

PERFORMANCE STUDIES

THE INTERPRETATION OF AESTHETIC TEXTS

RONALD J. PELIAS

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Performance Studies

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The
Interpretation
of
Aesthetic Texts

Ronald J. Pelias

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Preface: To the Instructor

Performance Studies: *The Interpretation of Aesthetic Texts* is an undergraduate textbook that asks students to use performance as a means of understanding the artistic utterances of others. To suggest that performance is a way of learning reminds us of a long tradition in the discipline of oral interpretation. Characteristic of this tradition is a careful and detailed focus on literary texts. Such a focus encourages students to translate their literary insights from the page to the stage and, in so doing, to increase their knowledge of literature. We have described this translation process as a communicative, artistic, therapeutic, and critical act. It is communicative in that literature in performance is a transaction between speakers and listeners. It is artistic in that literature in performance is a theatrical event. It is therapeutic in that literature in performance is a means of self-discovery. It is critical in that literature in performance is an explication of a literary work. This tradition is the foundation for the present textbook.

The oral interpretation tradition, however, is not static. We have continued to build upon its theoretical perspectives. In recent years, we have given increasing attention to the concept of human communication as a performance act. Explaining communication in theatrical terms allows us to see all communication acts as spoken by actors who have specific motives and exist in particular scenes. We have come to realize that our specialized training in performance places us in a particularly strong position to view communication in these terms. Not only have we called upon performance terminology to explore communication, we have become even more convinced that the act of doing performance, of giving voice and body to others, is a powerful way of knowing. In short, we believe in the value of performance as a mode of inquiry. It is for this reason that the present textbook uses the label *performance studies* as the best description of current interests. Even so, this book is perhaps best read and understood as a continuation of the long and rich traditions of oral interpretation. The book keeps the word *interpretation* in its title not only to honor our history, but also to identify an informing perspective.

No undergraduate textbook in performance studies could adequately address all the subjects that are presently commanding attention from scholars in our field. This book restricts itself to four central thrusts. First, it encourages students to examine various types of aesthetic texts. It asks stu-

dents not only to look at traditional literary forms, but also to embrace any communicative act that possesses aesthetic qualities. It invites students to consider all utterances, written and oral, that speakers structure in a unified and expressive manner as appropriate material for performance. Second, the book challenges students to create aesthetic performances. It calls upon students to become performing artists, engaged in aesthetic transactions. Third, the book presents students with an extended discussion of performance as a methodology. It shows students how to use their voice and body as well as empathic skills as tools for examining the aesthetic texts of others. Fourth, the book offers students a detailed description of the participatory and evaluative role of the audience in aesthetic events. It urges students as audience members to take an active part in the aesthetic exchange. In general, then, the book invites each student to assume the tasks of textual critic, artistic performer, and performance critic. By the end of the book, students should be able to:

1. understand aesthetic communication as performative, dramatic acts, as carefully constructed utterances that present the most engaging thoughts of humankind,
2. possess greater sensitivity to aesthetic texts, recognizing their distinct forms and characteristics,
3. use performance as a method for examining human communication, and
4. have increased their critical abilities to give informed and precise evaluations of artistic performances.

In keeping with these interests, the textbook is divided into four parts. Part I, “Performance Studies in Perspective,” offers students an overview and working definition of performance studies as well as a brief history of the field. Part II provides students with several procedures for exploring the aesthetic texts of others. Chapter 4 presents the dramatic method. Chapter 5 develops the idea that the performer’s voice and body are analytic tools for examining aesthetic texts. Chapter 6 focuses upon the performer’s empathic skills for understanding others. Part III, “The Nature of Aesthetic Texts in Aesthetic Transactions,” describes the typical qualities of aesthetic utterances and discusses the dynamics of aesthetic transactions. Part IV turns to the performative and evaluative roles of the audience.

Throughout the textbook, students will find probes to help in their learning. The probes function in a number of ways, including serving as study questions, exercises, topics for in-class discussion, and potential assignments. Some of the probes students can work with on their own; others would benefit from the instructor’s guidance. In addition to the probes, the book includes two appendixes, a bibliography of aesthetic texts, and a glossary to aid instruction. Appendix A offers several aesthetic texts for classroom

discussion. It is not intended, however, as an anthology for the course. The Bibliography of Aesthetic Texts points students to a number of sources for their performance material. Appendix B presents a sample dramatic analysis written by an undergraduate student.

Considerable thanks are in order to a number of people for their insights and support during the preparation of this book. I am particularly grateful to Linda Park-Fuller, Bruce Henderson, Beverly Whitaker Long, Robert Overstreet, and Carol Simpson Stern. Their careful reading of earlier drafts of the book helped shape the final product. I am also very grateful to Sharon Bebout, Amy Burt, Darrin Hicks, Kevin Kelch, and Tami Spry who worked on the Bibliography of Aesthetic Texts and the Glossary. To Jill Taft-Kaufman, Mary H. Pelias, Cathy Pusateri, and James VanOosting, I give my special thanks.

Ronald J. Pelias

Preface: To the Student

This is a book about performing. It asks you to do what all performers do—to take on another’s voice and body, to become another person. It invites you to put on stage the words of other people. Not just any words, but words that have artistic value. Throughout this book, we will refer to such language as aesthetic communication. Doing performance and working with aesthetic communication are common activities. Such practices are familiar daily experiences. Let us pause for a moment to consider some of our everyday actions in these terms.

We are constantly engaged in acts of performance. Not only do we watch them regularly on television and films, but we produce them for others in our everyday encounters. We tell stories for the enjoyment of our friends. We share the latest joke we have heard. We participate in ceremonies that mark important occasions in our lives. We quote what others say in order to mock them or to ponder their thoughts. We give speeches in our classes and for various organizations. We tease and mimic our acquaintances. We often create such utterances more for their expressive than for their practical value. We enjoy playing with language, using it to entertain ourselves and others. We recognize that some performance acts are more pleasing than others. Some engage us more fully; some demand greater attention. In short, we create and evaluate many performances as we go about our daily lives. In doing so, we are often producing aesthetic communication acts.

As the above paragraph implies, this book looks at two primary types of aesthetic communication. First, it considers performance itself as an aesthetic act. In other words, performance is an art form that demands of its practitioners what all the arts demand: a willingness of the artists to give of themselves, learn their crafts, and take risks. Second, it assumes that the language or texts that performers present are aesthetic. We often find compelling texts for performance when we read traditional literature. Performers have a long history of taking poems, short stories, novels, and plays to the stage. Performing such literary works requires no defense; people have enjoyed the performance of literature for many centuries. But performers are surely not restricted to just these kinds of texts. Aesthetic utterances occur not only in written form, but also in everyday talk. Aesthetic acts are very much a part of our speech environment. As we shall see, performers may look beyond traditional literary works in their efforts to find aesthetic texts for presentation.

Performance is also central to this book—as the basis for studying aesthetic texts. This book assumes that performance is a powerful method for exploring other people. It allows the performer to live in another’s sensibility, to take on another’s voice and body, to think in keeping with another’s mind. Such a process permits a profound encounter with others. Performance offers experiences for our lives. Doing performance is a way of producing understanding. It is a means for coming to know others.

This is also a book about listening to performances. By listening to what performers present, we can also learn. Performers stage performances not only for their own benefit, but also for ours. By attending to what they offer, we share in their discoveries and benefit from their efforts. In doing so, we take on an obligation to give to performers. At a minimum, we must give our focused attention, but we should be willing to share our critical responses as well. Performers want and deserve feedback. Our responsibility to performers is to offer responses that are not just mere flattery but are carefully constructed insights into their work.

This book, then, has four central goals. First, it challenges you to create aesthetic performances. It summons you to become a performing artist. To help you achieve this end, the book provides specific suggestions about performance work, offering techniques for presenting your own and others’ aesthetic communication. Second, the book encourages you to examine various types of aesthetic texts. It gives a detailed account of the common qualities of aesthetic acts and makes a case for seeing a wide array of communicative acts as aesthetic. Third, the book urges you to use performance as a method of inquiry. It shows how doing performance work generates insights and identifies specific procedures that performers can follow to make their encounters with aesthetic texts productive. Fourth, the book asks you to become an informed critic of artistic performances. It establishes a vocabulary and several models for making sense of performance events and develops an argument for what constitutes valid evaluations.

The book also relies upon probes to aid your learning. These probes are used to elaborate upon points, to put into practice particular concepts, to demonstrate the complexity of some issues, to develop specific performance skills, and so on. Some probes you may find difficult; others, fairly easy. In either case, you will benefit from trying to work through the probes.

By the end of the semester, you will probably surprise yourself with the quality of your performance work. You will see what it means to be a performing artist. You will understand why people have found performance wonderfully engaging. You will know the joys of an aesthetic encounter. You will learn from others’ aesthetic acts. You will discover what makes for rich discussions of artistic performances. In short, you will experience communication at its most profound and most seductive.

Performance Studies



The Interpretation of Aesthetic Texts

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PART I



Performance Studies in Perspective



CHAPTER 1

Understanding Performance

Part I provides an orientation to the field of performance studies. Chapter 1 argues that we can view all human communication as an act of performance. We shall see how we could define performance quite broadly before focusing our interests on artistic performances. Chapter 1, then, specifies the scope of this textbook. Chapter 2 offers a definition of performance studies, and Chapter 3 presents a history of performance studies.

Human Communication as Performance

All human communication is an act of performance. In its most general sense, performance is the executing of an action. Performance also provides some language or vocabulary that helps explain how people communicate. To illustrate this viewpoint, we might follow a hypothetical student, Eric, through a typical day to see if we can understand his behavior in performance terms.

Eric begins the morning by getting ready for school. He does his daily exercise routine, combs his hair, and dresses. With each of these activities we could view him as preparing for the performances that he will engage in during the day. He assesses how his body performs and then judges whether his clothing is a suitable costume for the roles he will have to play that day. Eric's actions so far are private or backstage, "warm-ups" for the day's activities.

After leaving the house, Eric makes his way to school. In doing so, he follows the rules of the road, playing the role, perhaps unconsciously, of the private citizen who obeys the law. Once at school, Eric plays the familiar role of student in a series of classes. He recognizes that his instructors have expectations about the language students should use in the classroom. In his second class, Eric wants to make a point and rehearses in his own mind what he plans to say. When the instructor calls on him, however, the rehearsal fails to pay off. Eric blows his lines by saying something he did not intend.

Throughout the day, Eric encounters various friends. Playing the role of

friend, Eric's language is usually more casual, less carefully planned than in the classroom. Eric recognizes that his friends view him in a variety of ways—as witty, attentive, distant, supportive, and so on. His perception of their views feeds into how Eric sees himself. By talking with his friends, he comes to realize that they look at him in certain ways and expect certain behaviors from him. They anticipate that Eric will engage in certain scripts, and Eric is more likely than not to fulfill their expectancies.

Eric also realizes that his talk is, in part, determined by how he perceives each of his friends. With some friends, he typically enjoys intense discussions about political issues; with others, he often reflects upon past high-school days. Eric and his friends, then, take on the role of friend or audience for each other, selecting language that is appropriate to the role. They decide on scripts to present in each other's presence and they understand to some extent why they present them in certain contexts.

After school, Eric goes to his part-time job at McDonald's. He is quite aware that much of his behavior at work has been carefully scripted and that the restaurant has been thoughtfully designed for maximum efficiency and economy. The manager insists that Eric greet customers with the standard line "May I help you?", that Eric always respond to a request for "a small order of fries" with the gentle corrective "Regular?", that Eric present himself as friendly and polite, and so on. The boldly printed menu above the cashiers, the drive-up window, the napkin dispensers, the food trays, and the trash receptacles are all designed to move customers through their meals with speed. Even the tile flooring, the plastic chairs, and the brightly painted walls encourage customers to eat quickly and leave.

Eric starts home after his shift at work. On the way, he stops at the grocery store to buy a few things. Here he plays the role of customer, exchanging a few socially scripted words with the cashier:

Eric: Hi, how are you?

Cashier: Fine, thanks. [Rings up groceries.] That will be \$5.87. Thanks for shopping at _____. [Returns change.]

Eric: Thank you. Have a nice night.

Cashier: You too.

Both Eric and the cashier know that the most efficient way to complete the transaction is to stick to their predictable, socially set lines.

Once home, Eric greets his roommate. They share stories of interest from the day's events. They both play the role of storyteller and, in so doing, decide what is worth telling and how they might best tell it. In the telling, they make sense of their world, not only for each other, but also for themselves. Soon, Eric begins to unwind from his performances of the day. He takes off his shoes, pulls his shirt from his pants, and collapses into his favor-