

From Work to Text, Then Where? Observations on French Postdramatic Poetics from 1980 Onwards

Dimitra Kondylaki

The contemporary dramatic work, especially in France which is a principal axis for the formation of European dramaturgical tendencies, seems to be the *sui generis* and paradoxical product of the crisis in literary genres: on the one hand its narrative and “fragmented” dimension completely contradicts the rules of traditional dramatic form. On the other hand, it lays claim to an intensely poetic dimension which returns theater to the sphere of literature. “Postdramatic theater” is an anti-dramatic theater, “poetic” in the sense of the predominance of the word over action, of monologue over dialogue, but also of interiority/reading over spectacle/watching. Representative of the “postdramatic theater” of the last two decades of the twentieth century is Valère Novarina’s “Theatre of the Ears,” on the meaning of which we especially focus here. To what extent, however, can a contemporary poetic theater completely disengage itself from drama? This is the main question posed by this paper, with reference to dramatists who constitute the core of contemporary French theater, from Bernard-Marie Koltès to Olivier Py and Valère Novarina.

Acting as a Source of Writing

The way we conceive, understand and deal with things is reflected in the names we give them. With regard to writing for the theater, in the last thirty five years or so, there has been a great variety of definitions describing the object of this practice. A general sense of confusion surrounds the issue of definition: a lack of agreement as to *what* theater writing is, what it *should* be, *how* it should be. Formerly, in France—just as in Greece—we simply spoke of “plays” (“pièces”). Today, this definition has

lost its neutrality and has acquired an aesthetic nuance, since it tends to evoke a traditional perception of theater writing, referring more to texts belonging to the classical theater repertoire, something used to advantage, for instance, by French publishers who specialize in theater. “Pièce,” when used for contemporary works, seems to aim at emphasizing their literary quality, seeking to overcome a stereotypical prejudice against them. In contrast, definitions like “text/s” or “writing/s,” which are used more often in an institutional and artistic context, reflect a fundamental distinction between theater and “literature,” with literature taking on a negative connotation here, as a literary activity, foreign to the stage.

The expression “dramatic text/s” does not, of course, refer solely to contemporary dramaturgy. It implies the appearance of a “new genre,” still extremely abstract and vast—since its main characteristics, as in the visual arts, are as general as its variety and multiplicity: “the transgression of the boundaries between genres” or “the experimentation in all kinds of rupture with older models” (Heinich 8).¹

The French subsidized promotion of contemporary drama offers an ideal platform from which to observe the shift “from *Work* to *text*” (Barthes 155). We note that what prevail in the book lists of publishers who specialize in theater,² in the titles of events relating to contemporary playwrights,³ in the names of associations and organizations that promote contemporary work,⁴ even in the name of the equivalent sector in the French Ministry of Culture,⁵ are the terms “text/texts” and “writing/writings” (“écriture”/“écritures”). Especially the plural form of “writing” (“writings”), which in English, as in Greek, sounds awkward, is meaningful in the French language. As the sociologist Michel Simonot points out in his book *From Writing to the Stage*, “Today there are more and more events dedicated to *contemporary*

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1. Unless otherwise stated, the translations of French and Greek texts into English are mine.
 2. E.g. Solitaires Intempestifs, 2003 catalogue: “theatre texts, works unpublished or otherwise, narratives, essays or comments, that we love [...], that we wouldn’t want to see lost or forgotten, texts by men, women and worlds that concern us”; or Théâtrales, 2000 catalogue: “An increasingly greater number of texts by today’s writers—some of which are becoming the classics of tomorrow.”
 3. Such as, “New stage writings” (“Nouvelles écritures scéniques”). Théâtre 95, Cergy Pontoise.
 4. Such as, the “Centre Dramatique National des Ecritures du Spectacle” in Chartreuse, or the “Centre d’Ecritures Dramatiques” in Brussels.
 5. “Bureau des écritures et de la recherche” (Direction de la musique, de la danse, du théâtre et des spectacles/Sous-direction de la création et des activités artistiques).

writings than to *contemporary writing*. [...] The plural allows us to take into account, and to include, all expressive forms that have artistic intent, whatever fields they may belong to, while the singular tends to refer exclusively to the text.” (29). A statement like this presupposes that “writings” henceforth include video, dance and, potentially, all forms of performance, even if they are not based on a written text—something that applies widely throughout Europe. This is much more the case today, when “performance, initially focusing on personal experience, often anti-logocentric, and by extension anti-dramatic [...] is no longer marked by its focus on body and movement, but by a turn to speech” (Tsatsoulis 54). On the other hand, even if the dramatic text is no longer considered necessary for a stage production to be created, theater writing has never been more widespread in the West. Obviously, the need for new literary texts transubstantiating reality on stage persists. So, the issues of “text,” not only as dramaturgy accompanying a performance event, but also as an independent literary form, are at the center of the current debate on contemporary theater.

In France, this is made clear by the institutional support enjoyed by the playwright (as well as the specialized publisher and the translator)—something still missing in Greece. In the regulations concerning proposals that seek funding from the Greek Arts Council in 2008, it is stated that equal credits will be given to “pioneering and research-based work in the theatre and to regular involvement in experimental or innovative forms of theatre arts.”⁶ Neither the type of pioneering or research-based work, however, nor the goals of the “innovative forms of theatre arts” are specified, and consequently the interpretation of the above criteria remains completely arbitrary, adjustable to any enterprise. It is clear, though, that using the adjective “innovative” presupposes the existence of a “norm” from which the “innovation” differentiates itself. This norm relates to the play as traditionally conceived. On the contrary, the “innovative forms of theatre arts” are mainly associated with scripts conceived as a synthesis of various texts, not with original texts, as can be deduced from another criterion, which introduces the necessity for working with a dramaturge.⁷ Certainly, the long ex-

6. “Proposal evaluation information and criteria,” Greek Republic, Ministry of Culture, National Centre for Theater and Dance, *Notice of Application for State Subsidies for the Greek Theatre 2008-2009: Terms and Conditions*, 24 July 2008, File No. 65, 5. (Criterion 9).

7. See above: “Cooperation with a dramaturge, especially in cases where this is required by the form of the theatrical endeavour (such as synthesis of text, innovative theatre forms, etc).” (Criterion 12).

pected emergence of the dramaturge, especially since Theater Studies departments have been operating in Greek Universities for twenty years now, means the recognition of a significant specialization which still remains essentially inactive in the Greek theater. However, is not the dramaturge's place next to the director equally important, when working on the classical or the contemporary repertoire? Is it not missing the point to associate him/her largely with the synthesis of texts? And is it not a paradox to provide support for the dramaturge, while removing it from the playwright?

Given the complete withdrawal of an earlier criterion which offered "support to the modern Greek play,"⁸ associating the necessity for the dramaturge with "innovative forms of theatre" proves institutional puzzlement about the state of things now taking shape in Greek theater. This impression is accentuated by a provision which, not taking into account a strong dramaturgical movement inviting the encounter of acting and writing, forbids one single person to have two or three roles within the same project.⁹ It seems that in seeking to overcome the introversion of the modern Greek play of the 70s and 80s, a major part of progressive Greek directors and critics mainly connect innovative work with collaborative work. However, the practice of collective writing, which originally appeared in the West in the 60s and 70s, though still extensive, has given place to a re-evaluation of the dramatic text as an independent literary entity—but under new terms.

First, the complete, written work is no longer necessarily perceived as complementary to the stage. This removes the requirement of representability from the texts. With leading contemporary playwrights, like Samuel Beckett, Heiner Müller, Bernard-Marie Koltès, the word aims to be "writing" more than anything else—meaning or reason. Consequently, the traditional characteristics of the dramatic form (chiefly dialogue, plot and conflict) are rejected or, if not, they are radically revised, and thus we can speak of postdramatic writing.

8. "Proposal evaluation information," *National Policy for the Theatre* (Athens: Ministry of Culture, Fine Arts Directorate, 1999) 103. (Criterion 4).

9. "A clear indication that this scheme, which aims at generating a significant production, is based on the team work of talented people with strong personalities, and does not focus on the promotion of (in other words on serving) just one person, who, quite often appears in the proposal under two or three different capacities (e.g. playwright + director + actor, etc.). *Notice of Application for State Subsidies for the Greek Theatre 2008-2009: Terms and Conditions*, 4. (Criterion 6.)

Second, playwriting has been cut loose from the field of literature and is cultivated as stage practice. This new perception of playwriting certainly reflects—perhaps even reproduces—the “rift” between contemporary theater and the rest of cultural expression. As Michel Vinaver observed in his study about theater publishing in France, this rift is directly confirmed by the refusal of large publishing houses to include theater in their editorial program, and also by the absolute indifference shown by literary critics towards contemporary theater texts (Vinaver 72). On the other hand, systematic training in playwriting is enjoying spectacular development throughout Europe, extending from isolated workshops, scholarships from cultural institutions for playwriting (the French Ministry of Culture, Fondation Beaumarchais, Centre National du Théâtre etc.), residency placements with national theaters (like the Royal Court Theatre in London or the Chartreuse—Centre National des Ecritures du Spectacle in France) to specialized course modules in university departments (mainly in Germany and the UK).

Third, since the beginning of the 80s, in the French-speaking world in particular, though not only there, if the playwright had, till then, been identified as an intellectual, today he/she is principally identified as a theater practitioner. This new perception of the dramatic text and the playwright may be the result of the undermining of the omnipotence of the director, which, in an apolitical era of ideological breakdown, often led to self-referring stage shows of sterile formalism. During the 80s, it became clear that new stage roles and new ways of performing (writing, acting, showing) had to be invented: the traditional distinction between the director and the playwright had become inoperative and publishers specializing in theater undertook to bridge, in a way, the distance between them. The publishing house *Théâtrales*, calling the situation regarding the repertoire a “false crisis”¹⁰ at the time of its founding (1981), became the first channel for the expression of this new generation of “professionals, theatre practitioners, directors, playwrights, designers, actors who are inventing scripts based on acting and stage reality.”¹¹ Effectively, *Théâtrales* but also French series specializing in theater such as *Actes Sud-Papiers*, *Les Solitaires Intempestifs*, *Théâtre Ouvert*, etc. have, for the last twenty-five years or so, been a seedbed for dramatists like Michel Azama, Eugène Durif, Xavier Durringer, Didier-Georges Gabily, Rodrigo Garcia, Patrick Kermann, Jean-Luc Lagarce,

10. *Théâtrales*, “Bureau du répertoire,” Catalogue 83, (Paris: Fédération Nationale de Théâtre, 1983) 2.

11. See above.

Daniel Lemahieu, Phillippe Minyana, Wajdi Mouawad, Olivier Py, Nöelle Renaude and others, whose way of writing has its source in the practice of acting, but who, at the same time, lay claim to the status of literary writers.

The merging, however, of the skills of the author and actor is in no way accompanied by a view of writing as a tool, as a kind of scenario or canvas of action, as it may happen with director-writers in Greece. On the contrary, the created texts distance themselves from the process of their realization on stage. That the playwright has his/her origins in the practice of theater intrudes on the aesthetic identity of these texts in the sense that the common element is their pursuit of the physicality of language itself. Thus, the contemporary dramatist finds him-herself at the polar opposite from the stereotype of the playwright, which has survived up until today, as the ethical reformer of the world. Refusing the traditional didactic characteristic of his/her role, he/she tries to reconnect with the channel of poetry, using the relationship with the stage not as an ideological but as a sensual experience.

This is an assertion symbolically made by the poet, playwright and visual artist, Valère Novarina, who in the last few years often prefers to direct his own work. "The Theatre of Ears" which he introduces attempts an extreme undertaking: to restore to the theater, a place where one essentially goes to see, the interiority which is an ingredient of listening (Novarina, "Entry into a Theater of Ears" 146). This does not mean that such theater will lack images—in fact, precisely because it is characterized by a dominant and persistent sense of monologue, it can only be completed visually. But not by illustration: the text does not contain the image, thereby imposing on the director the search for its complementary relationship with the stage. The "theatre of the ears" is a consciously "utopian theater" (innumerable characters, complete freedom of time and space, exclusively metonymically functioning action).¹² Because of the impossibility of representing it, this "theater" impels an absolutely original image-making, leading to a radical independence of image from speech. The performer cannot represent it, but he can play it or play *with* it. By choosing such a paradoxical title for his theater, Novarina is asking to be compared and contrasted, not with the image, but with the "abuse of sight" (Débord 17), with the "spectacle" in the sense of an illusionary reality which tends to replace the

12. Stage direction of the type "the actor bends down to look for a verb" or "successively takes actions out of his pocket" are typical. *The second to last man (l'Avant-dernier des hommes)*, 26, 28.

real senses.¹³ And it is these that he aims to activate: experience in the place of the spectacle; the actor in the place of the spectator; in a “society of spectacle,” hearing is set in the place of sight: a truly subversive, revolutionary intention.

My eyes have seen so much, that I can’t bear to see anything anymore: hospitals, Mycenaean ruins, true copies of lazarettos, animals with real fur [...] This very minute I’d like all the lights in the theatre to go out, and all those who know, who think they know, to go back into the darkened theatre, not to look at anything yet again, not to look, as always happens, but to take a lesson in darkness, to suck in the half-darkness, to suffer what the world is and to break out into howling laughter. To suffer the rhythm, time, numbers, the four dimensions. To make an entrance into music. (Novarina, *For Louis de Funès* 55-57)¹⁴

According to Novarina, in today’s theater, appearance (“opsis”) is pitted against speech, the body, truth: “We don’t go to the theatre to see, once again, the very same, the identical image of the world multiplied by thirty-two dramatic positions, but—how can one say this?—we go in order to be present in mind, in body, in truth ...” (*For Louis de Funès* 65). In the place of a theater physicalized in the extreme, he envisions a theater which will engage deeply with the art of the actor, offering as medicine to the contemporary world, the wisdom of playing: “Louis de Funès knew more about man than all the experts on what being human is about [...] because he knew—up there on the stage, in his bones—that man is something that re-invents itself every moment, something that de-constructs itself through words every evening, something that is torn down continuously and re-built, something that becomes completely new with every breath taken” (61). The main ingredients of this theater, then, are the body and speech. Nevertheless, the essence of speech here is not in the meaning, but in its absolutely “concrete” dimension, that is language in the sound of words themselves and in the rhythm that their sequence produces. The word, because of the painful practice that its embodiment and projection imposes, is the most faithful companion of the actor in his/her attempt to subdue matter. In this way, Novarina radicalizes the definition of poetry, since poetry is indeed more concerned with the

13. The “theatre of the ears” could be a festive response to the pessimism of Débord, having of course completely assimilated him.

14. The extracts cited from *For Louis de Funès* are translated from the Greek edition.

“how” and less with the “what,” with the use of language and not with the “message.” Words, in a silent reading, may narrate absolutely nothing at all, no story, but only an arbitrary story-line that its reader will create. While on stage, they are suddenly lit by a uniform perspective, which has to do with the actor’s labor, physical labor, above all, with the objective of acquiring the technique of speech and rhythm. This is why it is difficult for such texts to move off the page without the input of the stage creators, especially those that are written for the theater (*L’Atelier volant*, *Vous qui habitez le temps*, *L’Opérette imaginaire*, *le Drame de la vie*, *le Discours des animaux*, *l’Avant-dernier des hommes*, etc.). In some ways, Novarina manages to re-state Peter Brook’s request by creating an “empty space” within language itself. And the audience is led into a state of non-understanding so firmly structured that it activates a kind of “bodily listening” (Verschuer Von 12),¹⁵ similar to that required by performances of contemporary dance. The actor’s first listener, however, is the writer, in an inverted function: “The actor writes the text, the writer merely repeats it,” states Novarina’s German translator, who is also an actor and a director (Verschuer Von 11).¹⁶ It is interesting that the text which established him in the theater, and which was not originally written for the stage, was inspired in 1973 by watching rehearsals of another work, *Atelier volant*, from which he was expelled by the director because of his insistent interventions. And so Novarina’s visionary *Letter to the Actors* came about in 1979, glorifying the actor and his/her work.

Equally significant for the emergence of a movement for an “Actor’s Theater,” with a renaissance of speech at its center, is another letter, written, thirty years later, by the actor, playwright and director Olivier Py, addressing young actors. Having an essay form and destined for the stage, the *Epistle to Young Actors so that the Word be Rendered unto the Word* is written in the style of a biblical parable about the trials of the Word (of Poetry but also of Meaning) in the society of Spectacle. According to Py, the urgent nature of speech which animates the actor, should also guide the contemporary playwright, since only through this, albeit inarticulate, impetuous, spasmodic speech, is there any hope for the revelation of the Word to be kept alive. Certainly, in this text, we are dealing with a more “didactic,” “theological” perspective. But, in any case, writing and speech, writing and interpretation, are so closely connected in this “postdramatic theatre,”¹⁷ born from the “crisis

15. Translated from the Greek.

16. Translated from the Greek.

17. After Lehmann’s book title.

of representation,” that one cannot easily differentiate the writer from the performer. Exactly as, at the level of a written text, it is hard to differentiate the *I* of the writer from the *I* of the character speaking. We are dealing with a theater that is anti-dramatic, more related to poetry, in the sense of speech prevailing over action, monologue over dialogue, but also interiority/reading over spectacle/sight: If that which comprised the theater script’s particularity, according to the Hegelian concept, was the traditional distinction of the character from the playwright’s *I*, in postdramatic writing the borders between *written* and *spoken* are abolished. “Its main representatives appear to be more interested in a kind of written transcendence of the theatre, rather than in theatre scripts” (Mervant-Roux 129). Thus the printing of these texts takes on a primary role. “The writers respond to publication as a process whereby the text is completed, as independently and just as importantly as it is by interpretation on stage” (Kondylaki, “The ambition of postdramaticity” 56-57).

The aesthetic parameters of the “Actor’s Theater” cannot be analyzed in detail here. But, certainly, in our examination of it, we need to take into account that *experience* (writing, acting) tends to be pushed into prominence over *distant observation* (spectating, identifying reality on stage) in today’s theater. According to Denis Guénoun, French theorist but also playwright, director and actor, “only the players (*les joueurs, en désir de jeu*) make up the audience of today” (165). The invention of the cinema, by giving the imaginary world of the stage concrete substance, irrevocably cancelled out the function of identification in the theater (152). So, the stage is no longer defined by the stage characters themselves, but principally by the process of their performance—and of their dramatic construction—a process that is today invited to expose itself in all its transparency (163). This is exactly the point at which there is some meaning in seeking the power of the theater as a living art today. In an era where audiovisual media infiltrate the individual’s every possible definition, the stage, fighting virtuality and passive spectating, is becoming a place for experiencing. And this is also confirmed through the ever more frequent use of interactive media in contemporary performances, which demand the active physical engagement of the audience; even in the case of whole, original works, contemporary or classical.

The Playwright is Dead, Long Live the Text

Theater writing in its most innovative forms has, today, incorporated the theatrical exploration of former decades, based on the convictions of

Craig, Brecht and Artaud, regarding the claim to separate theater from literature.¹⁸ The question whether theater belongs to literature or not, which once sounded revolutionary and progressive, today sounds outdated: the answer had already been given in the 60s, with the collective works (*créations collectives*) which definitively disengaged the theater event from the dramatic form. In our times, dramaturgy using myths, narration, autobiographical testimonies, memoirs and all kinds of extracts, adaptations of literary texts but also the practice of intervention in plays belonging to the repertoire, appear absolutely legitimized. Consequently, theater is no longer “trapped” in literary fields—something the nineteenth century inappropriately imposed—nor is it exclusively identified with a dramatic form; it has once again been given back to the world of the stage. Precisely this established view of the theater as a “stage-practice” (Ubersfeld 9) led to the differentiation of theater studies from the branch of literature (Dort 9).¹⁹

However, the need of the creators of the 60s for emancipation from the play affected not only the development of the live spectacle, but also the very process of dramaturgical practice, often with negative results. The opening up

18. The question whether theater belongs to literature or not has preoccupied people involved with the theater since the early twentieth century, and has often caused heated debate. The positions of Edward Gordon Craig and Antonin Artaud have been among the most emblematic on the issue: the former's essay *On the Art of the Theatre* (1911), in which he maintains that dramatists are a foreign body in the theater and asserts that the art of theater will only rediscover its real power once it rids itself of them (“Plays and playwrights”), and the latter's *Le théâtre et son double* (1935), in which he demands that the stage be relieved of the burden of masterpieces of “written poetry” and that the poetic function be assigned to the director (“En finir avec les chefs-d'œuvre”). The questioning of the dramatist's authority later finds fertile ground in the Brechtian perception of theater direction as dramaturgy. After the Second World War, the issue resurfaces to occupy center stage, this time on the part of people of letters, such as the powerful French critic Gaëtan Picon who, in the *Panorama of Contemporary French Literature* of 1960, raised the question “Does theater belong to literature?” (294).

19. In his famous article “L'Etat d'esprit dramaturgique,” Dort notes: “When I entered university, the only thing that mattered was the theatrical text. At best, dramaturgy consisted in studying its structures. At worst, it was dealt with just like any other literary text. So, our only care at the Sorbonne Institute of Theatre Studies, was to take direction into consideration [...] To first lay down the stage event and using this as a starting point to move up to the text. So, we ended up giving precedence to the concept of theatrical performance and addressing it as a relatively autonomous datum. As a particular object. It is on this particularity that theatre studies at university level were established as distinct from literary ones.”

of the stage to “any text” (Pavis 353)²⁰ on the one hand, made the term “dramatic” relative, but, on the other, often introduced awkwardness at the level of speech: what should be said, why is it necessary, why is it necessary *on stage*. Thus, theater texts without literary distinction multiplied. The questioning of the complementary nature of stage and text, however, in no way removes the demand for poetry in the texts as a claim for density, not only at the level of thought, but also of rhythm. On the contrary, it re-instates it even more intensely, for the additional reason that the reader, above all, becomes the ideal recipient of writing which is indifferent to stage conventions. At the same time, however, can poetic writing in the theater be completely disengaged from the dramatic form? And what might the boundaries of its “evacuation” be?

It has been suggested that contemporary theater has more in common with the novel than with drama (Corvin 1416-18). The lengthy monologues, the absence of action and conflict constitute the standard characteristics of a large number of dramatic texts written after Beckett. This reversal is clearly visible in printed works. Often, thumbing through a play, the contemporary reader is met with blocks of text which in no way remind him/her of customary, published theatrical works. And then again, the exact opposite occurs as well: the page is so sparsely printed that the coherence of the reading is interrupted, since it is composed by the writer with reference to pauses and gaps. The lay-out indicates poetic rather than theater writing. This does not, of course, mean that, in this way, the demand for a “poetic theater” is met—especially if we accept that poetry in the theater cannot be restricted only to the word, but presupposes, as the contemporary Greek writer Dimitris Dimitriadis has stressed, the “creation of events on stage” as well (“The poet and the stage” 1).²¹ Equally, there is an enormous distance that separates contemporary theater writing from classical works, as well as from the “last desperate attempt to restore imitation” (Abirached 389) which the avant-garde of the 50s engaged in. In the elliptical, fragmented language of the contemporary theater text and in the breakdown of the authority of the playwright, one can distinguish both the questioning of the play as the “ob-

20. “Putting forward a definition of the dramatic text that sets it apart from other types of texts is quite problematic. [...] Any text is dramatizable from the moment we use it on stage.”

21. “By poetic theatre I mean [...] the making up of dramatic situations, I do not confine poetry only to speech. Or else we have a theatre which is not dramatic. It could become lyric, it could become elegiac, it could even become an oratorio, but it is not ‘drama,’ the way I mean it... For me poetic theatre is a theatre that creates scenic events.” (Trans. Daphné Angelopoulou).

ject of the performance,” in semiotic terms, as well as the mark of deconstruction, as a new way of writing and reading, which is accompanied by the anti-authoritarian and ideologically progressive demands of the 60s. In order to verify this, it is enough to re-read the ground-breaking articles by Roland Barthes “The Death of the Author” and “From *Work* to *Text*”.

By giving his “text” the definition of “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture” (“The Death of the Author” 146), Barthes radicalized a concept of literature that had first appeared at the end of the nineteenth century and had been reinforced by the explosion of surrealism. The surrealists had recognized in automatic writing and in the narration of dreams “a key capable of opening that box with the multiple bases called man to an infinite degree” (Breton). From a perspective such as this, meaning appears as a polysemic entity: it can no longer be considered as a “message from the Author-God” (Barthes, “The Death of the Author” 146). In the name of the Author, with a capital A, of course, there is no questioning of the subject, but of the universality of the truth which it supposedly expresses: “literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to assign a *secret*, an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law” (147). Even if this means that literature is in danger of being exclusively reduced to the experience of writing. So, “literary genres” break down, since they presuppose the meaning of the Work—a trademark of Great Literature—while writing activates “that point where only language acts, *performs*, and not *me*” (143). Writing refers to a manual activity, a notion which is also indicated in the term “modern scriptor” (146), which Barthes invents to replace the traditional “Author.” “The text is experienced only as an activity of production” (“From *Work* to *Text*” 157) which resembles a “performative, a rare verbal form (exclusively given in the first person and in the present tense), in which the enunciation has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered” (“The Death of the Author” 145-46). Finally, since writing stops being the exclusive domain of experts and opens up to every “subject that writes,” the boundaries between writer and reader, writing and reading, are removed.²²

22. In his essay, “The Author as Producer” (1934), Walter Benjamin has already played a part in the demystification of the Author by underlining the access of workers to newspapers in the Former Soviet Union: “[...] As literature gains in breadth what it loses in depth, so the distinction between author and public, which the bourgeois

Schematically speaking, if the Work refers to “art,” “working” refers to “profession”: this reduction of “writing” to a “work” with its usual meaning is inherent in the passing “from *Work* to *Text*.” Following on from the sense of the Work, the sense of the Text separates literature from art: First, the Text resists categorization (“From *Work* to *Text*” 157).²³ Second, it accepts its identification with the signifier (158-59)²⁴ while the Work supposedly carries a hidden meaning. Third, it is defined by its “polysemy” (159),²⁵ disdaining the uniqueness of the Work. Fourth, it resists ownership (“From *Work* to *Text*” 161)²⁶. The “text” gives birth to the author and not the author to the “text.” Fifth, it is placed at the opposite pole from literature as an activity which is effected by an elite and is intended for the same elite, abolishing the boundaries between the creator

press maintains by artificial means, is beginning to disappear in the Soviet press. The reader is always prepared to become a writer, in the sense of being one who describes or prescribes. As an expert—not in any particular trade perhaps, but anyway an expert on the subject of the job he happens to be in – he gains access to authorship. [...] Writing about work makes up part of the skill necessary to perform it. Authority to write is no longer founded in a specialist training but in a polytechnical one, and so becomes common property” (90). Benjamin uses this example not only in order to question “the conventional separation between genres, between writer and poet, scholar and popularizer” but also between “author and reader.” It is understood that nothing any longer remains of this differentiation, which the western bourgeois press of his time kept up, between the well-known author, and the public. Today anyone can have access to newspapers; the public can at any moment express itself in them. Besides, the platform of public expression has expanded significantly. In addition to the printed press, there is now electronic media, not just radio and television, but also blogs, where opinion and information do not pass through any kind of institutional filter. The more control and filtering of media is removed, the more liberated writing becomes.

23. “[...] the Text does not stop at (good) literature; it cannot be contained in a hierarchy, even in a simple division of genres. What constitutes the Text is, on the contrary (or precisely), its subversive force in respect of the old classifications.”
24. “The logic regulating the Text is not comprehensive (define *what the work means*) but metonymic; the activity of associations, contiguities, carryings-over coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy [...]; the work—in the best of cases is *moderately* symbolic (its symbolic runs out, comes to a halt); the Text is *radically* symbolic: a work conceived, perceived and received in its integrally symbolic nature is a text. Thus is the Text restored to language.”
25. “The Text is plural. Which is not simply to say that it has several meanings, but that it accomplishes the very plural of meaning: an irreducible (and not merely an acceptable) plural.”
26. “The author is reputed the father and the owner of his work. [...] As for the Text, it reads without the inscription of the Father. [...] Hence no vital *respect* is due to the Text : it can be broken ... ”

and the recipient (161).²⁷ In this way, it promises the reader a pleasure which classical works deprive him/her of: the pleasure of re-writing, without worrying about being disrespectful, since “it is impossible today to write *like that*” (Barthes 163).²⁸

Singing in the Ashes of Language

The speaking subject is no longer as responsible for the speech (he who pronounces it, who affirms and who judges en soi, who is sometimes depicted in it, in an appropriately shaped grammatical form), as is non-existence, in whose vacuum the indeterminate diffusion of language continues ceaselessly.

Michel Foucault, “La pensée du dehors”

*When you're up to your neck in shit,
All you can do is sing.*

Samuel Beckett

Similarly to a literature reconciled to its “essentially verbal condition” (Barthes, “The Death of the Author” 144), in the postdramatic theater the leading role is given to language itself. In other words, theater writing is confronted by the “non-comprehensive logic” (“From *Work* to *Text*” 158) of the “text.” “Language appears not as speech of characters—if there still are definable characters at all—but as an autonomous theatricality” (Lehmann 18). So, the “play” is no more conceived as a “comprehensible narrative and / or mental totality” (21). On the contrary, the construction of the plot gives way to the elaboration of the signifier itself, something that releases speech from “meaning” as an exclusively rational entity (Kermann 42)²⁹ and may

27. “... the Text requires that one try to abolish (or at the very least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader to the work but by joining them in a single signifying practice.”

28. “I can delight in reading and re-reading Proust, Balzac, even—why not?—Alexandre Dumas. But this pleasure, no matter how keen and even when free from all prejudice, remains in part [...] a pleasure of consumption; for if I can read these authors, I also know that I cannot re-write them (that it is impossible today to write like that) and this knowledge, depressing enough, suffices to cut me off from the production of these works, in the very moment their remoteness establishes my modernity (is not to be modern to know clearly what cannot be started over again?). As for Text, it is bound to *jouissance*, that is to a pleasure without separation.”

29. “... the gesture of speaking has meaning by itself, because there is meaning in the theatre [...] but [...] not where we expect it to be, not in the story itself (of the text, of the performance, etc).”

allow “the placing of difference to be not in individuality and psychological contrivance, but in the manner of addressing [...] or in the differentiation of intensity” (Lacoste 13). As Hans-Thies Lehmann notes, what finds articulation in postdramatic writing “is less intentionality—a characteristic of the subject—than its failure, less conscious will than desire, less the ‘I’ than the ‘subject of the unconscious’” (Lehmann 18).

This kind of concept favors reading rather than interpretation, since speech—which retains the texture of a monologue even when it is shared among different characters—lays claim to a universal neutrality. It is impersonal, it can be assigned from mouth to mouth—and this is why its ideal agent becomes the author him-herself. Public readings of texts without aesthetic intent, which were occasionally followed in the past, have given their place today in whole performances, where the text is shown to advantage on stage, as in the case of Joris Lacoste after 2000.³⁰ This alienation of the speaker from the self—real or imagined—having Beckett’s theater, especially of his last period, as a catalytic point of reference, is in step with the “destruction of dialogue” (Sarrazac 310)³¹ and whatever this presupposes: the breakdown of trust in the communicative power of words and the return to the closed world of the “I”; but a foreign “I,” struck by the madness of history, which has lost dominance over its very own language. Indicative is the work of Patrick Kermann³² who was writing in the 90s. His work is possessed by the anguish of reason in a ruined world, in the shadow of the Holocaust, seeking a contemporary form for the expression of mourning: “Just these words, virtually—or exclusive-

30. Joris Lacoste (1973-...): One of the representatives of the new generation of French playwrights. He often reads his poems in public as a kind of acoustic performance. He first appeared in 2000 with *Ce qui s'appelle crier*, which was written for the radio and was read on the French national station France Culture making an impression among intellectuals. His works have since been published by Théâtre Ouvert/Enjeux (*Diptyque*, 2002) and in the periodicals *Inventaire/Invention*, *Chaoïd*, *remue.net* and *L'Animal*. His work *Purgatoire* has been performed recently at Théâtre National de la Colline (2006-2007).

31. “At the end of the twentieth century one of our common stakes is the emphasis put on the monologue and the subsequent acceleration of the destruction of dialogue. At the same time, at the level of personal poetics, from Beckett to Duras passing through Novarina we can detect several unique *idioms*, types or variations of monologues, which constitute an equal number of answers to the common stake.”

32. Patrick Kermann (1959-2000): He produced the whole of his œuvre, which includes modern opera libretti, theater plays and translations in the 1990s. His texts have been published by Théâtre Ouvert-Tapuscrit, Phénix Editions, Lansman-Nocturnes Théâtre and Editions Inventaire.

ly—sounds, giving birth to other sounds, and a rhythm, but nothing more. It is from this point that [...] this language is born. Almost obliquely: when it establishes itself in the body, pervading the writer as he/she is writing, like a foreign language that does not define the world but its irreconcilable distance from the world through its monstrous, deformed syntax [...] always repugnant, since it is itself the inexpressible, the non-representational, beyond location” (Kermann 41).

The postdramatic writing reflects a similar, “disrespectful” relationship with language. The Aristotelian “beautiful [...] living creature” (Aristotle 1450 b, 41-44)³³ is lost forever, along with the very faith in the possibility of the “fulfillment” of existence. The text becomes the image of an intentional, as well as an inescapable, interior schism. So, the postdramatic author searches for beauty in the “breaking” of “size” and “order”; the claim “beginning, middle, end” (29-32) is overturned. The postdramatic text does not invoke, as the theatrical play does in its traditional form, “the imagining of its own representation” (Ubersfeld 56). The sense of “incompleteness” (“incomplétude”)³⁴ while reading is realized in its own composition, since it seeks an intentionally fragmented aspect. The text often becomes a space for an arbitrary accumulation of images, structured in such a way that any new articulation is possible at the moment of performance. This gives the text a new autonomy. As it is not objectively performable, it demands the freedom of imagination in its reading, exactly as with the novel. It is therefore open to multiple stage versions. In this sense, it anticipates its theatrical violations in its very composition.³⁵ In any case, as the director (until 2005) of the French CNES (Centre National des Ecritures du Spectacle) emphasized “the fragment permitted writers to write differently. Contemporary writing no longer respects the classical form, however deep what it relates is” (Villaume).

This opening reflects the diffusion of boundaries between writing, acting and seeing. So, the recipient can create his/her own text (Villaume). But in order to do that, he/she has to infiltrate the mechanisms of interpretation. An ideal example of this is Novarina’s theater, which we have already re-

33. “... in everything that is beautiful, whether it be a living creature or any organism composed of parts, these parts must not only be orderly arranged but must also have a certain magnitude of their own; for beauty consists in magnitude and ordered arrangement.”

34. See Ubersfeld 11.

35. One way of “opening up” the text to the interpreter is to eliminate punctuation, a practice seen in a large part of contemporary texts.

ferred to, where the text operates as a kind of musical score for the stage presentation. Here the meaning doesn't derive from the words, but from the associations that are revealed during their pronunciation. This writing doesn't follow the traditional "dramatic" criteria, but is defined as a point of fusion of matter and spirit, and in this way it becomes "performative" and "theatrical," since it chooses the body of the actor as its final destination. We could say that Novarina's texts illustrate very precisely Denis Guénoun's position according to which "today, playing/acting takes over the stage completely" (156). The dividing line between writing and acting is definitively eliminated. The appearance of this "new generation of writers, who have established themselves not only as theatre practitioners but also as literary men" (Bailloux 69-70) is not accidental. So this tendency of the "text" to absorb the boundaries of the writer and reader is realized both metaphorically and literally in the post-dramatic text. Besides, the expression "I write for the theater" today includes adaptations. It is a fact that today's stage seems flooded with novels, poetry, even adaptations of other theatrical plays. But, like Barthes's "text," the post-dramatic text springs from the process of a conscious meta-writing, either directly (in the case of an adaption of some other work), or indirectly (in the case where the text arises from an intertextual comparison). It is indeed a fact that the trend of adaptation in theater today would be incomprehensible without having removed guilt from the pleasure of "re-writing" ("From *Work* to *Text*" 163).

All in all, the rise of the "text" does not only offer a critical tool in approaching contemporary theater, but also liberates a new way of writing, which, however incompatible it may be with the traditional concept of the play, continues to contain its own "truth" (Novarina, "L'écriture, le livre et la scène" 13). But this truth has to do with "precision" (*justesse*) which one seeks at the level of the poetic synthesis and not in the expression of a monosemous meaning. According to Novarina,

there is only one truth [...] and the actor must not distort it but reveal it. [...] The most wonderful actors do no more than play the real music of the poet, nothing more, and they do it every time so that it sounds like it is being heard for the first time. Because it is always elusive, it is never recorded, it is always destroyed, an unheard music which was waiting for them. (13)

Hence the desire of some writers, like Philippe Minyana,³⁶ to "guide" the rehearsals:

36. Among the most productive French playwrights of the 80s who received exceptional

We, the writers, must be present at every moment of rehearsal, especially since today's writing (often, in any case) adopts this dense, abundant language, the speech of survival, the transfer [...] of the chaos of everyday language; from the moment that there is preoccupation with the song, with a specific kind of enunciation, with a particular rhythm, there is [...] organic material to orchestrate and we the writers who write it and who verify it can guide the actor in a different way from the director. (18)

The "respect" towards such texts in their stage production does not entail the creator's serving one *a priori* specific meaning so much as rendering their inner rhythm. The play abandons for good the former intention of communicating a specific meaning, no longer considering language capable of more than singing on its very ashes—just as Winnie does in her earthen hill.³⁷ "Words are never beautiful and true" according to Novarina, "[what is beautiful and true is] only the destruction of one by the other, their contrast with thought, their combustion within the phrase, the movement that rouses them" ("L'écriture, le livre et la scène" 13). The actor is invited to deal with words as if they were the material of "confession" (Arditis),³⁸ but relieved of any didactic intent. "What I would like now is something that happens on the surface, to end with depth, the deeper meaning, the grand meaning, myth, metaphor, the lyricism of the subject and all that metaphysical equipment that theatre drags around like a compulsory testament" (Lacoste 13). Postdramatic writing no longer wants to interpret, it presents fragments of reality, having, however, lost the ideological thread that joins them or, having chosen to lose this thread, and responding in this way to the collapse of the great ideologies that fed the theater of the twentieth century.

From this point on, it is obvious that the demand for representation of the world as a component element of the "dramatic" is lifted as something completely utopian. As Michel Simonot points out, "A common character-

support from subsidized bodies. Since 1979, he has written more than thirty-five plays, libretti and radio plays, a large part of which he has directed himself. Most of them have been published by Ed. Théâtrales. In 2008, he moved to L'Arche publications.

37. The reference is to the protagonist in Beckett's *Happy Days*.

38. "In order for a text to be destined for the stage, it needs a nucleus of public confession. The action of standing before an audience and speaking has a unique, extreme, dynamism."

istic of contemporary writings, textual or not, if there is such a thing, is that they all carry in their structure, in their form (if one considers the fragmentation or the absence of narration), and even in their content (if one considers the violence, social or physical, that they present) the very issue of representation. More precisely, the meaning of the *contemporary* defines the questioning of the very possibility of representation and therefore of intellectual revisioning through art" (100). This characteristic concerns the live performance arts more than any other, since the simplicity of the means and resources does not allow them to compete with either the cinema or television with regard to the performability of the real. So they are forced to make use, to an extreme degree, of elements that are entirely their own: those that differentiate them from technically reproducible arts. The postdramatic text seeks precisely that: "theatricality" beyond representational limits while at the same time it points to its impasses.

Arguments for a Re-evaluation of the Dramatic (in Expectation of a New Drama)

Indeed, it appears that despite its "castration," the desire for the "dramatic" remains. First, the "end of genres," from the moment it is registered in a pre-determined context, seems forced. Is it not contradictory for new dramatists to insist that they write "theater" when they are promoting its nullification? For better or for worse, language itself, and not pre-determined theoretical criteria, "decide" the destination of the text. The case of the Greek writer Dimitris Dimitriadis, whose work has been particularly well received in France over the past few years,³⁹ is typical: despite the large number of dramatic texts that he has had published since the beginning of the 1980s, the theater world has shown a clear preference for his narrative texts, and these, later, became the starting point for the discovery of his plays. But these texts were *not written* with the stage in mind. If there is a transcendence of the dramatic form here, it occurs *despite the author*, since that is not his goal—and that is also the reason for his cautiousness regarding their stage production. And yet, these texts are in complete accord with contemporary stage aesthetics which call for the crossing of genre boundaries—something which makes his theoretical insistence on "distinction between

39. The Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe (Paris) is putting together a large tribute to the author by initiative of its director, Olivier Py, for the 2009-2010 season. In this context, a large number of his unpublished works has been translated, so that they can be published and presented on the radio and on the stage.

the genres” seem paradoxical.⁴⁰ On the other hand, although they take the form of narrative or monologue, texts like *Dying as a Country* or *The Commission* address somebody. Someone is speaking to somebody else. Even if the “I” is impersonal, its speech allows the breath, the body, the matter of the speaker to reach the recipient.⁴¹ This, of course, can also occur in a play with a plot. But the plot does not necessarily guarantee “flesh and blood” characters. Conversely, all narrative texts do not necessarily invite the human voice and oral articulation. Quite the opposite, in fact. So what is it that makes an autonomous literary text theatrically interesting?

The question is no longer one of choosing between a traditional form or not. This has now been absolutely consumed by the passing from the “Play” to the “Text.” The question is to determine what makes a text “theatrical” regardless of form. And this seems to be the ability to generate action. In this sense, the “distancing from the material commitment of space and time” and the “concentration on characters and action which is governed by an internal dramatic core” (Sakellariidou 185) that Dimitris Dimitriadis seeks in his latest texts, written for the stage, after having experimented for years with the dramatic form appears extremely significant.

The exploration of similar issues, though, of course, in different stylistic terms has made Koltès one of the most popular contemporary playwrights in the world.⁴² None of the writers who have emerged in France since his death in the mid-1980s has managed to supersede him. Although he violates basic pre-requisites of drama—opting for vast monologues; writing passages for reading and not interpretation; preferring loose, almost un-

40. “It is here [...] that [...] the great paradox of Dimitriadis’s artistic creation lies: While at the theoretical level he asserts, and in part, puts into action a writing which is free of restrictions of time and place, and of regulatory provisions, when it comes to theatre he still recognizes and cultivates the existence of genre boundaries” (Sakellariidou 185).

41. “Neither Greek, nor a theatre practitioner, but simply an author. An author, however, who is of interest to the theater—because he contains the theater. There exists an inner, fundamental, constituent bond between his writing and that which constitutes theater: the body, the present time and demand for transformation; thus confirming that writing for the theater does not exhaust itself in dramatic form” (Kondylaki, “Dimitris Dimitriadis” 229).

42. The circulation of his works is indicative: By 2001 the sales of his works in France had reached unprecedented figures by contemporary standards for plays: “*The Solitude of Cotton Fields* 48,000 copies, *Roberto Zucco* 36,000 copies, *West Pier* 27,500, *Return to the Desert* 19,000, and *Black Battles with Dogs* 17,000 copies, while a contemporary play barely sells 500 copies” (Salino).

der-developed plot—his language is not content with a self-complacent “poeticality.” He rather aims at generating action, something that leads him to offer very clearly defined characters, necessarily placing them in the context of myth. Consequently, the violation of dramatic form does not aim at negating it but revealing what remains of it. The dramatic language may seem, perhaps, more anarchic, more delirious and more deficient in its structure, but it preserves an ultimate demand: to capture the present; to capture the voice, movement, seeing, addressing, in the here and now. “You cannot make a character say something directly, you cannot ever describe as one does in a novel, talk about a situation, you have to make it exist. [...] You cannot make someone say *I am sad*, he has to say *I need to go for a walk*” (Koltès 13). This is precisely what a master of urban drama would claim: “For characters to emerge vital and vivid from the written page, the playwright must find the speech that constitutes *spoken action*, the living speech that gives movement, the direct expression that is the equivalent of action, the unique expression [...] that is appropriate for this character in this given situation” (Pirandello 19). In a similar vein Hegel states in his *Aesthetics*: “In order to be truly dramatic, the poet must keep the performance alive in front of his eyes, must make his heroes speak and act [...] in the sense of a real and present action” (Hegel 650).

Of course, in the contemporary dramatic text the production of action must be confined exclusively to the use of speech and not in the ability of characters to act, that is, to make decisions and implement them. As it has been already observed in the middle of the 1950s regarding the “static dramas” of Maeterlinck, where “the category of action is replaced by that of situation” (Szondi 49), similarly in contemporary theater—in the work of Koltès in particular—it is situation that prevails rather than action. And this happens not through description but through experiencing, which in the theater is produced by contact, conflict, and interaction between separate characters.

It is precisely this element—the element of the Other—that is missing from postdramatic texts when they are accused of egocentricity and of “navel-gazing” (Lansman, Bobiller).⁴³ “In this way, by physicalizing,

43. This seems to be the logic behind the reduction in drama publications by publishers of general literature since the 80s. Reactions to this issue are often very strong: “In reality, it is not easy for metaphysical or platonic texts, with no other content beyond an *I love you you don't love me* or *my navel is the centre of the world* to reach the audience. This is also the case with texts whose elegant language fails to mask the lack of content” (Lansman). Or “*The plays you usually receive are...? – Pitiful – What is*

fetishizing language, in a sense by freeing it from its content, we render it to a kind of spoken music [...]” (Finkelkraut 17). However much one is obliged to avoid critical generalizations which aim at condemning the whole of contemporary drama, today’s critic is indeed called in to distinguish in contemporary dramatic speech between a functional formalism and a narcissistic one which makes language itself its object. The danger of verbal self-complacency had been discerned by Foucault as a possible “side-effect” of the reduction of literature to “its verbal condition” (Barthes, “The Death of the Author” 144) as early as 1969: “To attribute a primary position to writing” is also “a way of re-formulating in transcendental terms [...] the theological confirmation of its sacred character” (823). The postdramatic text often seems to suffer from such a sanctification of language. In French playwrighting, especially, from the 80s on, this tendency was quite marked.

However, by contrast to the novel and poetry, the theater is inherently dialogic. It may not be superfluous to bear in mind that tragedy was transformed from ritual into art, at the moment when Aeschylus increased the number of actors from one to two, reduced the part of the chorus and established dialogue as its main component. In reality, for someone to try to express polyphony through monologue does not only contradict the particularity of theater writing but also leaves unexploited its greatest potential, which is none other than multivocality. As a result, instead of shaking the authority of the author, which was one of the main aims of Barthes’s “text,” we are returning to a writing that lacks in differentiation, since all the characters—regardless of whether they appear through dialogue or monologue—are nothing more than variations of one single voice: the voice of the author.

Finally, the concern with the “absence of meaning” that the postdramatic movement expresses in every possible way perhaps increases even more our need for meaning. Certainly, to refuse to give meaning a definitive dimension, defines a position that sets itself against dogma and authoritarianism. But it also allows one to avoid taking a position, or declaring an attitude in relation to reality, or naming it. In the theater which, because of its public nature, always invites a shared view of the world, the preoccupation with rhythm is not enough to constitute an urgent speech, a speech of “survival” (Minyana 18). This does not mean that the intent of the contemporary playwright to overcome the didacticism of grand meaning is not of ethi-

usually the subject? – Nothing but their own selves, it relates to them only” (Bobillier).

cal value. However, its unconventionality atrophies since it often functions as an excuse for the verbal narcissism of writers. Thus, in the face of the violent turn that reality has taken in the West, which in the 90s has brought concern for social and political issues back to the fore, the playwright is called up, once again, to reassemble the fragments of the “external,” to clarify its ethical orientation. As is affirmed by the French interest in socialist playwrights, like the British Edward Bond, whose work dominated the Parisian stage in the 90s, theater writing seems once again to be interested in “participating in the social process,” in “speaking about politics and not about turning to the self” (Bond 125). This does not mean sanctifying Truth anew, but suggests the playwright’s need to re-commit him-herself to the search for it, since “if there is language, if there is art, it is because there is the other” (Steiner 169). Perhaps the re-evaluation of the dramatic today means, in fact, the re-evaluation of the Other, the transcendence of the (now worn out) fascination with self-reference—and that certainly applies not only to France, but to most European countries where theater is searching for a more active social role.

*University of Peloponnese
Greece*

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