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DRAMA, 1945–2000

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Contents

<i>Preface to First Edition</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Preface to Second Edition</i>	x
1 The absent voice: American drama and the critic	1
2 Eugene O'Neill's Endgame	14
3 Tennessee Williams: the theatricalising self	31
4 Arthur Miller: the moral imperative	69
5 Edward Albee: journey to apocalypse	124
6 A Broadway interlude	154
7 Sam Shepard: imagining America	164
8 David Mamet: all true stories	199
9 The performing self	237
10 Redefining the centre: politics, race, gender	261
11 Beyond Broadway	363
<i>Notes</i>	425
<i>Index</i>	441

CHAPTER ONE

The absent voice: American drama and the critic

In recent years attempts have been made to fill some of the more obvious absences in the literary canon. The battle for the future, as ever, begins with the past. First blacks and then women chose to define present reality in terms of a redefined tradition. The project was an implicit critique of a critical practice that had filtered out experiences not felt to be normative, that had denied a voice to those marginalised by the social or economic system – hence the significance of the title of Tillie Olsen's book *Silences* and the potency of Richard Wright's image of laboratory dogs, their vocal chords cut, silently baying to the moon, in *American Hunger*. Language is power, the shaping of language into art is power and the codification of that literature in the form of literary history is also a source of power.

It is, however, not merely the literary expression of the experiences of particular sections of American society that have fallen below the threshold of critical attention. There is also another surprising absence, another silence, another example of critical reticence. Whatever happened to American drama? Why is it that literary critics, cultural historians, literary theorists, those interested in the evolution of genre, in discourse and ideology, find so little to say about the theatre in general and the American theatre in particular? Can it really be that an entire genre has evaded the critic who was once drawn to the poem and then the novel and who, more recently, has chosen to concentrate on literary theory? There are, of course, honourable exceptions, but on the whole the silence has been remarkable.

Any account of American drama must begin by noting the casual disregard with which it has been treated by the critical establishment. There is no single history of its development, no truly comprehensive analysis of its achievement. In the standard histories of American literature it is accorded at best a marginal position. Why should this be? Is it

perhaps the nature of drama which takes it outside the parameters of critical discourse, unless, like Shakespeare, its canonical status as scholarly text has been established by time? After all, is drama, and the theatre in which it takes place, not inherently ideological? Does the transformation of the word on the page into the mobility of performance not raise questions about discourse and text? Is the stage, the most public of the arts, not a place to see dramatised the tensions and concerns of a society? Is a concern with the reception of a work, with the way in which it is 'read', not of special significance to an art in which that reception may profoundly modify the work in question? May questions of authorship not have special bearing on an art which might be thought to be collaborative? Is the very nature and status of criticism not challenged by work which to a large degree incorporates a critical reading in the very processes of its transmission? These might be thought to be rhetorical questions, but the history of literary criticism and cultural studies suggests otherwise.

It was Umberto Eco who reminded us that though the intervention of the actor complicates the act of reception, the process remains the same in that every 'reading', 'contemplation' or 'enjoyment' of a work of art represents a tacit form of 'performance': and every performance a reading. That reader may, of course, be in the theatre. He or she may be on their own, confronted with the printed word. It could even be argued that the latter may, in a perverse way, be in a more privileged if exposed position in that the individual imagination is not coerced by the interpretative strategy of director and actor. As David Mamet has said, 'the best production takes place in the mind of the beholder'.¹ But of course the theatre's attraction lies in its power to transcend the written word. That is the key. It is physical, three-dimensional, immediate, and perhaps that very fact has itself intimidated the critic. It should instead have challenged him. Too often, we are offered reductive versions, even by those who acknowledge drama as an aspect of literature. Thus, in his diatribe against the American playwright, Robert Brustein, as a young critic, had denounced Eugene O'Neill as a 'charter member of a cult of inarticulacy' who perversely suggested that the meaning of one of his plays might lie in its silences, and Tennessee Williams for emphasising 'the incontinent blaze of live theatre, a theatre meant for seeing and feeling', a plastic theatre which did not reward the literary critic. This view, expressed in *Harper's* magazine in 1959, has been echoed sufficiently widely since then to merit consideration.

Roland Barthes describes the author as a man

who radically absorbs the world's *why* in a *how to write* . . . by enclosing himself in the *how to write*, the author ultimately discovers the open question, par excellence! Why the world? What is the ultimate meaning of things? In short, it is precisely when the author's work becomes its own end that it regains a mediating character: the author conceives of literature as an end, the world restores it to him as a means: and it is in this perpetual inclusiveness that the author rediscovers the world, an alien world, since literature represents it as a question – never finally as an answer.²

But who more than Eugene O'Neill was engaged in this restless search? No other playwright has committed himself so completely to the 'how' of literature, restlessly testing every style, strategy, concept of character, linguistic mode, theatrical device. And the 'how' does indeed lead him towards the 'why'.

The process of O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* is one in which style is substance, in which the theatricalised self is left disabled by its own imaginative projections. It is like the film of a life run backwards, from sophistication and power to innocence and total vulnerability; the portrait of a social world unmaking itself, of a language dislocated and in retreat from coherence, of a civilisation reverting to origins, of an individual stripping off the accretions of logic and civility, of a society tracing its roots back to myth.

In so far as language is power, the absence of language is an index of relative powerlessness. So it is that Brutus Jones's language slips away with his loss of social control as the lowly night porter, in O'Neill's *Hughie*, barely contributes a coherent sentence. On the other hand a steady flow of language does not of itself imply a confident control of experience. Indeed in this latter case the hotel guest's articulate accounts of personal triumph merely serve to underline the social silence which is his life. What is spoken betrays the centrality of what is not. The truth of his life is what can never make its way into language. He keeps alive by the stories he tells. He is a down-market Scheherazade. The dramas he invents are his defence against the world and his own insignificance. They are also all that stands between him and despair.

The theatre is unique in its silences. In the literary text such spaces close. Even the blank page of a Laurence Sterne can be turned in a second. In the theatre silence is not merely kinetic potential. It may teem with meaning. We are used to the notation 'silence' in a Beckett or Pinter play, but Susan Glaspell and Eugene O'Neill were fully alive

to the possibilities of reticence forty years earlier. In *The Outside* Susan Glaspell created a character stunned into silence by experience; but the aphasia of Anna Christie and the inarticulateness of Yank in O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* equally compacted meaning into those moments when language is inadequate to feeling.

If the word, spoken or withheld, is a central and potent fact of theatre, so, too, is space and the occupation of that space by the body. Nor is it simply a matter of proxemics, of the meaning generated by gesture or appearance; it is that the word is made flesh. The theatre is by its nature sensuous. Even didactic drama alchemises its arguments through the mind made body. The severity of words on the page is corrupted by the mouth which articulates them. The minimalism of the printed word gives way to plenitude. That seduction, implicit in the text, becomes explicit in production. It cannot be extirpated. The Puritans were right to close the theatres. However irreproachable the sentiments, their theatricalising required a waywardness the elect were bound to suspect. For Tennessee Williams, for example, that sensuousness was crucial, since theatre is not merely the condition of his art but also his subject.

Thus *A Streetcar Named Desire* is pre-eminently aware of its own constitutive conventions; that is to say it is concerned, in the Russian formalist Viktor Schlovsky's terms, with the generation of plot from story. It foregrounds the processes of theatre, the elaboration of a structure of meaning out of mere events. It defamiliarises the real by dramatising the extent to which, and the manner in which, that reality is constituted. Blanche is self-consciously her own playwright, costume designer, lighting engineer, scenic designer and performer. You could say of her world what Roland Barthes says of the actor – it is artificial but not factitious. The dramas which she enacts – southern belle, sensitive virgin, sensuous temptress, martyred daughter, wronged wife – are all carefully presented performances embedded in their own narrative contexts. In Fredric Jameson's terms, it is a play that speaks of its own coming into being, of its own construction. If, to Jameson, all literary works emit a kind of lateral message about their own process of formation, in *Streetcar* it seems more central and more deliberate. And not here alone. Laura, in *The Glass Menagerie*, enters the theatre of her glass animals, making mobile in her imagination what is immobile in a world of mere facticity, just as Tennessee Williams himself enters his own drama, charging the words on the page with a kind of static potential which gives them the energy to be discharged in performance. There is, indeed, a real sense in which Williams is a product of his work. When he began to write he was plain

Tom, poor Tom. The invention of 'Tennessee' was not merely coterminous with the elaboration of theatrical fictions, it was of a piece with it. In that sense it is not entirely fanciful to suggest that he was the product of the discourse of his plays. Indeed he created female alter egos, such as Blanche in *Streetcar* and Alma in *Summer and Smoke*, before he began, as he did in later life, to dress up as a woman. Later he even turned performer, stepping into one of his own plays as actor in a work called *Small Craft Warning* where the part he played, that of a failed doctor who had lost his licence to practise, was in effect itself an expression of his sense of his own disintegrating powers. Where did the work end and the life begin? The man who consigns Blanche to insanity later found himself in a straitjacket. Later still he wrote a play set in an empty theatre in which two characters fill the emptiness of their lives by speaking lines from a play generated out of those lives, a metadrama of fascinating intellectual and ontological complexity. And if by that stage of his career there was a terrible appositeness in a play in which characters address an empty auditorium, is there not another significance to it, for though America's playwrights have found huge and appreciative audiences around the world and though their plays are reviewed and widely published and read, the academic critic, the cultural historian, the literary theorist for the most part has turned his or her head away.

Tennessee Williams saw himself as a poet. Why, then, turn to the stage? I think because the body had a significance to him beyond the homosexual reveries which recur in his *Memoirs*. It – the body – was everything the world was not. It was warm; it was animate; it was three-dimensional. It inscribed its own meaning; it generated its own discourse, independent of and at a tangent to a verbal language which threatens to pull the self into history. It was its own act of resistance in a world in which the mechanical dominated. And how could that body's violations, its temporary alliances, its vulnerabilities, its resistances be better communicated than on the stage? So much of the tension of his work (as of O'Neill's) comes from placing the body in a situation essentially oppressive to and at odds with its needs. The immobility towards which he presses his characters, the catatonia which awaits them, derives its impact precisely from their earlier manifest motility – a motility most easily invested with immediacy and meaning in the theatre. Then again the protean gesture of pluralising the self and, indeed, meaning itself – not as in a novel where a narrator controls and contains the multiple self – offers a protection against being too completely known and hence vulnerable. For a man for whom the concealment of his true sexual identity

was for long a literal necessity, the fragmentation of the self into multiple roles offered a possible refuge.

A novel is more fixed, more stolid, more resistant to subversion by its own form (though of course we have the evidence of *Tristram Shandy* that such subversion is perfectly possible). Since Williams is the poet of the unauthorised, the unsanctioned, the outlawed, it seems logical that he should choose a form which more easily releases its pluralism of meanings – under the pressure of actors, director, audience – than does the poem or the novel. It is not that novels have restrictive meanings but that the incompletions of the theatrical text are readily apparent, indeed implicit in the form. If Roland Barthes is right in saying ‘Who *speaks* is not who *writes*, and who *writes* is not who *is*,’³ it is equally true to say of the theatrical text that what is *written* is not what is *spoken*, and what is *spoken* is not what *is*. In the theatre language is deliberately played against gesture, *mise en scène*, appearance; the mouth which shapes the word also subverts the word, as facial expression, tone, inflection, volume offer a counter-current. It is uttered in a social context, the silent receiver of language on the stage communicating with no less force than its transmitter. Meaning is communicated proxemically, annihilated by its own expressive gestures. In the novel, speech is sequential, part of a serial logic in which one word replaces or supersedes another; actions which may be simultaneous have to be recreated in a way which denies their simultaneity and simultaneity is a crucial virtue of the theatre. Theatre is the only genre which habitually operates in the present tense and which makes that presentness an acknowledged part of its own methodology. It is the only genre which unavoidably foregrounds its processes. The lighting scaffold, the conscious frame of the proscenium arch – abandoned in the sixties and resurrected in the eighties – the co-presence of other members of the audience underlines one’s own status as ‘reader’ of the text of the performance. The curtain separating the performance on stage from that off, the ticket you hold in your hand (the sign of your entry into otherness and itself a text inscribed with meaning), the whole paraphernalia involved in visiting the theatre, is part of the process of defamiliarising, which is what theatre is about. The novel can be put down, picked up, interleaved with other experiences; the theatre makes its demands. The price of entry in terms of energy and commitment and sometimes financial cost is high. We go to the theatre as ourselves part of a ceremony knowing that our own involvement will be central to the meanings which proliferate.

Mikhail Bakhtin argues for the primacy of the novel on the grounds that its generic skeleton 'is still far from having hardened, and we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities'. While the other genres are older than written literature, 'it has no canon of its own . . . it alone is . . . receptive to . . . reading'.⁴ This sounds to me a little like special pleading. In Tennessee Williams's *Camino Real* there is a gypsy girl whose virginity is restored by every full moon. It's a good trick if you can pull it off, but the theatre is a little like that. It is surely the most sensuous, the most alluring, the most unformed of the genres. Each production restores a kind of innocence only to take pleasure in violating it. When Bakhtin argues that in drama 'there is no all encompassing language that addresses itself dialogically to separate languages, there is no second all encompassing plotless (non-dramatic) dialogue outside of the (non-dramatic) plot',⁵ this, too, seems to me a virtue. In the theatre I am in fact more free from the author's discourse, which in the novel invites me to align my imagination with his. For Bakhtin, 'The fundamental condition, that which makes a novel a novel, that which is responsible for its stylistic uniqueness, is the *speaking person and his discourse* . . . [which] is an object of *verbal* artistic representation.'⁶ In contrast to drama it is represented by means of 'authorial discourse'.⁶ Since there is clearly such a thing as an implied author as well as an implied reader, the distinction he draws is perhaps rather too sharp but in so far as he is correct to suggest an instability in drama, a plurality of possibilities, this is surely one of its strengths. Indeed in some ways it is the author's loss of control which constitutes something of the attraction of theatre. For the playwright, at any rate, it may offer a means of breaking with an aestheticism that has overtones of inauthenticity. And that leads us in the direction of ideology.

In 'Authors and Writers' Roland Barthes insists that

for the author, *to write* is an intransitive verb; hence it can never explain the world, or at least, when it claims to explain the world, it does so only the better to conceal its ambiguity: once the explanation is fixed in a work, it immediately becomes an ambiguous product of the real, to which it is linked by perspective.⁷

Barthes distinguishes between the author and the writer, for the latter the verb 'to write' being transitive. Thus, the notion of a committed author is a contradiction in terms. As he says, it is

absurd to ask an author for 'commitment': a 'committed' author claims simultaneous participation in two structures, inevitably a source of deception . . . whether or not an author is responsible for his opinions is unimportant; whether

or not an author assumes, more or less intelligently, the ideological implications of his work is also secondary; the author's true responsibility is to support literature as a failed commitment, as a Mosaic glance into the Promised Land of the real.⁸

But frequently, of course, those impulses are indeed contained in the same sensibility. There *is* an ambiguity about the committed author/writer whose commitment is necessarily a double one – to the word and to the word's transparency. Commitment requires that the word should dissolve into its own social fulfilment, declare its own ultimate irrelevance, its second-order status, as the writer serves a cause whose demands go beyond his own imagining. But the author also wants to refashion language, ease it away from its history, separate it from the social world which exercises its restraints.

James Baldwin was all too aware of this ambivalence and seized on the theatre as a way of resolving the tension. Drama offered a way to loosen his grip on aestheticism. The balanced sentences, the carefully sculpted prose that had distinguished his essays, and which many blacks in America felt were distancing him from his own and their experience and aligning him with an alien literary tradition rather than a social cause, were broken open by the glossalalia, the profusion of voices which is the essence of theatre. He turned to the theatre precisely because he needed to deny himself a controlling voice, because he wished to subvert his own authority. It was almost as though the surrender of total responsibility implicit in theatre was in some way a guarantee that subject had primacy over style, that he was not allowing aesthetic issues to dominate experiences whose authenticity could only be diminished by the transformations of art. LeRoi Jones plainly felt much the same, his change of name coinciding with a retreat from metaphor into a literalism which intensified as black nationalism gave way to Marxism–Leninism and the dense and profoundly ambiguous images of *Dutchman* and *The Slave* led first to the crude melodrama of his black revolutionary plays and then to works such as *Sl* and *The Motions of History*, in which social reality was allowed primacy. Ultimately, he followed his own logic and abandoned the stage for the factory gate and the dramatic text for the political leaflet. It was a logic followed, too, by a number of politically motivated theatre groups whose distrust of the ideology implicit in the fact of the theatre building took them onto the streets, and whose distrust of what Barthes called 'fine writing' led them to the communal creation of texts which were an assault on the authority of the writer and whose openness to audience participation was another antidote to a self-referring art.

As Baraka has his black protagonist confess in *Dutchman*, there is a seductive quality in language. Words have a detachment from experience. They are not the thing itself. They stand in the place of action. They have a coherent structure which may be at odds with the unregulated passion which generates them. To that extent they are a betrayal, representing a kind of sanity when a holy madness is required. In the case of Clay, in *Dutchman*, the safety that he seeks in words is finally only securable in action. He dies because he cannot relinquish his grasp on the detachment that language brings – the detachment of the writer. It is a debate that Baraka continued in *The Slave* in which the intellectual leader of a black revolt remains enslaved to his own articulateness no less than his emotions. So the battle rages outside the window while he engages in debate with a white professor, husband to the white wife he had abandoned. Since Baraka, university educated, separated from his white wife and drawn to the literary world which showed every sign of responding to his talent, was himself caught in just such a dilemma, it is hard not to see the play as a debate in which he engages himself, a debate whose power derives, at least in part, from the honesty with which he confesses to and dramatises his own ambivalence. What the theatre offers is a social context for language, a language now energised as it becomes the action it invokes.

Literature requires and is an act of renunciation. The condition of its creation is withdrawal. Its nature implies abstinence. But the theatre offers a special grace. Drama may be privately conceived but it is publicly created. It is a re-entry into the world. The word becomes action, albeit action drained of true risk. It gives back to the writer what he has sacrificed in order to write. It restores in the public action of the play the power to act, to offer the body as a sign of authenticity. What is conceived in a denial of community ends with a restoration of community. A word silently inscribed sounds forth in confident expectation of communication. The act of distributing that language between characters and the actors who articulate them is itself a confident sign of shared experience and of the possibility of sharing language.

The actor who speaks another's words and endeavours to mould them to his own shape, to bend the language to his own reality and accommodate himself to the language (a compromise without which he would lack all conviction) mirrors our own relationship to the words that we speak, words we do not devise but which we struggle to make our own. His attempt to negotiate the terms on which necessity and freedom, the given and the created, can co-exist is a model of those

other such negotiations in which we participate daily. For the black writer there is a special irony in deploying a language which was the instrument and sign of slavery. To distrust the words you speak, words which have a history, is to place yourself at odds with your own articulateness, and the theatre, which never carries the voice of the writer, only his or her characters, offers a release from that paradox which can then become subject rather than means.

Roland Barthes has suggested that 'literature is always unrealistic' since language 'can never explain the world, or at least, when it claims to explain the world, it does so only the better to conceal its ambiguity; once the explanation is fixed in a work, it immediately becomes an ambiguous product of the real, to which it is linked by perspective'.⁹ And there is, indeed, a revealing suspicion of language not merely on the part of the avant-gardist, disassembling his art in a radical gesture of defamiliarisation, but also on the part of the committed playwright for whom that language is a barrier between the urgencies of a tangible world and those he would make aware of those realities. More than that, the gap between act and word is a reproach, that between fact and word an irony; the disproportion between need and its expression is a constant reminder of the impossible project in which the writer chooses to engage. In becoming itself a 'product of the real' the play simultaneously submits to the condition it would resist and becomes a rival for attention with the circumstance which inspired its creation but to which it is only analogically connected. Those who left Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* shouting out the need to 'Strike! Strike! Strike!' re-entered a world whose social structure and political arrangements lacked the ordered logic and casual resolutions of the play, a world in which character and action were more profoundly ambiguous, a world, indeed, in which theatre itself is regarded as marginal and as implicated in the values of the system it purports to challenge. At base it was its lack of realism that was its most noticeable characteristic and perhaps its redemption. The same logic would apply with equal force to the committed writing of the fifties, sixties, seventies and eighties. The most striking aspect of this theatre is its naivety, a willed innocence that conceives of character, language and action as elements in a dialectic, as compressed images of oppression or revolt. Amira Baraka's *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* offered a catechism of revolutionary faith which divided the world not so much into contending racial forces as into platonic models of rebel or collaborator. These were agit-prop gestures, a

theatre of praxis designed to intervene in the political system at the level of personal epiphany, to be achieved through group experience. But it was always an uneasy theatre, acutely aware of the inadequacy of its own gestures, expressive and direct, preferable to an inert prose contained and constrained by the page, but still disproportionate to the fact.

There is a poem by the Czechoslovak poet Miroslav Holub which explains something of this desire to *show* in theatre rather than *tell* in the novel. The poem is called 'Brief Reflection on the Word Pain':

Wittgenstein says the words 'It hurts' have replaced
tears and cries of pain. The word 'Pain'
does not describe the expression of pain but replaces it.
Replaces and displaces it.
Thus it creates a new behaviour pattern
in the case of pain.

The word comes between us and the pain
like a pretence of silence.
It is a silencing. It is a needle
unpicking the stitch
between blood and clay.¹⁰

It is not that the theatre can wholly close this gap but that it can remind us of its existence by pitching word against dramatised experience. Perhaps that is one reason why the committed writer has been drawn to the theatre. It is out of a desire to replace that stitch which will reconnect blood and clay. Either way the aesthetic and literary implications of committed theatre, particularly in the American context, have barely even been registered let alone addressed with any sophistication or theoretical concern.

And what of those critics attracted by theory in recent years? After all, Derrida takes a brief look at the theatre of cruelty and Roland Barthes at Brecht and Bunraku theatre. On the whole, theatre has commanded very little interest from the major theorists or those who have taken up their theories. Not even the question of authorship seems to have stirred much interest, except among those most immediately involved.

Antonin Artaud believed that no one had the right to call himself author, that is to say creator, except the person who controls the direct handling of the stage. In the 1960s even this claim on behalf of the director was challenged in the name of the group. Texts were deliberately broken open and invaded by actors who chose thereby to imprint themselves more directly on the performance. In one of the Open Theatre's

productions the actors literally spelt out words with their bodies, in revolt against the canonical text. When the Wooster Group chose to do this to Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* in their work, *LSD*, he threatened to go to law, as did Samuel Beckett, over the American Repertory Theatre's version, in that same year, of *Endgame*, and Harold Pinter, over an Italian version of *Old Times*, which presented that play as a lesbian tryst. In an earlier production the Wooster Group stirred up the Thornton Wilder Estate by playing selections from *Our Town* on video monitors juxtaposed with pornographic images. What was at stake was copyright. What was at stake was ownership. It was in effect a debate about authority and authorship. The authors were in effect asserting the significance of the printed text. Granted that in order to move from page to stage a series of transformations, of interpretations, were necessary but the authors wished, as a bare minimum, to insist on the retention of the words as written, on the right to define the limits of an interpretive range. And that of course raises questions entirely familiar in other genres but scarcely addressed at all in theatre criticism. What constitutes the text, who could be said to write it, how do we describe it or define its reception? It may make legal sense to demand that a play be performed 'without changes or alterations' – a phrase from legal contracts – but it scarcely makes theatrical let alone epistemological sense. Beckett's own response was to suggest that the best possible play was one in which there are no actors, only text, adding, perhaps only partly ironically, that he was trying to write one. It is hard to resist the thought that he almost made it. Can critics, though, afford to be equally cavalier? Can they, moreover, continue to regard the American theatre as socially and culturally marginal, peripheral to the concerns of the critic, whether that critic be committed to an exploration of the structure of language, the generation of character, the elaboration of plot, the nature of readership or the aesthetic response to ideological fact.

After all, could Barthes's description of a text of bliss, of *jouissance* – the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts, unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relations with language – not be said to apply to O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, Williams's *Outcry* and even *Streetcar*, Miller's *The Archbishop's Ceiling*, Albee's *Listening*, Mamet's *American Buffalo*, or Shepard's *Icarus's Mother*.

The conditions of theatre do radically disrupt accustomed readings. It may be indeed that this insecurity over the object of study is the real reason for critical withdrawal. Should it not, however, rather be a reason

for critical engagement? The aim is not to arrest that mobility, to deny drama's protean quality by generating normative versions, critical models which are stable because inert, but to acknowledge the legitimacy of analysis, of readings of a text which is in truth only a pretext for a performance that will in turn constitute a new text.