CHAPTER 3

Performing Texts

Theory in Perspective: What Is a Text?

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1980) details three important critical orientations, or analogies for social interaction, that developed in the twentieth century: life as a game, life as drama, and life as text. The game analogy will be covered in Chapter Six, "Performing Social Roles," and life as drama anchors Chapter Four, "Performing Drama." For this chapter, the central analogy is "life as text."

How do we come to understand the world as a text? The movement in human history from orality to literacy is important to understanding (1) how we are "text-centered" in print culture, (2) how we are taught to interpret texts, and (3) how "text building" is central to the work of a number of areas of knowledge production: "literature, history, law, music, politics, psychology, trade, even war and peace" (Geertz 1980, 177).

The discipline of Speech has traditionally studied texts embodied in performances: the speeches and sermons given by powerful orators. What makes an effective oration? In antiquity and the Middle Ages, rhetoricians focused on tropes: the figures of speech, turns of phrases, and commonplaces that build effective arguments to move an audience to action. For example, the *chiasmus* is a trope that reverses the order of a phrase the second time it is said. John Kennedy, at his presidential inauguration in 1961, used this ancient form: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

Tropes, however, "do not walk in by themselves" (Campbell 1982, 121) but are embodied in performance by the orator. Aristotle, too, recognized the relationship between the text of a play and its embodiment onstage in performance. Plot, character, and thought concern the play, or text, itself. Spectacle, song, and diction involve getting the text on "its feet" in and through its performance. In Richard Bauman's performance keys, four of the seven (special codes, figurative language, parallelism, and special formula) are text-centered; special paralinguistic features,

appeals to tradition, and disclaimers get these texts "on their feet" through embod-iment in performance.

The relationship *between text and performance* is central to many academic dis-ciplines that study performance. Text-centered theories of performance necessarily feature "what" questions: What is performed? What are the conventions of this text—on the page and in performance? And what is the relationship of the text to its uses—as canon, intertextuality, and objects? When we study texts, our engage-ments, understandings, and uses of texts are intricately tied to the medium that enables that text: orality, the printed page, television, radio, film, and the computer screen. Because communication scholars have been interested in texts in all these media, this chapter takes a close look at how performance theories have explored definitions, conventions, and embodiments of texts.

Humans and Symbol Use: Text Me Later. OK?

The vibration of the cell phone in your pocket is an invitation. If you're sitting in a lecture hall or driving in heavy traffic, please ignore it. If the time and place are appropriate, however, you'll most likely dig the phone out of your pocket, glance at the screen, read the text message "UR L8," and choose among a vari-ety of ways to act. Do you then curse? Laugh? Roll your eyes?

For many people today, this is a simple and ubiqui-tous moment in the day, but it also involves **symbol use that is situated, mediated, learned, and enacted**. Symbol use is a uniquely human endeavor. While many ethologists argue that animals communicate in com-plex ways, only humans communicate in *symbols*— representations that are intricately various, generative, and infinite in their combinations. These symbol sys-tems are always *situated in contexts* bound by history, culture, institutions, and ideologies. Symbol use is always in some way a *mediation:* sound, print, images, pixels, and digital code are all media, or tools, by which the symbols are coded and transmitted. Symbol sys-tems are *taught and learned.* Shakespearean sonnets, musical scores, architects' blueprints, and "leet" on the pager screen are symbols that must be learned to be read and interpreted as meaningful. And, finally, sym-bols are *enacted by people* who use them for a variety of purposes.

SOURCE: Photograph by Todd Kravos.

James Kinneavy (1971, 39–40) compares language to a window to explore the many uses humans make of symbols:

Language is like a windowpane. I may throw bricks at it to vent my feelings about something; I may use a chunk of it to chase away an intruder; I may use

it to mirror or explore reality; and I may use a stained-glass windowpane to call attention to itself. Windows can be used expressively, persuasively, referentially, and artistically.

Glancing at the screen of your phone is complex indeed. To begin to explore how the text message "UR L8" is symbol use that is situated, mediated, learned, and enacted, we need to begin thousands of years ago.

From Orality to the Page to the Screen

Long before the written word, information was stored in bodies, in cultural memories, and in oral traditions, enacted only in their performances. Walter Ong (1982) traces the ways that orality is a technology: Valuable cultural information is available *only* in sound, in bodies and performances, and in fixed, formulaic oral phrasings that aid memory. The knowledge stored in bodies was passed on, generation to generation, through performance—face-to-face, participatory, immediate, and empathetic.

Ong maintains that the way a culture stores and retrieves its important information is intricately tied to how individuals in that culture think. He details three kinds of thought, or consciousness, tied to cultural knowledge. These three kinds of thought, *mnemonic, chirographic,* and *typographic,* are important for understanding how texts have become the preeminent means and ends for understanding in the literate world.

Mnemonic Thought: Thinking Memorably

Mnemonic thought is based on *memory.* In this system, you only know what you can remember. Most cultures of the world have been (and continue to be) oral cultures. Ong (1982, 7) notes that of tens of thousands of languages spoken across the world, only 106 have written forms. Out of approximately 3,000 languages spoken today, only 78 have produced a written literature. While *Homo sapiens* has been around for 50,000 years, the earliest dated script is only from 6,000 years ago.

How do people in oral cultures manage without writing? Ong answers, they "think memorable thoughts." He offers these examples of how thought must be shaped to be memorable:

> Thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antithesis, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings (the assembly, the meal, the duel, the hero's "helper," and so on), in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall. (34)

Mnemonic thought is *nested in sound,* not in words on a page. Sound is immediate and important. Ong writes, "A hunter can see a buffalo, smell, taste, and touch

a buffalo when the buffalo is completely inert, even dead, but if he hears a buffalo, he had better watch out: something is going on" (32). Words are invested with great power in oral cultures: Laws, history, and religion exist only in their repeated sayings and performances in appropriate contexts. "The spoken word is always an event," writes Ong (75).

Oral formulas for memory are never just decorative but are instrumental for remembering. Rhyme, rhythm, repetition, parallelism, word clusters, "stock" phrases, formulas, and mnemonic devices keep cultural information intact. John Kennedy's chiasmus recalled at the beginning of this chapter is an example that makes Ong's point: How many other phrases from that inaugural address do we recall so easily? The chiasmus is powerfully memorable precisely because of its formulaic phrasing.

Ong lists these familiar sayings: "Red in the morning, the sailor's warning; red in the night, the sailors delight. Divide and conquer. To err is human, to forgive is divine. . . . The clinging vine. The sturdy oak" (35). The information embedded in these sayings is crucial for a culture's work, law, ethics, and aesthetics, enacted daily in their performances.

"Rules" of Oral Expression

The experience of **primary orality**, or the *orality of a culture untouched by reading and writing,* is extremely difficult for literate people—so steeped in the page—to grasp. But we often feel the pull of oral expression when we write. English teachers critique precisely those moments in writing when we "sound" like we're talking. Ong (1982) lists four characteristics of "oral based expression" that are specifically devalued in writing.

1. **Repetition and redundancy.** How often has the exclamation "This is redundant!" appeared in the margin of your paper? There is no need to repeat on the page because a reader can reread. Yet redundancy is crucial to oral communication. Imagine an orator in ancient Greece speaking to a thousand people, long before electronic amplification carried his voice. How many times would this speaker need to repeat himself to be heard and understood by all? Moreover, this orator's ability to talk—without hesitations, without long pauses, while thinking on his feet—was highly valued. "Rhetoricians were to call this *copia*" (41), a fluency in speaking achieved in and through redundancy.

2. **Stock phrases, word clusters, and formulas**. So important in orality for keeping information intact, stock phrases are considered "clichés" in writing to be avoided, as the joke goes, "like the plague." Writing values newness, freshness, and originality. The originality in oral cultures, however, stems from new uses and applications of traditional materials: "formulas and themes are reshuffled rather than supplanted with new materials" (42).

3. **Additive connectors**. Much oral expression tends to connect thoughts additively through the use of the word "and." Listen closely to any story told out loud. You'll hear the narrator link the story elements like this: "and . . . and

then . . . and. . . ." Writing values organization that prioritizes and subordinates—like an outline's headings and subheadings. A story written down will work very hard to replace "and" with a range of other connectives: "*First* this happened. *While* that was going on. . . . *Next. . . . Then. . . . Finally. . . .*"

4. Concreteness. Oral expression is close to the human life world. Proverbs are full of real, tangible things like birds, bushes, stitches, and cooks. Writing, however, encourages abstractions and enables analysis of those abstractions. The abstractions and analysis typical of philosophy, science, and mathematics were only possible, according to Ong, because of writing.

Learning to perform in an oral culture, however, relies on participation and apprenticeship: There are no training manuals. Isidore Okpewho (1992) details the formal and informal training of oral artists in tribes across Africa who perform hundreds of verses of praise songs, oral histories, and divination rites. "How is the poet able to retain so much text in memory and perform steadily without faltering?" Okpewho asks. For the performers of Yoruba hunters' chants,

> To this question there is usually a twofold reply. First, practice makes perfect: constant repetition helps the artist to master the text so well that the chances of error are drastically reduced. Second, the chanters admit that they make use of various kinds of medicinal charms (called isoye) which aid in the retention of memory. (Okpewho 1992, 227)

Practice, repetition, memory, and retention are central to oral traditions that only exist in performance. Lee Hudson (1980, 33) writes of epic Homeric traditions, "No text existed apart from its sounding, and no epic was less than the artful performance a singer afforded it. Composition, rather than being an independent art, was the art *in* performance."

MAKE A LIST

What Can You Remember?

Much of the cultural information you store and retrieve was learned in and through performance. Make a list of examples of each of the following categories, and then analyze how these texts were taught, remembered, and performed. What oral formulas of rhyme, rhythm, repetition, alliteration, assonance, and word clusters aid your memory?

nursery rhymes

secular oaths, pledges

religious prayers

mnemonic devices

(Continued)

(Continued)

> proverbs
>
> children's songs/rhymes
>
> advertising slogans
>
> clichés
>
> tongue twisters

Chirographic Thought: Thinking Alone

Chirographic thought is based on *handwriting.* Humans began representing the world not in sound but in visual symbols thousands of years ago. The earliest writing is traced to the Sumerians in Mesopotamia around 3500 B.C.E.; Egyptian hieroglyphics date to 3000 B.C.E., Chinese script to 1500 B.C.E., and Aztec script to 1400 C.E. (Ong 1982, 84).

SOURCE: Photograph by Jonah Keegan, Mitaka, Japan. Copyright © 2005 by Jonah Keegan.

Early writing systems were often pictographic, representing things in pictures or stylistic representations. Pictographic systems are very large, requiring thousands of characters to write something down. The K'anghsi dictionary of Chinese, dated

1716 C.E., has 40,545 characters (Ong 1982, 87). With the invention of true alphabets, symbols did not represent things, but sounds. The English alphabet has 26 characters, a very elegant system compared with the thousands of characters required in a pictographic system.

The earliest manuscripts were created on papyrus, and then vellum—animal skins—and rolled. "The parchment codex (or book, as we term it today)" triumphed "over antiquity's roll format: almost always rectangular with the long axis running vertically, the book can be said to derive 'naturally' from the rectangular shape of the animal skin" (Shailor 1999, 9). These books were meticulously hand-copied by scribes and elaborately decorated in gold and paint by artists. One scribe could work for twenty years copying one book.

Ong maintains that creating words on a page, rather than out loud in speech, enabled consciousness that values analysis, visualization, and isolation. How? First, handwriting slows down thought and speech. Most people write at one tenth the speed of speech. Handwriting enables slow creation of words, pondering, mulling, trying out different ideas (their order, their exact phrasing) on the page. Oral communication, however, is immediate and irreversible.

Second, writing "locks words into a visual field." If we are native speakers of English, most of us *see* the letter "A"—perhaps in red with a shiny apple next to it—when we *hear* the sound ā. This association of sign and thing is also a reduction of sensation and experience to the visual. This reduction is especially evident in Western conceptions of time—as linear, as the face of a clock, as divisible into units. For an oral culture, words only exist in sound, not in the visual.

Third, writing "interiorizes" thought by making it private and solitary. "Oral communication," Ong maintains,

> unites people in groups. Writing and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself. A teacher speaking to a class which he feels and which feels itself as a close-knit group, finds that if the class is asked to pick up its textbooks and read a given passage, the unity of the group vanishes as each person enters into his or her private lifeworld. (69)

Ong argues that chirographic thought was the beginning of thinking that moves consciousness from the concrete and immediate to abstract analysis, that interiorizes and visualizes thought, and that isolates people from each other.

Moving from orality to the page means that, for the first time, we conceive of a text as separate from its enactment. Betsy Bowden (1982) analyses two performances of Bob Dylan's song "Hard Rain." When Dylan was asked in an interview if he could single out any album tracks of his that were particularly good, he asked: "As songs or as performances?" This distinction is impossible in primary orality: Songs only exist in their enactments, not on the page. Studying "Hard Rain" on the page is a slow, visual, and private process. Experiencing "Hard Rain" in performance is immediate, participatory, and communal.

Typographic Thought: Thinking through the Printed Page

Typographic thought is based on *print and the production of writing through mechanical means*. The invention of moveable type and the printing press, attributed to Johann Gutenberg in Mainz, Germany, around 1453, was a "cultural and intellectual revolution" (Shailor 1999, 9). Suddenly, the printing press, not human hands creating and copying manuscripts, was central to recording, storing, and disseminating information.

Many of the traditions we now associate with books began as imitations of handwritten manuscripts. The fonts that we recognize on the printed page and on the computer screen were originally designed to imitate handwritten models. Other conventions began as conveniences for typesetters—texts spaced in even columns, "justified" margins, even pagination, word spacing, and paragraph breaks were established by typesetters laying out pages. The printing press has even been credited for the "birth of the author" when title pages were included. Most works before the seventeenth century did not include an author's name.

The invention of print was central to the Renaissance in Europe. The Protestant Reformation has been linked to the dissemination and availability of Martin Luther's German translation of the Bible. For the first time, people could read the Bible themselves rather than rely on the Catholic Church to teach it. Scientific publications, especially from publishing houses in Holland, were disseminated across Europe. Standardization of scientific knowledge and method occurred in large part because of this new availability of scientific works. While both religious and scientific treatises had been written in Latin, suddenly books were published in vernacular languages. The decline of Latin and the rise of other languages in print democratized knowledge for literate people across Europe.

Shailor (1999) summarizes the impact of the "Gutenberg revolution":

> The rapid availability of books and the uniformity of their texts meant that more people could read books, that more people could converse with one another about their contents; printing contributed to the open access to knowledge and the more broadly based discussion of ideas, whether philosophical, literary, theological, or historical. (10)

Walter Ong extends Shailor's conclusions: Only through books could we become "text" centered. Ong argues that "print culture" not only creates texts— books, history, science, philosophy, even last wills and testaments—but also creates the assumptions and values we hold about texts.

First, a "print culture" creates the impression that a text is finished, closed, final on the page. (Anyone who has ever sent copy with a "typo" to a printer knows that Ong's point is, in a way, quite accurate.) Second, only in print culture did the Romantic ideals of "originality" and "creativity" evolve as linked to an author's capacity to create new texts on the page. And, third, only in print culture can a "textbook," a repository of facts, straightforward and memorizable, hold sway over

cultural knowledge formerly held only in bodies, learned through apprenticeships and hands-on participation. All of these assumptions about print will be central to "text-centered" approaches to performance.

READ MORE ABOUT IT

"Flock" by Billy Collins

Billy Collins was Poet Laureate of the United States from 2001 to 2003. "Flock" is from his collection The Trouble with Poetry and Other Poems *(2005, 35).*

> *It has been calculated that each copy of the*
> *Gutenburg Bible . . . required the skins of 300 sheep.*
>
> —from an article on printing

I can see them squeezed into the holding pen
behind the stone building
where the printing press is housed,

all of them squirming around
to find a little room
and looking so much alike

it would be nearly impossible
to count them,
and there is no telling

which one will carry the news
that the Lord is a shepherd,
one of the few things they already know.

SOURCE: From THE TROUBLE WITH POETRY AND OTHER POEMS by Billy Collins. Used by permission of Random House, Inc.

Electronic Thought: Thinking Textually through Orality

Even in 1982, Walter Ong anticipated new kinds of consciousness that he called "Post-typography: Electronics," or the *electronic transformation of verbal expression through television, radio, and sound recordings.* He calls this **secondary orality.** While these media once again put an emphasis on sound, immediacy, and oral expression, *secondary orality continues to be dependent on the page, relying on printed scripts* as their genesis. Electronic thought builds on primary orality: It has a "participation mystique," fosters a sense of community, and concentrates on the present moment.

When Collins reads "Flock" in an NPR interview, this is a wonderful example of secondary orality, for it relies on the printed poem for its enactment and immediacy.

Ong lists three ways that primary orality differs from the "new orality" of electronic communication. First, while secondary orality generates a "strong group sense," this group is much bigger than those in traditionally oral cultures. "Mass communication" puts its emphasis on numbers and distance. Millions of people across the world can experience a U.S. President's State of the Union address through television, radio, and the Internet.

Next, secondary orality encourages and values spontaneity—not because analysis through writing is unavailable, but simply because "we had decided that spontaneity is a good thing" (Ong 1982, 137). U.S. President Ronald Reagan is often called "The Great Communicator." His ability to perform manuscript speeches as if spontaneously created was at the heart of this label. President George W. Bush is notoriously bad at performing from manuscripts. His spontaneity too often creates "Bushisms," speech malapropisms that create a much different impression of him than Reagan.

Third, much of the expression in electronic forms of communication is self-consciously informal, especially compared with the "formality" we often expect of much writing and print. E-mail, instant messaging, text messaging, and leet are all new instances of orality's immediacy, participation, and community. The medium, however, is not sound, but text. This new text is a wonderfully innovative transformation of both sound and print. "L8 4 work?" the text message reads.

Research into the connections between secondary orality and performance are rich avenues to understand audiences, performers, and performance texts. Richard Bello (1997) explores Louisiana Voices, a neo-Chautauqua movement. While secondary orality emphasizes communication across large distances and "mass" audiences, these Chautauqua performances highlight immediacy of performer-audience interaction and enable local "truths" to be performed. True to Ong's sense of the spoken word, Louisiana Voices make "history come alive" (Bello 1997, 193).

Ong helps us recognize that the phrase "spoken word" in primary orality is a redundancy. There is no other kind of word. Only in a world of texts, print culture, and secondary orality do we make a distinction between "the spoken word" and "the written word."

CAUGHT LOOKING

"Turning the Pages" of Antiquity on the Computer Screen

The British Library Web site enables you to "turn the pages" of fifteen of the world's greatest books on the computer screen, to hear them read aloud, to magnify each page to study it, and to read or hear analysis of the importance of the text. Choose one of the great books to experience this way. Then explore each of Ong's categories—mnemonic, chirographic, typographic, and electronic—in relation to this book. Do Ong's claims make sense for your experience? Why or why not?

Interpreting the World as "Text"

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1980, 175) maintains, "When we speak, our utterances fly by as events like any other behavior; unless what we say is inscribed in writing (or some other established recording process), it is as evanescent as what we do." If we write our utterances down, however, we transform the *saying* into the *said.* The utterance becomes a text that allows "its meaning to persist in a way its actuality cannot."

Geertz argues that looking at all social phenomena *as text* allows us to focus on how we create and fix meaning in actions:

> 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 socio-logical interpretation. To see social institutions, social customs, social changes as in some sense "readable" is to alter our whole sense of what such interpretation is toward modes of thought. . . . (175–76)

Looking at the world as a text we can "read" enables "interpretative explanation" (167). Literary criticism, or interpretative explanations of the value and meaning of texts, is an important model for exploring the world as text.

How Are We Taught to Read Texts?

Most of us were taught to read, understand, and explore literature—poems, short stories, plays, and novels—in high school English classes. And most of us can remember the central concepts for that exploration: metaphor, paradox, irony, tension, and symbolism. The school of literary criticism that introduced these concepts in literary study was called "New Criticism."

This approach to literature bloomed and thrived as the premiere way of studying literary texts from the 1930s to the 1970s in the United States. Many generations of Americans grew to love (and to hate) poetry in English classrooms because of a textbook written by two influential New Critics, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students* was first published in 1938 and stayed in print for forty years. Robert Scholes (2001, 2) argues that "poetry anxiety" is as real and as important as "math anxiety" and was caused in large part by how the New Critics taught us to read poetry.

Kristin B. Valentine (1983, 549–50) posits that New Criticism was a reaction against the reigning critical approaches of the day. Literature was studied as biography of the writer, or history of the times, or a lens for audience analysis through Marxist, humanist, or anti-bourgeois criticism. Valentine claims that the New Critics "wanted to concentrate on the substance of literature rather than its intent or effect" (550).

How did New Criticism "concentrate on the substance of literature?" And what was "new" about this way of studying literature? First, New Criticism separated the

poem from the poet, the world, and the reader, arguing that *the poem* is the autonomous object for study and interpretation. This approach maintains that a poem is a self-enclosed, organic unity—a world onto itself—available only through close reading and analysis of its arrangement, forms, and language devices. Second, New Criticism argued that poetic language is different from "ordinary" language, especially scientific language. If scientific language is denotative, then poetic language is connotative. It is densely layered, purposefully ambiguous, rife with tensions that create intrinsic pushes and pulls, and anchored in paradoxes of meaning that are dynamic yet unified. Third, the New Critics maintained that no single meaning is possible in poetry, but instead that poetic language engenders multiple meanings achieved through paradox and its reconciliation in the text.

New Criticism attempted to make textual criticism a rigorous and systematic study. While a text holds many meanings, the route to those meanings was carefully policed. Here are three critical "mistakes" readers make in the eyes of the New Critics. W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley (1946) coined the phrase the **intentional fallacy** to argue against importing information from outside the poem. Information about the poet's life or times or personality was extraneous to the enclosed world of the poem on the page. For Wimsatt and Beardsley, the intention of the author is not a desirable standard for evaluating the success of a poem.

W. K. Wimsatt, in *The Verbal Icon* (1954), coined the phrase the **affective fallacy** to describe a different kind of importation: judging the success of a poem based on the emotional response of the reader. Wimsatt maintains that this emotional relativism—the fact that the same poem can move readers in different ways—leads to critical trouble. Instead, the critic's job is to recover the publicly accessible world contained in the poem, not his or her idiosyncratic response to it.

Cleanth Brooks argues that good poems are not paraphrasable, nor are they reducible to summaries of their themes. No other words can substitute for the words of the poem, their careful construction, their internal dynamics and tensions. Brooks calls this the **heresy of paraphrase**. Brooks (1947, 67) writes, "The poem communicates so much and communicates it so richly and with such delicate qualifications that the thing communicated is mauled and distorted if we attempt to convey it by any vehicle less subtle than that of the poem itself."

READ MORE ABOUT IT

I Need Help Fast!

Robert Scholes (2001, 23–24) surveyed online high school bulletin boards for the kinds of questions students posted regarding their assignments in English classes. Students wanted help finding the symbolism of the river in Huckleberry Finn, sexual symbols in gardens, and any symbolism in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily." Theme, tone, and irony were other major categories that baffled students. Here is Scholes' example of one question and his plea that we teach literature in ways other than searches for "irony."

Subject: Oedipus Rex—Irony

I need help finding Irony in Oedipus Rex! There's supposedly a lot in there, but I've been assigned Scene II and there's only so much. . . .

What a terrible thing it is to be required to find irony in *Oedipus Rex,* knowing that there's "a lot in there," and then be given a scene that got short-changed on this precious stuff. It is, one might almost say, ironic. Now this is a play about how a scandal in a ruler's private life is causing public disasters—like a plague, for instance. You might think that questions about the relation between sex and politics, between private and public life, would have a certain resonance in these times. Questions about justice, guilt, responsibility, sexual desire, and family life are raised by the play. But "irony" is a safe topic, a "literary" topic, one of those topics that seems to belong only to the artificial world of "English classes," where we English teachers feel at home. My point is that, by playing it "safe," we are losing the game. The great works of literature are worthy of our attention only if they speak to our concerns as human beings, and these must take precedence over the artificial concerns of symbol, tone, and irony. Symbol, tone, and irony, after all, are only devices, or ways of talking about technique. We need, and shall have to find, better ways of talking about what these works mean and how they connect to our lives.

The Science of Criticism and the Art of Oral Interpretation

New Criticism was extremely influential for departing from the study of literature as biography or history and for turning to the text as an object of study. New Criticism encouraged close reading by an "objective" reader and gave us a vocabulary for the work of literary analysis—taking a text apart to study its parts.

This approach may sound scientific, and, in a way, it was. Northrup Frye, in his book *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), argues for a true "science" of literary criticism. While both science and literature seek to name the world in accurate ways, the wisdom gained through science and literature are different. Don Geiger (1950, 513) argues that $E = mc^2$ is an accurate naming and meaningful for a wise scientist, "but this name alone does not satisfy the search for wisdom that asks, 'What does $E = mc^2$ demand of me?'"

In college speech classrooms throughout the United States from 1940 to 1970, the tenets of New Criticism dovetailed with the methods of oral interpretation of literature. Valentine (1983, 557) summarizes their convergence: The study of literature is the focus, not the performer's training in technique; an oral reading of the poem is the end product, not paraphrase or précis; and methods of analysis are intrinsic, not biographical or historical. Scholars of oral interpretation differed in their approaches to literary texts. Jill Taft-Kaufman (1985) offers three emphases in textual study through performance: the drama of the poem created through attitudes; the experience of oral performance as more "genuine" than a silent reading; and the restoration of the links between Aristotle's rhetoric and poetics.

Don Geiger (1950) maintains that literature is a complex of attitudes; the interpreter's job is discover those attitudes through close analysis and to communicate

those attitudes to an audience in an oral reading. Wallace Bacon and Robert Breen (1959, 9) draw connections between literary experience and life experience: "a writer fashions a work of art which reveals his discoveries about life, and a reader tests the value of those discoveries by a kind of sympathetic and critical imitation of the actions and reactions found in the writer's work." Thomas Sloan (1967, 91) returns to Aristotelian connections between rhetoric and poetics to "negotiate a union between New Critics who see literature as aestheticians . . . and rhetoricians who see literature as transactional gesture—communicative shaping of an experience."

Unlike the literary critic whose end product is *an essay about a poem,* the oral interpreter's end product is a *performance of the poem* that returns presence, immediacy, interaction, and—most important—body to the text. Wallace Bacon (1966, v) maintained that "the *presence* of literature is the distinct task of the interpreter. . . . [Interpretation] is seen, furthermore, as carrying out the primary need of literature to be experienced, not simply analyzed." Literary analysis is part of the process, and the performance itself is a kind of "proof" of those analytical discoveries. Echoes of the science of literary criticism appear in the claim that the oral interpreter "actually tests the attitudes and actions of the work by acting them out, matching words with physical responses" (Sloan and Maclay 1972, 7).

The New Critics never were a unified group or had a single agenda (Valentine 1983), but attacks on their ways of studying literature were common. The most frequent attack, especially from students, was that this way of studying literature effectively killed any pleasure for the reader and forced painful dissection of a poem in a search for "deep" meanings. American poet Archibald MacLeish wrote a poem about this discontent, entitled "Ars Poetica," or the Art of Poetry. The famous last two lines, "A poem should not mean / but be," encapsulated this sentiment. Fortunately, oral interpretation was one effective and pleasurable method to let a poem "be."

All the World's a Text: To Infinity and Beyond

New Criticism ushered in close reading of literary texts. Structuralism, a worldwide movement across many academic disciplines, sought to engage in "close reading" of much more than literature. The basic tenet of this critical orientation is that there are fundamental, underlying structures operating in all language, culture, and society. These structures, once postulated, can be "read" and interpreted for how meaning is constructed by and for individuals and societies.

Structuralism grew out of borrowed concepts from linguistics, beginning with the concept of a deep structure, or grammar, that gives rise to particular ways of speaking. Ferdinand de Saussure (1959/1966) called these *langue* (the rules of grammar) and *parole* (the spoken manifestation of those rules). Saussure called his approach to linguistics **semiology**, or the study of signs. He approached language as a binary system composed of two concepts: the signifier (or sound image that is heard or imagined when read) and signified (the concept or meaning that we build

on and through that image). So bathroom doors are marked by signifiers, iconic figures of male and female, that signify concepts of gender, imaginary constructs of male and female, and values attributed by, understood, and agreed to by the community that uses them. Many restaurants play with bathroom signifiers, asking you to guess the signified: In a seafood restaurant, are you a buoy? a gull?

SOURCE: Photograph by Jaclyn Lannon. Copyright © 2007 by Jaclyn Lannon.

French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1976) turned the "study of man" into the study of symbolic structures that organize and create meaning in social life. From the concept in structural linguistics, Levi-Strauss theorized that all cultures, like language, have a "deep structure" or grammar. Levi-Strauss (1969) argued that kinship could be studied to discover its underlying "rules" in each culture.

Kinship is a theoretical concept—whether a theory based on genetics, biology, nature, or association—that is practiced differently according to different cultural rules. Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon (2001, 2) note that kinship theory and practice is changing because of reproductive technologies, international adoptions, genetic screening, and "families of choice." The deep structure kinship rule for many Western cultures, "blood is thicker than water," is at question because of these changing practices.

Roland Barthes (1988), French philosopher, semiotician, and structuralist, married the concepts of structural linguistics and structural anthropology to study the "mythologies" of bourgeois culture and consumerism, treating everything—wine, food, clothing, and literature—as signifiers that become signified as cultural myths with powerful sway over bourgeois audiences. When Barthes analyzed literary texts, photographs, and advertising, he went beyond literary analysis:

> I mean by literature neither a body nor a series of works, nor even a branch of commerce or of teaching, but the complex graph of the traces of a practice, the practice of writing. Hence, it is essentially the text with which I am concerned—the fabric of signifiers which constitute the work. (1982, 462)

Susan Hayward explains Barthes' two orders of signification, denotation and connotation, which in turn produce a third: ideology. Hayward (1996, 310) uses the example of a photograph of Marilyn Monroe:

> At the denotative level this is a photograph of the movie star. . . . At a connotative level we associate this photograph with Marilyn Monroe's star qualities of glamour, sexuality, beauty. . . . At a mythic level we understand this sign as activating the myth of Hollywood: the dream factory that produces glamour in the form of the stars it constructs, but also the dream machine that can crush them—all with a view to profit and expediency.

The Hollywood myth is a good example of a "fabric of signifiers" that folds into and across American culture as something to be both sought after and avoided at all costs: glamour, power, money, but also decadence, destruction, and decay.

Looking at culture through the linguistic lens of language to analyze its structures, binaries, and operations is a twentieth-century phenomenon. M. H. Abrams (1979) argues that New Criticism of the mid- twentieth century birthed "The Age of Criticism," and that structuralism of the 1960s ushered in "The Age of Reading." Abrams claims we no longer engage "a work of literature but a text, writing, *ecriture.*" As a critical orientation, structuralism was killed—for the most part—by Jacques Derrida, but text-centered approaches to the world continue on. Hazard Adams writes,

> The term "text" came to include all cultural systems as if they were languages or made up of languages. The triumph of the linguistic world may be marked by the sudden ubiquity of "text" and the treatment of everything as if it were linguistic. Perhaps the phrase that most fully expresses this situation is Jacques Derrida's "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte," which is probably best translated as "There is no outside-the-text." (1990, 7)

Elinor Fuchs (1985, 173) features Derrida's pun in the phrase, "meaning both that there is nothing outside the text, but also that the text has no outside." In short, there is no way of understanding human knowledge that is not text—written, spoken, thought, created, manifested in discourse.

SOURCE: Photograph by Jon Cancelino. Copyright © 2007 by Jon Cancelino.

READ MORE ABOUT IT

Embodying Iconic Mythologies

Mimi Swartz (2007, 122–25, 284*) followed Anna Nicole Smith's career for more than a decade, from tracing her upbringing in Mexia, Texas; to her famous court battle for the rights to her husband's estate; to her death in the Bahamas in 2007. Swartz captures the powerful mythologies operating in Smith's rise and fall and the nuances of denotation, connotation, and ideology in reading Smith's tabloid life as text.*

When her mother emerged from obscurity to discuss her death on "Good Morning America," she shared Anna Nicole's explanation for exaggerating her small-town past. "Mom," her daughter had told her, "nobody wants to read books or see people on TV concerning, you know, 'Middle-class girl found a rich millionaire and married him.' There's not a story in that. The story is, I come from rags to riches, and so that's what I'm going to tell."

It was an easy sell. Anyone who's ever driven up Interstate 45 and passed the Mexia exit can think they know all they need to about Anna Nicole's history. . . .

Her youthful, abundant beauty from that time continues to startle. Anna Nicole could convey both purity and sophistication; she was innocence in a plunging bustier, on satin sheets, in a hay field, on the beach. Not coincidentally, her career took off at a time when the country's divide between rich and poor was widening and the price of blue jeans became an odd if critical marker. The owners of Guess, the Marciano brothers, followed a trail blazed by former socialite Gloria Vanderbilt and transformed denim from a proletarian uniform to something aspirational. Their sexy black and white ads worked a little like hip Rorschach tests—you could spend a lot of time trying to decide whether the young, hot, beautiful types pictured had just done it or were about to do it—and so created a compelling link between casual clothes, casual sex, and casual glamour. In front of the camera, Anna Nicole embodied it all effortlessly. . . .

From the moment Anna Nicole got famous, she told the world that her role model was Marilyn Monroe. It was a shrewd move, as it linked her image with one of the greatest American icons of all time, and it had a neat logic: one platinum-haired sex symbol taking after another, one poor, deprived child latching onto the success of another. But Anna Nicole couldn't keep up the act to ensure icon status of her own. Monroe had talent, but Anna Nicole's gifts were limited—she was just beautiful, and she never had any sense of how to operate in the world. She had bad manners, she was impulsive, she lied, and she was fiercely derivative. . . . Even then, Anna Nicole couldn't fathom that anyone would want her unless she was pretending to be somebody else. From the beginning, she was always trying too hard.

Monroe was probably just as needy and just as self-destructive, but all that time spent at the Actors Studio and in psychoanalysis gave her insight into herself and her culture: She saw herself as a modern-day Aphrodite, someone who could rescue the populace from the sexual constraints of the fifties and early

(Continued)

> sixties. As James Hollis, the executive director of the C. J. Jung Educational Center, in Houston, told me, "She conceived that her role in life was to embody, represent, and channel that missing, exuberant sexual energy." Carrying that burden tends to take its toll—the authentic self has to take a backseat to perpetuating the dreams and fantasies of the public—and Anna Nicole, "an imitation of an imitation," in Hollis's words, had it a lot worse than Monroe. By the time she became a celebrity, in the early nineties, most people didn't need to be cured of their sexual inhibitions. They could watch music videos (now we have Fergie in her Girl Scout uniform), learn bedroom fashion tips from Victoria's Secret models, and enjoy 24/7 access to porn on cable and the Internet. When Anna Nicole showed up on the ubiquitous red carpets stoned, bloated, and bursting out of her clothes, she was nothing more than the embodiment of a supersexualized, celebrity-besotted culture: Aphrodite as a drunken, drug-addled slut. No wonder people turned away.
>
> Despite suffering horribly—growing up deprived, struggling with all sorts of addictions, losing a child—she was incapable of generating sympathy. She was either too needy (even she made jokes about her appetites) or too enchanted with the surface of things (playing at being Monroe, for example), always both too near and too far from everybody else. In the end, there was nothing for the public to connect with except her slow, determined decline, and since no one much wanted to be party to that, Anna Nicole became a reliable punch line instead. She died as she had lived: as a bit of tabloid ephemera, sandwiched between a diapered, love-crazed astronaut and Britney Spears's new skinhead do. That's where Anna Nicole must have really believed she belonged; it just took her a lifetime to convince the rest of us she was right.
>
> SOURCE: Mimi Swartz, "Punch Line," reprinted with permission of *Texas Monthly*.

When Text Meets Performance

Lynn Miller, a performance scholar in communication, claims (1998, 53), "A text is something created, something made, *text*ures are found in woven fabrics, texts are words, ideas, woven together. A family, a performance—whether of a personal narrative, a poem, a dance, a cultural ritual, or of our own bodies—all are texts that we can study, that we *do* study."

From the creation of texts in human knowledge production to the deconstruction of texts in contemporary critical theory, the study of texts is central to much performance theory. Text meets performance in different ways in different academic disciplines. For theatre practitioners and theorists, a text is a play script. For musicians, a text is a musical score. For literary critics, texts are poems, short stories, novels, and essays. For software designers, a text is a string of binary code composed in a computer language. For an architect, a text is a blueprint.

In all of these uses of the word "text," these representations on the page or screen are **enabling pre-texts** (Strine, Long, and HopKins 1990, 184). That is, a play

script, a musical score, a poem, or a blueprint is a *guide or set of directions for the performer.* Paul Gray (1996, 107) summarizes well the assumptions of conceiving of texts as enabling for performance: "to start with nothing but black marks on a page and out of that silence to conjure everything—a voice, a listener, an author, a world." Even a poem is a set of directions for the reader, as she performs the poem in her head. Not all these texts are readily understandable on the page. Most of us don't know HTML code, and many of us can't "read" music or an architect's blueprint. So, every text is a set of codes or conventions that must be learned to be understood.

Still other texts can be considered **enabled post-texts** (Strine, Long, and HopKins 1990, 184), or representations of a *performance that are written down after the fact.* These post-texts are ways to capture and to store a performance in order to study it more carefully. Examples abound in many disciplines concerned with communication: Folklorists record performances of verbal art they collect in the field. Conversational analysts transcribe ordinary talk. Narrative theorists record family stories told around the dinner table. Oral historians interview people about their lives and create texts from the transcriptions.

If pre-texts go *from text to performance,* then post-texts take the opposite direction: *from performance to texts.* While this diagram (see Figure 3.1) treats the relationship between texts and performance as clear, linear, and productive, the relationship is much messier. How do performances developed through improvisational techniques fit into this diagram? Dance choreography is a good example of performance that can be based on pre-text (dance notions written down and used to guide the performance), improvisation (dance is created in the moment in and through bodies), or post-text (the performance is coded and recorded after the performance).

Strine, Long, and HopKins' characterization of pre- and post-texts is helpful for the study of performance that is text-driven and text-centered, especially in academic fields that study texts to explore their meanings, to preserve their effervescence, and to posit their worth as aesthetic, communicative, and cultural artifacts. But there are other "texts" that instigate performance in myriad cultural forms. For those, performance theorist Richard Schechner provides helpful guidelines and categories for text in performance.
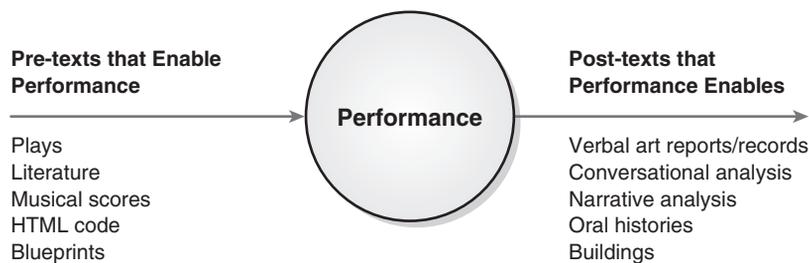

Pre-texts that Enable Performance	Performance	Post-texts that Performance Enables
Plays		Verbal art reports/records
Literature		Conversational analysis
Musical scores		Narrative analysis
HTML code		Oral histories
Blueprints		Buildings

Figure 3.1   Pre-texts and Post-texts

Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance

Richard Schechner accounts for a range of "doings," actions, gestures, and their executions—rituals, rites, stage plays, improvisations, dances, singing—across the world. Schechner conceives of this range of activities in a series of fuzzy, concentric circles that are often not discreet from each other. The innermost circle in Schechner's (1988a) schema is the **drama**. The drama does not require an expert to teach it but is independent of its production. This can be "a written text, score, scenario, instruction, plan, or map" (72). "The drama is what the writer writes" (85). "Drama is the domain of the author, composer, scenarist, shaman" (71).

Taking the Academy Awards broadcast as an example, the drama is the written outline for the show created by the producers, mapping out the order and timing of the awards, musical interludes, and prerecorded clips. Many other dramas—speeches, lists of nominees, testimonials—happen within the producer's map of the Awards.

Schechner is careful to characterize script, the next concentric circle, not as "text"—something always written—but as **script,** "something that pre-exists any given enactment, which persists from enactment to enactment" (70). Scripts are important for determining "the overall flow of events" (87). The script requires someone to teach it to others; it is *the domain of the teacher, guru, master* (71). Schechner distinguishes between tight and loose scripts. A *tight* script is carefully constructed, often written down, and followed more or less precisely.

When an award recipient pulls an acceptance speech from his tuxedo jacket pocket and reads it aloud, he is working with a tight script. When the director calls camera shots during this speech, he is working with a loose script that follows "an overall pattern consisting of accepted sequences of events" (87). Reaction shots of producers, cast members, and family are interspersed with shots of the award winner.

Theatre is the "specific set of gestures performed by the performers in any given performance" (85) and "what the performers actually do during the production" (72). Theatre is *the domain of the performers* and is "concrete and immediate." The performers at the Academy Awards ceremony make entrances and exits, give speeches, read from cue cards, sing, dance, laugh, cry, hug, and kiss, to name just a few of their concrete and immediate actions.

The outermost circle, encompassing all the others, Schechner labels **performance**: "the whole constellation of events," involving performers, audience, technicians—"anyone who is there" (85). The red-carpet interviews before the show, the jostling of paparazzi, the green-room interviews during and after the Awards, even the post-show parties are now established parts of the televised performance. Performance is *the domain of the audience,* Schechner maintains, for their arrival and departure begin and end the performance.

Schechner's categories are valuable for conceiving of performances that have no written "text" but are developed in and through improvisation, plans, action in flow, and repeated enactments. Moreover, his largest, most encompassing circle is performance with its accumulating dynamics.

Going Around in Circles

Choose one of the performances below to analyze in terms of Schechner's categories. Remember, not all of these events will include drama, scripts, or theatre; and the events will be different according to whether you are a central performer, an audience member, or a combination of both.

A telephone greeting at your workplace
A wedding reception
A quinceañera
A college class
A political rally
A church, mosque, or synagogue service
Thanksgiving dinner
YouTube
A Step Show
Dungeons & Dragons

Assumptions about Texts: Canon, Textuality, and Materiality

Basing his work on the writings of Roland Barthes, W. B. Worthen (1995, 13) lists three uses of the word "text" in performance theory: (1) a text is a canonical vehicle of authorial power and tradition; (2) a text is play in an open field of textuality; and (3) a text is a material object, the text in hand. Each use of the term has important implications for performance practices and textual interpretations.

Canonical Vehicle of Authority: You Know Why I Pulled You Over

For a text to be **canonical**, it is *recognized and accepted by experts as a worthwhile, important, and established part of a genre,* or canon of great works. Canons are established by cultural authorities (scholars, judges, church officials, scientists). Shakespeare's plays, for example, are an established part of the canon of great plays. In this use of the term "text," much scholarly debate revolves around the playwright's authority to determine meaning. This text is assumed to hold and to reveal the secrets of the author. Worthen (1995, 16) notes that it is this use of the word "text" that creates debates about specific performances. When is a production of Shakespeare not "faithful" to the original? In this use of "text," the work is "closed, fixed, single," a manifestation of one author's creative vision that is not to be tampered with.

The "canon wars" reinvent themselves every couple of decades. In the 1960s and 70s, feminists argued that the canon excluded women—as writers, artists, scientists,

clergy, and political and social leaders. Tillie Olsen (1978) rightfully and accurately argued that for every twelve men in a literary anthology, only one woman appeared. "One in twelve" became a "watchword" for this exclusion across the academy. In the late 1980s, the "canon wars" involved cultural literacy: What great texts ought to be known to all members of Western culture? And how is cultural literacy about whiteness, middle-classness, and reading and writing?

If the canon wars seem particularly academic, then it is also important to note that claims to canonical authority through texts have "truth effects"—real-world implications for all of us. Your driver's license makes certain textual claims about you: your appearance, your age, your gender, your eyesight and physical abilities. If you are pulled over, then you are accountable for performing, before an officer of the law, the "truths" made in these claims. Tax codes, laws and ordinances, Supreme Court decisions are all canonical texts with truth effects: They shut down meaning in and through their "official" interpretations.

Wole Soyinka is a Nigerian playwright, poet, novelist, and director who won the Nobel prize for literature in 1986. Soyinka compares oral and written cultures for their differing attitudes toward violations of sacred textual authority:

> I know of no example in oral culture that prescribes a mandatory capital punishment for a real or imagined crime against a divine text. . . . Christianity and Islam appear to be the most vulnerable to such destructive traits. Maybe it is time we devoted some serious global attention to why, throughout the ages, the mere materialization, on perishable parchment or paper, even stone, of some immutably determined word, evokes such mortal and primitive passions. It all centers on power and domination, of course, of which the written word is mystic weapon, the magic amulet of terrestrially ambitious priesthood. (1995, 76–77)

"Canon" is a contested term and place: It is a repository and evaluation of great individual and cultural endeavors, and it holds the potential for harm and violence.

Make a List

Who's the Shakespeare in Your Canon?

Faculty members at the University of Alberta were asked to name their culture's "Shakespeare"—the canonical author in their culture. Faculty listed Matsuo Bashô, Taras Shevchenko, Miguel de Cervantes y Saavedra, Cao Xueqin, Hafiz, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Taha Hussein, Rabindranath Thakur, and Dante Alighieri.

Visit Geoff McMaster's (2003) article "Who's Your Shakespeare?" online to read more about these writers. Then make a list of the reasons given for the exalted status of these authors and their works.

With that list of exemplary qualities, make a case for your "Shakespeare" for the canons of popular music, television, movies, and video games. How might a canon war and "truth effects" play out in the classroom debate?

Textuality: Play, Production, and Practice

Textuality plays with the notion of writing itself—its conventions, its histories, and its interplay with other works in the canon—challenging anyone's claim to author-ity and enforcement. In this use, texts are open fields, a place of "play, activity, pro-duction, and practice." Painting a mustache on the image of the Mona Lisa is playful textuality: It requires our knowledge of the canon of great art, as well as a knowledge of the history of conventions of poking fun at any portrait.

All texts exist in a discursive field composed of other texts; all texts assume a relationship to those other texts. Poems, for example, are always written in light of the history and conventions of other poems. Poet Richard Howard (Rodden 1995, 237) claims of many students studying poetry in the classroom, "They enter poetry as if it were an empty, silent room. Whereas it's really an echo chamber filled with countless voices."

Examples of playful intertextuality in the media are all around us. Brian Ott and Cameron Walter (2000) detail examples of parody, appropriation, and self-reflexivity in film, music, and television and on the Internet. They explore parody in Mel Brooks' horror films; cultural critique and self-awareness in the Gangsta rap of Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G.; television shows like "South Park" and "The Family Guy" that reference and re-create moments from other shows and popular culture; and texts that invite insider knowledge and commentary on Internet fan sites.

Elinor Fuchs (1985, 166–7) argues that "textuality" in the theatre "has emerged in a number of new roles, as character, as theme, as setting, and as a virtually independent theatrical constituent to be set beside Aristotle's six elements." Fuchs lists a number of ways that "texts" are coming to replace "presence" as *the* consti-tutive element of performance: performances made up of montages of other texts—criticism, novels, plays, theory; characters labeled as "the reader" or "the translator"; actors who "read" in monotone texts onstage; amateurs cast instead of professional actors who tend to "contaminate the performance with the enlarged personal 'presence' of the professional"; and images of writing as set pieces. Fuchs' description of two performances of Stuart Sherman's are worth detailing:

> The back wall of his 18-minute silent *Hamlet* was decorated with pages from Shakespeare's text, cut and pasted into dagger-like patterns. The character Hamlet was played by five actors carrying copies of *Hamlet.* The central design element of his 1985 *Chekhov* was a grove of two-dimensional cherry trees con-structed from blow-ups of pages from Chekhov's plays. Other pieces of set fur-niture were covered with text as well, and two stage hands in black sat at either side of the stage reading Chekhov's plays. To a background of recorded lines from the plays, the actors performed silent gestures. One's attention flickered choicelessly from the gestures to recorded sound to the text on the stage objects. At the climactic moment of the piece, the grove of text trees toppled over and we were left for a moment to contemplate the stage, and by extension the world, stripped of text. (170–71)

Fuchs' examples put textuality—play with words, print, reading, writing, and dis-course—in the middle of contemporary theatre practice that challenges canonical authority to dictate the "correct" interpretation of Shakespeare or Chekhov.

ACT OUT

When "Flock" Meets Performance

Create a solo performance of Billy Collins' poem "Flock" that features textuality—something the poem clearly comments on with great poignancy. Across the range of performances in the classroom, what features of textuality and its pro-duction are highlighted in the performance?

Materiality: Can You Hold It in Your Hand?

The **text in hand**, or the object we can hold, is a third way to conceive of text: the book, the poem on the page, the blueprint. A playscript used in rehearsal is a par-ticularly solid example. But playscripts go through many, many versions. Worthen (1995, 18) notes these different kinds of texts of the same play: "a preproduction text, a text published in conjunction with the premiere, subsequent editions pub-lished after later productions, texts incorporating revisions which may or may not have been made directly by the author, collected editions, acting editions."

Even though we may have faith in what we can touch, see, and read, and the materiality of something we can hold, the text in hand is both invested with canon-ical authority and an opportunity for open, playful textuality. Playwright Richard Foreman offers an invitation to directors to play with language in his plays even as he invokes limits. He writes,

> Take a text such as any of the ones in *Unbalancing Acts.* Start by erasing all stage directions. Then erase ALL INDICATIONS OF WHO SPEAKS WHICH LINE. Re-distribute the lines among the actors, inventing additional or fewer characters than I used in my own productions. Change the sex of the actors. Feel free to combine, for instance, three lines of dialog, spoken back and forth between two performers, into one speech spoken by one actor. Or vice versa. The only thing I would insist is that lines should not be re-ordered sequen-tially. Aside from that—cut, repeat, do as you will. But imagine a REAL and COMPLEX world in which such a newly freed language takes place. (Foreman 1994, 39)

Not many playwrights are this generous about changing their plays.

Interestingly, when the *playwright* gives this permission, all three uses of the word "text" are implicated. Canonical vehicle assumes the author's vested power and authority to license play and to stop it. Playful textuality is evident in the

author's invitation to directors to "free" the language of the play. And the text in hand—a product purchased from a publishing house—is challenged as well. Richard Schechner asked Foreman, "Why don't you offer the first ten university productions royalty free?" And he did.

The "text in hand" features materiality—not just a page of script, but the hand that holds that text. Bodies are the material that make texts happen in the doing of performance. Immediacy, presence, and embodiment constitute the text in hand.

GO FIGURE

Which Text Is This?

Choose one text from the list below. Make an argument for how this text is canonical. What is the canon? What are the canon's conventions? How is this text an authority that shuts down interpretations?

Then make a second argument for how this same text is an open, playful field. How does it reference, revise, and rework other texts?

Then make a third argument for this text in hand. What is this text made out of? How is it material? Words, fabric, digital code, images? Are these texts stable? Variable? And why?

A sampled song

A basketball uniform

A Web site

A fairy tale

Spam e-mail

A restaurant menu

An instruction manual

A board game

A Web blog

A video game

A love letter

A tattoo

Interpreting Texts

Are texts fixed in stone? Are they open to a variety of interpretations in performance? Is there a limit to "anything goes"? Beverly Whitaker Long (1977)

provides a taxonomy of textual interpretation that is very helpful for under-standing the elasticity and boundaries of literary texts and their multilayered meanings. Long claims that questions about textual meaning can be answered in four ways: all texts include (1) **certainties** (specific, definite, or known facts in the words on the page); (2) **probabilities** ("weighted likelihoods" given on the page); (3) **possibilities** (inferences based on hints or clues provided by the words on the page); and (4) **distortions** (deliberate negations or misrepresentations of the words on the page).

These categories are particularly revealing when applied to musical scores as texts. Marc Geelhoed (2006) writes of three different performances of the same Mozart sonata. Each pianist is true to the certainties of the notes in the musical score. The probabilities and possibilities in performing Mozart are endless; dura-tion, stress, and tempo vary widely. Notably, none of these pianists distort the text by leaving out notes or substituting others.

Long's taxonomy is a valuable one for its vocabulary of performance choices with literary texts. The notion of certainties in texts creates a kind of obligation to the words on the page and reveals a critical faith in the existence of commonalities of meaning among all readers. Probabilities and possibilities are inferences that performers have license to make and allow for a range of differences across readers. Distortions reveal the boundaries of interpretation and the politics of the cate-gories: One person's distortion may be another's possibility. Whether we perform texts *within* or *outside* these boundaries, however, all are commentaries on textual politics, power, and authority.

SOURCE: Photograph by Jaclyn Lannon. Copyright © 2007 by Jaclyn Lannon.

THEORY MEETS WORLD

"You Mean, We *Shouldn't* Do That"

Michael S. Bowman, in "Performing Literature in an Age of Textuality" (1996), writes of two very different performances of the same text, Kahlil Gibran's The Prophet. *Published originally in Arabic and translated into English in 1923, this book is a collection of 26 essays, or meditations, of the Lebanese-born writer. It garnered much popular attention and fame among members of the U.S. counterculture in the 1960s. Its literary worth, especially in light of New Critical tenets, is debatable. Bowman relates that one student loved the book and wanted to perform from it; a second student, who hated it, promised she was "going to do something different with it." Bowman describes the two performances.*

As it happened, both women were scheduled to give their performances of *The Prophet* on the same day of class. When I arrived that day, the first student, the one who loved the book, had everything set up for her performance. She had come to class fully costumed in a kind of harem outfit—pants, halter-top, and veil—and had taken the trouble to transcribe her text onto some old, parchment-like material in what appeared to be a form of calligraphy. She burned incense. She was on big pillows. She read the words of *The Prophet* in prophetic tones. There was not the faintest whiff of irony to perturb the performance's effluvium of earnestness. . . .

. . . the other student who was to perform *The Prophet* entered the room (she had excused herself earlier). She, too, came fully costumed: a skimpy, skin-tight, backless, red minidress; black fishnet stockings; a five-inch spiked heel on one foot, its broken mate on the other; heavy, grotesque makeup; a fifty dollar bill protruding from her cleavage; and a paper bag with a whiskey bottle in it in one hand. The first words out of her mouth were, "What a fucking night!" (in a heavy Brooklyn accent). She took off her broken heel, threw it in the trash can; grabbed the bottle out of the bag and started chugging the "whiskey." Then she began her monologue.

She told us in fairly graphic but not in the least sensational terms about her "dates" that evening; about her relationship with her "old man"; about the various men she had known in her life. Then she related that on her way home, she had passed by a street corner where a "religious nut" had set up a crate and was preaching to the passers-by. A few were gathered around listening, a few were heckling him, most were ignoring him. She stopped for a laugh, she told us, and learned that this fellow, who called himself "The Prophet," was talking about love. "What do I need this shit for?" she asked. But as she started to leave, he said something that made an impression on her. "Here, I wrote it down," she said. She picked up her paper bag and read a couple of distinctive lines from *The Prophet.* Then she began to interpret those lines for us from the perspective of the character she had created, to translate them into the character's own vernacular. She did the same with a few more passages from the text, each time becoming a little more wrapped-up in the text and its sentimentality, though she tried to hold on to her cynical, hard-bitten persona. Finally, she "caught" herself before giving in wholly to the sentiments of *The Prophet,* pulled herself together, crumpled the paper bag, and tossed it into the trashcan. End of performance.

(Continued)

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> During the discussion that followed, the class would hardly let me speak. For the most part, the students' comments sought to work through the contradictions we had just experienced: how could the "good" performance, the one that came closest to matching the speaker-in-the-text, have been "bad"; how could the "bad" performance, the one that ignored the text's dramatic speaker in favor of articulating an external point of view on the text, have been "good"? Some students felt that the first performance was the "right" one, and that the second performance was illegitimate, even though most claimed they preferred it. "We just can't do that!" I recall one student insisting. Before I could respond, another student jumped in with, "You mean, we *shouldn't* do that; obviously, it *can* be done."
>
> SOURCE: From "Performing Literature in an Age of Textuality" by Michael S. Bowman. *Communication Education* 1996. Reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd. http://www.informaworld.com.

ACT OUT

Your Poetic License Is Issued!

Choose a small portion of any "Read More About It" box in this book and create four one-minute group performances using Long's categories of certainties, probabilities, possibilities, and distortions. Starting with the "certainties" performance and moving to the "distortions" performance, how did the text drive each performance? How can you evaluate each performance in relation to the text, the audience, and the performers?

Text Versus Performance

The relationship between a text and its performance is often characterized as a dialectical, even antagonistic, one. Are written works of art—plays, poems, short stories—best left on the page? If not, why not? Marvin Carlson (1985) discusses the relationship between play scripts and theatrical performance in the history of Western theatre. In the Romantic period, performances were conceived as **illustrations** of texts, especially for audiences who couldn't read or write. In this relationship between performance and text, the text is clearly the superior, authoritative version; "a staging may add to the attractiveness of a play but not to its essence" (6). In the early nineteenth century, performance was conceived as a **translation** of a text, but this translation was necessarily inferior to the original written version. Also in the early nineteenth century, performances were conceived as **fulfillments** of texts. In this sense, performances are creative and artistic completions of scripts by actors, directors, and designers. And, based on the work of Jacques Derrida, performances can be conceived as **supplements** to texts. Each new performance reveals the endless possibilities of scripts in performance.

Josephine Lee (1999) characterizes the text and performance relationship as **libratory** or **embodied.** In the first sense, performance "frees" the text from the

confines of textual authority. In the second sense, performance "embodies something quite analogous to the text: in some cases, the immortal spirit of the masterpiece; in others, the presence of hitherto marginalized peoples" (154).

The movement from text to performance has been justified and described in a variety of ways, always reflecting the institutional histories of disciplines that study texts. Strine, Long, and HopKins (1990, 185) note an important tension in all of these characterizations of the relationship between text and performance:

> Whatever the comparison, the performance paradoxically declares both subordination to and power over the written work: even while approximating, representing, substituting for, the performance nonetheless clarifies and illuminates to the point of resolving, for a time, the work's ambiguities.

RETHINKING TEXTS

Approaching the world as a text to be read, studied, and analyzed follows traditions of literary criticism. Clifford Geertz (1973, 452) is famous for this textual approach to the study of culture: "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong." Text-centered approaches have been criticized for their emphasis on the printed page, for silencing or doing violence to groups without access to print, for privileging the literary critic, and for failing to pay attention to bodies in performance.

Shannon Jackson (2004, 155) argues that text-centered approaches ultimately privilege literary critics and their methods. To expand the analogy of a text to everything "position[s] the domains and objects of other fields as patiently awaiting illumination by their own methods of explication." The authority of literary study—over anthropology, history, theatre, communication, cultural studies, and sociology—is a kind of colonialism over the academy.

Dwight Conquergood (1998) labels Geertz's textual approach to culture a "visualist/textualist bias." This bias privileges writing, sight, the printed page, and literacy over orality, sound, performance, and embodied practices. This bias is especially violent to marginalized groups excluded from making knowledge about themselves in print. Any study of texts ought to include the myriad manifestations of performances as participatory and embodied ways of knowing and being.

Elizabeth Fine (1984, 92) notes that conceiving of performance as text leads to ignoring features of the performance that don't conform to the page. Building on the work of Walter Ong, Fine's list of print "preconditionings" are abstraction, linearity, disembodiment, and privileging print over the spoken word. Fine's list of performance features left out of print preconceptions include the performance's "presentational fullness, its paralinguistic and kinesic dimensions." A text lifted from its performance and written down is just a "skeleton" of its former self.

All of these critiques recall Walter Ong's claims about orality and performance as the means of creating human knowledges and practices. As human history has moved to creating *texts,* not in sound and memory but by hand, print, and now
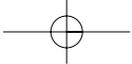
electronic and digital means, these representations are hotly contested and infi-
nitely productive for performance theory.

Text-centered approaches to performance are evidenced in the careful study of
texts as objects for performance, in the creation of texts from performances, in the
assumptions we bring to and take away from the printed page, and in the multiple
ways we "read" texts. When text meets performance, the politics of interpretation
are always present as canon, textual play, and materiality. The criteria for our
choices in performance—certainties, probabilities, possibilities, and distortions—
are assumptions about texts and their relationships to politics, ways of reading, and
history.