

The Theatre of Reading

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I delivered this paper at the inaugural ESSE conference in Norwich, September 6, 1991. Its argument stands, even though the references are no longer "recent". The paper has not been published before.

In a recent essay 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. (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, the author's intentions and the recipient's reaction.¹

Short gives several reasons that suggest why dramatic criticism should not analyse performances: 'Teachers and students have traditionally read plays without necessarily seeing

¹ Short (1991) makes this case 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' (1083).

them performed and have still managed to understand them and argue about them' (1989, 140)—an argument that could also be used against Short's own plea for discourse analysis. Short makes a clear distinction between a play and its performance:

The dramatic producer

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.' (1989,140-41)

Short makes four assumptions: (1) There is a logical difference between text and performance; (2) The text comes first and has therefore the highest authority; performance is always derived from it. (3) The text, unlike performance, is stable, and 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 text. 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. There has even been some worrying, whether the theatre and literature should be studied by the same discipline. In some countries this has led to the creation of the discipline of *Theatre Studies* or *Theaterwissenschaft*, a process which, however, often just reproduces the problems that I have mentioned, because people in Theatre Studies usually have a background in literary studies; with performance criticism, especially of Shakespeare, this is definitely the case.

There are mainly three strategies that have been used to deal with the problem:

- Most radically, the importance of performance has been denied, by arguing—along with Mick Short—that all the relevant factors are contained in the text.²
- Performance has been given its place in the text, as it were, by postulating, in the manner of Iser's reception aesthetics, gaps and indeterminacies in the dramatic text, which the production has to deal with. This is the strategy most frequently followed in performance criticism.³
- The notion of the text has been widened beyond what literary scholars have traditionally understood by this term. Performance is then

² 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' (1989, 143). The analyses he offers in his essay, however, do not bear out this claim. We should also note that the context of performance is not mentioned.

³ A recent example of this approach is Bennett, 1990.

considered to be a complex composite text, made up of several codes, like language, tone, facial mime, gesture, movement, make-up, hairstyle, costume, props, décor, lighting, music and sound effects (Kowzan in Elam 50). This, of course, has been the strategy of semiotics.

All these strategies have in common that, 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, which, to various degrees, is supposed to control the free subject of the reader.

Textualist discussions of this kind, no matter whether they are examples of discourse analysis, performance criticism, or semiotics have some important things in common: First, they typically begin when the curtain has opened or the lights in the auditorium have gone down, and they end before the applause begins; and the audience does not occur in them.⁴

Reducing performance to text (characterized by its being read) cannot do justice to crucial ritual features of the theatre, features that have been described by anthropologists like Victor Turner, Richard Schechner or Eugenio Barba. For reasons of space, I can only sketch two of these features, occasion, and audience, and juxtapose theatre and literature in terms of these. I shall also introduce text because its role is important to our discussion.

⁴ Working with the video recordings of productions, as it now has become common, of course supports this.

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, but more often performance takes place in buildings specially erected for the purpose (cf. Schechner 161-66). Moreover, the occasions follow a pattern of gathering, performance, and dispersal that is regulated by social ritual.⁵

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 or finish reading whenever they like.

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.

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 affecting the text in

⁵ Even Guerrilla theatre takes these rules for granted, but it lives on their negation.

front of them—hence, for example, the terms *reception* and *recipient*.

The *text*, finally: In the theatre a (fixed) text is not essential; the *commedia dell'arte* may serve as an example of this, but also Hamlet's advice to the actors. 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 our reactions are not determined entirely by the text and us as individuals. And, finally, we have learnt in recent years that *the text*, as we discuss it, is not something entirely fixed, except (but by no means always) in certain graphic shapes on the page.

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I should therefore like to propose that instead of trying to turn performances into texts to be read, we should view reading, *all reading!*__, in terms of performance.⁶ The characteristics of performance may be less obviously marked

⁶ In doing so we can draw on the support of speech-act theory in its various forms, on relevance theory, etc.

than with the theatre; we have certainly paid less attention to them than to those of theatrical performance. But there is no reason why things should be essentially different.

Yeats has a memorable phrase on reading: The reader 'lays away his own handiwork and turns from his friend' (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, 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 characterised 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.⁷ 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, between waking and sleeping, between home and work, while waiting to be admitted into somebody's office, etc.⁷ The place, time and progression of such occasions is certainly less rigidly defined than with 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

⁷ Pratt (1977) is still useful on this.

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 different kinds of performers, authors, actors and audiences that is characteristic of the theatre.

However, this is only the case if we see reading in terms of a subject facing the object of the text—the kind of paradigm that I have rejected.⁸

But we should 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 motivating further performance, in other words, the self is conscious of itself. We then have a 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 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

⁸ 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.

reading, i. e. of performance. In other words, in literary studies we always discuss readings, not texts. (Note that 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. 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.

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In conclusion, I should like to return to Mick 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.

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 seen with what they have either performed in reading, or, more frequently, to other productions they have seen.

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