



Pauline Picot // Have you ever felt *galvanized*? Surely you must have—if we consider the meaning that is nowadays assigned to this verb, which is to “shock or excite (someone) into taking action”[1]. But have you ever felt galvanized in an electrical sense, according to the original meaning of the word?

The term comes from a name, mostly forgotten today but widely known at the end of the 18th century in Europe: Luigi Galvani’s, an Italian physician who alleged to have

discovered the existence of “animal electricity”. In the early 1780s, a strange phenomenon occurred in the scientist’s laboratory: while one of his assistants was touching the bare muscles of the frog he was dissecting with a metal scalpel, a spark suddenly ignited from the electrostatic machine that Galvani was working on—proving the presence of electricity in the room—and the frog’s leg kicked, as if abruptly brought back to life[2].

The physician deduced from this unexpected chain of events that purported “animal electricity” must be secreted by the brain when bare muscle tissue is in contact with metal. Galvani consequently formulated the hypothesis that this electricity runs through the nerves, adding another bold and dubious conjecture that would give the word “galvanism” its long-lasting lexical prosperity: if you stimulate a body’s “animal electricity” with an electric discharge, you might bring that body back to life[3].

Italian physicist Alessandro Volta, a fierce detractor of Galvani’s, soon demonstrated that the living body does not produce electricity as much as it conducts it[4]. But this didn’t prevent this fascinating image from finding its way into popular imagination. Neurologist and science historian Laura Bossi argues that the discovery of this alleged “animal electricity” appears in the scientific—and soon in a wider, cultured—milieu as “a Promethean spark, able to induce the resurrection of the dead, to breathe life into a creature made from *disjecta membra* [scattered limbs] and even to animate man-made androids”[5]. Before being irreversibly discarded by Volta, galvanism thus knew an undeniable moment of glory through its popularization throughout Europe, and notably in France[6].

The powerful symbolic dimension of this hypothesis might explain the good literary fortune of galvanism, even after it had been disproved by scientists. It is addressed in several major European works of the 19th century, such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* (1818)—a subtitle that implicitly but eloquently refers to Galvani’s metaphysical ambitions—Edgar Allan Poe’s *Some Words with a Mummy* (1840), or Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s *L’Ève future [Tomorrow’s Eve]* (1886).

But galvanism not only persisted as a fertile literary subject; it also very slowly made its way into common speech, and was noticeably used by the French theater critics of the second half of the 19th century. Unlike the current use of the verb “galvanize”, which mostly refers to the impact made on an audience during public gatherings such as political meetings, the term surprisingly did not relate, at that time, to the public. Used over the course of two decades by critics Valentin Darthenay (1853), Jules Claretie (1869) or Louis de Carné (1872), the term describes the miracle by which actors and actresses display their ability to invigorate—in the manner of a galvanic operation—either bad plays by their fresh acting, or dated dramatic repertoires by their sheer vivid

presence. Moreover, the term “galvanize” could also refer to the failure of an actor or actress to accomplish this eagerly awaited resurrection.

In his acerbic critic of the comedy *Madame Desroches* by Léon Laya, staged at the Comédie-Française on December 23rd of 1867, novelist, playwright and critic Jules Claretie states that “the major flaw of M. Laya’s play—and it is essential—is, and I must declare it first and foremost, boredom”[7]. But after thoroughly narrating the plot, he then comes to a precise moment of the representation when one character powerfully asks another to marry him, and he exclaims: “this scene, or rather this scream, has galvanized this dying comedy”[8]. Claretie reuses the same image in his critique of the comedy *La Petite ville* [*The Small Town*] by Louis-Benoît Picard staged in the Théâtre de l’Odéon on May 18th of 1868, but this time in a more appropriate context since the play was being restaged sixty-seven years after its premiere in the same theater. The challenge is really, this time, to galvanize a dead body of words, since Claretie writes that “one could never think of something more old-fashioned”[9]. And it indeed “t[akes] the expressiveness of the actors, the talent of Martin, Madame Lambquin and Mademoiselle Marie Guérin to galvanize all this”[10]. By describing actors bringing obsolete or bad plays back to life, the galvanic metaphor graphically illustrates a physical operation that, apart from a scientific experiment, only theater could perform, since this art is about breathing life into lifeless texts.

However, the most interesting use of this image relates to actors and actresses trying to reinvigorate dated repertoires by their youth and vividness. Journalist Louis de Carné regrets for instance, in his 1872 *Souvenirs de ma jeunesse* [*Youth Memories*], the loss of tragedian Louis-Joseph Talma that makes it henceforth impossible to “galvanize the works of old poets” of the Académie Française, as if only his vigorous acting could have brought something modernistic to any old-fashioned play.

As for journalist and critic Valentin Darthenay, in *Les Acteurs et les actrices de Paris* [*Actors and Actresses of Paris*], he is the first of many to highlight the almost sacred mission of great tragedian Rachel Félix, which is to “have galvanized the [17th century] tragedy which, without her, would be irrelevant”[11]. Claretie approves when he nostalgically writes that she managed by herself to “galvanize [those] dead masterpieces” but undermines his words by regretting that this “brilliant woman” dedicated her life to “galvaniz[e] the dead rather than offering her faith and fire to the living”[12]. The metaphor is all the more inept as Galvani did not succeed in reanimating dead people, and the French verb “galvaniser” only referred to “animating [a body] with a kind of artificial life”[13]. Félix, like Galvani, seems to hold on to a metaphysical ideal that only lives through her performance.

Even onstage, where actors might be considered as thaumaturges and could easily bear a comparison with Luigi Galvani, there are certain things, perhaps, that should not be brought back to life. Claretie reiterates this claim when he criticizes the son of famous mime artist Debureau who cannot, despite all his talent, “galvanize the dead [pantomime]”. Émile Zola does the same in 1881 when he favors dawning Naturalism over moribund Romanticism, claiming sententiously that “one does not galvanize the past”[14].

One might thus explain this late peak of galvanic metaphors in the second half of the 19th century by the prolific but very changeable context of the French theater, in which plays of old and new genres are being staged at the same time—a context in which the 17th century classic tragedy experiences a revival alongside fading Romanticism and nascent Naturalism. This context allows critics to debate whether the stage should be the place for resurrection or a place reserved for the living.

[1] « galvanize. » *Lexico.com*, 2019, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/galvanize>.

[2] Auguste Tripier, *Manuel d'électrothérapie. Exposé pratique et critique des applications médicales et chirurgicales de l'électricité*, Paris, J.B. Baillière et Fils, 1861, p.59. [Digitized by Gallica-BnF]

[3] Galvani publishes the comments on his observations and experiences in his 1791 dissertation *De viribus electricitatis in motu musculari* [about the effect of electricity on the muscular movement].

[4] Alain Beltran et Patrice Carré, *La Vie électrique. Histoire et imaginaire (XVIII^e-XXI^e siècles)*, Paris, Belin, 2016, p.24.

[5] Laura Bossi, « L'âme électrique », in Jean Clair, (dir.), *L'Âme au corps. Arts et sciences (1793-1993)*, Paris, Réunion des musées nationaux, Gallimard, 1993, p.167. My translation.

[6] Christine Blondel, « Animal electricity in Paris: From Initial Support, to its Discredit and Eventual Rehabilitation », in Marco Bresadola and Giuliano Pancaldi (eds), *Luigi Galvani International Workshop. Proceedings*, Università di Bologna, 1999, pp.187-209, ffhalshs-00172331f.

[7] Jules Claretie, *La Vie moderne au théâtre. Causeries sur l'art dramatique*, I, Paris, Georges Barba, 1869, p.209. [Digitized by Google Books] My translation.

[8] Jules Claretie, *La Vie moderne au théâtre. op. cit.*, p.211.

[9] Jules Claretie, *La Vie moderne au théâtre, op. cit.*, p.360.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Valentin Darthenay, *Les Acteurs et les actrices de Paris*, Paris, chez les éditeurs Rue Grange Batelière [depuis Éditions de la Grange Batelière] et dans tous les théâtres, 1853, p.22. [Digitized by Google Books] My translation.

[12] Jules Claretie, *La Vie moderne au théâtre*, *op. cit.*, p.344.

[13] Pierre Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIX^e siècle*, t.8 (F/G), Paris, Administration du *Grand Dictionnaire universel*, 1872, p.973. [Digitized by Gallica-BnF] My translation.

[14] Émile Zola, *Le Naturalisme au théâtre. Les théories et les exemples* [1881], Paris, Charpentier et Fasquelle, 1923, p.78. My translation.

Cover Picture by Pauline Picot

Proofreading by Aude Claret