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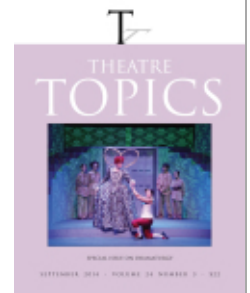
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Textual Harassment: Teaching Drama to Interrogate Reading

Michael Vanden Heuvel

We know of no system that functions perfectly, without losses, flights, wear and tear, error, accidents, opacity . . . [and] the distance from equality, from perfect agreement, is history.

—Michael Serres

The ongoing struggle to justify the teaching of dramatic literature within English and Theatre Departments has been further complicated in recent years by the emergence of various forms of interdisciplinary theory which, on the surface, seem to reduce dramatic texts to purely linguistic structures. However, a closer examination of recent theory reveals that it is deeply implicated in the processes and rhetorics of performance and theatricality. Indeed, the most potentially progressive applications of the new theory might well be found in the teaching of drama, so long as instructors are not bound to conventional reading practices which privilege the “literary” qualities of the dramatic text over its theatrical nature.

A number of recent critics, in fact, have argued that conventional forms of reading have become so naturalized in literature classes that we have lost sight of the possibility that alternative modes of sense making may exist (Atkins and Johnson; Ulmer; Kecht). Their research opens up new possibilities for the teaching of reading and suggests that instead of finding ways to make drama “fit” into orthodox literature curricula and pedagogy, we might explore how the teaching of drama could be used to interrogate conventional reading practices. Dramatic literature, owing to its semiotic differences from fiction, poetry, and expository writing, may present literature teachers with a vehicle for critiquing the assumptions upon which traditional reading methodologies are based. With the addition of certain principles from theory, this critique might even offer an opportunity for a positive and extensive transformation of the reading practices we teach.

Teachers, whether they acknowledge it or not, are always already theorists (McCormick 111). Through generations of humanistic tradition and years of institutional apprenticeship and conditioning, most college literature in-

structors have had inscribed within themselves what Robert Scholes labels a “professional unconscious,” which prompts them to teach what seems like an obvious, common sense paradigm of reading (4). Scholes argues that this widely-accepted discursive framework often promotes the teaching of some version of what theorists call an “aesthetic of presence.” This phrase defines an orthodox conception of literature as a shadowing forth of some ideal truth or knowledge that lies somewhere behind or before the literary representation of it, which is then communicated to an autonomous perceiving subject (Sayre 4). Literature teachers have traditionally called this occluded, timeless knowledge the author’s “vision” or “worldview,” even “genius,” and have taught students what seems like the natural consequence of such aesthetic logic—that is, that the best literature is that which comes nearest to expressing its author’s meaning in its purest, most “present” form.

What teachers have sometimes been less conscious of, and what is rarely taught students, is that this seemingly natural mode of reading posits, and resides within, its own ideological space. This space reproduces a certain framework for interpreting the texts, literary and non-verbal, that make up the student’s world. However, that space is no longer stable.

As a culture we certainly have become less resistant to the notion that many observations are theory-laden, that is, founded on socially-constructed discursive formations, ideological paradigms, and tacit subject positions that are never absolutely objective. Educators have learned to be skeptical regarding any notion of reason that purports to narrate an absolute truth or normative practice by denying its own contingent desires and historical construction. As a result, teachers today inevitably work within fields of knowledge where claims to objectivity are being overturned in favor of forms of knowledge that recognize the constructed nature of their own truth claims and methodologies. What recent theory asks us to consider self-consciously is the question: “How do we teach in an atmosphere where difference and contradiction—that is, the necessary *absence* contained in texts—is at least part of the fabric of meaning?” More to the point of this essay, how can the teaching of drama in literature courses help foreground this question productively and allow teachers to acknowledge Gerald Graff’s claim that “one can learn something from understanding the dispute [in recent theory] itself, which poses fundamental questions about the nature of meaning and the functions of literature” (163)?

This brings us to the question of the role drama can play in interrogating the mythologized assumptions of reading that are traditionally taught in literature courses. Drama differs from literature in at least two related respects. First, it is most often intended to be performed and therefore is grounded in temporality. Second, dramas are written within an aesthetic and semiotic framework

that includes theatricality or spectacle. Yet these are just the attributes teachers are most often asked to suppress when they teach drama as literature.

It would appear that the ideology of an aesthetics of presence is largely responsible for the neglect of the temporal and performative nature of dramas taught by literature faculty. This neglect occurs because the very nature of theatricality constitutes a critique of textual presence. When we study how a drama produces meaning in its performative context, we foreground explicitly a paradox that is suppressed by traditional reading practices which take the presence of the text for granted. Recall that an aesthetics of presence assumes that the text is a self-contained entity which holds within itself a meaning or vision that transcends temporality and difference. This ideal text thus generates a number of possible readings, yet every reading, every "performance" of it can only be an event of the second rank; that is, we expect during our readings to experience imperfections, misreadings, and outright mistakes that in a hypothetical perfect reading or performance would never occur. The text thus has an *a priori* status in relation to its manifestations, so that it not only authorizes certain readings but always transcends them as well (Connor 118). From this perspective, the reader's performance of the text and the knowledge it produces is rendered, paradoxically, not as an empowering and productive activity but as an unfulfilling quest for the text's always-elusive presence.

By contrast, to look at a particular materialization of a play is to own up to the text's dependence on theatricality and temporality and to foreground the text's own lack of absolute presence. Performance and theatricality thus do not partake of an aesthetics of presence but rather one of absence. As Henry Sayre puts it, an aesthetics of absence

subjects art to the wiles of history, embraces time. [While] an aesthetics of presence defines art as that which transcends the quotidian, an aesthetics of absence accepts the quotidian's impingement upon art. For the one, art is absolute; for the other it is contingent. (74)

As I have noted, Western culture and its academies have traditionally privileged presence over absence, the universal over the contingent, and the text over performance. Theatricality, argues one theorist, is the name for the contamination of any artifact that is dependent upon conditions outside, or other than, its own (Fried *passim*). But if we do not limit ourselves to such formalism and ask: by *what* is theatricality "contaminated?" we find that the term is a *pharmakon*, connoting both "poison" and "remedy" (Derrida *passim*). Even accepting that performance is indeed a contaminated version of the text, we see that it is poisoned by just those "wiles of history" and by the presence of contingent discourses and difference that characterize the quotidian. The point to be made is that this fundamental absence which inheres in the dramatic text

need not be construed as a drawback (as it traditionally is in literature courses). In a world where knowledge and language itself are increasingly conceptualized in terms of their own necessary absences—that is, by the fact that something cannot “mean” by virtue of any positive property but only because it is different from and in opposition to other elements within a structure of meaning that is always changing—then it may be that such textual absence and the ways by which knowledge is “contaminated” by history are just what should draw our greatest attention as teachers. Teaching students to look critically at the processes by which meanings are historically “fabricated” (“made up” and “built to serve some productive purpose”) and maintained can move them to become more self-conscious of how such fabrication occurs and how it affects their own constructions of knowledge and value.

So, rather than repressing the absence or “poison” that resides in performance, literature teachers might allow it to operate as a remedy for the hegemony of conventional reading practices. Instead of theorizing only modes of reading and literary analysis built on assumptions of textual presence through our teaching, we might consider supplementing that approach by foregrounding theoretically drama’s differences from literature, that is, its performative and contingent nature. Teaching to read “theatrically” might alert students to the possibility that one may interpret a text, dramatic or otherwise, and create meaning and knowledge through its absence—through its lack of totality and its inability to fix its languages into transcendent and universal meanings—as well as its presence.

Such a practice could present several potential benefits. First, the approach can be used to emphasize the ways in which theatre, like any art form but perhaps *more* than any other art form, is linked through a dense feedback loop to the material conditions and ideological formations of the culture which produces it. Looking at how drama is made material as theatre can provide students with an embodiment of art’s social context by foregrounding the way meaning and knowledge are produced in, alongside, or in subversive relationship to, the cultural practices of a given time. For example, by asking students to study several productions of *The Glass Menagerie* staged in different historical contexts, by directors of different race, class, or gender (and CD-ROM video technology and hypertext software are making this easier to do), we can ask students to read not only for universal and transcendent meanings within texts but also for evidence that the various production “texts” exhibit traces of inherent instability. The object of the analysis thus becomes not the presence contained in the text but the manner by which the text’s absences open up spaces for different meanings to be re-produced and re-staged. Such a perspective would help to reclaim literature and theatre from reading practices that stress literature’s autonomy from the world and to reestablish the connections between literature and history, culture, and society.

This rather simple exposure of textual difference and absence can lead in turn to more sophisticated interrogations of conventional reading practices and to the introduction of an alternative model of reading and knowing, one built around the disruption and displacement of the text's presence by various cultural agents. Dramatic texts are again useful here because they present vivid examples of how signification occurs not strictly through the intentions of the author but through the cultural activity of countless co-producers of meaning. Dramatic literature is a perfect vehicle for such a reading practice because dramas are first and foremost texts which announce themselves as inadequate as *mere* text, which call upon other agents to transform them into signifying events. As Una Chaudhuri notes, plays do not always, like the more static arts, "become history" but often "have a history" (48). Dramas, after all, are always in the process of producing other texts: the author's playtext engenders the director's prompt copy, which in turn generates the actor's rehearsal and performance text, and all combine to produce the reception text constructed by a spectator—which could conceivably become the new prompt copy for yet another "production" of meaning.

By drawing attention to the way that dramatic texts are interrelated to larger uses of signs in a culture, teachers can reconstruct the definition and functions of texts to highlight how knowledge or meaning can be contained in the activities and culture-bound processes of interpretation, rather than in the fixed and autonomous text and its inscribed intentions. The analysis of drama through its theatricality constructs a mode of reading which sees knowledge as a flexible system of difference or absences extended through time and across various historical and cultural fields. Here, meaning exists as a network of possible meanings unashamed of its contingent status, which is in fact enabled by its occasional and temporary nature. In more advanced courses, such notions might establish a first step toward calling into revision the logic of terms like authorship, text, identity, audience, and interpretation.

Once the authorial presence of texts is broken down, the productive nature of "intertextual" knowledge can be foregrounded in several ways. Intertextual reading—that is, an analysis of texts as they relate to the general signifying processes of a culture—constructs an image of textuality without an absolute *a priori* axis of organization or fixed center of meaning. This notion of textual decentering has had a significant impact in recent theory, motivating, for example, much of the current interest in ethnography, intercultural study, and multicultural education. From this perspective we cannot assume a central cultural tradition which makes all experience coherent. Instead, we learn that we must confront cultural difference and seek to understand the consequences that inevitably arise when different signifying practices are brought into contact.

Teachers of dramatic literature are especially well-positioned to investigate this intertextual space of culture because productions of dramatic texts often cross textual and cultural boundaries (race, class, gender, nationality) and become subsumed within the material practices by which meaning is produced (modes of production, body kinesis, iconic indices) of other societies and subcultures—something not so easily accomplished by a novel or a poem. Thus a classroom discussion of Ariane Mnouchkine's *Richard II* at Théâtre du Soleil might serve, for example, as a basis for analysis of the effects of cross cultural codings (feudal French, classical Japanese) that take place within her *mise-en-scène*. Alternatively, the play might motivate discussion of the cultural moment (late modernist capitalism, postmodernism) which makes such intertextual inscription aesthetically possible and productive. In both cases, the knowledge dispersed in the classroom has less to do with the universal themes of Shakespeare's play and more in common with a cultural studies approach to learning, one which questions discourses in order to identify not their presence but what is at stake in our interpretations of them.

There is a broad critical purpose to projecting knowledge as a heterarchy of situated truths rather than a hierarchy of truths which are fixed and absolute. It has been my experience that students soon internalize the notion of texts existing as processes and realize that they themselves can act as valid agents in the "staging" or "performance" of a text's meaning and in the production of forms of knowledge. Students begin to "perform," "design," and even "direct" appropriate contexts for meaning. By the professor's adding simple classroom strategies of structured cooperative learning (where students work together to "jigsaw" various tasks), these activities can also lead to a greater emphasis on the sociability, or "rehearsability," of knowledge construction and meaning production. In such an environment, students are free to confront actively, like revisionist theatre directors and collaborative artists, not only the dramas they read but also the other texts of our culture in order to renegotiate their meaning and function in light of differences within and across texts.

Reading drama from the perspective of its theatrical "contamination" can alter underlying assumptions about the nature of meaning and representation. Such a reading practice, it seems, could be utilized to foster in the reader both a theoretical and theatrical cast of mind, reminding us of the deep semantic link between the two terms. By doing so, teachers would enact a process of reading and critical thinking similar to what Herbert Blau calls the "restaging of thought" which "transforms the real only as theatre can, by producing meanings in the act of performance" (457). This enactment or production of knowledge (as opposed to mere reproduction) grounds the conceptual objects it produces in the self-conscious act of interpretation that produces them. And so, by literally "performing" knowledge, students would be learning to stage and

restage their thought through processes that do not seek merely to organize existing data but to transform knowledge in the act of producing it. Students might thereby become more self-conscious of the way in which changing historical interests inevitably predetermine some of the questions we ask of past texts.

Students can learn from reading dramatic texts to interrogate the principles of knowledge production itself, and so the "theory of reading" I have discussed here thus becomes less the topic of a course than a cast of mind enacted by institutions and teachers and fostered in students. Its purpose is not so much to teach students a "skeptical cast of mind" as it is to reveal that such skepticism need not be nostalgic; that is, that we need not regret the passing of an idealistic notion of meaning but can celebrate its de-mythologizing by recognizing and welcoming the political possibilities for self-determination inherent in any recognition that knowledge is made by humans as the result of choice and specific material practices. Nor does there seem to be any reason to bewail a condition of moral anarchy that might arise in response to such critical reading. Reader-response theorists have asserted convincingly that in the activity of reading, far from there being no values to which one can appeal, there can never be a moment when we are not in the grip of some value-system. What is denied is the possibility of a neutral description of absolute values, a perfect and self-contained "world" whose uninflected image resides in the text.

The project of education can be understood as producing not only "knowledge" in some consensual sense but also the critical thinking necessary to the maintenance of an active democracy. This means providing students with the opportunity to develop the capacity to challenge and transform existing social, aesthetic, and cultural practices, rather than simply to adopt them. Because they are such private acts, we sometimes forget that reading and writing are inherently social forms of production. Perhaps theorizing the teaching of drama in ways similar to what I have described here can motivate teachers to address this aspect of how they teach.

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