That Shakespeherian Rag: Essays on a Critical Process by Terence Hawkes (review)

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For example, she shows how the often misunderstood "Pen, Pencil, and Poison" — generally seen as an argument for the amoral nature of art — is, instead, a criticism of the specialization and separation that had been forced upon the art world by bourgeois art criticism.

Her treatment of *Dorian Gray* is particularly interesting. Her impressive knowledge of French aestheticism allows her to clear up the mistaken notions many people still hold about Wilde's debt to the French. Rather than talk only about literary influence, Gagnier demonstrates that the concepts of *dandy* and *gentleman* stood in a controversial and well publicized relationship to one another within the journalism, advertising, and writings about the public schools of the time. *Dorian Gray*, an exploration of the life of a gentleman turned dandy, is thus seen as an ideological battleground on which two views of how men are to behave is fought out. When we understand the subversive nature of the dandy within this first true "consumer" society, we can understand the harsh response that this book — which seems quite moral by twentieth-century standards — received from the press. And we can also understand the partisan nature of the positive and negative responses to this text: as Wilde alienated one audience he actively cultivated and helped to form another.

One could cite many other examples of how Gagnier's method pays off in new insights into Wilde's work and its relationship to the general culture which it addressed and attempted to form. For example, Gagnier's convincing treatment of Wilde's comedies shows how they can be both popular and subversive, both glittering surface and in-depth criticism of the consumer society that delighted in them. Her method even allows us to see that two seemingly different kinds of theater — Wilde's comedies and Artaud's theater of cruelty — have surprisingly similar rhetorical and social goals. Equally provocative is Gagnier's discussion of *De Profundis*. Critics in the past have tended to see this work as an isolated expression of Wilde's late career and to explain its peculiarities in exclusively biographical terms. Gagnier, on the other hand, demonstrates that the full social import of the work can be understood only when it is placed within the context of other prison writings of the time.

Gagnier's book, then, is important for two reasons. First of all, it is an impressively researched and very readable part of the critical movement that works to reject the popular image of Wilde as a second-rate, precious aesthete and to recognize him as the challenging artist and critic that he is. Gagnier's book adds to this critical material most significantly as it allows us to understand Wilde within the context of the discourses of early consumerism. Second, the book is a model of how a "new" literary historian can operate. Gagnier argues for this method most convincingly, but not in a theoretical or abstract manner. Instead, she offers an eloquent and direct argument by showing her readers the rich results this approach can yield.

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TERENCE HAWKES. *That Shakespeherian Rag: Essays on a Critical Process.* London: Methuen, 1986. 131 p.

Amid a proliferation of new approaches to Shakespeare, the essays of Terence Hawkes are among the sprightliest. Editor of Methuen's New Accents series,

Hawkes favors accents redolent of Barthes yet archetypically American: "Responding to, improvising on, 'playing' with, re-creating, synthesizing and interpreting 'given' structures of all kinds, political, social, aesthetic . . . " (118). For Hawkes as for Geoffrey Hartman, the American art form that best serves as paradigm of a productive author-critic relationship is jazz. The author is analogous to the composer who provides the melody, the critic to the performer who spontaneously improvises upon it. This symbiotic egalitarian arrangement is not exclusive; many performers can variously render the same melody, each performance being unique. Difference and plurality are inherent in jazz.

Not so in ragtime. Like the classics, rags are *written* music. Since every performer must play the same notes, every performer's scope of interpretation is limited. A would-be European mode, ragtime foregoes the improvisational, the *oral,* in order to be "so elegant, so intelligent" — so insistent on a single authoritative (author-derived) interpretation. Thus ragtime offers a restrictive model for criticism, especially inapposite for Shakespearean criticism insofar as "Shakespeare's texts always yield to, though they can never be reduced to, the readings we give them" (67). If Shakespearean criticism is so wide-ranging, being composed of myriad partial truths, it is partially because Shakespeare is a major literary site of political contention. Consciously or not, all critics make political use of the texts they interpret. That appropriation is the critical process of Hawkes' subtitle, a process greatly in need of the demystification that Hawkes engagingly provides.

Of the half dozen essays collected in *That Shakespeherian Rag,* "Swisser-Swatter: Making a Man of English Letters," concerned with Sir Walter Raleigh, first Professor of English at Oxford, and "*Telmah,*" with John Dover Wilson, most entertainingly illustrate conservative critico-political processing of Shakespeare. Raleigh (no relation to the famous Elizabethan) won his prestigious academic post for undertaking the composition of the Shakespeare volume for the English Men of Letters series, a project designed to help create a unifying heritage in a nation dangerously divided by its social and economic class structure. (Recall that one percent of Edwardian England's population owned sixty-nine percent of England's wealth.) For his successful achievement Raleigh gained an aristocratic title. That achievement was to construct Shakespeare as epitomizing Englishness (Raleigh's Shakespeare was descended from King Alfred); as a writer for readers, not spectators (ragtime, not jazz); and most memorably, as a man's man, not an effete artist: Shakespeare "collects his might and stands dilated, his imagination aflame, the thick-coming thoughts and fancies shaping themselves, under the stress of the central will, into a thing of life." Raleigh constructs, as Hawkes gleefully observes, "Shakespeare as Phallus of the Golden Age — Phallus in Wonderland" (60). Other instances of Raleigh's processing are his writings on *The Tempest.* In 1904 Raleigh regards the play as a fantasy about America and Caliban as a sympathetic native American; but in 1918 *The Tempest* has a change of venue, and Caliban becomes loathsome: "the monster, and the mooncalf, as who should say Fritz, or the Boche" (64-65). Hawkes comments, "Shakespeare is a powerful ideological weapon, always available in periods of crisis and used according to the exigencies of the time to resolve crucial areas of indeterminacy" (68).

Perhaps less deservedly, Dover Wilson suffers a Raleighesque deflation in *"Telmah" (Hamlet* spelled backwards to indicate its subtext). Wilson is guilty of underestimating the strength of the pre-revolutionary Bolsheviks, of celebrating tzarist autocracy, of attempting to explain away an inconsistency in *Hamlet* (why doesn't Claudius react to the dumb-show?), and of receiving

a congratulatory letter from Neville Chamberlain for what Hawkes regards as Wilson's " 'appeasement' of the text" (116). Yet despite Hawkes' Byzantine indictment of Wilson, "*Telmah*" makes its point: our political predilections influence our interpretation of literature.

Whereas Wilson vehemently rejects inconsistency and contradiction, A. C. Bradley uncomfortably admits to and T. S. Eliot slyly feigns bafflement as they confront dramatic elements that a traditional or "realistic" approach to literature and language cannot explain. In "A Sea Shell" Hawkes exposes the pre-Saussurean notion of the transparent text upon which Bradleyan character criticism is based. As Bradley struggles with the question of when lack of speech is significant (why does Hamlet say so little about Ophelia?), he discovers the importance of textual silence and is led to confess that "I am unable to arrive at a conviction as to the meaning of some of [Hamlet's] words and deeds, and I question whether from the mere text of the play a sure interpretation of them can be drawn" (39). Since all texts abound in silences, Hawkes takes this statement as an implicit avowal of the impossibility of comprehending any text within a unified definitive reading.

Tone being no less problematic than silence, Hawkes devotes his title essay, "That Shakespeherian Rag," to exploring the ramifications of Eliot's critical encounter with "the mere text of the play." For Eliot the play was *Antony and Cleopatra*, the cryptic passage Charmion's dying words, "Ah, soldier!" Eliot writes, "I could not myself put into words the difference I feel between the passage if these two words, 'Ah, soldier' were omitted and with them. But I know there is a difference, and that only Shakespeare could have made it" (82). As Eliot the poet well knew, what we cannot put into words speaks volumes. Hawkes, following G. L. Trager, refers to such tonal signifiers as "paralanguage," and suggests that Hamlet's last utterance, the Folio's "O O O O," is also paralanguage — non-discursive modes that subvert written language as a complete system of expression.

Subversion of traditional linguistic, critical, and political views is Hawkes' larger purpose in this collection, from his introductory piece, "Playhouse-Workhouse," to his "Conclusion: 1917 and All That." In "Playhouse-Workhouse" Hawkes considers *The Tempest* and the Shakespeare industry in light of Stratford's dispossessed, the poor of Jacobean and recent times; like Walter Benjamin, Hawkes finds an intimate connection between culture and barbarism. In his final essay, Hawkes returns to subjects touched upon in "Swisser-Swatter" and *"Telmah"*: the political function of Shakespeare in the face of the threat to British imperialism from the Russian revolution and from American emergence as a world power. The mission subsequently enjoined upon the study of English literature and its chief luminary was to produce and sustain a sense of the superiority of British culture — and, concomitantly if implicitly, of the social, economic, religious, and political foundations of that culture. The critical pluralism Hawkes urges is an effective antidote to such ideological overdoses. The analysis of critical processing that he would place at the forefront of literary studies can only liberate both student and text. The inevitable politicization of literature is a crucial subject to which *That Shakespeherian Rag* makes a contribution no less valuable than delightful.

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