Conference Address: The Theater of Inquiry¹

Madeleine R. Grumet

University of Rochester

When Max van Manen first suggested that I might bring my interest in theater to the task of reflecting on the Conference, I was delighted. Finally, a chance to have the last word. The contributions that women make at conferences, no matter how lauded, rarely, I have observed, stretch beyond the boundaries of their own presentations. Their words, categories, and concerns seep out of the talk, and the themes and concerns that shape the discourse are most often the utterances of their male colleagues.

And theirs, given the conventions of public discourse that most of us experienced as we were growing up, is the resonance that seems fitting, even natural. For none of us, no matter what our ethnicity, is the presence of the male voice in the classroom, courtroom, temple, or church, surprising. Nor is the sound of men's voices strange to me. I remember it as melodious and comforting from the days when I was growing up in Brooklyn and would go to the synagogue on the sabbath or on the High Holy Days. Even though we attended a conservative synagogue, where women and men sat next to each other, the place was filled with the murmuring chanting sounds of men's voices, "dovvenning" it was called—a collective prayer cycle in which one man's voice seemed to set off another's. If the women dovvened, you couldn't hear them. So this invitation to speak at the end of the conference was, finally, an unusual opportunity to have the last word, and knowing how rarely women receive that opportunity, I accepted it eagerly.

Later, when Max invited me to participate in the opening session, I began to get nervous. The first word and then the last word? Well endurance is always a measure of dovvenning, for the truly observant would arrive at the beginning of the service and stay for hours and hours through the last prayer. And, even though Edmonton is a long way from Flatbush, this invitation to say the first and the last words acknowledged a capacity for endurance that the old neighborhood had denied.

But then the invitation became more suspect. The beginning and the end? Was this another effort to marginalize the female, to stick us on the periphery? Answering the door, taking the coats and then reappearing to make the gracious farewells. A lovely time. I'm so glad you could come.

Had *The Jewel in the Crown* not just been on television, I probably would have been despondent, but there every Sunday night at nine and at 10 o'clock was Alistair Cooke, bestowing his marvelous first and last words upon us. Would you call him marginal? How about Vincent Price? Or Beverly Sills? Now my concern shifted from spatial anxiety, worrying about marginality, to temporal tension. These hail-and-farewellers were all has-beens. So soon? I just got here.

Lest these ruminations seem excessively preoccupied with my position in the space and time of this event, I would excuse what must appear as inordinate self-scrutiny as a theatrical sensibility. Theater requires, I will argue, both the act and the eye. The meaning of drama, something acted, doesn't quite convey the Gestalt that is theater, for it is something acted for the observation of another. This doubling contains actor and audience, intentionality and reflexivity. It is the form in which we see ourselves seeing, fear ourselves fearing, move ourselves moving.

The danger in this moment is the objectification of our common experience that it invites. For the theatrical sensibility draws a ludic frame around the conversation, meals, gossip we have shared. As the theater of inquiry stages our common concerns, it draws our attention away from the concerns themselves, to the esthetics and politics of our speaking of them. It invites us to become the audience to our own actions, and encourages us to focus on the form of our performance, rather than on its content. If we could assume that this is the best of all possible esthetic worlds where every form is the perfect vehicle for the content it expresses, we would have no formal problems. But forms linger long after the intentionality that filled them has disappeared, and we are still in the grip of the well-made play. It is what Sartre called the structural fallacy, the beginnings, middles, and ends that artifice imposes on experience. He describes it in *The Words*, sitting in the silent movie, knowing that the action would reach its ultimate conclusion as the pianist in the corner indulged in spiralling, cascading crescendos.² In our time commercials signal such expectations. We know that they will come more frequently toward the climax, once we're hooked. Maybe that's why we never see Beckett in prime time. The well-made conference then would be seen to have its unities, too. Introduction of the actors, identification of the protagonist, antagonist, the struggle, the climax, the resolution and, if the planes fly on schedule, the *Deus ex Machina*. Surely you have at some time during these last few days, viewed these events through such opera glasses: listening to the first day's overture with expectation, identifying the stars, the ingenue, the good guys, the bad guys.

The conventions of our theatrical imaginations are well established. They are filled with stock characters. They divide the stream of experience into processal units whose position in sequence prescribes significance. These rhythms reassure us. They provide a recognizable structure that helps us to organize our expectations and quell our anxieties. Beginning. Middle. And end. Three acts, really. Intermissions. Entre Acte entertainment. Snack Bar. This was the traditional theater that Brecht defied.³ It was cozy. It invited identification, its scenarios, dramatis personae, passions, and punctuation so familiar that the actions they expressed appeared inevitable, cohesive, necessary, and sufficient.

Anthropological conceptions of theater can be as stultifying as literary ones. Geertz, Fortes, Turner, all celebrate the capacity of theater to provide a community with a view of its collective interpretative practices. The latin word *ritus*, meaning order, reminds us that ritual provides a scheme against which we perceive ourselves, and each other, as belonging to this discourse community. It is tempting to use the metaphor of ritual because it promises to bring form and shape to our common projects. Ritual, Fortes claims, prehends the occult and makes it patent. It grabs what is hidden, pulsing, present but unsayable and brings it to a symbolic expression that is accessible to a community of persons.⁴ Geertz tells us that it is both a model of and a model for our belief systems.⁵ Turner sees it as an adaptive mechanism that, because it is bounded and set apart, can be the prism into which we release antagonism and doubt.⁶ A brief respite, expressive and futile, that permits us to do what it is we eventually must do.

Such an anthropologist would watch us, interview us. If one were a structural functionalist one would see through our theater to our alliances. Charting our comings and goings, our speaking and silences, one would see our oppositions as adhesive antagonisms that keep us, if not whole, stuck together.

Or one might move to speech-act theory to see how our very utterances constitute our purpose and community. In *Divinity and Experience* Lienhardt notes that the only utterances of the priest taken to have magical efficacy are those spoken in public.⁷ What he mutters on the way home is irrelevant. Similarly, it is the mimetic response of the assemblage that confirms their status. Lienhardt would come to our plenaries to hear our chants and their echoes, our collective murmurings, dovenning, if you will. And they all would write chapters on our deities, recording in great detail our ancestor worship of deceased Germans and a few French, their secret words, sacred texts, the pouch we pass around of their toenail parings, semen, lost eyelashes.

To any one of us who has been attending conference sessions these three and a half days, the literary and anthropological appraisals of theater offer us safe passage out of this experience. Their categories organize and edit our memories, so we can slip them into a pocket in our briefcase and march them right by customs without declaring a thing.

Let me suggest a more disorderly theater, one which disorganizes our perception, which diffuses identity, splinters community, and dissolves discourse so it leaks right out of the suitcase, on to the customs counter, a sticky substance that must be explained before we can travel on.

In our theater we are, each one of us, writer, actor, and sometime director. To present a paper is to act out the contradiction of these forms. For the writing is stretching. The writing of the text extends us to the very outermost edges of the ego. Our prose is linear, sequential, it slides along the page, between the lines. It inches us through space like a cord through the hem of the laundry bag. When the French feminists invite women to discover our specificity, our sensuality, they invite us to write ourselves into existence, to wind our way from actual to possible, inscribing a channel for our lives to flow through.

So that is how we write before we come. We fling ourselves across the page to the waiting arms of imagined friends or foes. And then we come here with the word. Now we have heard a good deal about rhetoric here. Loren Barritt has portrayed our rhetorical conceits. He called the line we take in these texts first a high wire, then a bundle of knots. Actually I had to go to my notes to retrieve the high wire; it had slipped from his text to mine, another circus trick, without passing through my brain. But I remember him standing squarely behind the table, grinning and declaring, "This is me, Biff Barritt." For to tell the text is to reach out and pull it back. Back into the body that it escapes. Back into the voice.

As we speak the text, the line that was strung taut between actuality and possibility is now kept aloft on a column of air. Breath is the spirit in respiration. The telling never coincides with the writing. To read is to interpret. Separated in space and time from the day we stretched across the page, the telling gathers up the figure we left lying there, appreciating its curves, marvelling at its dreams, or irritated with its sluggish refusal to be roused. Telling is part of the birthing and perhaps it is the resistance of the text to make itself present that we perceive when we speak about "delivering a paper." So the telling and the text undermine each other. Meaning jumps back and forth between them. Now I believe the word, now the voice. And gesture undermines them both. For gesture is to speech like poetry is to prose. Ambivalent, ambiguous, contextual, resonant,

gesture dances around the text and telling, a mime that parodies, a sculpture that threatens like Galatea to get up at any moment and move away from the word.

The body undermines the word like Jerry Lewis mugging Dean Martin in what Brecht call a social geste.⁸ For the dialogue does not take place only between the writer and reader. The body, the breathe, the voice that tells, speaks in space and time to another, to us. To tell is to stand in relation to the politics of the situation. Shall I use the podium? Can you hear me in the back? I won't read this, I'll just tell you tell you about it. Here's a handout. I'm almost done. "The geste is," Brecht tells us, "not a specific gesticulation of the hands but a particular attitude adopted by the speaker towards other men."⁹ And so as we all have passed through the space and time of this conference, we have participated in a social choreography. We have not dimmed the lights. Brecht would approve. His audience was not to lose itself, no suspension of disbelief here. The audience was witness to the action, responsible for judgment. And we too have watched, still watch each other watching. We scan to find another derisive smile, a skeptical inclination of the head. And, unlike Brecht's audience, we meet at performance after performance and learn each other's repertoire of grins and grimaces. Soon it becomes difficult to locate the place of meaning as it moves from the podium to the aisles, to the coffee stand, the elevators. It detaches itself from the program and slips out of town.

And it is out of town, in a road show of our memories, that meaning grows. For our tellings, as so many of you have noted, are also silencings. Our showings hide. Herbert Blau reminds us that the history of the theater is a history of this ambivalence between presence and absence:

Theater is after all obscene, always was. The root is the Greek word *skene*. *Ob* means against—so against the scene. There is in every performance an aggression against the scene of the performance as a value, a derealization . . . In the history of theater itself, the scene invariably tends toward fragmentation, closure, loss of outwardness and a sense of infinite behind. Perspective was fake infinity. With Racine, in the traditional theater, the scene becomes a hothouse, a suffocating system, narrowed and specious, introverted and private, profound in self-consumption; like appetite, the universal wolf, the scene eats up itself. The scene is cannibalized by realism in time and has to repossess itself in its fullness. The pressure toward a surface makes you wonder what's behind. The scene remains obscene. The obscene submits what should be kept private to public scrutiny. In that act, the value of the private may be reduced. That is the perversity of theater. We can't afford to fool around.¹⁰

The very division that Blau suggests between the public and the private is the boundary that our work challenges. Phenomenology at-

tracts us because it undermines that barrier and slips underneath it to a space in our experience that is not demarked by these territories and borders. Yet that relatively clear place of meditation becomes bounded as thought becomes text and even more delineated as text becomes performance. The danger is that theater is by tradition, by our expectations, and by its very enactment, conservation. Drawing us to show, hiding the unseen, it diminishes private reservation. And that poses a particular problem for us, we who have gathered here to seek forms for human science that honor the complexity of what it means to be human. For the theater of inquiry, like the chi square, the case study, the interview, the survey of the literature, distorts what it aims to show clearly and displays what it, perhaps, should keep hidden. But secrets do not liberate, and so we cannot in the name of science encourage a conspiracy of silence. Instead, we can work so that the theater of our thought reveals both our conviction and our doubt, as well as our inevitable duplicities. Those esthetic forms that present their own contradictions without containing them in comforting resolutions, are the ones that constitute great theater.

In *Theater and Revolution* it is the playwright who questions not only the tenets of his own society, but also the colors and shapes of his own responses to it that Robert Brustein praises. He celebrates Ibsen because he turns on his own convictions and rejects Shaw for his constant, if worthy, positions. Peter Brook finds this hard edge again and again in Shakespeare where introspection and the metaphysics soften nothing. "It is through the irreconcilable opposition of the Rough and the Holy through an atonal screech of absolutely unsympathetic keys that we get the disturbing and the unforgettable impression of his plays. It is because the contradictions are so strong that they burn on us so deeply."¹¹

So the theater of inquiry provides us, I hope, not with the well-made play. Rather, it gives us the chance to catch ourselves in the act. And what seems possible, and difficult, for it violates our expectations of closure, the denouement—happily ever after—is to recover the contradictions in our own performances and, as we return to our case studies and libraries, to expose their little lies with even grander ones.

Notes

1. This paper is a revised version of the closing address at The International Human Science Research Conference, University of Alberta, May, 1985.
2. Sartre, J.-P. (1964). *The words* (Bernard Frechtman Trans.). NY: Fawcett.
3. Brecht, B. (1964). *Brecht on theater* (John Willet Ed. and Trans.). NY: Hill and Wang, p. 97.

4. Fortes, M. (1966). Religious premises and logical technique in divinatory ritual. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*. B. vol. 215.
5. Geertz, C. (1968). *Islam observed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
6. Turner, V. (1967). *The ritual process*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing.
7. Lienhardt, G. (1961). *Divinity and experience*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
8. See, for example, Cixous, H. (1976, Summer). The laugh of the medusa. (Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen Trans.), *Signs* . 1:4, 887.
9. Brecht, p. 139.
10. Ibid.
11. Blau, H. Letting be be finale of seem. In Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello (Eds.), *Performance in Post Modern Culture* (p. 75). Madison, WI: Coda Press.
12. Brook, p. (1968). *The empty space*. NY: Atheneum.