The Page as Stage:
On the Pragmatics of Literary Texts[1]

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In his essay "Discourse Analysis and the Analysis of Drama," Mick Short illustrates the usefulness of discourse analysis in the discussion of drama. In his opening paragraphs he clears the way for his specific type of discourse analysis by attacking the emphasis on performance in recent drama criticism.

He sees two problems:

> First, plays have to be treated in a *radically* different way from other literary works. This means that there can be no coherent discipline called criticism. Second, the object of dramatic criticism becomes infinitely variable. Both meanings and value will change not just from one production to another but also from one performance of a particular production to another. There then becomes no play to criticize. (Short, "Discourse Analysis and the Analysis of Drama" 140)

Instead, he proposes that the text should be the object of study, as it is more accessible and has more stability than the other two he sees. These are, according to a simple scheme of communication, the author's intentions, and the recipient's reaction. In another piece, Short makes this case quite explicitly, and for literary texts in general:

> The language of the text is the only candidate for "critical object" status which is both common to all literary works and is invariant enough to allow shared investigation by more than one person. (Short, "Literature and Language" 1083)

Short gives several reasons that suggest why dramatic criticism should *not* analyse performances: The first of them, I think, is self-defeating and can therefore be discarded right away: "Teachers and students have traditionally read plays without necessarily seeing them performed and have still managed to understand them and argue about them (Short,

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"Discourse Analysis and the Analysis of Drama" 140)—it is self-defeating because it could also be used for traditional readings of plays against Short's own plea for the application of discourse analysis. There are better arguments for discourse analysis—certain kinds of discourse analysis.

The other reasons for privileging the text are more serious: Short illustrates them as follows: The dramatic producer (as he calls the director somewhat strangely)

> must be able to read and understand a play in order to decide how to produce it. [... A] production of a play is in effect a play plus an interpretation of it. [...] Coming out of the theatre, people can be heard making comments of the form "that was a good/bad production of a good/bad play." Moreover, this distinction works not just for value judgments about plays and performances but also in terms of whether or not a particular production of a play was a faithful one. (Short, "Discourse Analysis and the Analysis of Drama" 140–141)

Four assumptions underlie this statement: (1) There is a logical difference between text and performance (cp. the producer preparing a text for performance); (2) The text comes first and has therefore the highest authority; performance is always derived from it. Because of this "faithfulness" may be a criterion. (3) The text, unlike performance, is stable (anybody can go and read it). It should therefore be the object of our study. (4) This (it is clearly implied) is possible, because textual analysis, unlike seeing a performance, offers unmediated access to the work of art.

I disagree with all four of these. The reasons should become clear in the course of my argument.

We should be aware, however, that Short's argument is just one of many examples illustrating the problematic, often tense or confused relationship between the study of literature and that of the theatre. In more general terms, this problematic relationship is articulated by the distinction between *theatre* and *drama*.[2]

[2] In some countries this has led to the creation of the discipline of *Theatre Studies* or *Theaterwissenschaft*. This, however, often just reproduces the problems that I have mentioned, because people in Theatre Studies often have a background in literary studies.

There are mainly three strategies that have been used to deal with the problematic relationship between text and performance:

(1) Most radically, the importance of performance has been denied, by arguing, along with Short, that all the relevant factors are contained in the text.[3]

(2) Performance has been given its place in the text, it is taken to be inscribed in it, as it were. On the one hand, deictic words (like demonstratives) are read as determining performance. On the other hand, in the manner of Iser's reception aesthetics, gaps and indeterminacies in the dramatic text are postulated, which various productions will try to fill in different manners—hence the possible variety of interpretations in production. This is the strategy most frequently followed in performance criticism.

(3) The notion of the text is widened beyond what literary scholars have traditionally understood by this term. Performance is then considered to be a complex composite text, made up of several codes, like language, tone, facial mime, gesture, movement, costume, props, décor, lighting, music, etc. This has been the strategy of semiotics.

All these strategies have certain things in common: in various ways, they allow literary scholars to return to their home ground, the reading and interpretation of texts. The text is seen as something objective (Short's "critical object"), the access to which is full of obstacles, but which, to various degrees, still *controls* interpretation. The metaphor underlying this is that of the scientist observing an object of study. Note the term "approach." I call methodologies of this kind *textualist*.

More specifically, textualist discussions of the drama and theatre, no matter whether they are examples of discourse analysis, performance criticism, or semiotics have two important things in common: First, they typically begin when the curtain has been raised or the lights in the auditorium have gone down (i.e. the first stage-directions or words spoken), and

[3] Short does make a gesture towards context: "a text can only be understood as an object embedded within a set of linguistic (and other, for example, sociological, literary) conventions" Short ("Discourse Analysis and the Analysis of Drama" 143). The analyses he offers in his essay, however, do not bear out this claim. Interestingly, he does not mention the context of performance.

they end before the applause begins; and, secondly, and even more embarrassingly, the audience does not occur in them.[4]

Reducing theatrical performance to text (characterized by its being read) will not do. It cannot do justice to three related crucial features of the theatre,

(a) the contribution of the audience to the performance, and, as importantly,

(b) the performance dynamics that becomes possible through audience participation.

(c) the stability that performances (productions) have despite so many various contributors.

In dealing with these problems, we find help with anthropologists like Victor Turner, Richard Schechner, or Eugenio Barba. I can only sketch two of these features, the role of occasion and that of the audience, and juxtapose theatre and literature in terms of these. I shall also introduce text because its role is important for the argument.

Occasion: Theatrical performances always take place at a specific time, in the Middle Ages, for example, on certain religious holidays, since the Renaissance (in London at least) also regularly on certain days at a certain time. Theatre is always performed in special spaces, which are closed off from the everyday world. These spaces may be created by the fact of performance (the circle forming around street performers), but more often performance takes place in buildings specially erected for the purpose (cf. Schechner 161–66)—often called *theatres*. Moreover, the occasions follow a pattern of gathering, performance, and dispersal that is regulated by social ritual. This concerns both audience and performers. When does a performance begin for the audience? It may be argued: when we shower at home before leaving (see Schechner; Turner)

A literary text, on the other hand, seems to be independent of time and place. It can be read anywhere, where it is not too dark or too noisy. Readers can determine the time and the place of their reading entirely on their own. They can start, interrupt, or finish reading whenever they like (or are forced by circumstances).

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[4] Working with the video recordings of productions, as it now has become common, not only in theatre studies, of course supports this tendency.

The second difference concerns the *audience*. In the theatre, being an audience promotes solidarity; we act as a collective body (applause is a good example of this—either the others join in, or we stop). The audience, by *acting its part*, contributes to the totality of the performance. Performances change with changing audiences, as we notice when we go to the same productions several times.

With literary texts things seem to be different on both counts: The readers are alone and react as individuals; and they do not seem to have any possibility of changing the text in front of them—hence, for example, the terms *reception* and *recipient* in criticism.

The *text*, finally: In the theatre a fixed text is not essential; the *commedia dell'arte* may serve as an example of this. We can even do without any text. With a literary text, on the other hand, there is *by definition always* a text. Author and reader can apparently meet directly, without the intervention of a third person. The author (dead or alive) can fix every detail and is usually held responsible for it.

The account of reading literature that I have just given is based on what may fairly be called a consensus view, or at least one that informs the practice of most literary critics—even where their theoretical positions may be different.

But this juxtaposition of reading texts with the theatre may also have suggested that it is not entirely satisfying. We may often have felt that reading too has its occasions. We are more clearly aware that as readers:

(a) Our reactions are not determined entirely by the text, as we notice, for example, when re-reading a text after many years.

(b) Our reactions are not determined entirely by us as individuals.

(c) And, finally, we have learnt in recent years that the text, as we discuss it, is not something entirely fixed, determining its meaning, except (but by no means always) in certain graphic shapes on the page. The distinction between reading and attending a theatre performance is therefore questionable.

I therefore propose that instead of trying to turn performances into texts to be read, we should view reading, *all reading!*, in terms of performance.[5] The characteristics of performance

[5] In doing so we can draw on the support of speech-act theory in its
various forms, on relevance theory, etc.

may be less obviously marked than with the theatre; we have certainly paid less attention to them than to those of theatrical performance, due to the consensus view of texts that I have sketched in the previous section. But there is no reason why things should be essentially different.

Yeats has a memorable phrase on reading which is useful here: The reader "lays away his own handiwork and turns from his friend-" (Yeats 207). It touches on the two points—occasion and audience—on which I have concentrated. *Occasion*: A text that we read is, of course, always part of an occasion. There are various kinds of occasion: I may be sitting under a tree or in a seminar room, I may be reading a manuscript or a paperback. I may be scanning a text for specific images (e.g., because I am writing a paper on this), I may be examining its dialogue as an exercise in discourse analysis, I may be preparing it for production, or I may be reading it, well, for fun.

Each of these occasions is characterized by the centrality of the text in it, but also by specific kinds of preparation, which determine how and with which expectations we read them). How do we get a book? How do we open it and put it down again? (see on this Pratt and Genette).

As we perform differently according to the occasion, the results of our reading will also be different (otherwise all readings would be the same). It is also striking that (unless we do so professionally) we tend to read in places and periods in-between, e.g., between waking and sleeping, between home and work, while waiting to be admitted into somebody's office, etc.

The place, time and progression of such occasions is certainly less rigidly defined than in the public ritual of the theatre (but there are also special buildings for reading, libraries, and we have our favourite chairs). But, as in the theatre, they separate us from our everyday world. They make us, in Yeats's phrase, lay away our own handiwork.

Yeats also says that the reader turns from his friend: Being an *audience* in the theatre and as a reader is a more problematic parallel. Reading, unlike going to the theatre, is not a social experience. The reader is isolated, lonely, silent. This seems to preclude the kind of interaction between various kinds of performers, authors, actors and audiences characteristic of the theatre.

But this is only the case if we see reading in terms of a unified, monolithic subject facing the object of the text—the kind of paradigm that I have rejected.[6] We should rather see the process of reading not as one of subject facing object, but as a reflective one—the self performs, watches itself perform, and the two motivate further performance, in other words, the self is conscious of itself. We then have an interiorized situation that creates a space for the interacting performances of actors and audience that are characteristic of theatrical performance. (This is precisely the mindset that historians of consciousness like Ong associate with literacy.)

This takes us to the problem of the *text*. The ink on paper may be of interest to the chemist or the criminologist. As readers and critics, however, we have nothing that is not the result of reading, i.e., of performance. In other words, in literary studies we always discuss readings, not texts. I am not saying, as Stanley Fish has done, that the reader supplies it all; it is logically impossible to distinguish between the contributions of what we call «the reader» and "the text"). The stability of the readings is not simply located in the text or in the interpretive community that reads it. It is located in the readings, in the performances.

This stability is taken for granted (against possible evidence). With literature, an institution crucial to the self-definition of cultures, this is a prerequisite for maintaining cultural stability. Where does this stability come from? More importantly, this stability is continually, re-affirmed by ritual repetition. Works of literature are continually re-interpreted, re-taught, re-read, ritually re-performed.

Short's four assumptions, which I mentioned at the beginning, then cannot be maintained:

(a) The difference between text and performance should be clearly made--this is not possible.

(b) The text comes first, performance is derived from it—the opposite is the case.

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[6] There is an interesting analogy here between notions of the text and notions of the self: Where the text is taken to be something objective and self-consistent, we also regularly find a unitary, monolithic notion of the self (the belief in the heart of the onion, as it were). It is difficult to leave such notions behind: The clear subject-object division is part of our Western tradition.

(c) The text is responsible for stability—It is not only the text to which this can be ascribed.

(d) Study gives unmediated access to the text—this is not the case.

In conclusion, I should like to return to Short's points concerning the unity of the discipline and the stability of meaning and value. The unity of the discipline, which he sees threatened by performance criticism, and which he tries to save by denying the role of performance, is not in danger. It is not in danger, if we acknowledge the role of performance with *all* works of literature, instead of reducing them to objects of study. We could then describe Short's position as follows: He privileges one use of texts over others: analysis over stage performance.

The stability of meaning and value, which he sees threatened by performance criticism, and which he tries to save by ascribing sole authority to the text, is not in danger either. It is not in danger because of the role of performance in the ritual re-affirmation of tradition. To return to Short's two examples: The producer performing the reading of a play in order to stage it has other performances of this or other plays in mind; and the people leaving the theatre, making comments of the form "that was a good/bad production of a good/bad play" are comparing what they have experienced to what they have either performed in reading, or, more frequently, to other productions they have seen in the past; to performances which, in their minds, have simply become "the play."

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