

Chapter 11. Dramatic Literature, Dramatic Performance, and the Drama of Life: Casting About for Meanings

I had frequented New York theater from early adolescence, with a special attachment to musical comedy, Gilbert and Sullivan's sly operettas, and then Brecht's plays of social critique. As an adolescent, I had my first taste of (bad) acting when I went to an arts camp. During my first year at Cornell, I had small roles in campus productions. These earlier experiences intersected with my writing in a series of courses taught by a newly-minted professor Scott McMillin. He asked us to think of play scripts as only preliminary sketches for actual stage performances within specific sociohistorical moments, witnessed by audiences located in time and place. I was excited by his perspectives more than what I had found in other literature courses, where meaning began and ended with the text. McMillin expanded my ways of looking at drama, at all writing, at all art, and all life, even as he kept careful scholarly focus on the works themselves. At least for me. As for him, I doubt he thought of himself as a writing teacher or a life coach or philosophical mentor; he only talked about the theater, specific plays, specific productions, and how they could be most fully understood.

As I now reread his comments on my papers, I see ideas that would only become familiar in literature departments in following decades, but he never was explicit about his theoretical sources, nor did I ever hear his views on anything beyond the analysis of the works under study (even when I read his later critical works). Yet absorbing his perspectives and writing from them in his class reverberated throughout my understanding of the world and a quest for a meaningful life. I see in my papers for the three undergraduate courses I took with him ideas and analytic perspectives that gave a legitimacy, focus, and systematic method to the ill-formed ideological criticisms I was making in other courses, rejecting the stances of particular literary works. The perspectives nurtured by this professor continued to reverberate throughout the remainder of my schooling and my professional life as I moved from the study of literature to literacy and its teaching.

The World's a Play

In the fall of my third year, on the recommendation of a friend, I took Professor McMillin's course on comparative contemporary drama, from Ibsen and Chekhov through Brecht and Pirandello. The first paper (about 1500 words) was an analysis of a single character, in the context of the unfolding of the play. My analysis of Madame Ranevskaya in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* focuses on a single scene as iconic. I think I had adapted the idea of an iconic moment from

a previous course on Chaucer, where the professor had lectured on the icon or emblem as a prominent device in “The Knight’s Tale.” In this paper on *The Cherry Orchard* I did not explicitly use the term iconic, but I distinctly remember thinking about using the device to focus on one scene as emblematic of the whole work. I used the explication techniques I had learned in close reading of poems, but here I placed the words within the unfolding dramatic actions and dialogue located within the social context of the play’s production. I also looked at the psychological motives behind the lines, standard practice in acting. In my final evaluation of the character, I identified with Ranevskaya’s acceptance of human weakness and her consequent modesty and gentleness. Professor McMillin, however, in his comments asked me to pursue the analysis of the key speeches in greater detail, which I was to do in the final paper of the term.

The second paper (about 1000 words) again looked at specific scenes, but focusing on secondary characters rather than the protagonists in Shaw’s *Major Barbara* and Brecht’s *Good Woman of Szechuan*. The paper compared the working-class characters in both plays to investigate the revolutionary stances of the two authors as embodied in dramatic structure. This was a bit more sophisticated dramaturgical approach. I first discussed Shaw’s proletarians, suffering but self-aware, leading their best lives under the circumstances, and then turned to Brecht’s paupers, who have less class consciousness and more veniality. I end with two long paragraphs comparing the political programs posed by each author, and the play form—semi-realistic comedy vs. epic theater invoking alienation and audience critical reflection. McMillin’s comments directed me towards reconsidering my naive invocation of “basics” as separate from form; now I would say he was trying to get me to confront essentialism and recognize that what we view as material is experienced ideologically through systems of meaning. At the time, I was not ready to fully understand what he was driving at, though my final paper for the term does take some further steps in this direction.

The final assignment was to construct a four-play repertory season and provide a rationale. The paper I wrote (around 2500 words) was deeply personally meaningful at the time and for a long time after. In retrospect I see it as the start of a set of positive commitments, beginning with my entering Peace Corps training the next term and ultimately to the teaching of writing and understanding how writing transforms the world. I still find this paper moving and eloquent of my state of mind. I remember the process of writing this paper as almost in a trance. I became exhausted after writing each part, falling asleep in the middle of the day, waking only for meals and writing another paragraph or two, then immediately falling back into sleep for more hours, then dragging myself up, writing a bit more, then falling back into sleep. This went on for several days, as though I were in a deep and exhausting meditation, floating in and out of a dream, but a dream so drugged I had no memory except the impulse to take the next step of the journey. This was the kind of experience vatic priests must have had when they felt the words come from elsewhere but channeled through them, knocking them down,

knocking them out. Reading and writing until exhaustion is something that has in fact been part of my process, often falling asleep over my typewriter or over my books in the library and then upon waking, having a sense of what to write next—but never again to this extreme.

I do not know how much the tight sentences and moral vision were a product of the psychological crisis that had been building—as I broke from my dysfunctional family, as I questioned my personality and identity, as I looked for acceptance and meaning in the world and my actions. But I could see that this also was a product of my intellectual journey, bringing together pieces from my earlier papers into a more integrated vision. Perhaps my emotional and intellectual journeys were the same thing. That is, I had been using writing to figure out the world, my place in it, my values, my relations to others—what was important and how I felt about things. In doing so I was forming a new identity and way of being in the world, one that became more coherent at this moment and that became worked out in the following years as I formed new relationships, new responses to others, new interactions, and new goals. I remember thinking around this time, particularly around this paper, that it took time—even months or years to understand what I had written and what it meant in life. I awoke from the dream with a new direction and new sense of self.

Twenty years later James Pennebaker was to start the research that led him to understand the powerful effect of trauma writing, which he was eventually to attribute in part to allowing the writer to confront distressing events by building a coherent story one could live with (e.g., Pennebaker & Chung, 2007). Around 2000 when a graduate student introduced me to Pennebaker's work establishing that trauma writing could even improve our immune system, blood counts, health outcomes, and other biological markers, I recognized from my experiences the implication that writing could reach down into the core organization of ourselves and anxiety systems, and thus could influence the way we perceived and responded to the world around us. This paper for an undergraduate course brought together a deep and comprehensive story about the world and my life which I had been struggling with since high school. It crystallized an important reorganization in my life.

The paper designing the four-play repertory season started with a thematic overview as with other papers, but this introduction stretched across four long paragraphs (almost three pages). Not until the fourth paragraph did I get to the core point, that these plays raised the fundamental question of the forms of life in which we found ourselves or chose to live. This form of life guided our relations, and our understanding how to be and how to respond to others' being. The first three paragraphs built on the syntactic pattern of paradox, contradiction, negation—not this, but that—that had pervaded much of my earlier writing. Here, however, I was arguing with my own earlier approaches to drama, which had attempted to extract meanings or build a critical, alienated point of view, or even assert a superior moral framework. By the third paragraph I was transitioning

to how I came to a deeper experience of each of the four plays that were in this repertory, even though I had previously approached them in one of the ways I now rejected. In the fourth paragraph I landed on my new perspective, which I then elaborated in the remainder of the paper through discussion of each of the plays—Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Brecht’s *Mother Courage*, and Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*. I considered the dilemmas, stances, situations, and actions of the characters in relation to the frames provided by the playwrights and in the consequent relations established with the audiences. The discussion, register, and style were almost philosophical, in the manner of Kierkegaard and similar authors I was reading at the time. The structures of the plays were analyzed to reveal the set of assumptions that framed the actions and how these assumptions directed the meanings to be found by the characters, or which they refused as they came to understand the worlds they were caught in. A number of my sentences reached towards terse, rhythmic assertiveness, set against longer, slower moving discursive passages. The paper ended with a paradoxical instability between the tolerant resigned acceptance of Chekhov’s Madame Ranevskaya who appreciates the declining world as it is, recognizing the sad fateful delusions of the other characters, and Brecht’s assertive rejection in *Mother Courage* of the illusory world the characters cannot see beyond: “We live, then, in hope of a revolution, but despairing it will ever come.”

McMillin’s few comments were appreciative, suggesting a few places I could have confronted the paradoxes even more strongly. His final comment was: “A+ Right. You are if you think you are. I am.” At the moment, and even now, this support was powerfully meaningful to me. At that time, it was a sign that I was absorbing his perspective and that he recognized it, and in so doing he understood and approved of my journey. Now I see his comments as a reminder of his profound acceptance, understanding, and influence for me. After I withdrew my enrollment for the spring semester, passing through New York City on my way to Peace Corps training, I attended the latest avant-garde hit *Marat/Sade*. I wrote a long letter to Professor McMillin, following up on the paper, pondering the ironic vision of life in this play—but never mailed it.

Returning to McMillin’s World

After returning to Cornell from Peace Corps training, I talked a lot about the perspective I was gaining, and by that, I think I meant something like the stance I had developed in the previously discussed paper. That final year I took two more courses from this professor who was providing me the supportive space and ideas to work through my new vision—in the fall a survey of British drama, and in the spring a specialized course on Elizabethan revenge tragedy. My first paper in the fall was on the opening of Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* (about 2000 words), raising the same issue that I had pursued in my longer paper the previous fall—of a character caught in or escaping from the imposed dramatic world.

I underspecified the concept of ritual, although that was the central concept of the paper and had to do with the question of position within structure or form. That failure was commented on by the professor, though he agreed with the gist. This paper begins by noting the negations of the play's prologue, in contrast to the more typical prologue that set the scene. Rather than defining a context, it is denying a context. I note Faustus' declassée birth, and his lack of institutional rise, leaving him an outsider. I follow his sequence of thoughts and rejections of the opening scene as he discards the books of his disciplines, ending with philosophy and medicine. He does not finish sentences he reads as he cannot engage with the facts of his mortal existence. He turns to magic. I then make some brief, hand-waving comparisons with the ending, but do not examine it in detail, nor any of the moments between the middle and the end. McMillin's comments indicate that my lack of attention to the end limited my understanding of the play and Marlowe's presentation of Faustus. Coordinately he pointed to my ill-defined use of the terms "ritual position" and "external structures" which I rely on in my argument. He notes "you seem to be using these terms out of some private concern, and you need to give them full public meaning." Here as elsewhere his comments identify and challenge me on core issues to gain theoretical clarity. He, as always, was directly on target—and in ways even more than he could know, as that year, despite my religious skepticism I was experimenting with observing Jewish Law under the guidance of a young orthodox rabbi who was also a graduate student in philosophy. Even this adventure in religious practice, directed by the structures of Halakah, can be seen as influenced by ideas about the organizing force of forms to give motive, as I will explain at the end of this chapter.

The next paper on Beaumont and Fletcher's transgressively comic *The Knight of Burning Pestle* started out as a reflection on conventionality and the need to accept and understand the conventionality of the theater and the particular form of theater being watched—the private elite theater, in contrast to the more public, multi-class Globe. After two pages I applied this reflection to consider how the elite audience of *The Knight of Burning Pestle* would have viewed the conventions of the play and the attitudes towards the working-class characters who disrupt the play within a play, *The London Merchant*. The play within the play is vapid, not even living up to expectations of romantic comedy, having nitwits as characters, and thus would be viewed by the audience more as a burlesque than even a parody, while making fun of the middle-class morality enacted. I examine the stolid citizen and wife (placed among the audience) who view the play as bad because they do not understand the conventions of romantic love nor do they understand the difference between actors and their roles. They view their apprentice Ralph who is acting as the knight as an actual knight, in real danger, so they yell out with a warning at a melodramatic moment. While my analysis delights in the madness of the conflicting and collapsing conventions, the actual audience didn't enjoy it, which I explain as the discomfort of how the play positions them, recognizing their class positions and disdain for others. The teacher comments

how the opening pages of the paper were a bit routine as I attempted to respond to his previous request for greater conceptual clarity, but I did succeed in being explicit and clear in my analytical ideas. Once I got into the analysis of the play, the characters, and the position of the audience, he commented that “it’s hard to imagine how anything more valid and interesting could be said about the play.” In addition to the pride and confidence this comment gave me, it also reconfirmed that I was absorbing his way of looking at things and forming arguments.

The final paper (about 3000 words) was again a four-play repertoire with a rationale. I focus on the prologues and endings of all the plays, following the analytical strategy I had tried with *Doctor Faustus*, but focusing on the relation formed with the audience. Prologues I considered as bringing the audience from their daily lives into the world the playwright was creating. The endings sent them back out again into their social worlds with directions about how they should remember the play and how it might relate to their post-theater lives. I chose plays from four different periods—Jonson’s *Epicoene*, Sheridan’s *The Country Wife*, Wycherly’s *Way of the World*, and Shaw’s *Man and Superman*. Each established a different presence for the author and different ways for the audience to interact with the play’s events and characters. Jonson, I claimed, teases the audience about the relation of the play to life, but then says it is to be taken only as a fictional entertainment. I argued Sheridan suggests societal roles are as theatrical as on the stage, and ends with a scourging of the males in the audience, casting Restoration life as much as a game of upmanship as the theater. Wycherly takes that stance a step further in seeing life and theater as artifice. I end with the observation that modern realistic theater, in a way is freed for greater fictiveness and removal from the everyday world of the audience, even as it removes theatrical prologues and epilogues that mediate the relation to life. The connection to the world is through the ideas or perspective of the author, which Shaw elaborates in non-theatrical print commentaries.

In reading this paper now I am not convinced of all the parts of the argument and I see it forced in some of its interpretations, especially by an attempt to construct a neat historical sequence. The professor’s comments indicate he also was not convinced by some of my interpretations and patterns, though he thought the topic was a good one and some of the observations were on target. The paper also had more than the usual number of typos and syntactic slippages, and even stylistically cumbersome sentences—which the careful reading by the professor caught. All this indicates this paper was not fully worked out—whether this was because of time pressures with other papers due, because I was still working the ideas out, the ideas were just unworkable, or I was just sloppy, I don’t know. But from the point of view of my constructing a diachronic argument of genre and the relations of author, readers and content, this paper at least represents an early attempt at the kind of historical argument about changing authorial stance and relations to audience I was to use later in my career.

From my final course with McMillin on Elizabethan revenge tragedies, I have only a midterm paper in my files. I vaguely remember it was a practice at that

time to excuse graduating seniors from final papers, but perhaps I wrote one and never collected the comments. The 3000-word paper on Webster's *The White Devil* took the opening word "banished" as defining the experience of the world. As I had done previously, I considered how the audience was brought into the world of the play—in this case by the single opening word "Banished." This word becomes thematic in the displacement and ambiguity in the characters, the lack of a central character, the fluidity of settings and scenes, the evaporation of a moral center, and the audience experience of conflicting impulses, uncomfortable voyeurism, and repulsion against shallow and reprehensible characters. Yet the persistent attraction of lust and voyeurism keeps the audience engaged, as it engulfs and destroys all the other relations.

The paper was structured around the opening scene, which it analyzed in some detail. I then considered disruptive displacement later in the play. Much of the paper is a theoretical expansion and explanation of how displacement creates an uncomfortably ambiguous experience of lust and voyeurism. I ended with the one character, Vittoria, who cuts through all the displacement by denying the pervasive troubling tensions, providing an amoral center and clarity: "Ha, Whore, what is that?" McMillin in his extensive comments throughout the paper liked where my analysis was going and the insights I offered about the play, but he persistently pushed for greater conceptual clarity and precision, more detailed analysis at key moments to elaborate ideas, further rationale for some assumptions, and more attention to Jacobean conventions. So while he liked my paper, as elsewhere he kept pushing me to develop my ideas further, while providing guidance as to where that development might go.

Transitions in My Writing and My Self

This experience with McMillin marks another juncture in my journey as a writer. In my primary and secondary school years, I learned to play with language, discovered how to explore my feelings and values, and developed viewpoints. I learned to use some standard forms, work with sources and evidence, make judgments, and build basic arguments. These are the typical things we as writing teachers hope for in writing education. In my first years as an undergraduate, I then learned the preferred academic genres of the time, particularly literary explication, fulfilling the genres' expectations, and exploring their expressive potential. I learned to elaborate arguments and pursue them in greater objectivity and public persuasiveness with detailed analysis and evidence. My writing became longer and more intellectually sophisticated, able to incorporate varied kinds and structures of arguments with their differing entailments for their elaboration. As I learned to project my emotional and personal needs into academic questions and goals, I was able to build an academic voice and identity that distanced me from the troubles of my family. But I also ran into some roadblocks as I did not always feel in sympathy with my studies and I had no coherent standpoint from which

I could argue. Rather I bristled in ad hoc resistance to those texts and teachers that didn't make sense to me, or didn't fit with what I was perceiving and how I was developing. I did not yet have a compelling vision of the relation between the represented world of texts (whether in science or art) and the experienced world by which I could gain some coherence of understanding.

McMillin's courses in drama and his rigorous challenges to my nascent observations, however, started to give me an intellectual orientation I could live with, a way of understanding life as drama, given meaning by the frames that organized our relations, activities, and values. Within those frames we had possibilities of understanding and action that could transform our relations and emotions, and even transform the frames themselves. Yet this understanding did not yet provide me the concrete means of forming social relationships and enacting daily life that would grant life satisfactions. Coping with family and peer traumas left me increasingly anomic, even as it had forced me to question my values, relationships, and place in life. This reevaluation started to crystallize under McMillin's tutelage, but personally I was still adrift. The structured life of Peace Corps training had provided some stability and relieved some daily anxiety, but when I found I did not fit the program I was in, I again did not know quite what to do other than return to school and Telluride, under the cloud of both the draft and financial exigencies. But in the house, which had been the center of my social world and identity, I had been rejected and I felt again the outsider. I was looking for something that would provide me community and structure that I could connect with.

Seeking a Life Order

So, despite my explicit and continuing secular atheism and distance from religious identity (though maintaining some cultural affinity), I was tempted by the argument that one could never understand belief from the outside and that only by following Jewish law and living an observant life, could one come to understand religious commitment and emotions. During my senior year I first found my way to the soft-core campus Hillel, to which I reacted with the same distaste I had to my family's congregation as an early adolescent. But I soon connected with a more intellectually stimulating orthodox rabbi who was a doctoral student in philosophy. In addition to my regular coursework I began studying Hebrew again, was brought into the first stage of Talmudic study, and began to observe as much of the religious laws as I could comprehend and manage. And I spent Shabbos regularly with the rabbi's family.

This new way of life had the additional advantage of creating an identity of difference in the house, allowing me to avoid the communal meals and eat kosher TV dinners in my room. I found a way to have the financial support of the house, maintain a few friendships I still had, but yet remove myself from being a "member" of the house and needing to find validation within the intellectual world of the house. I was able to restructure the conditions and relations of my

life without radically adjusting the material conditions of going to college or disrupting my scholarship arrangements. This religious excursion was a kind of odd consequence of the views I had been developing with McMillin, though I would hardly blame him for this. It was my clumsy attempt to put into practice the idea of having an order or structure that would provide life meanings.

I remained skeptical about the underlying faith that would justify this way of life, though I was desperate to discover transcendence. I was particularly moved by the fervent appeal in the liturgy to “god of my fathers,” hoping to find a sense of tribal connection through the urgency of the thrice-daily prayer. I read a bit in mysticism and even visited and danced all night with Chassidim (whom I associated with my Eastern European forbears), and liked the idea of it, even if I never could understand it or feel it. I made a pilgrimage to the rabbi of my rabbi and visited other sites of religious study in the more rational tradition he came from. I was carried forward by the emotional well-being offered by my young rabbi and his family, feeling the warmth of the family celebrations. Yet I never felt any stirrings of belief and faith, never overcame skepticism, nor connected to the generations of fathers and their god. Within a day of leaving campus after graduation I left it all behind. I awoke as from a dream, realizing it was not a life that made sense in the world I lived in, and I was not moved enough to join a sequestered world of the faithful. After a day of tumbled thoughts and images as I walked around New York City, I stopped at a street cart to buy a non-kosher hot dog. The first bite marked the end of the year-long experiment.

One practical, but odd consequence of this religious chapter for my writing life was my choice of graduate school, affecting the programs and mentoring faculty I would encounter. I had applied to several graduate programs in literature (again because of the draft I felt there were few other options) and received some fellowship offers. I chose Brandeis over another more prestigious university, in part because I felt the atmosphere and expectations of the other colder and removed from my interests, but also because Brandeis had much more appetizing kosher food options, which was still important to me when I had to make the choice, but meant nothing to me by the time I got there. I still think it was a lucky choice, for reasons I will elaborate in later chapters. Such are some accidents of life that also influence writing development.

Another consequence of the year’s sojourn into orthodoxy was that it added a bit to my scriptural and Talmudic knowledge and interpretive procedures (though my Hebrew never got very far). Shards of Jewish knowledge and scriptural prosody have crept into my writing from time to time. I also started to appreciate a bit more the phenomenology of different historically emerged religions, as forms of consciousness and belief were integrated with forms of life, relationships, and community—all associated with particular emotions, values, and affiliations. This phenomenological conjunction would enter into my understanding of writing and activity systems and the relationship of perceptions, meanings, and ideology with those forms of activity. And, of course, in Judaism as much as

any religion, these phenomenological conjunctions found their grounding in the study and adherence to sacred texts. As I later came to understand, literacy was infrastructural for complex societies.

Even as I came to appreciate these different ways of life, while rejecting them as mine, I no longer felt the need to identify as an atheist. Atheism seemed to exist in a dialectic of opposition in which I was no longer caught. Religion and belief were no longer a question to which I needed an assertive answer. I lived in this world. This also meant, however, that I needed to understand human sociality and community in realistic ways without any of the supernatural explanations for the good that others might invoke.

This sojourn and its end also taught me that I had better ways to live out the insights and elaboration of ideas about structure and life than simply trying to impose something on myself or latch onto other people's structures. I once again was off to pursue my own path.