doubts whether *Lisideius* is correct in advocating these rules (primarily useful for the "teaching" aspect) for their own sake; Neander would rather see "delight" (which favours "irregularities") as the primordial instrument of instruction; thus he defends the "quick turns and graces" so typical of English drama without necessarily sacrificing decorum and regularity.

22 The voice of the preface bases its disgust with baroque (epic) fiction exclusively on the fact that such fiction delights in and depends on digressions (flashbacks), necessitated by the epic opening, "in medias res," of such novels (I, 112).

that digressions require an apology within the system of the contrivance, which pretends to pour old content into a new formal container.

Incognita ought to develop horizontally, for it presents the old-fashioned "stuff" of romance, its fixed topoi, its idealized characters,²³ in a blend of Spanish *novelas* of intrigue and French *romans comiques*. Such "stuff" depends on the accumulation of action, time, and place; the wealth of incident and properties requires a clever narrator, whose crucially important digressions stitch the texture of the story together. Formally, in contrast, the preface demands that *Incognita* will develop vertically, in depth, like neoclassical drama and late seventeenth-century psychological narrative. These genres depend on the elimination of action, time, and place, and develop forms of indirect speech representation (*stile pensé*) at the expense of an extra-diegetic narrator. *Incognita* is therefore interesting not only because of the dramatic technique imposed on the narrative, but also because the preface raises the problem of a difficult relationship between form and content. The neoclassical form rejects digression as contradictory to *its* brand of verisimilitude; the baroque content demands digression as necessary to *its* brand of verisimilitude.

The narrator tries to accommodate both contradictory impulses towards verisimilitude simultaneously, but does so unconvincingly and with numerous difficulties. For example, in the treatment of time, the contrivance demanded by the preface implies a sort of "degree zero" of narrative; an isochrony between narration and story, a perfect "concurrence between diegetic sequence and narrative sequence."²⁴ The narrator does achieve a relative isochrony: externally, since the story-duration equals an acceptable play plot-duration (three days), and internally, since the narrative sequence of the novel equals the performance sequence of a play (roughly two to three hours). But what is the cost of this isochrony imposed by the dramatic unities and the contrivance for the sake of a form of verisimilitude? Not only must the narrator theoretically abandon digression of any sort (including description), but he must also manipulate the plethora of events with such furious speed that the resulting narrative, far from becoming more realistic and verisimilar, is in fact incongruous

23 Drougge discusses these at length.

24 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, translated by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 86–87. Actually, rigorous isochrony between showing and telling or between narrative and story is impossible except in very artificial or in experimental texts (Genette, p. 88). But then, *Incognita* is introduced in the preface as such an experimental text, and the narrator's continual digressions serve to point out the artifice of the text.

and artificial, at times even absurd—for example, when a sighing character must sigh efficiently rather than emotionally: “So having put all her Sighs into one great Sigh, she discharged her self of ’em all at once, and formed the Relation you are just about to Read” (I, 144).

Many elements that the subtext of performance in baroque novels would highlight to pursue its own form of verisimilitude are sacrificed for the sake of speed and contrivance. Among the elements wryly omitted in crucial scenes are the descriptions of costume, once so popular in baroque fiction: “I should by right now describe her Dress, which was extremely agreeable and rich, but ’tis possible I might err in some material Pin or other, in the sticking of which may be the whole grace of the Drapery depended” (I, 119).²⁵ Similarly, the narrator deletes many of the detailed analyses of character gesticulation and movement that a subtext of performance deploys to stimulate the reader’s three-dimensional perception. Sometimes movement is deleted altogether: “Well, we will leave them both fretting and contriving to no purpose, to look about and see what was done at the Palace, where their doom was determined much quicker than they imagined” (I, 137). When highly complex, quick movement is rendered, it is often reduced to the mere outline of an almost absurdly fast scenario. Individual movements are supplied but the links between them are deleted. Hence the reader’s impression is of non-functional movement that serves to delay rather than promote the final resolution, as in the following scenario in which Aurelian and Hippolito are at home. When a coach stops in front of their door, Aurelian concludes that Don Fabio, his grouchy father, must be looking for him, and he runs away. But (a veiled) Incognita enters, asking Hippolito (she thinks he is called Aurelian) for the whereabouts of “Don Hippolito” (she means Aurelian, her flame). The real Hippolito departs, to look for his friend. Incognita waits, decides to leave, but first writes a letter with instructions for her suitor “Don Hippolito.” Hearing steps, she tears up the letter. Enter not Aurelian, as expected, but Don Fabio with the Marquess of Viterbo. Incognita shrieks, the men retire politely; when they come

25 The importance of clothing on the baroque stage and in baroque fiction as the visible signifier of an invisible signified need hardly be emphasized. Theatrical dress as a metaphor for thought and as a code or *écriture* is discussed by Roland Barthes, “Les Maladies du costume de théâtre,” *Essais critiques* (Paris: Sueil, 1964), pp. 53–62. See also Marie-Madeleine Martinet, “Pensée et Vêtement: Une Métaphore réflexive du XVII^e siècle. Source d’un symbolisme moderne,” *Bulletin de la Société d’Etudes Anglo-Américaines des XVII^e et XVIII^e Siècles* 12 (1981), 45–60; or David M. Bergeron, ed., *Pageantry in the Shakespearean Theater* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985); and Paula S. Berggren, “‘A Prodigious Thing’: The Jacobean Heroine in Male Disguise,” *Philological Quarterly* 62 (1983), 383–402.

back to apologize, the girl has already left. Re-enter Hippolito, who is understandably surprised at finding two elderly men instead of the lovely Incognita; although he recognizes Don Fabio, he feigns not to know him. Hippolito leaves promptly, pretending to search for Incognita—in reality he is still trying to find Aurelian. Tired of waiting, Don Fabio and the Marquess leave the room; almost immediately, Aurelian finally returns. He concludes that his father is still around and runs out again, but not without accidentally retrieving the torn-up letter left by Incognita. Although a crucial fragment is missing, he manages to arrive (purely by chance) at the right spot (the ruin of the monastery) in time to save Incognita from disgrace (I, 139–40). The reader rushes through this highly complex action in less than a full page of text.

And again, whereas the subtext of performance happily enlists direct speech representation for the sake of verisimilitude, the narrator very often cuts direct speech.²⁶ Often he prevents speech altogether; although speech would contribute to psychological verisimilitude, he argues that the verbose rhetoric and Ciceronian language of the romance situation are incompatible with the needs of the contrivance. For example, he will allow Hippolito to present his lengthy amorous monologue but only in the “background”; in order to save time, the narrator fills in Hippolito’s speech with some useful plot-information of his own:

In which interim, let me take the liberty to digress a little, and tell the Reader something which I do not doubt he has apprehended himself long ago, if he be not the dullest Reader in the World; yet only for orders sake, let me tell him I say, That So, Reader, having now discharg’d my Conscience of a small Discovery which I thought my self obliged to make to thee, I proceed to tell thee. (I, 123–24)

The narrator refuses to report the direct speech of the characters on several occasions when it would be crucial to the plot or the psychology (pp. 145, 147), most notably when he undercuts Hippolito’s well-prepared wooing scene (complete with lute and moonlit arbour) with the gloomy observation, “’Twere tedious to tell the many ingenious Arguments he used with all her Nice Distinctions and Objections. In short, he convinced her of his Passson [*sic*]” (I, 149).

In other words, when the narrator actually could promote psychological verisimilitude by showing dramatic scenes, he is content with telling and, piously or maliciously, sticks to the inflexible time scheme

26 Drougge analyses the only fully developed dialogue between Aurelian and Incognita in the ballroom (I, 117–19).

required by the preface and the contrivance. In contrast, the narrator will digress shamelessly in descriptive purple patches or in an assiduously developed subtext of performance precisely when verisimilitude and plot advancement benefit the least from it.

The narrator's famous attempt to describe Incognita's face is an example of the latter, undermining activity: "Now see the impertinence and conceitedness of an Author, who will have a fling at a Description, which he has Prefaced with an impossibility" (I, 125-26). The long passage following this disclaimer is such a precious-baroque and aesthetically abstract denial that we know less about Incognita's face than before. Paradoxically enough, the purple patches contribute to the girl's incognita rather than solving it (I, 125-26).²⁷ Again, indulging in extravagant detail, the narrator will provide background descriptions that are precise far beyond the needs of the plot; an amusing example is supplied by the description of the garden where Hippolito hides at night, (I, 146-47).²⁸ The garden setting with its angles-and-corners contradicts the limits imposed by the contrivance; it is a very baroque scene, designed to enhance confusion and generate surprise among the characters as well as in the narratee/spectator.²⁹ As we might expect, Congreve's narrator drives the conventions of baroque staging to an almost absurd extreme, thereby promoting illusion instead of realism. All the settings are three-dimensional enclosed spaces, but none really serves as background to the action in a way comparable to previous drama and fiction. Rather, the opposite is true: the narrator incessantly pushes the characters around in claustrophobic streets or piazzas enclosed by buildings, in a crowded ballroom or tilting arena, in the ruins of a monastery—subjecting action to description in the process. Corners, trees, and hidden doors prevent the reader or spectator from taking in the entire milieu or scene at once. The ballroom is large enough to allow people to disappear furtively; streets always have an unexpected turn; no door opens without yet another shadow slipping through. Character and reader alike are thus deprived of part of the action for lack of a privileged perspective: there is always something to obstruct clear vision. Like baroque

27 According to Corman, pp. 266-67, this "portrait" passage rivals "in length, if not quality," Fielding's introduction of Sophia in "A short Hint of what we can do in the Sublime, and a Description of Miss Sophia Western" (*Tom Jones*, IV, 2).

28 According to Drougge this elaborate description is necessary for the plot. I disagree: the "precipitate escape," for which Hippolito is so well prepared and for the sake of which the description is so finicky, never takes place.

29 See my essay "Theatrical Background in English Novels of the Seventeenth Century," *Journal of Narrative Technique* 18 (1988), 120-36.

stage designs, Congreve's settings favour angles and corners; "as the spectator sees only a portion of the scene, he is stimulated to supplement it with an imagined expanse beyond the given stage picture."³⁰ The many surprise meetings in *Incognita* must be interpreted with such an angle-and-corner setting in mind.

These examples of verbose teasing represent the narrator's rebellion against the practical demands of the verisimilitude-contrivance (ultimately, that is, against the demands of the preface). The conflict between the preface and the narrator is really a conflict between particular interpretations of the dramatic ideal and the narrative ideal. The preface represents the general trend of contemporary fiction, which increasingly developed towards dramatic, undigressive psychological forms in order to promote realism and verisimilitude. The narrator's playful manipulation of the techniques necessary to attain this end marks him as a supporter of the theory that each category of literature should emphasize a different set of reading rules, and that in each category of text the reader or narratee should emphasize different "operations of signification."³¹ He demonstrates that the rigid application of certain practices from a non-narrative mode (such as dramatic efficiency and economy) might suspend the subversive playfulness that many critics believe is at the very heart of the novel.

Everything considered, the entire narrative is a huge digression, encouraging confusion and mistakes at every turn. Why, for instance, do the characters insist so much on their incognito? Why does "Incognita" not reveal her real name to "Aurelian" (who is actually Hippolito; I, 144-45)? This crucial bit of information would solve the mystery. In fact, why do these silly adolescents not simply get down to essentials (the truth) from the very beginning? Why is the setting for this story specifically Saturnalian, carnivalesque in the first place? I believe that these essential questions can be answered in two ways.

First, the romance story simply cannot operate according to the narrative strategies defined in and required by the preface. The discourse of the narrator suggests that characters, plot, and motifs belonging to one mode of narrative cannot be made to behave according to the format

30 Dunbar H. Ogden, translator, *The Italian Baroque Stage: Documents by Giulio Troili, Andrea Pozzo, Ferdinando Galli-Bibiena and Baldassare Orsini*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 3.

31 Peter Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 184-85.

of another mode. Trying to impose a neoclassical or "regular" structure designed for psychological verisimilitude on a mode of narrative fiction that has always accommodated a very different view of verisimilitude is, as the narrator tells us more than once, an absurd undertaking. The voice of the preface may well propose verisimilitude as "the illusion of reality." But in the narrator's interpretation, verisimilitude becomes instead "the reality of the illusion." The fact that after *Incognita* Congreve never again touched the narrative genre may well indicate that he was not prepared to resolve the debate between these widely different interpretations.

The second answer is thematic in nature, but develops from the first, generic, answer. Because of the general pursuit of the reality of illusion, the romance city of the four protagonists provides a very attractive, vibrant, and erotic milieu. Such an interpretation of Florence obviously exists only on the diegetic level of the story. For on the extra-diegetic level, the events are controlled by a sort of Reality Principle in the form of the self-conscious narrator: a grouchy taskmaster who is egged on by the instructional program of the preface and whose task is continuously to point out the artificiality of the protagonists, of their adventures, and, in fact, of all fiction. By contrast, the protagonists defend the playful make-believe of verisimilitude as a boon more enjoyable than reality itself.

In spite of lingering aggression arising from amorous jealousy, the carnival spirit that moves Florence promotes play, masking, costuming, and lying—and thus it blatantly denies the Reality Principle. The protagonists insist on remaining incognito even when masks are no longer useful to their designs (for example, when Hippolito marries Leonora under the name of Aurelian, or when Aurelian "forgets" to ask Juliana her name). To go about in masks and to fabricate identities are pleasurable activities that resist the pressure of reality. Moreover, because these activities are nonfunctional, voluntary, and pursued in a mood of sportive *agon*, they also constitute the ideal form of play as defined in Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*.³²

The desire to remain incognito actually imposes a taboo value on such markers of reality as names and identities. Taboo-observances were the first "right" or "law" in Freud's interpretation of civilization, the communal life of human beings. And the primary law of the carnivalesque wedding celebrations in Congreve's Florence is precisely to go about

masked, incognito. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), for example, Freud generally argues that civilization rests on two elements: *ananke*, related to "the compulsion to work, created by external necessity"; and *eros*, "the power of love, which makes the man unwilling to be deprived of his sexual object—the woman—, and which makes the woman unwilling to be deprived of the part of herself that had been separated from herself—her child."³³ One can therefore argue that *eros* and *ananke* have become the parents of human civilization. But love and necessity are often at odds, and that fact brings about some of the many discontents that we recognize in our so-called civilization (in which so few people are truly happy). The "necessity" (in the sense of duty, family-related loyalty, and obedience as well as in the sense of compulsion to work) to which Aurelian, Hippolito, Juliana, and Leonora must submit is precisely the pleasant pursuit of "love" itself. By extension, the same duty affects everybody within the walls of Florence. Artisans and merchants are not allowed to work or to display their wares during the three days of wedding celebrations; in Saturnalian fashion, domestic servants imitate the courtship rituals of their masters. Since *eros* (love) and *ananke* (necessity, also in the above sense of duty) are so happily and harmoniously conjoined in Florence, the real proposition of young Congreve's novel may well have been the fictional-verisimilar representation of an adolescent utopia in which happiness is pursued and play rewarded, and which is charged with eroticism. After all, the full title of the story is *Incognita; or, Love & Duty Reconcil'd*.

The evidence of *Incognita* supports the notion that Congreve appears to have been interested in representing formal as well as thematic ambiguities early in his creative career. In his plays he continued to explore this interest by his manipulation of dramatic irony and "dark" subtexts. But in the process he gradually abandoned the adolescent-romance tone that makes *Incognita* such a rewarding first work. This tendency may be said to culminate in his last (non-operatic) play, significantly entitled *The Way of the World* (1700), where the pleasantry is considerably toned down and the cynicism is heightened. The frustration, determinism, even fatalism contained in the very expression "the way of the world" (occurring in act III, scene i) may well be a cliché and, as such, false, but it is nevertheless sustained throughout the text. In 1700 Congreve has a sarcastic Lady Wishfort suggesting to Mrs Marwood that they retire and

33 *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud, vol. 21 (1927–31), (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), p. 101.

become pastoral shepherdesses (V, i); the escape into a *happy* erotic society has become the subject of an extravagant and cruel joke rather than a rewarding and redeeming fictional possibility.

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