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Theater As Problem: Modern Drama and its Place in Literature
by Benjamin Bennett (review)

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Book Reviews

BENJAMIN BENNETT. *Theater As Problem: Modern Drama and its Place in Literature*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1990. Pp. x, 272. \$34.50, \$12.95 (PB).

Major breakthroughs in dramatic theory over the past fifteen or twenty years have attempted to account for performance in the analysis of plays. Dramatic texts, like musical scores, present dynamic systems of signs, available for any number of equally definitive productions. Philosophically speaking, the productions we see become the finished products of dramatic art, with text as pretext for potential performance. This philosophical stance often differentiates theatre specialists from literary scholars, who stress authoritative texts.

In his book *Theater as Problem*, Benjamin Bennett examines how performance implies the play's text, thus inverting the assumption verbalized above. He invokes the "virtual reader" residing within each "actual spectator." This "reader" watches a performance, conscious of the fact that this particular incarnation is only one of many interpretive options. While still grappling with how plays and their productions are necessarily linked, Bennett stresses the primacy of literature in Western dramatic art. He sees drama as a paradoxical genre that radically disrupts our ideas about literature by using extra-literary means to confront the word with its physical referent.

I assume ... that what happens in the theater, for all its unrepeatable physical particularity, is after all always a literary event, and that precisely the radical tension, the categorical disparity, that thus arises, is a crucial structural feature of what we mean by literature to begin with (p. 16).

In this assumption, Bennett reveals himself to be a literary thinker, disturbed by the existence of such a genre. In his view, drama is "ontologically defective" (p. 61), because it depends upon theater to complete its artistic expression. He tests its boundaries against the features of cinema and opera. He probes the reasons for its very existence.

"What does the theater do for literature?" he asks (p. 16); "... what stake [do] we have in distinguishing [drama] as a poetic type, hence, ultimately, who [do] we practice it in the first place?" (p. 64).

He pursues this inquiry through analyses of plays by Strindberg and Ibsen, brilliantly relating their treatment of dramatic time to painters' treatment of space. He relates the plays of Nestroy and Schnitzler to the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their originally targeted audiences. Through discussions of Ionesco, Pirandello, and Dürrenmatt, he examines hermeneutic ceremony and the ethical concerns of fascism. In relation to the work of Genet and Beckett, he asks: "Where does drama set itself off, in language, as a literary type?" (p. 194). The answer lies in "drama as a site of maximum semiotic awareness" (p. 185), since verbal signs meet their physical representations in theater. By tracing these issues, Bennett concludes that drama serves as "the church of literature"; it allows for "a focus of maximally intense self-reflection" (p. 14), inviting us to consider not only our place in history, but also the very nature and function of literature.

Bennett's inquiry both fascinates and maddens his reader. He identifies essential and obvious features of drama: the relationships of text to performance and of actor to audience (as did Beckerman in his classic book, *The Dynamics of Drama*); the communal reception of drama in performance, hence its ceremonial underpinnings (akin to Gadamer's work); and the relationship of the physical object on stage to its verbal sign (as does Chaudhuri in her book about Genet, *No Man's Stage*). With his literary perspective, he views each of these features through a fresh and intriguing lens. In this regard, the book is extremely valuable in expanding the parameters that define dramatic art. However, Bennett also frustrates his reader throughout the book by disclaiming all systematic answers.

What I have to offer is a collection of related arguments; and I think that the reader will find it more useful if I simply present that collection, with its rough edges and imperfect joints, than if I were to qualify each argument to death in the futile attempt to make the collection into a system. System, again, is a quality that I claim is already excluded by my subject matter. (p. 177)

While his point may be well taken and his collection engrossing, his constant disclaimers weaken the pleasure of following the development of his arguments. In sum, Bennett's latest book adds a valuable literary point of view to the theoretical framework of dramatic analysis, weakened only by his overly tentative approach to its exposition.

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