Disciplines of the Text/Sites of Performance

W.B. Worthen

What is in fact curious about all these gestures, these angular and abruptly abandoned attitudes, these syncopated modulations formed at the back of the throat, these musical phrases that break off short, these flights of elytra, these rustlings of branches, these sounds of hollow drums, these robot squeakings, these dances of animated manikins, is this: that through the labyrinth of their gestures, attitudes, and sudden cries, through the gyrations and turns which leave no portion of the stage space unutilized, the sense of a new physical language, based upon signs and no longer upon words, is liberated. These actors, with their geometric robes seem to be animated hieroglyphs.
-Antonin Artaud (1958:54)

Observing the Balinese dancers, Antonin Artaud undertakes a complex act of intercultural reading. On the one hand, what impresses Artaud is the immediacy of the performers, the sense in which their performance is not an act of re-presentation, but instead a kind of "pure theater, where everything, conception and relization alike, has value, has existence only in proportion to its degree of objectification on the stage" (1958:53). At the same time, though, Artaud also sees their performance-hollowing out the dancers, objectifying them: they become "animated manikins" making "robot squeakings"; they undergo a thorough and "systematic depersonalization" (58). Although their gestures "make useless any translation into logical discursive language," Artaud's account of the dancers nonetheless attempts such a translation: their movements demonstrate the value "of a certain number of perfectly learned and above all masterfully applied conventions," they have the "evocative power of a system," a system that verges, surprisingly enough, on "mathematics" (55). Artaud, the theorist of "no more masterpieces," working to evacuate the logos-like authority of scripted texts, nonetheless reads the Balinese dancers' bodies, produces these bodies and their performance as a text.

Artaud's reading is arresting for other reasons, too, not least for its imperial dimension: we might suspect that the Balinese bodies become texts so readily because, for Artaud, the Balinese are already just things. I open with Artaud's wild ethnology in order to tease out some contemporary assumptions about the relationship between texts and performances, assumptions that structure some of the fault lines that run through the various disciplinary and institutional formations that claim the study of drama/theatre/performance today: cultural studies, English, literature, performance studies, theatre history, theatre studies. Like many negotiations, boundary wars are as much a contest of authority and power as of "truth" or "method" - recall the 1993

American Theatre for Higher Education (ATHE) squabble about admitting Performance Studies as a FORUM member, or the summons in recent ads for TDR: The Drama Review, "The journal of Performance Studies" to "Join the move to performance studies!" Here, I want to explore the relationship between texts, textuality, and performance as an issue deeply inflected by notions of authority-not so much professional authority, but the stabilizing, hegemonic functioning of the Author itself. I am interested in the ways that notions of authority are covertly inscribed in recent discussions of performance, often at just those moments when the supposedly liberating "textuality" of performance is most urgently opposed to that Trojan horse of the absent author, the text. Reconsidering how, or whether, texts are actually opposed to performances, is one way to rethink the disciplinary instruments that map the contours of drama/theatre/performance studies today.

As Clifford Geertz has remarked, "The great virtue of the extension of the notion of text beyond things written on paper or carved into stone is that it trains attention on precisely this phenomenon: on how the inscription of action is brought about, what its vehicles are and how they work, and on what the fixation of meaning from the flow of events - history from what happened, thought from thinking, culture from behavior-implies for sociological interpretation" (1983: 31). Geertz envisions a continuum between texts and the textuality of behavior, one that enables us to read performances as texts, analyze how performances signify, and to interrogate the subsequent rewriting of those performances, the "fixation" of their meanings in texts. In theatre studies, however, a surprisingly romantic sentimentality tends to creep into this issue, opposing "performance" (transgressive, multiform, revisionary) to the (dominant, repressive, conventional, and canonical) domain of the "text." It's odd that texts should be regarded in this way (where would intertextualiry come from without texts?), and this incoherence perhaps suggests that texts are not what is really at issue, but how they are construed as vessels of authority, of canonical values, of hegemonic consensus.

Part of this confusion stems from three interlaced ways we think of a "text": (1) as a canonical vehicle of authorial intention; (2) as an intertext, the field of textuality; (3) as a material object, the text in hand. In "From Work to Text," his now classic celebration of textuality, Roland Barthes provides a convenient discrimination between the first two senses, one that informs contemporary discussions of the textuality of performance. Barthes describes an "epistemological slide" (1988:155) in the conception of written texts, from "the traditional notion of the work" to the more relativized sense of the text (156), and then characterizes several features and consequences of this slippage. The work, that "fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example)" (156-57), is the vehicle for authorized cultural reproduction, a "signified"

approached through interpretation; the work discloses a "secret, ultimate, something to be sought out" (158). The text, on the other hand, is the field of production rather than interpretation; its "field is that of the signifier," governed by a metonymic rather than a hermeneutic logic, best approached through "the activity of associations, contiguities, carryings-over," through "playing" (158). As an object of authorized interpretation, the work is, finally, "normally the object of a consumption" (161); the text is not an object but a field, "that social space which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject of the enunciation in position as judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder" (164). If the work is authorized, interpreted, consumed, the text is encountered as a field of "play, activity, production, practice" (162). It's not surprising that Barthes's opposition between the work (authoritarian, closed, fixed, single, consumed) and the text (liberating, open, variable, traced by intertexts, performed) proves so useful to contemporary discourse about performance, in part because Barthes's sense of the text is self-consciously performative. Barthes's text is the field of the signifier, of textuality, of play, of production - and, of course, of jouissance, "a pleasure without separation" (164). Where interpretation is earnest, concerned with fidelity and obedience, performance is insouciant, rewriting and disseminating the words of the text in various ways. Contemporary "studies" - cultural, literary, theatre, and performance - have gained analytical and theoretical leverage from this textualization of performance, the sense that performed events operate discursively, and that meanings arise from the slippage and interplay between signifying formalities. Yet despite the widespread application of "textuality" to reading the body and performance, these two conceptions of the text (text-as-work, text-as-textuality) often become blurred, compacted in one another, and compacted with that third sense of text, the material words on the page. This confusion most often takes place precisely when an opposition between text and performance is invoked to mark different disciplinary accounts of drama and performance, and the different institutional fields in which the study and practice of drama, theatre, and performance takes place.

Stage vs. page, literature vs. theatre, text vs. performance: these simple oppositions have less to do with the relationship between writing and enactment than with power, with the ways that we authorize performance, ground its significance. Not surprisingly, both strategies of authorization - literary and performative - share similar assumptions, what we might call a rhetoric of origin/essence. This rhetoric appears to ground the relationship between text and performance, a relationship that is always conceived, as John Rouse suggests, as "a question both of the possible and the allowable" (1992:146). From the "literary" perspective, the meaning and so the authority of performance is a function of how fully it expresses the meanings, gestures, themes, located ineffably in the structures of the work, which is taken both as the ground and origin of performance and

as the embodiment of authorial intention, the work. Though performance may discover meanings or nuances not immediately available through "reading" or "criticism," these meanings are nonetheless seen as latent potentialities located in the words on the page, the traces of the authorial work. The performative perspective generally avails itself of the same emphasis on origins: stage production is, in a sense, the final cause for the writing of plays, which gain their fullest, their essential meaning only in the circumstances for which they were originally intended: theatrical performance. Stanley Wells epitomizes this position in his "General Introduction" to the 1984 Oxford William Shakespeare: The Complete Works: "Nevertheless, it is in performance that the plays lived and had their being. Performance is the end to which they were created, and in this edition we have devoted our efforts to recovering and presenting texts of Shakespeare's plays as they were acted in the London playhouses which stood at the centre of his professional life" (1984:xxxvii). (It might be noted that this argument traces authorial intention in the generalized practices of the stage.) Much as the text-centered view essentializes and universalizes reading or interpretive practice (the meanings of the play are then in the text, regardless of the ways we have been conditioned to read them), so this view essentializes and universalizes notions of stage performance (the meanings of the play emerge on the stage, regardless of how we have been conditioned to produce or to read them). The text here is merely the signifier of the essentially performative nature of the play, an enabling accident of the performance.

I have phrased this dichotomy crudely, in part to suggest how notions of legitimacy and authority persist in thinking about dramatic performance. Think of acting students, for example, dismissing some baroque interpretation of Hamlet or Godot as unactable, not assimilable to the contemporary (i.e., "natural") discourse of stage production, and so illegitimate to the study of drama. Or of theatre reviewers (or literary scholars) dismissing some "experimental" production of Agamemnon as "experimental," trendy, somehow not "faithful" to the meaning, intention of the originating text. Or of stage directors talking about letting the stage release the intentions of the author; of the more theatrically oriented stage directions of the new Oxford Shakespeare; of the American Repertory Theatre (ART) Endgame debacle. The desire to ground the meaning of theatrical production by attributing its authority either to the work or to the institutions of the stage afflicts both the popular and the academic conception of theatrical meaning.

Part of the problem in the way that text and performance are conceived has to do with reductive assumptions of the formal consistency of published texts, of texts as material objects that house the work of the author. For although it is now conventional to see performance as traced by a variety of gestural, figural, and ideological textualities, the notion that there is a text to produce onstage is surprisingly resistant to change. And yet

recent controversies in textual studies - bibliography as it was once called - over the relationship between texts as material objects and notions of the authorial work have sharply undermined the supposed authority (intentional or otherwise) of the text. Much of this work in English studies surrounds the production of Shakespearean dramatic texts, the ways in which the history of editorial practice - from Heminge and Condell's publication of the folio Works of Shakespeare in University, and the way to combat it - to inaugurate the "move to performance studies" - is of course, to suggest that performance studies constitutes a "new paradigm."

In its particular blending of ethnology with literary and cultural theory, as well as in the productive eclecticism it sponsors, performance studies has certainly brought new questions into view, new ways of thinking, writing, and teaching into practice. But to define this "new paradigm" in opposition to theatre studies - or, indeed, to the other "paradigms" from which performance studies often draws its theoretical armature and methodological practice - is, finally, to reinscribe performance studies with at least some of the analytical hierarchies its practitioners would contest. In his now notorious paper first delivered at the 1992 ATHE convention in Atlanta, Richard Schechner suggests that "theatre as we have known and practiced it - the staging of written dramas - will be the string quartet of the 21st century: a beloved but extremely limited genre, a subdivision of performance," and so calls for a conceptual remapping of our current disciplinary and institutional horizons: "The new paradigm is "performance," not theatre. Theatre departments should become "performance departments"" (1992: 8, 9). Schechner is certainly right to view performance as "about more than the enactment of Eurocentric drama," and I am in sympathy - though, obviously, not in complete agreement - with his sense that "performed acts, whether actual or virtual, more than the written word, connect and negotiate the many cultural, personal, group, regional, and world systems comprising today's realities" (1992: 9, my emphasis). I don't want to go into Schechner's sense of this "new paradigm" here, however, in part because this brief, occasional essay gives a poor accounting of it - largely multiplying "objects" of study (that is, merely expanding the turf) under the banner of "intercultural" performance, rather than articulating the conceptual paradigm that would offer new modes of analysis and explanation, a new sense of what counts and of how it counts in the identification, analysis, and explanation of performance. This is not an unusual problem in the interdisciplinary world, and it afflicts most areas of the humanities at the moment - expanding the canon of literature, history, art, and so on has challenged the notion of a single embracing paradigm in ways that have yet to be resolved.

Where Schechner's new paradigm seems most fairly to evoke a Kuhnian conceptual revolution is in the area of pedagogy, how performance - especially intercultural

performance, the hallmark of performance studies in Schechner's formulation - will be taught. The basic premise of this innovation is a familiar split, an opposition between reading and doing: "It is not only a question of studying different cultures from a scholarly perspective, but of seeing and doing rituals, dramas, celebrations, and festivals from Africa, Asia, Europe, Native America, and Latin America"; "Students need to practice various kinds of social customs, dress, religious observances, and aesthetics" (1992: 9). The learning of the body is critical to any education, but Schechner's dichotomy between reading and doing is suspiciously evocative of the dichotomy between texts and performances, and suggests how difficult it is to articulate a new paradigm through a merely binary rhetoric.

What are the consequences of conceiving reading as the domain of textual domination, of the explicit transmission of the repressive and canonical authority of dominant culture, and of performance as the means of evading such authority? In "Dramatic Ritual/Ritual Drama: Performative and Reflexive Anthropology," Victor Turner describes his collaboration with Schechner in a performance/anthropology workshop that offers one version of this pedagogy. In this workshop, participants (Turner, his wife Edith Turner, and students both of performance and of anthropology) enacted various rituals of the Ndembu people, who had been the subject of much of Turner's anthropological fieldwork and analysis. Turner was, naturally, sensitive to the limitations of this experiment: "Surely, at so many removes, must not the whole performance have seemed highly artificial, inauthentic? Oddly enough, according to the students, it did not" (1982: 96). The fact that authenticity is at issue here is revealing, and troubling. Although there is an intertextual element to this workshop, "performance" is finally a mode of fidelity - to the offstage authority of the work being reproduced here, the authentic Ndembu ritual. At the moment that this performance becomes truly intercultural and intertextual - when, we might say, the rituals of NYU and the Ndembu finally deconstruct one another, subvert notions of authorized performance altogether - it loses its value for Turner, precisely because that "authentic" other disappears from view, is replaced by a performance whose only authority is in the performance itself. Attempting to perform a girls puberty ritual - which takes place in a culture in which inheritance was matrilineal but "politics was mainly in the hands of males" (1982: 97-98) - the performers tried to get inside the "affective dimension" of the ritual through a kind of intercultural performance "framing":

They began a rehearsal with a ballet, in which women created a kind of frame with their bodies, positioning themselves to form a circle, in which the subsequent male political action could take place. Their idea was to show that action went on within a matrilineal sociocultural space. Somehow this device didn't work - there was a covert contemporary political tinge in it which denatured the Ndembu sociocultural process. This feminist

mode of staging ethnography assumed and enacted modem ideological notions in a situation in which those ideas are simply irrelevant. (1982: 97)

Irrelevant to whom? This performance is "irrelevant" only if we believe that performance can achieve authenticity, that it can become (unlike the text) the faithful vehicle of the immanent, authorized work. Much as the Kathakali King Lear is haunted by notions of Shakespearean authority imported at precisely the moment that "text" is opposed to "performance," so here Ndembu rituals assume the status of a work, which governs the performance as its "signified": the performance is relegated to the status of interpretation, a means of echoing meanings which already exist elsewhere rather than being a site for the production of meaning, a site where the ways in which meaning is produced can be interrogated, inspected, performed. Turner's students, in a manner of speaking, might as well have been staging scenes from Hamlet in an English class.

Although Turner wants to oppose reading and doing here, escaping the deadly authority of the text for the exploratory activity of live - and enlivening - performance, his performing bodies are, in effect, readers of the most conventional kind, searching in their performance to reproduce not merely the "text" of Ndembu ritual - which like all other texts, deconstructs the thing it represents - but the absent, authoritative, authoritarian work. Their bodies, in a sense, become like the bodies of Artaud's Balinese, not a site of intertextual production, nor of intercultural dissonance; performance is the site for the reproduction of authority, the authority of the innate meaning of Ndembu ritual. I don't mean to suggest that the use of performance in teaching, or intercultural performance, or performance studies itself must necessarily fail to fulfill the promise of a "new paradigm": indeed, the promise of this shifting can be felt precisely in the variety of work that can be characterized as "performance studies." But I do mean to suggest how difficult it is to discover such a paradigm without understanding the notions of "paradigm" and "discipline" we use to frame and authorize our activities in a sufficiently dialectical manner. New paradigms are often ghosted by their history in ways that are difficult to recognize, acknowledge, and transform; to understand "performance studies" through a simple opposition between text and performance is to remain captive to the spectral disciplines of the past. Both texts and performances are materially unstable registers of signification, producing "meaning" intertextually in ways that deconstruct notions of intention, fidelity, authority, present meaning. At the same time, texts and performances retain the gesture of such semiosis, and discussions of both text and performance remain haunted by a desire for authorization. If I have fairly captured even part of the complexity of this situation, it should be clear that no simple opposition between text and performance - or, I would argue, between the "paradigms" we constitute to frame them - will be sufficient to capture the rich, contradictory, incommensurable

ways that they engage one another. Given this difficulty, I think we should be eager not to foreclose understanding, to preempt new critical practice, by reaching too quickly and irritably for the certainty that notions of "paradigm" and "discipline" appear to offer. At this moment of undisciplined, interdisciplinary flux, euphoria, uncertainty, mystery, and doubt, perhaps what's called for is a little negative capability.

W. B. WORTHEN

Richard Schechner:

About my work, Worthen complains that I do not articulate, "the conceptual paradigm that would offer new modes of analysis and explanation, a new sense of what counts and of how it counts in the identification, analysis, and explanation of performance". But of course I do. Such an articulation is precisely what my theory of "restored behavior" is all about. I won't expound that theory in detail here. Readers interested can check out my "Restoration of Behavior" essay (1985). The paradigm for performance that I put forward asserts that performance is a special kind of behavior, what I call "twice behaved behavior." Performance studies, therefore, is concerned with identifying, analyzing, and discussing in historical context the very wide variety - both generically and culturally - of restored behavior. Performance studies is concerned with acts enacted, with experience, and with the possible and actual interactions among what I call the "performance quadrilog": (1) spectators/audiences; (2) authors (of the actions); (3) directors/arrangers; (4) performers. Of course, in particular instances, any of these four may be conflated. In performance art, a single person may be author, director, and performer; in some rituals, there is no named author or director and the performers and spectators may be one and the same. Electronic media further complicates matters, introducing its own level of performance in addition to, though not replacing, the level of "live performing." Thus, far from proposing a "binary" (text vs. performance) as Worthen says I do, I see at least four forces always interactively at work creating and/or constituting performance. Regarding Victor and Edith Turner's "performing ethnography," Worthen takes an "in-the-midst" experiment and reads it (pardon me!) as if it were a finished theory. Turner was searching for ways to give a fieldworklike experience to people who could only read an ethnographer's account. Very few performed ethnographies were done; and although Edith Turner continues this kind of work (Victor Turner died in 1983), not many other anthropologists have picked up on it. Where the Turners' experiment proved most fruitful was in opening up an avenue of theatrical creativity. Works using ethnographic materials in which artists from one culture perform behaviors from another are now too commonplace to need individual citation. Of course, such a practice raises questions of

appropriation, neocolonialism, and so on, but these problems are not the subject of Worthen's essay nor my response. Worthen doesn't deal at all with performance art, the genre where the Turner's experiments have proven most fruitful.

Even while apparently arguing otherwise, Worthen actually writes as if the staging of dramas were the normative expectation against which all other practice and theory must be measured. But as I and others have pointed out for decades, the staging of dramas is but a small part of what constitutes theatre; and an even smaller slice of what constitutes performance. To accept the play to/on stage as the normative model is to confuse the history of an academic field with performance theory. To give but one example of a performance genre that uses a playtext but does not operate as Western drama - into - theatre does: in noh what happens onstage is not derived from a rehearsal process during which the playwright's text is examined and interpreted. A noh performance is transmitted down parallel lines within schools of shite (masked performers), waki ("side" performers), kyogen (interlude and comic performers), and musicians. Although specific literary texts of great beauty and meaning are performed, these texts are not the generative kernel of noh as practiced. What generates any particular performance of noh are the relationships among the traditions of the particular "noh families" who arrange to put on a performance. These traditions are not abstract: they include specific gestures, modes of intonation, masks, playtexts, dance patterns, music, and arrangement of repertory. These specificities change according to the practice of the different families. The practice of noh is one way of making performances; the staging of dramas another. And there are dozens if not scores of other ways. These various practices cannot be reduced to a single description.

For example in Indian raga music there is a preexistent kernel, a certain sequence of sounds. But the actual deployment of these sounds-how a player gets through the sequence, what the variations of detail might be-are decided on during performance. There is an extremely rich tension between what is given and what is improvised. This tension is sounded during the performance itself; and how the performer handles, explores, and exploits the possibilities of a given raga is what separates the ordinary from the accomplished, the humdrum from thrillingly artistic. One could say that raga structure is analogous to a sports match where rules must be obeyed, yet what is admired is how masterful athletes stay within the rules even as they outsmart opponents and invent new ways of playing. African American jazz uses principles very similar to raga; and many of the drumming and dancing traditions of Africa work in a similar way.

Most world performance traditions are not based on preexistent generative texts of the kind used by drama. Dramatic theory - overt or covert - cannot be used as the basis for

any "general performance theory." The dramatic theatrical tradition deserves respect, but it is not the master model. Performance studies insists on acknowledging the multiplicity of performance practice. There is no "normative" against which all other practice can be measured, neither Greek tragedy nor Vedic chant nor African dance theatre came "first." There is no single master model. What we theorists must learn is how to give up our desire to find - or invent - such a master model.