accomplished. Levinas, Deleuze and Foucault all emerge in Sheehan’s argument as “Beckett’s theoretical inheritors” (184). He concludes by suggesting that in contemporary theoretical reflection, fiction and philosophy have been reunited: “It is here that the counterhumanist concerns of the modernist novel are allied with paraliterary practices that continue, and extend, the effort to decompose narrative form” (189). If in modernism the struggle with narrative is in its essence a struggle with the human, “[i]n theoretical antihumanism the struggle with the human is really a struggle with narrative—a successful struggle, this time, that culminates in the formation of a ‘postnarrative’ technique” (191). Theory, in Sheehan’s argument, emerges as modernism without narrative. This is a strongly recommended read.

Notes


Reviewed by Klaus Mladek, University of Cincinnati

At last, we can welcome a defense of the theater against both its most passionate enemies and its most ardent lovers. After this study, a lot of polemic energy spent in debate between pro-theatricalists and anti-theatricalists, between adherents of modernism and those of the avant-garde, can be spared. The fault lines between solipsistic and elitist modernism on the one side, and a collaborative and political avant-garde on the other, must be drawn anew. As Puchner brilliantly demonstrates, the radical difference must be thought, first and foremost, along the parameters of anti-theatrical modernism versus the theatrical avant-garde. Whether it is in the case of Mallarmé, Joyce, Stein, Yeats, Beckett or Brecht, the boundaries between anti-theatricality and the theatricality of the avant-garde remain permeable. While the modernist closet drama, for example, maintains its own mode of political intervention, its own communities and utopian hopes, the avant-garde used the theater not out of mere love for the theater itself but in order to “attack modernism’s most central values” (11). Their relationship is thus much more than a simple opposition; theatricalism and its modernist rejection are profoundly dependent upon each other.

After Puchner’s shrewd readings of key closet dramas by modernist dramatists, the contours of an “anti-theatrical theater” or a “theater without theatricality” become suddenly more than a theoretical construct without life support. The shape of the anti-theatrical closet drama proves to be finely-honed and filled with flesh and bones. Theater studies and literary criticism will now have to deal with this distinct creature that destroys their dearly-held separations and dichotomies. Closet dramas must be understood as the future of theater.

To be sure, books are not theater and the theater is not a book, but through the genre of the modernist closet drama it is possible to study each other’s potentials, limitations and cross-overs. The fusion of genres and art forms in the closet drama turns into a resounding appeal to both theater studies and literary criticism. Puchner’s study superbly subverts the false alternative that has haunted the fields of theater studies and literary criticism from their inceptions: either to
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defy the authority of text and writing as foreign to the dynamics of the stage or to purge the book from the contamination of the actual theater. Rather than devoting its zeal to liberating theatrical performance from the authority of the dramatic text, or to yet another bashing of Michael Fried, theater studies would be better advised to learn from the profound anti-theatrical thrust of modernism. And rather than constantly containing the theater within the category of an “écriture générale” or text, literary criticism and semiotics would be better-off acknowledging the thoroughly different boundaries of literature and the theater. The solitary act of reading cannot be superimposed on the structures of watching a play; neither can the much-celebrated metaphor of “theatricality” (gesture, performance, act) in literary theory be simply abstracted from actual theater practice.

Curiously enough, Puchner compellingly argues that the more the armies of anti-theatricalists flex their muscles against the actual theater, the more creative sparks are released for fundamental innovation. “[M]odernist anti-theatricalism does not remain external to the theater but instead becomes a productive force responsible for the theater’s most glorious achievements.” (13) We owe the most radical reforms and revolutions in the history of the theater to the staunchest anti-theatricalists, from Mallarmé to Brecht and Beckett. In the midst of anti-theatricality occurs the resurrection of a new theater. This understanding of the modernist closet drama as the pioneering motor of contemporary theater is far more than a simple dialectical two-step. The simultaneous resistance of the modernist closet drama to and dependence upon the theater creates a peculiar hybrid of text-theater or book-stage whose rules, norms and regulations form a highly-charged new breed. This curious blend remains unquestionably different from both theater and the book. The particular composition of this book-theater is precisely the crux of the issues at stake here: the determination of the modernist closet dramatists, particularly of Mallarmé, consists of nothing more than the desire to reinvent both the theater and the book from scratch.

Aside from all of the talk about the paralyzing effects of the language crisis, these modernist writers, including Hofmannsthal, aggressively aspired to an extraordinary fusion of the arts, radical modes of expression, and a complete revision of traditional writing and theater practices alike.

With admirable theoretical acumen, Puchner elucidates the closet drama as an anti-theatrical theater which opposes the potent “theatocracy” of Richard Wagner—his cult of the stage, the imperial gestures, the stage divas and ballerinas, the grand gesturing of his “characters” and heroes. Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk forces everything into the confines of all-encompassing theatrical representation; all arts, senses and media are stimulated and gathered under the umbrella of “gesturality” on the stage. The intensity of this total theater overwhelms the spectator in order to unleash a theatricality that collapses critical distances and disables analytical responses. This turns into an immensely political project. Wagner fathoms a theater which will serve to unify the politically divided German Volk. The modernists at stake here sensed the potential violence of Wagner’s fixation with the stage, but Adorno’s analysis was, in fact, needed to comprehend fully Wagner’s dictatorial gestures and politics, whether the “terrorist beating” of his conductors or Wagner’s personal anti-Semitism. The character Mime from the Ring serves as the epitome of false-hearted acting and, as Adorno discovered, he is inscribed in the long-standing anti-Semitic topology of the “cunning Jew.” In this instance, Wagner reveals the underside of his fateful unification of theater and politics: the totalitarian politics of the work of art and its spirit of anti-Semitism. However, as the example of Mime exposes, Wagner’s libretti contain secret layers of anti-theatricality themselves. Resistance to the theater, Puchner contends, structures the theater from within, even in the case of Wagner’s theatocracy. Yet more importantly, as the figure of Mime proves, theatricalism constitutively fails to transpose fully all actions, senses and media into theatrical space.

As we all know, anti-mimesis and anti-theatricality have a powerful forefather: Plato. Puchner demonstrates that Plato’s dismissal of the theater (while his dramatized dialogues betray a silent fascination for the theater) is based on a particular moment in the performance, when the actor or poet performs a diegesis (report, explanation) “through mimesis.” The actor begins with the
truthful representation of an event, but then slips into another role and another (untruthful) mode while the captivated audience is increasingly seduced and deceived. Only “diegesis without mimesis” is therefore acceptable to Plato—the expulsion of the theater from thought and politics. The modernist closet drama follows a strikingly similar pattern of anti-theatricality; it picks up on this particular Platonian suspicion of mimetic theater and incorporates various forms of diegesis. Throughout his book, Puchner follows the traces of such diegetic speech in the heart of the closet drama. Interspersed commentary, narrative reports, stage directions or lengthy explanations pierce the smooth fabric of the drama.

Against the representational mise-en-scène, the modernist closet drama proposes a mise-en-livre. No new theater shall exist without thoroughly destroying the imaginary or even the virtual theater in our heads and our reading habits. The best theater must be forced onto the stage against its will, as can be seen in the example of Stein’s Four Saints. A theatrical space is conjured up only to be taken apart. When Puchner discusses Brecht’s epic theater we finally understand what it means to “de-theatricalize” theater: actors are turned into diegetic narrators, novelistic reports disassemble the phantasm of the mimetic character while gestus replaces interiority. The cool control and philosophical distance of readership must be introduced into the mimesis of the theatrical performance. For both Stein and Brecht, the audience, rather than being passively drawn in, must read the performance and follow it more like a story than a plot. Actors and spectators alike become in Brecht’s theater what Benjamin calls “functionaries” and “philosophers” (152). Herein lies the most compelling politicization of the theater against the theatrical spectacles of fascism. Puchner shows that this tradition remains alive and well today. Whether it is the Wooster Group, Bob Wilson or Elevator Repair Service, the influence of modernist anti-theatricalism can still be felt everywhere in contemporary theater.

The theatrum mundi of the modernist drama hides in the closet to avoid voyeuristic spectators or at least to force them into the solitary confinement of readership. There they have to break out of the passive trance into which Wagner supposedly lulled his audience. On the reader of the closet drama rests the “entire modernity,” (71) as Mallarmé believes; the deliberate and controlled act of reading will resist the narcoticizing effect of method actors and authentic characters, stage props and theatrical mimesis. Against the Medusian petrification of the spectator in the theater, Mallarmé advances in his Livre the abstraction and depersonification of plot and acting. Through narrative reports and inner monologues (Joyce), obsessive stage directions (Beckett) or the introduction of narrative commentators on the outer stage (Stein), the theatrical space itself becomes systematically “unstaged.”

To be sure, nobody wishes to have this drama come out of its closet without serious acknowledgment of its anti-theatrical thrust. For the closet drama is exciting, deviant and subversive; its retreat into the closet is far from pacifying; on the contrary, it is exceedingly aggressive (90). While the modernist book attempts to contain and fight the theatrical, it nevertheless returns to it in the very space of writing, “whose typography is infiltrated by the theater” (64). The illicit and the experimental go into hiding and wander to the mysterious and oblique spaces which the public eye cannot see—not primarily to avoid censorship, but to experiment more freely with the potential of genre and medium. What is buried remains the most precious. Not only for Mallarmé was the book the dearly-held object and subject of a deliberately-encrypted text-theater. What Puchner discovers in Mallarmé is true of all closet dramas. They are inhabited by “all imaginable types of performing arts, including opera, ballet, parades, and theater; music, including orchestral music, hymns, chant, and chansons; and literature, including verse, poetry, drama, and journals” (70). Even Brecht, who attempted to undo Wagner’s fusion of the arts on the stage, relied heavily on the fragmenting forces of different genres and media. The closet drama invites its audience to leave and averts the curious gaze only to lure it all the more seductively into its labyrinthine maze. This particular structure of simultaneous showing and hiding is also (in)visible in Joyce’s chapter “Circe” “in which the novel’s textual unconscious was acted
What happens when those dramas are forced out of their closet? They tend to lose their radical anti-theatrical charge: “It is the closet drama alone that is truly capable of resisting them [the limitations of the theater]” (90).

Even the sharp terminology of this study cannot and probably should not avoid the seductive rhetoric and slippery slope of the term “theatricality.” As the chapter on Joyce affirms (see page 84), or as Puchner’s study of Nietzsche and Benjamin renders visible, a “theatricality without theater” (as Marinetti called it) is possible. Despite the large overlap, the values and goals of the theater and those of theatricality are not always coexistent, as this study sometimes seems to suggest. Theatricality is not bound to the stage alone, but it is the merit of Puchner’s study to convince us that it is impossible to grasp this concept without serious reference to the actual theater. Platonic anti-theatricality, although largely similar to its modernist version, has a somewhat different ambition. There are also different ambitions among the modernist anti-theatricalists themselves. It would be useful to elaborate on the finer differences between the distinct anti-theatricalities within modernism and with respect to Plato.

Something must be said about Puchner’s extremely successful choice of authors and texts. By doing justice to the minute details of their works, to the dramas and theories of Mallarmé, Joyce, Stein, Yeats, Brecht and Beckett, Puchner makes a compelling case for the central thesis of the book. Moreover, Puchner develops a new terminology for examining the conflicting forces within the modernist closet drama, and of modernism as a whole. Whether it is Mallarmé’s “closet theater,” Joyce’s “exuberant” or “narrative closet drama,” Stein’s “diegetic theater,” or “cubist diegesis,” Puchner’s provides a new vocabulary to analyze modernism’s “hate affair” with the theater.

Hopefully Puchner or someone else will deliver future works along this rich avenue of thought, works which will pose questions such as: how could a “theatricality without the theater” (for example in the visual arts, philosophy and politics) be understood? How do we examine traces of anti-theatricality in the seemingly boundless theater of the avant-garde and what role would Wagner play in this? How do certain features of anti-theatricality play out in contemporary theater practice and theory? In a nutshell: what is the future of anti-theater?


Reviewed by Phyllis Lassner, Northwestern University

While the theoretical relationships between literary and historical studies have often been at odds, a recent issue of PMLA on the topic of “Imagining History” suggests an official move towards reconciliation. As its authors attest, the old historicism of context and the new historicism of imagined connections are now more often combined than debated; the combination bears witness to the necessity of a historicist approach to literary study across cultural and temporal lines. There is, however, one history represented in this PMLA that does not fit quite as comfortably within this merger as do the English Renaissance, Victorian Britain, colonialism, and “Idealist Historiography.” It may not be a coincidence that two selections, the 2002 Nobel speech by Imre Kertesz, and Hans Kellner’s essay, proffer the Holocaust as a test case for reading history into literature. Both pieces demonstrate that the Holocaust—its specific atrocities, historical contexts, and narratives—is the testing ground for how we are able to imagine “the unfamiliar past” and its relation to our reading in the continuous present.1 Where Kellner uses the arguments of Holocaust historians about perpetrator motivation to test “the historical sub-