

# The State of the Stage: Representation from Corneille to Diderot

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Benjamin Kolstad

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France, the institution of theater was in the process of re-inventing itself after centuries of proscription by the Catholic church for its immoral and irreligious qualities. The task of its practitioners was to justify their product in the face of these accusations.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, the fact that a pagan philosopher claimed that people take pleasure in imitation is not enough to justify the re-creation of the tragic stage. The moral argument which arose to supplement Aristotle's *catharsis* and became the cornerstone of the French classical theater was based on the Horatian *delectare et prodesse*. Tragedy, it was argued, was useful in addition to being pleasurable. The Abbé d'Aubignac's *Pratique du Théâtre* (1657) calls theater "absolutely necessary:"

Pour les Spectacles qui consistent autant dans les discours que dans les actions, ... ils sont non seulement utiles, mais absolument nécessaires au Peuple pour l'instruire, et pour lui donner quelque teinture des vertus morales.... Les esprits de ceux qui sont du dernier Ordre, et des plus basses conditions d'un Estat, ont si peu de commerce avec les belles connoissances, que les maximes les plus generales de la Morale leur sont absolument inutiles.... Il leur faut une instruction bien plus grossiere. La raison ne les peut vaincre, que par des moyens qui tombent sous les sens. Tels que sont les belles representations de Theatre que l'on peut nommer veritablement l'Ecole du Peuple. (8)

Theater then, claimed to serve a specific function in Richelieu's time: the instruction of the *tiers état*. However, neither d'Aubignac, nor the Académie Française, not even Aristotle himself satisfactorily explained how the theater could have this edifying virtue. Among the many writings that attempted such a task, those of Corneille and Diderot stand out as the most sensitive and illuminating, as well as the most revolutionary. Corneille, in his attempt to justify the success of his plays despite their apparent infidelity to Aristotle, developed the most insightful beginnings of what we now call a *Rezeptionsästhetik*, while Diderot, through his recom-

mendation of *les conditions* instead of characters, redefines the possibilities of spectator identification.

In chapter six of his *Poetics*, Aristotle provides the following definition of tragedy: "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and possessing magnitude; in embellished language...; in the mode of action and not narrated; and effecting through pity and fear [what we call] the *catharsis* of such emotions" (50). But he provides only tantalizing references to how tragedy might have this effect (catharsis) on the spectator. The first, in chapter two, mentions the pleasure people take in mimetic representation in general; in chapter fourteen, he reminds us that it is not every type of emotion one should seek in tragedy, but rather that pleasure which is appropriate to it: this pleasure "comes from pity and fear and is produced by imitation" (Else 410). For Aristotle, then, the pleasure of tragedy comes from *painful* emotions (pity and fear), made *pleasurable* by the medium: imitation. Unfortunately however, this is as far as he goes. He never mentions how tragedy is supposed to bring about this catharsis of emotions. The spectator is left out of his poetics. It is up to the proponents of theater in seventeenth-century France to sketch a theory of identification to justify their claims of its moral instruction.

Perhaps it is only right that the spectator be left out of a poetics. The Constance group associated with Hans Robert Jauss and the aesthetics of reception entitles their seminar *Poetik und Hermeneutik*. The two tasks are difficult to combine, and it is perhaps this difficulty that made for much of the embarrassment of writers on the theater in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who attempt to explain how the tragic effect operates (a hermeneutic endeavor) by recourse to Aristotle, who provides only a poetics. As Paul de Man puts it in his introduction to Jauss's *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, "poetics ... is concerned with the taxonomy and the interaction of poetic structures [figures of speech, metaphor etc...], [while] hermeneutics is concerned with the meaning of specific texts" (viii).

My argument proceeds in three stages. The beginnings of a pro-theater theoretical discourse claim that the theater provides virtuous characters for the spectator to admire and identify with, while at the same time it presents tragic circumstances that inspire pity. This combination results in the edification of the spectator (a version of Aristotle's pity and fear), which is d'Aubignac's posi-

tion, for example.<sup>2</sup> In a second movement, Corneille displaces the concept of identification into admiration, and reduces the ability of pity to produce catharsis, relying instead on the fear of tragic outcomes to explain the idea of a catharsis (the spectator is too exhausted with admiration and overcome with fear to have any emotion left to use in an evil way). And in the third movement, Diderot returns to the concept of an edifying theater, no longer through Corneille's admiration, but through sympathetic identification.

Corneille quite deliberately upsets the notion put forward by d'Aubignac and the other more orthodox writers on theater that Aristotle sanctions the theater on moral grounds. He is quite blunt on this point: "... selon Aristote le seul but de la poésie dramatique [est] de plaire aux spectateurs..." (Corneille 117). By limiting Aristotle's authority at the outset to the domain of pleasure, he is able to explain his own (Corneille's) version of *catharsis* without having to rely totally upon Aristotle. Corneille is able to show how his plays can succeed (please) despite not adhering to the classic interpretation of Aristotle. For him, "le but de l'art ... [est] de plaire selon les règles" (*ibid.*).

In the first of his *Trois discours sur le poème dramatique*, he explains that it is impossible to "plaire selon les règles" without also providing utility (119). He lists four types of usefulness for the theater in France: it can 1) provide "sentences et instructions morales ... presque partout" (120); 2) depict "la naïve peinture des vices et des vertus" (121); 3) present "la vertu [qui] triomphe, et l'on prend le vice en horreur" (122); and 4) portray "la purgation des passions par les moyens de la pitié, et de la crainte" (*ibid.*). But the most important part of Corneille's discourse is the fourth point, for it is this *purgation* which is Corneille's most interesting reflection on the hermeneutics of the theater. According to Corneille, this *purgation* is only possible through a process of abstraction and reflection, not identification. That is, the theater presents tragic actions in characters who are exalted personages, like heroes and kings, whose situation is impossible for the ordinary spectator to identify with: he must admire, not identify. Unlike his eighteenth-century counterparts however, Corneille claims that this impossibility of sympathetic identification is the reason for the success of a play. He uses the example of *Rodogune* in which, he says, "Cléopâtre... est très méchante" (Corneille 129). She, like Medea,

kills her sons, but unlike Medea, her only motive is her desire to rule. No one in the audience can relate to her actions, but they can recognize a "teinture" of a "principe" in her situation and character that might push them to lesser crimes:

Il est peu de mères qui voulussent assassiner, ou empoisonner leurs enfants, de peur de leur rendre leur bien... mais il en est assez qui prennent goût à en jouir.... Bien qu'elles ne soient pas capable d'une action si noire et si dénaturée, que celle de cette reine de Syrie, elles ont en elles quelques teinture du principe qui l'y porta, et la vue de la juste punition qu'elle reçoit leur peut faire craindre, non pas un pareil malheur, mais une infortune proportionnée à ce qu'elles sont capables de commettre. (147)

In other words, no one can identify with her character or actions, but they can nevertheless recognize her as a human being living out a moment of crisis, albeit on a grander scale, both of social importance and of criminal passion than their own. The process by which the theater achieves its purgative effect is thus based, not on identification, but on admiration: as Corneille puts it in the first discourse: "Cléopâtre... est très méchante... mais tous ses crimes sont accompagnés d'une grandeur d'âme, qui a quelque chose de si haut, qu'en même temps qu'on déteste ses actions, on admire la source dont elles partent" (129). As Catherine Kintzler aptly puts it, the admiration-devotion that one feels for a thoroughly good character (Polyeucte, for example) corresponds to the admiration-horror that one feels for Cléopâtre.<sup>3</sup> In both cases it is not through identification that the spectator can place himself into the place of the protagonist, but it is through a reflective admiration for their humanity in spite of their excesses, be they good or evil, that produces the desired effect in the spectator.

This claim, that it is through admiration and not identification that the theater works its effect on the spectator, is precisely what Diderot and, following him Beaumarchais and Mercier, decry in the French classical stage, and what they hope their new genre, the *genre sérieux*, will supplant. They claim that the exalted status, not to mention the exaggeration of character in these plays precludes the spectator's identification and undermines any possibility of edification; they propose instead, a representation which resembles the spectator, in order that the theater might live up to its promise to entertain and to teach. The program of the theater for these

writers is thus clear: it must have a social effect, based on the identification with one's *semblable*.

In a certain sense, Diderot's longing for a theatre that will reform French society is a return to d'Aubignac's position. However, the values have changed considerably in the hundred years between *La Pratique du Théâtre* and the *Entretiens sur le Fils naturel*. Instead of "ceux qui sont du dernier Ordre... les plus basses conditions d'un Etat" (d'Aubignac 8, cited above), Diderot's spectator is everyman: "il n'y aura point de conditions dans la société, point d'actions importantes dans la vie, qu'on ne puisse rapporter à quelque partie du système dramatique" (1166). This universalization of the bourgeoisie, combined with Diderot's privilege of *le vrai*, which we will soon see in greater detail, puts us at complete antipodes with d'Aubignac, for whom "il y a bien des choses véritables qui n'y doivent pas estre veuës, et beaucoup qui n'y peuvent pas estre représentées" (d'Aubignac 76).<sup>4</sup> Louis-Sébastien Mercier goes even further than Diderot: "les conditions les plus basses, ou pour mieux dire, les plus utiles, peuvent fournir des coups de pinceau à la vérité et à l'intérêt du tableau" (176). So we see the social program of the eighteenth-century theater writers.

Diderot uses an example from Racine's *Iphigénie*, the archetype of the rarefied, abstracted atmosphere of the older model of tragedy. The interesting thing is, he claims that Racine got it right: "Si la mère d'Iphigénie se montrait un moment reine d'Argos et femme du général des Grecs, elle ne me paraîtrait que la dernière des créatures" (1138). Her dignity for Diderot comes not from her exalted status, but from the presentation of a tableau of maternal love, "dans toute sa vérité" (*ibid.*).

What is at stake in this definition of tableau, and of *vérité* on stage, is the spectator's interest in the play. Without that element of *vérité*, Diderot is not struck, not *renversé*. It is "les grands intérêts, les grandes passions" which work in the theater, and which have an almost universal effect: "c'est ce que tout le monde dirait en pareil cas; ce que personne n'entendra, sans le reconnaître aussitôt en soi" (Diderot 1143). One of the leitmotifs of the *Entretiens sur le fils Naturel* is that the play is not written for the conventions of the theater, hence to be *vraisemblable*, as d'Aubignac and the French classical interpretation of Aristotle demand, but precisely that it is *vrai* at the expense of the *vraisemblable*. Far from disrupting the illusion of reality, Diderot claims, the *invraisemblance* contributes

to it. The argument is too long to rehearse here in detail, but it is predicated on the spectator's identification with the condition of the characters. To return to Diderot's discussion of the scene from Racine, it is the *vérité* of the tableau which is the key element. This *vérité* allows for the spectator's recognition of Clytemnestre, not as queen or political figure, but as a mother. To subjugate the condition of motherhood to a character's political and social status (which is the argument against the French classical interpretation of Aristotle's rule of character in tragedy) is to foreclose any possibility of sympathetic identification. It is precisely this lack of possible identification for the spectator of the mid-18th century that makes Beaumarchais ask his famous question:

Que me font à moi, sujet paisible d'un Etat Monarchique du dix-huitième siècle, les révolutions d'Athènes et de Rome? Quel véritable intérêt puis-je prendre à la mort d'un tyran du Péloponèse? au sacrifice d'une jeune Princesse en Aulide? Il n'y a dans tout cela rien à voir pour moi, aucune moralité qui me convienne. Car qu'est-ce que la moralité? C'est le résultat fructueux et l'application personnelle des réflexions qu'un événement nous arrache. (Beaumarchais 10)

Here Beaumarchais applies Diderot's theory of conditions to his own dramatic program. Just as Diderot calls for *un tableau et un discours vrai*, which everyone recognizes that they would themselves say in the same situation ("ce qu'il faut que l'artiste trouve, c'est ce que tout le monde dirait en pareil cas" [Diderot 1143]), Beaumarchais wants for the members of his audience to apply the situation immediately to themselves through sympathetic identification: here he speaks with the voice of the spectator: "...ma conclusion est sûrement de chercher à me corriger. Ainsi je sors du Spectacle meilleur que je n'y suis entré, par cela seul que j'ai été attendri" (Beaumarchais 12).

We see how quickly the formulation has changed: in 1757, Diderot proposes to change the conventions that would value Clytemnestra as queen and public figure; in 1767 Beaumarchais calls for her banishment from the stage! The "sacrifice d'une jeune princesse en Aulide" has nothing to attach the spectator Beaumarchais is writing for. Polemical overtones aside, the shift in dramatic representation is called for on the basis of spectator identification: what was successful in the tragedies represented for

the court of Louis XIV does not translate to the bourgeois theatergoer, not to mention the parterre, of the 1760s.<sup>5</sup>

Hans Robert Jauss has defined, in terms borrowed from this debate over how best to achieve the purpose of the theater, what is at stake in the spectator's identification with a representation: "The observer, freed by the 'pleasure in the tragic object,' can adopt through identification what is exemplary in the action [this exemplarity is both d'Aubignac and Diderot's hope for theater]. But [and this is Corneille's reproach to bad theater as well as Rousseau's reproach to all theater] the spectator can also cushion and aesthetically neutralize the experience of identification if he does not go beyond a naive amazement at the deeds of a 'hero'" (*Aesthetic Experience* 96). What is surprising to me about this formulation is how explicitly a reader-response theory from the twentieth-century is modeled on a debate over imaginative identification between seventeenth- and eighteenth-century dramaturgists. Corneille and Diderot seem to have laid the groundwork for a greater valorization of the spectator—they develop their poetics with a hermeneutics in mind.

I want to close, however, with a question: does Diderot's sympathetic identification attempt to bypass intellectual response; does his stress on dramatic illusion to "mettre le peuple à la gêne" through immediate, non-reflective response not ultimately fail, unlike a poetics, precisely because of its hermeneutic project? By foregrounding the spectator of a certain period (eighteenth-century France), he seems to foreclose on the possibility of his "bourgeois drama" to affect, say, a twentieth-century spectator. His anti-narrative prose works, like *Jacques le Fataliste*, located at almost the opposite ends of identification, seem much more capable of attracting an audience today than does his theater.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Phillips for a detailed account of the arguments put forward by the Church against the practice of the secular theater.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, as Hans Robert Jauss reminds us, *aedificatio* originally entailed the preparation for the imitation of Christ which was

# STATES OF IDENTITY

*Limits and Possibilities  
of Writing "French"*



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**Special Issue**  
**Paroles Gelées 15.2 1997**

*Selected Proceedings from the UCLA  
French Department Graduate Students'  
Second Interdisciplinary Conference*





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SELECTED PROCEEDINGS FROM THE UCLA FRENCH  
DEPARTMENT GRADUATE STUDENTS' SECOND ANNUAL  
INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE. APRIL 25-27, 1997

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de  
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici  
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

**PAROLES GELEES**

Special Issue

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## Introduction

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When we began preparations for the Second French Graduate Student Conference at UCLA, we learned very quickly that the concept of "being late" is a phenomenon that haunted not only the Romantics. To follow an original event of any kind is a challenging task, but the successful outcome of our conference *States of Identity: Limits and Possibilities of Writing "French,"* documented by the high quality of the present proceedings, demonstrate that there can be original "seconds," as paradoxical as this might sound.

Our "Call for Papers" for a conference on "identity" in the context of 'French' writing generated national and international responses from students in different disciplines such as Art History, ESL, Philosophy, Theater, as well as French, German and Comparative Literature thus underlining the interdisciplinary appeal of this conference.

Denis Hollier's thought-provoking keynote address on the very timely and controversial question of teaching literature in translation inaugurated the three-day event. Hollier's talk was complemented by insightful responses from Janet Bergstrom and Andrea Loselle from the perspective of film and poetry. We want to thank all three of them for setting the stage for an intellectually challenging yet collegial discussion among students, faculty and the many guests from outside the academic community.

Though the papers presented by the graduate students in six panels contributed much to our knowledge regarding individual aspects of "identity" in different cultures and time periods, the subsequent discussions made it clear that attempts to reach "sameness" regarding a given problem were inevitably deferred by new questions and concerns. What remained was the realization that in spite of the plurality of opinions, we had achieved "identity" in the overarching collective gesture of intellectual

exchange. It is this discovery that justifies this conference and our work in the humanities in general.

This conference and the publication of its proceedings would not have been possible without the generous financial support from our sponsors and we want to thank the Borchard Foundation, the French Consulate at Los Angeles, the UCLA Graduate Student Association, the Center for Modern and Contemporary Studies and the Campus Programs Committee of the Program Activities Board. Last but not least, we want to express our gratitude to the UCLA French Department and its faculty, whose continued support, encouragement and presence during the panels was much appreciated by the graduate students. A special thank you is due to Jean-Claude Carron for his introduction of the keynote speaker and tireless personal *engagement* in the organization of this conference.

Our last acknowledgment goes to the graduate students of the French Department who contributed in many ways to the successful outcome of this event and sacrificed much precious time to meetings and other organizational tasks. We hope that the success of the first two conferences will serve as motivation and inspiration to those who are currently working on next year's conference, which we are all eagerly anticipating.

The Editors

*Diane Duffrin*

*Markus Müller*

# ***States of Identity***

## ***Limits and Possibilities of Writing "French"***

*Selected Proceedings from the UCLA French Department  
Graduate Students' Second Annual Interdisciplinary Conference,  
April 25-27, 1997*

### **Friday, April 25, 1997**

SOUTH BAY ROOM OF SUNSET VILLAGE COMMONS

#### **4:45 p.m. Introduction of Keynote Speaker**

*Jean-Claude Carron, UCLA*

#### **5:00 p.m. Keynote Address**

*Denis Hollier, Yale University*

"Blanchot, Speaking in Tongues: Otherness in Translation"

#### **Respondents**

*Janet Bergstrom, UCLA*

*Andrea Loselle, UCLA*

#### **7:00 p.m. Reception**

### **Saturday, April 26, 1997**

NORTHRIDGE ROOM

#### **9:00 a.m. Panel #1**

##### ***Grafting Past to Present: Hybrid Identities***

Moderator: Michael Stafford

1. "Norman French, Latin and Scots English: Three versions of the *Leges inter Brettos et Scottos*," *Kristen Over (UCLA, Comp. Literature Program)*
2. "Verlan: An Expression of Beur Identity or Reversal by Inverse," *Amy Wells (Texas Tech University, Dept. of Classical and Modern Languages)*



3. "Marcel Mauss on Nationalism: An Approach to *The Gift*,"  
*Luke Bresky (UCLA, Dept. of English)*

**10:45 a.m. Panel #2**

***The Politics of Pedagogy: Translating Culture in the Classroom***

Moderators: Natalie Muñoz, Marcella Munson

1. "Silent Words: Language as an Obstacle to Immigrant Integration and Identity in French Society," *Katharine Harrington (Texas Tech University, Dept. of Classical and Modern Languages)*
2. "*The Guest in the Classroom: The Voice of Camus in Multicultural Academic Discourse*," *Ajanta Dutt (Rutgers University, ESL Program)*
3. "Radical Chic(k): The American Roots of Marie de France,"  
*Susan Purdy (University of Western Ontario, Dept. of French)*

**2:30 p.m. Panel #3**

***Bodies in Writing: Feminine Identity and the Literary Text***

Moderator: Heather Howard

1. "Discordant Locations for the Me-ospheric Void: Théophile Gautier vs. *La Sylphide*," *Regina Fletcher Sadono (UCLA, Theatre Arts Dept.)*
2. "The Bodypolitics of Feminist Science Fiction: Elisabeth Vonarburg's *Le silence de la cité*," *Lorie Sauble-Otto (University of Arizona, Dept. of French and Italian)*
3. "The 'I' Which Is Not One: Dual Identity in the Case of Simone de Beauvoir's Autobiography," *Kim Carter-Cram (Idaho State University, Dept. of Foreign Languages)*

**4:15 p.m. Panel #4**

***War and Remembrance: National Epitaphs of Self***

Moderator: Stacey Meeker

1. "Proust's Poetics of Recontextualization," *John S. LaRose (Louisiana State University, Dept. of French and Italian)*
2. "The Body and the State: Fantasies of Identity in Genet's *Pompes Funèbres*," *Leslie Ann Minot (UC Berkeley, Dept. of Comp. Literature)*
3. "Ecriture et Mémoire: Identity and Collective Memory in Jorge Semprun's *L'écriture ou la vie*," *Marcus Keller (California State University Long Beach, Dept. for German, Russian and Romance Languages)*

**Sunday, April 27, 1997**

SOUTH BAY ROOM

**9:00 a.m. Panel #5**

***Lieux de Mémoire: Negotiating Boundaries of Francophone Identity***

Moderator: Anne-Lancaster Badders

1. "Exile and Identity in the Plays of Maryse Condé," *Melissa McKay (University of Georgia, Dept. of Romance Languages)*
2. "Personal and National Narrative in *Une vie de crabe* by Tanella Boni," *Laura K. Reeck (New York University, Dept. of French)*

**10:45 a.m. Panel #6**

***Representation and the Reconsideration of Identity***

Moderator: Diane Duffrin

1. "Classical Aesthetics, Modern Ethics: Lacan, Kierkegaard, Sophocles, Anouilh," *Joseph Jenkins (UCLA, Comparative Literature Program)*
2. "The Stage of the Stage: Representation from Corneille to Diderot," *Ben Kolstad (UCLA, Comparative Literature Program)*

**Open Discussion**

**Closing Statement**

*Markus Müller, UCLA*

