

Words from Another Place

By Andrew Starner

Abstract

This essay addresses modern performance that de- or re-centers the question of language by using the question of language to de-center performance. I use a framework of specifically feminist post-structuralism to support a set of ideas about how to better account for theatre's "coming to language." I've collected a wide range of dramatists, directors and/or performance theorists and performance artists who have contributed to this shift and describe how this "coming to language" has been influenced by other forms of writing, fields or disciplines and developments in technology. Someone reading this piece should be "convinced" that they should approach acting or writing or spectating differently, no matter what sort of theatre they make or see. I use as warrants for this argument selected figures of feminist post-structuralism and a brief account of the work of Kane and Gray which I believe actually expose the fallacy of psychological realism from the very place it should be most secure: the one-man or one-woman autobiographical drama. I use the example of full-length monologue, or autobiographical drama with the intention of exploring tensions in how plays should be received—which is to say how they should be written, acted, and spectated. (And here I am thinking of something more magical and mercurial than the "received" in, say, Received Pronunciation). I am mostly interested in how language has been shown to exceed itself, and, in so doing, to exceed normal psychological explanations such as motivation. Finally, I'll briefly explore how in moving beyond the normative uses and definitions of language, it is important to discuss the paranormal in relation to language.

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Conversing with my sister Alison in the kitchen of her yellow faux-colonial in suburban Washington, I am interrupted by a tugging at my sleeve, followed by a string of unintelligible sounds. It is clear to me that my three-year-old niece wants a cookie from the plate that sits on the table just out of her reach. As I turn to bring the plate closer, my sister stops me and admonishes her daughter, "Use your words. Use your words to ask." Surely what my sister demanded from her daughter was that she use *her* (that is, Alison's) words to ask, the words that as a mother she had given to her daughter, and now wanted to have back from her. This memory returns to me in force as I consider the actor's challenge to use a dramatist's words to...full effect?

With "Words From Another Place" I offer a discourse on acting, writing for the stage, and language acquisition. I contend that the monologue, often considered the *sine qua non* of realist acting (not for nothing is it called psychological realism), might provide an occasion for considering language that is profoundly de-individuated. Recasting the successful theatrical monologue as a working-through by the actor of the "trauma" of ventriloquism, this article suggests that while the words have indeed come from another place, when the actor has made them her own, she achieves (an) identity in this process. If the short essay that follows were intended as advice to the actor, it would be not to see the monologue as a way to go deeper "in" to character, but instead as an occasion to become a medium for a real broadcast "out."

Although the meaning of my niece's grunts was evident, she lacked the magic formula adequate to satisfy her desire. Do playwrights, actors,

and directors have the adequate dramatic language to serve theatre in the twenty-first century? And where does this language come from? Part psychoanalytic reading (indebted to Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray), part textual analysis (arising from Sarah Kane and Spalding Gray), I focus on the material object wherein and upon which disparate language phenomena take place, both in the nowhere of the psyche and in the lived space of the body: the spoken word. Although I alight on two performance texts that break in key ways from dramatic tradition, these “readings” are part of a larger argument that stems from a conviction that all dramatic literature can/must be read in a new way that accesses the creative act, not as a form of inscription, but as a trans-personal bequest.

There is something about the stage that makes it a privileged position to pursue questions of how patterns of thought and behavior are transmitted. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, theatre played a key role in the proliferating domains of the social sciences. Theatre and dramatic literature provided a reservoir of architectures and narratives for the emergent fields of linguistics, semiotics, and psychoanalysis, which in turn returned to theatre the anti-discipline of performance studies by the 1980s. Theatre could be so generative because it was and is a dependable source of paradox, especially in the domain of language. Actors are forever coming to language in performance and they are forever doing it in ways that defy easy categorization.

With the distance that the 21st century affords, it is possible to perceive the violent contours (I am tempted to call them birth pangs) of modern thought: the empirical pursuit of knowledge and scientific certitude that sought to banish the half-held beliefs of an unenlightened world. The weight of the past could not be dissolved with mathematical theorems, however, and history continued to haunt writers, thinkers, scientists, and artists, spurring them to ever-newer inventions. Altered

social relations exerted pressure on the family, the state, and endangered forms of religion and social ritual. For this reason, theatrical innovation reached a dizzying pace, as theatre responded to reconceived circumstances. Naturalism, Futurism, Dada, Formalism, Surrealism, Absurdism, and Postmodernism are all attempts to respond to new possibilities and potentialities. New forms that theatre-makers used to overcome the perceived handicaps of popular theatre created challenges for the performer and the audience. New technologies such as amplified sound and electric light also contributed to changing theatrical practice.

Theatre was a site for negotiating the very changes that were ravaging the social, to maintain both the spirit of the times and to appease the spirits of the past. Theatre is a language, and it has a language, but the promise of these new intelligences was that theatre could be made to speak in a language that is not its own. Or better, to speak its own language, but using words from another place. The play, instead of representing a social order, could challenge that very order. (Here I draw on Julia Kristeva's notion of thetic art, to which I will return later: "art—the semiotization of the symbolic—cracking the socio-symbolic order" [Kristeva 79]).

The question of language, never far from the practice of the dramatic art, took center stage in modern philosophy as well. Re-centering the question of language came to mean de-centering man as a unitary subject, or perhaps giving new prominence to the very categories that the Enlightenment had shunted to the side, such as woman, child, and primitive. At the turn of the 20th century, scientific rationalism was ascendant; the language of science predominated, and the science of language came into being. But the challenge of linguistics was that the closer you looked at the words, the more they retreated from your grasp. The study of language as exemplified by the Russian Formalists and carried

out by Volosinov and Bakhtin, later Prague Circle Semioticians such as Mukarovsky and Jakobson, and even the late inheritor of Marxist Linguistics, French theoretician Pierre Macherey pointed through discourse analysis to the ideological in language itself. The key insight of Wittgenstein, inaugurator of the so-called “Linguistic turn,” was precisely that the language of philosophy stood in the way (of understanding?) – occluded any knowledge of ourselves and the world. Increasingly, the advanced vocabulary of ever-more specialized fields foreclosed human potential instead of expanding it. And yet linguistic conventions *allow* for meaning, and there could be no meaning without them. Perhaps it is a mistake to think of language as descriptive at all—one must imagine it rather as an instrument for the facilitation of life.

Psychoanalysis, also a product of the late 19th century, followed this path in its own way; Freud’s “talking cure” belied a belief that language was the excrescence of truth, but of the inner kind. The psychoanalytic perspective that the subject is always divided within him- or herself opened a space for a poetics of the unconscious. With an almost Wordsworthian insistence that the ordinary was invested with mystery, analysts insisted that the immediacy of explicit meaning yield to the hermeneutics of underlying theme. In the psychoanalytic situation, the patient speaks to the analyst using words that exceed his or her own understanding of them. Psychoanalysis always confronts this other. Lacan recognizes this when he observes, “in the work [the patient] does to reconstruct it *for another*, he encounters anew the fundamental alienation that made him construct it *like another*, and that has always destined it to be taken away from him *by another*” (Lacan 42). The duty of psychoanalysis is to pierce discourse in search of another (repressed) discourse, to uncover the patient’s thinking through speaking. To, in

effect, surprise the patient in the act of speaking with his (the analyst's) thinking.

Catherine Clément suggestively addresses this dynamic of the psychoanalytic situation, but in a different key: she looks for the way in which the analyst surprises the patient in the act of speaking his (the patient's) *own* thinking through what she calls a “fabricated syncope.” Never is thought closer, she argues, than in the moment when thought leaves the body, in the loss of consciousness of syncope: “it was only a matter of reproducing, by using the poor means of the session structure, the effect of the primordial syncope in which the subject is formed: by suddenly precipitating it into its own language” (Clément 125). Syncope, a gap in experience, is something like the crisis of (non)thought that is (leads to) language. In Clément's scenario, it is not the analyst's abundant and superior penetrating reason that leads to a breakthrough, but the flight of (from) reason. Clément's account of the syncope is meant as a corrective to the Western tradition that in Cartesian fashion cannot think the mind and body together. It is the moment when the mind leaves the body...or is it the body that abandons the mind? The gap in experience that the syncope represents is at the heart of Clément's understanding of religious devotion (mystics both Eastern and Western, yogis, renouncers, and ascetics of all types). Crucially, she points to how the syncope is related to the sublime, the limit term of perception and experience in the West.

The psychoanalytic theory of Julia Kristeva—which is also a theory of literature—is a different rebellion against the tyranny of reason, figured now as symbolic thinking. To affect this insurrection, Kristeva returns to Freud's Oedipal drama (the appropriation of Sophocles being among the inheritances of theater I noted earlier) of subject formation but with a different emphasis, the *mother*:

...as the addressee of every demand, the mother occupies the place of alterity. Her replete body, the receptacle and guarantor of demands, takes the place of all narcissistic, hence imaginary, effects and gratifications; she is, in other words, the phallus. The discovery of castration, however, detached the subject from his dependence on his mother, and the perception of this lack makes the phallic function a symbolic function—*the* symbolic function. This is a decisive moment fraught with consequences: the subject, finding his identity in the symbolic, *separates* from his fusion with the mother, *confines* his jouissance to the genital, and transfers semiotic motility onto the symbolic order.

(Kristeva, 47)

But to stay in this motility of the semiotic (which Kristeva introduces in this text, as the part of language that *resists* semiotics, that rests before meaning), in the exuberant transindividual babble of a language which is not one's own: this is the radical promise of poetry from Mallarmé through his experimental inheritors. This promise seems to violate the basic tenets of poetry: grace, beauty, and balance. Kristeva's poetic "revolution" is found in poetry that dispenses with euphony and description, that doesn't approximate but instantiate. Rhythm rather than rhyme, felt in the body.¹ Not metaphor (the symptom of commodity), but onomatopoeia, something like the materiality of language bodying forth on the page. I am well aware that onomatopoeia is not generally considered the highest attainment of the poetic art: it is the special joy of infants. Children's babble. More of that to come.

¹ Clément writes, "it is sometimes said that syncope 'attacks' the weak beat, like... a virus; and yet the last beat is the saving one. Attack and haven, collision; a fragment of the beat disappears, and of this disappearance, rhythm is born" (Clément, 5).

For the child, the mother is the source of all nourishment, and satisfies every need. The uterine environment pertains for the first months of the child's existence, and the infant's experience of that environment is of complete control, so that it experiences itself as continuous with that environment.² ...But it must separate, achieve individuation. Lacan offers the mirror stage as the moment when, seeing its own reflection, the child becomes aware that it is a discrete entity. The importance of the gaze in this scenario and of optics throughout his thinking makes his work essential for film and media studies, but his explanation is not the only paradigm for individuation. Didier Anzieu, another French analyst working in the '50s and '60s makes a new model for the child's process of becoming in his 1974 work *The Skin-Ego*. The skin-ego resituates the body as the central component in child development. The energies and libidinal investments of the child are spread over the surface of its skin. The skin-ego is a screen where all the senses pertain, where an internal "image" of the world is generated sensually. And, crucially, the child comes to language through the skin, comes to its own in a sonic envelope when it returns the words of the Mother to her, but in its own voice. This idea of a consciousness as a sonic envelope is a kind of auditory equivalent to Lacan's mirror stage, but with a key difference: while I recognize myself as distinct from the world, I do so in words that the world itself has given to me.

At the same time that Anzieu was formulating the skin-ego, feminism and feminist post-structuralism were detailing the gendered conditions of thought and society. Irigaray explored the potential for unsettling the source of speech in *To Speak is Never Neutral*, a powerful

² I mean to say that the fetus is continuous with the mother's body in a way that continues to pertain after birth. And if it seems too much to say that the infant is in control in utero, certainly the mother's experience of pregnancy can be one of strangely losing that sense of bodily control we all struggle to maintain.

corrective to linguistic theory, and in (what I can only call a new mythology) *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*. In *Forgetting*, Luce Irigaray assails the German philosopher for his masculinist tendencies, for the very solidity of his thought. Although her thinking is strongly influenced by Heidegger, she nevertheless heaps scorn on the Heideggerian impulse to thing thoughts and concepts, to make the transcendent category of being into a thing, to deal in the horizontal and earth-bound. *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, as the title might suggest, is a work of diaphanous beauty. All of the platitudes generally applied to works of philosophy fail: how could it be incisive, penetrating, ground-breaking, densely argued, or meticulously reasoned when it is made of precisely that ether which defies the grasp? By turns, the book takes of the air of the ionosphere, the upper part of the earth's envelope that the sun bathes in radiation. At times it is the humorous miasma of a dark summer night—the thickness of it serving to suspend thought.

Yes, Heidegger forgets air, and the solidity and implacability of his writing calcifies subjectivity. But the oblivion of the title not only points out the mistake of grounding his metaphysics, but also of forgetting the umbilicus of air that sustained Martin in the womb: “in the first ‘meeting,’ before his thought’s beginning, [the mother] gives—gives herself in the ‘form’ of fluids. These fluids penetrate into him, exceeding all boundariesHe takes her into him, immediately, without even any perception of the difference between perceiving and perceived” (32). Indeed, the child’s first expulsion of air is the mother’s breath. He cries with her voice, and she answers her own call. He, Heidegger, must achieve his philosophy—his very *interiority*—at the cost of hermetically sealing himself into a prison chamber of being: “he now occupies his language more than he does his living body. He wants this language he uses to ensure him a solid foundation” (37-38). Heidegger not only forgets his own origin, he

condemns his readers to a recapitulation of the same fatal error. The vaporous breath of the spirit in the “still silent space of speech” (73) suggests that “Air could be this nothing of Being: the Being of Being” (74). Recognizing the Being of sexedness and the sexedness of Being, Irigaray critiques Heidegger's emphasis on the element of earth as the ground of life and speech and his “oblivion” or forgetting of air.

I offer this telegraphed course through psychoanalysis, linguistics, and semiotics—an incomplete history of language in the twentieth century—to point to the ongoing crisis of language that motivates so much critical inquiry and artistic experimentation. Outside the theatre, the same conceptual concerns motivated the avant garde poetics of the Black Mountain Group, Fluxus follow pieces (in which an artwork could consist of nothing more than a list of written instructions) and the concrete L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets of the 1970s. Art galleries, too, featured the work of artists who challenged notions of representation of language, such as Lawrence Weiner. Art began to leap off the walls, and a form of theatre that deviated markedly “from the script” began to be recognized as performance art.

To accommodate this explosion of theatre-like expression, the study of theatre underwent a sea change. The pressure of performance studies (an emergent discipline that began to coalesce after the publication of Richard Schechner's *Essays on Performance Theory* (1976) and Victor Turner's *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982)) on theatrical criticism in the academy led to increased attention to forms of knowledge from outside theatre history and practice. This encouraged sorties into adjacent domains of knowledge such as anthropology and linguistics to enrich theatre theory, with a contingent emphasis on embodiment and perception. Among the most promising of these approaches was phenomenology, and by the late '80s books such as

Bert O. States's *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* (1987), Herbert Blau's *Blooded Thought* (1991), Alice Rayner's *To Do, To Act, To Perform* (1994), and Stanton Garner's *Bodied Spaces* (1994) began to engage the work of Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Heidegger.

Phenomenology opened a new dimension in meaning: the inner dimension, or corporeal sense, and offered new ways of talking about the tension between word and action. Resisting an urge to turn away from drama towards performance, Rayner writes, "if play of action is the medium for drama and theater (not *of* them) then performance need not be understood as either an embodiment *of* text or a freedom from textuality or structure" (Rayner, 5). Continuing, she asserts her belief that "dramatic texts serve to reinforce the dimension of action as representation where *theater* and *performance* offer the dimensions of its visibility and actuality" (Rayner, 9).

Postmodern theories of subjectivity informed by post-structuralism weren't far behind, as Elinor Fuchs's *The Death of Character* (1996) exemplifies. Here, and necessarily influenced by Lacan, titles such as Derrida's 1967 *Writing and Difference* (1967), Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), and Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* (1974) begin to surface in a critical landscape that underscored the lability of performance and criticism in the last decades of the twentieth century. The emphasis on contemporary avant garde performance in Michael Kirby's *Formalist Theatre* (1987) and much later Hans-Thies Lehman's *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999) responded to the virtuous circuit between theory and theatre among practitioners that was impossible to ignore.

More recently, several books have been published that address performance and textual theory: Benjamin Bennett's *All Theater is Revolutionary Theatre* (2005), W.B. Worthen's *Drama: From Poetry to Performance* (2010) and Gruber's *Offstage Space, Narrative, and the*

Theatre of the Imagination (2010). Worthen credits performance studies with encouraging “[r]eading drama between *archive* and *repertoire*, writing and behavior, poetry and performance” and moving the field away from questions of textual fidelity (Worthen 75). He sees contemporary performance especially in Germany offering what he calls “de-dramatized” language. In particular, Worthen discusses a production of *Ivanov* directed by Dimiter Gotscheff at the Volksbühne in 2005: “each character appears and disappears from the fog, apparently summoned by Ivanov from...where? his mind? memory? rage? desperation? anomie?—well, summoned from somewhere else on the stage” (Worthen 84-85). ...Or from another place entirely.

The eerie disembodied performance of *Ivanov* that so challenges Worthen’s idea of drama resembles nothing so much as a radio play. Among the most important technological advances at the dawn of the last century, sound recording and transmission altered the reception of language in ways that their creators could never have anticipated. A contemporary practitioner of audio, Gregory Whitehead describes his fascination with radio: “to my ears, radio waves fascinate because they are so dirty, that is, the airwaves are so full of voices and bodies trying, in one form or another, to get into the ears of somebody else” (*Experimental* 90). Radio, the air that bodies share. Radio, the place where the living can dance with the dead and then disappear into the night. Such is “the voice of ventriloquism and spiritualism; one might add that it is also the voice of the century’s newly imagined sound recording and broadcast technologies, of acousmetric voices without origin or telos, of the inmixing of voices of the living with those of the dead” (*Breathless* 19).³

³ Weiss uses “acousmetric,” from the French *acousmètre*, to describe the eerie, disembodied voice of radio. It’s a combination of acousmatic (that’s when you hear a sound but don’t know what’s making it, which I guess is a combination of acoustic and automatic) and *être*, (French for “being”) popularized by film theorist Michel Chion. Chion’s 1980 book *Audio-Vision: Sound on*

Here the discourse of psychoanalysis meets the excess of psychology: parapsychology. Near his death, Thomas Edison was working on a device he was certain would allow him to communicate with the dead. Strain to imagine the overwhelming popularity of the occult in the waning years of the nineteenth century. The advance of science in our own era into the furthest reaches of the Solar System and the tiniest chambers of the atom seems to have chased the spirits away. Even so, the supernatural returns (the idea of it) with troubling regularity. Theatre studies is more open to these questions and concerns, especially as regarding traditional performance. The spiritual dimension of performance practices is outlined by Ralph Yarrow, editor of *Sacred Theatre* (2007) and co-author, with Peter Malekin, of *Consciousness, Literature and Theatre* (1997):

to take the receiver out of the ordinary is the task here; not just in the sense of presenting something slightly unusual, but much more 'radically' or fundamentally opening up the capacity for seeing anew, for beginning to get in on the ways things put themselves together. To do that, you have to go 'back' to 'before' preconceptions, to a 'place' prior to 'language.'

(Yarro
w 15)

The performer's body, rather than bearing the burden of representation, instead becomes an incandescent opening in time. Detached from identity

Screen carefully explores the aesthetic role and potential of sound in the cinema. He is particularly interested in how audiences use what they hear to "fill out" image and narrative, and how filmmakers can use unusual or unexpected sounds to destabilize both.

or personhood, detached from a language, the voice of the performer shaman haltingly “speaks” a hidden knowledge to the spectator.

Heidegger was himself obsessed with radio, with the detachability of the voice from the body. Ronnell’s translates from *On the Way to Language* (all but unrecognizable—her voice, his words):

Everything spoken stems in a variety of ways from the unspoken, whether this be something not yet spoken, or whether it be what must remain unspoken in the sense that it is beyond the reach of speaking. Thus, that which is spoken in various ways begins to appear *as if it were cut off from the speaking and the speakers, and did not belong to them*, while in fact it alone offers to speaking and to the speakers, whatever it is they attend to, no matter in what way they stay within what is spoken of the unspoken.

(Ronnell 164)

But what is the effect of hearing oneself on the radio? Freud would call it the uncanny, but does it have an effect on the speech itself? In a mesmerizing metaphysics of the voice, Mladen Dolar offers a potentially revolutionary (the same as Kristeva’s) interpretation of the myth of Echo and Narcissus:

Repetition—the very repetition that is the famous mechanism of the “performative,” through which meaning is stabilized and destabilized—here turns out to be a mechanism that produces the reverse effect. Echo’s repetition is a babble that dissolved the semantic register entirely, leading the voice back to an infantile state that is not yet speech.

(Dolar 168)

Rather than repeating words, Echo repeats *sounds*. The re-vocalization is thus a *desemanticization*. Like an infant who repeats the mother's words, stripping them of their meaning.

It is no surprise that Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* begins with a quote from Augustine's *Confessions* about the acquisition of language.⁴ Recent linguistic theory by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Jean-Jacques Lecercle, and Denise Riley comment on and extend the work of Gilles Deleuze in *Logic of Sense* (1969). Heller-Roazen's *tour de force* of language's extremities, *Echolalias*, comments fruitfully on babble, the child's leaving/learning speech: "[l]anguage and a speaking being now emerge from the disappearance of babble" (Heller-Roazen 11). The slow resemanticization of speech depletes the child's creativity and slowly the child shrinks to the limits of its consciousness. Infantile amnesia: memories of a past life fade, or are suppressed by parents who believe that a child speaking about a previous life must be lying or expressing wild fantasies. What else occurs in that moment but the foreclosure of movement, the sedimentation of the symbolic order: as Kristeva observes, "[l]anguage learning can therefore be thought of as an acute and dramatic confrontation between positing-separating-identifying and the motility of the semiotic *chora* (a nonexpressive totality)" (Kristeva 47).

Returning to this moment of radical possibility is the charge and potential of speaking without speech and few have the courage or conviction to achieve it. And that far shore cannot be found without cost:

⁴ I do not have time to elaborate on Wittgenstein's many theses on language, but I will point to §165: "Here I should like to say: 'The words I utter *come* in a special way.' That is, they do not come as they would if I were for example making them up. —They come of themselves.—But even that is not enough; for the sounds of words may *occur* to me while I am looking at printed words, but that does not mean that I have read them" (Wittgenstein 66). This strange opening in language—not quite reading, not quite thinking, aligns with the gap in the symbolic order that I have been pursuing.

Antonin Artaud's radio broadcast *To Have Done With the Judgment of God* (1947) is sobering in this regard. Aside from his torture, however, there is yet a grace in it, a return to the *chora*. Allen Weiss explains, "...while the child 'creates' language from amidst the glossolalic and echolalic babbles of its prelinguistic expression, Artaud conversely creates his texts, his art, his identifications, by transforming the structures of language into glossolalic pronunciations" (*Breathless* 126).

Spalding Gray's unique appropriation of the monologue form is a kind of self-contained broadcasting unit. As he describes in the introduction to *Sex and Death to the Age of 14*, his compositional method was to turn on a tape-recorder and start telling stories. Later, he played the tapes back and further refined his language—that is, *his* language, that returned to him from another place. His theatrical aesthetic was totally saturated by the downtown, experimental scene; he'd "worked with occasional words sandwiched between a piece of howl and a slice of grunt" (Gray, x). In 1975, Gray and Liz Lecompte, a fellow member of Schechner's Performance Group, formed the Wooster Group. They began by performing the *Rhode Island Trilogy*, the first installment of which, *Sakonnet Point*, was "a silent mood piece which represented the child before speech" (Gray, xi). The sequel, *Rumstick Road*, staged the child's coming to language, and was developed using sound recordings from Gray's own family.

Gray's monologues are ruthlessly rooted in the specifics of his experience—sensations and intuitions are combined with incisive wit. But the cumulative effect is not an approximation of Gray, approaching complete knowledge of the speaker asymptotically. Gradually, you begin to see how Gray's speech exceeds his language. Not in terms of subtext or irony, but in sheer overcoming of language. The overwhelming feeling I have is that of despair. Despair of language, despair of intellect, despair of

history. And yet the pain of it realigns the world. New avenues are opened, and Gray becomes a kind of sacrifice of/to language. How can I possibly justify such an experience? After all, I never met the man. I have only read his work, sensing in it the same kind of movement beyond sense that I recognize from experimental literatures, Lewis Carroll to Robbe-Grillet.⁵ There is something of a secular guru in Gray's persona. In *Sacred Theatre*, Ralph Yarrow points to the quasi-mystical vocabulary of actor training, the potential to become "possessed" by a character: to become "so 'involved' that the individual actor disappears in the character" (Yarrow 24). Spalding Gray the actor becomes possessed by Spalding Gray the character and so Spalding Gray disappears. I think it really is as simple as that, as terrifyingly simple.

Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London, after the author's suicide in 1999. It deals with the anguish of mental illness, yes, but also with the anguish of language and mortality. David Greig, who wrote the introduction to the *Complete Plays* cautions against the view that the play is conventionally autobiographical. He writes,

And my mind is the subject of these bewildered fragments, the play states. Yet perhaps it is as well to be cautious here. Whose mind? The mind of the speaker of the words in the theatre, definitely, but does that mean the mind of the author? Kane's work has constantly shown the self to be a problematic and fluid entity, shifting and struggling against its own limits, and transforming. Why should her authorial self be any different?

⁵ And watched him on film, vhs, dvd, and streaming video. Is my conviction that his performance is haunted in a specific way an artifact of the spectral media I used to experience it? Perhaps, but even the experience of reading dramatic literature encourages this kind of imagination. A willed alertness to sensation, touch, even spatial proximity.

(Greig, xvi)

He continues, “a mind which is the author, and which is also more than the author.” To read the play as a reflection of her mental state is not misguided, although the most intriguing aspect of this approach is how the threads of the narrative lead to temporal discontinuities. If she were considering suicide and not certain she would finish the play, and no one can be certain it was a play—it is virginal text, no stage directions, no speeches for characters, very little punctuation—she would have known there was a good possibility that the drafts would be assembled into a performance text after her death. Is she thus able to represent her own death? Here we must seek guidance from Derrida’s reading of Blanchot’s *The Instant of My Death*, where he writes, “the biographical or autobiographical truthfulness of a witness who speaks of himself claims to be recounting not only his life but his death, his quasi-resurrection, a sort of Passion—at the limits of literature” (Blanchot, 16-17).

So, to comment on the play?⁶ It is precisely an audience’s natural reaction to hear “I have resigned myself to death this year” and believe that they are hearing a suicide note that must be avoided at all costs (Kane

⁶ I recognize that this approach to language makes much dramatic criticism superfluous; I don’t believe it is possible to offer a close reading of a text from another place—e.g. the pleasure of scholarly equipoise, in-the-know anecdotality and intrepid academic gumshoedom. Garner’s phenomenological approach doesn’t suffer from this deficit. On the contrary, it is a lens that focuses his interpretation. I would be just as inclined to mention *Struck Dumb*, a play co-authored by Joseph Chaikin and Jean Claude van Itallie that appeared in New York in 1991 as he is, but I am loathe to make the same judicious inclusions of pertinent quotes from the play. Garner explains that the piece was “written in the voice of a fictional character named Adnan [as] a response to the aphasia with which Chaikin was afflicted as the result of a stroke he suffered in 1984.” While this may be factually correct, it is more interesting to take the performance as an attempt to recreate the conditions of aphasia in the performer (which admittedly in this case is Chaikin himself) and in the audience. To aid in his memory, the text of the play was present on the stage—written on the walls and in plain view of the audience. In a halting and strained voice, Chaikin somehow made audible a displaced text from another place: “Thinking myself ghost./ Well, not myself./ But ghost using my voice maybe.” (quoted in Garner 122)

208). Only a production that breaks the circuit of meaning, especially dime-store psychologism, can succeed in hearing the words from another place. The actor must have fidelity only to the materiality of the words. The meaning of the individual words recedes, in the echo chamber of language's tumult:

flash flicker slash burn wring press dab slash
flash flicker punch burn float flicker dab flicker
punch flicker flash burn dab press wring press
punch flicker float burn flash burn

(Kane 231)

In search of wholeness and illusion, realistic acting can have a seemingly counterintuitive effect on the audience. Stanton Garner writes of an audience in an intimate theatre that perceives the gaze of the performer and "...responds either by assuming the role of a fictional auditor in the dramatic representation or by rendering himself or herself absent, invisible" (Garner 49). John Berger has called this making-oneself-absent of the audience member the "textualization of the audience" (quoted in Garner 49). The audience should resist the hermeneutic temptation to make sense of the production at a remove and instead plunge into the seam

The liveness of the play, an effect that covers over its repetitiveness (calling to mind Marx's remark about history repeating itself), obscures the temporal dimension. History has failed, as have all grand narratives, as theory has. Is Language itself a failure? Language, which is at base an accumulation of time, continues to have an effect, to be effective, to perform. The audience comes to language as a result of hearing it declaimed in an auditorium. The performers come to it by virtue of reading the script. The dramatist him or herself comes to language in the alchemical process of writing in a possessive moment of scriptofreneticism

(if you'll forgive the term—meaning just that yes, mad writing, writing mad).

Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* offers an aesthetics of rupture, not through fragmentation but through the semiotic, the moment before the symbolic hardens all. The rupture exists, but not in the text but in *time*. Before there was the spoken word there was the language. Speech approximates this language. Importantly, however, before there is language there is the "I" which can only come from another. You can say, the phrase.

Linguistics sought rules and laws that would pertain to all languages and would in this sense be the form that preceded it. Derrida extends and enlarges this insight to insist that writing precedes speaking, that the spoken word is a form of inscription. But crucially what precedes both speaking and writing is speech itself. The child has both a capacity to speak and, crucially, is able to speak even before it knows language. From whence does this speech derive? The child's words come from the Mother.⁷ If only the form of drama could return us to this state, it could save us all, by demonstrating the discursive construction of society and by suspending the immediate usurpation of language the symbolic order.

Although I hope I have suggested how *4.48 Psychosis* and *Sex and Death to the Age of 14* exceed their own limits as autobiography, it must be admitted that Gray and Kane do share the same material: their own lives. Spalding Gray and Sarah Kane share also the same tragic end. It was only after Gray's death that his work could become a play in the more traditional sense, when friends of his paid tribute to the dead author by

⁷ Or from anyone that is in the child's life--I don't mean the biological mother only. I use "Mother" here to figure all of these sources (whether or not it comes in the form of language *per se*) and I'm playing a little fast and loose with my terms at precisely the point I need to be clearest: I'm inclined to follow Heller-Roazen, say, and imagine that words and speech include all kinds of manner of (in)articulation: utterances that are not contained in symbolic language.

performing his work at P.S. 122 in May 2006. And though they did not attempt to mimic his delivery, who could be faulted for seeing Spalding in the room along with his (?) words? Here again, the promise of speaking without speech, and accessing *another place* beyond the senses.

It is not we who come to language in performance or anywhere else but language that comes to us. It is the radical promise of all theatre that only a few works can achieve, when sympathetic dramatists, actors, directors, and audiences enter into a sacred bargain. Brown professor of theatre Lowry Marshall gives her acting students this dictum for their scene work: “(Think) I’m fighting for love, and language is my weapon.” No! I’m fighting for language and love is my weapon (or key) —poison and antidote. When we try to make it our own, language, we fail. And when language does come and begins to possess us, ...we cease to be ourselves. This is perhaps the only gift the theatre can give: to recognize, embody even, the disconnect between language and identity.

* * *

In closing, I refer to an installation by Susan MacWilliam seen at the Northern Ireland pavilion at the Venice Biennale: “Remote Viewing.” Stepping into the darkness of a theatre, my eyes are slow to adjust after the brightness of day. After a few moments I can make out the outlines of the piece: it is a video reenactment of a famous Irish medium’s unusual ability to communicate with the world beyond. Interspersed with archival photographs are interviews with poltergeist investigator Dr. William G. Roll. He sits in front of a shelf groaning with books on the paranormal. He reels off a list of abnormal phenomena he is familiar with. *Ectoplasm*. *Psychic Ectoplasm*. *Telekinesis*. *Ecto-telekinesis*. *Psychic-kinesis*. He reads them exactly. Then the terms seem to emerge from his closed lips—only later does the mind register it is merely some very clever editing. But what was so unusual about this medium and that time?

Not only did the medium speak with the dead, he was able to make the spirit words appear out of nothing. I can see it now, the eerie word “F-l-a-m-m-a-r-i-o-n” hanging in the air.

Flammarion.

What could it mean?

...And where did it come from?

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