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The Theater and its Derridean Double: Writing Upon Derrida's Theater of Thought

Clark Lunberry



"Let us leave textual criticism to academic drudges and formal criticism to aesthetes, and recognize that what has been said need not be said again; that an expression does not work twice, does not live twice; that all words, once uttered, are dead and are effective only at the moment when they are uttered."

-Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*

"What is tragic is not the impossibility but the necessity of repetition."

-Jacques Derrida, "The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation"

[1] **Scene One:** The problem with the reading is the writing. For the words are only there as long as you see them there. The book closes and the words are gone. "Now you see them; now you don't." Like magic. Or like actors on a stage, the printed words perform only while the curtain, while the book, is open. Otherwise, they lie dumbly and unseen between the closed or curtained covers. To see the words again, you have to read them again; in other words, you must repeat the reading, and then, apparently, repeat it again. And then—"tragically"—again.

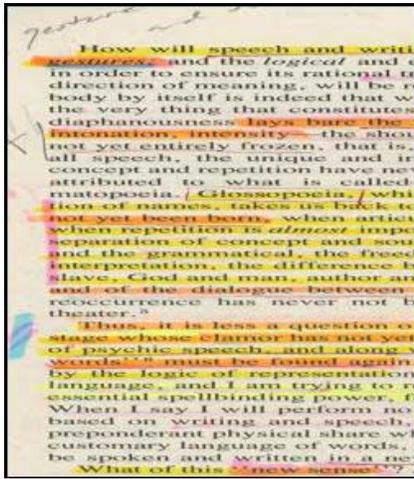
[2] I often wishfully kid myself into believing that in reading, I am somehow absorbing, assimilating, internalizing the words written—making the language (like a swallowed host) my very own. However, I know—internally—that this is not the case and that, in reading, I am (at best) ephemerally engaged with the words, only fleetingly holding onto them, hosting them. For unlike the completeness of a computer download, one never knows for certain what—if anything—remains on our hard-driven brains when a book is closed, and where, as T. S. Eliot so elegiacally noted, the "[w]ords strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden, / Under the tension, slip, slide, perish, / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, / Will not stay still" (121).

[3] It was under such a burden that this basic, if banal, dimension of reading recently made itself apparent to me, of the tension of words decaying, refusing to "stay still." The issue arose because I was returning to an essay—Jacques Derrida's early analysis of Antonin Artaud, "The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation"—that I had read multiple times over the years and upon which I now intended, finally, to write something of my own. In preparation, I was going back to Derrida's essay, to look again at what I'd looked at before so many times—to refresh my memory, to restore something of the perishing text. After all, one never knows for sure what really endures of one's reading, just how much has been overlooked or misunderstood, forgotten or entirely lost.

[4] In that groundbreaking essay, Derrida painstakingly delineates that which Artaud's cruel theater is, or was, or could be, or—perhaps far more to the point—what it most certainly is not, was not, and, finally, could never be: a theater without repetition, upon a stage erased, unhaunted by the whispering

prompter. It is, however, in this same essay that Derrida nonetheless signals to something that might act as that absent theater's stand-in, or double. In part, he does this—as he would even more explicitly in writings to come—by implicitly taking to heart the etymological coupling of the words theory and theater (derived as they are from the Greek *theoria*, signifying the act of beholding or

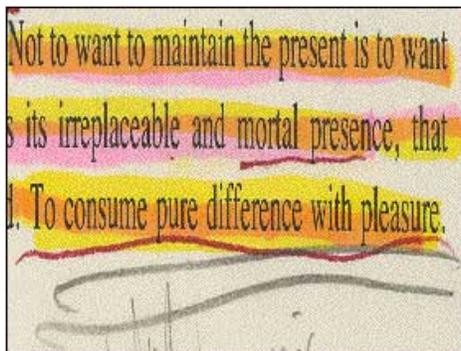
witnessing). Indeed, through the witnessing, beheld "space" of his gestural writings, Derrida enacts a kind theatricalized theory, or a theorized theater. It is in this essay's dense (but dazzling) culminations that Derrida finally offers his fullest response to Artaud's imagined, impossible theater, by offering us the tragic thought of it, a variant of the thought that Artaud himself had chronically sought. Returning to Derrida's essay and repeating my own reading of it was something that I had done already again and again over the past several years, and now—preparing to write this paper—I was about to do it once more, wondering what remains of those earlier readings, what remained of Derrida's written and read words.



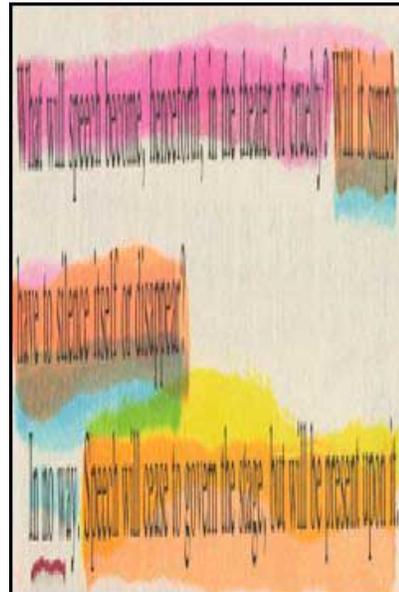
[5] However, in returning to this essay once more, and even before beginning to reread it—while still partially remembering some of the essay's striking ideas of theater and of thought suggested above—I was immediately drawn to something unexpected, something supplemental to the text and previously unseen (though, all along, right before my eyes). What I couldn't help noting was *not* Derrida's writing exactly, but instead something of my own writing *upon* Derrida's. I'm referring to the variety of markings (the highlightings, the underlinings, the notations in the margins) that I had made over the years upon this essay, specific evidence of my periodic efforts to work with it, to understand it, to—as we now colloquially say—"get it" (though uncertain about what the *it* of that *get* might prove to be, or not to be. For that is, I suppose, the question that finally matters most, the indeterminate *getting* of an indeterminate *it* meeting upon the written scene of an indeterminate eye of desire). For instance, I could see that, early on, with each separate reading of Derrida's essay, I had used a different type of highlighter to mark particular parts of the pages—a yellow one, an orange one, a pink one, a blue one. Along with these multicolored highlightings, I also saw that I had at different times used a red pen, a black pen, and a pencil to underline certain sections. Each of these

markings was employed in its turn, often separated by months or even years, with each inadvertently and retrospectively cataloguing my accumulated contacts, even creating a kind of accidental archive of my efforts with Derrida's text, complete with its own vividly delineated archaeological layerings.

[6] Sometimes the highlightings or underlinings stood alone—a particular passage marked once—while others were joined together, marking all or part of the same section of writing. For example, at various points there would be a yellow highlight, upon a blue (together forming in the blend a luminous variation of green, a Frankenthaler-like stain upon the printed page). At certain other points, there could be seen a veritable medley of markings going over the same sentence, or group of sentences, with—in several cases—yellow onto pink, onto orange, onto blue, finally all underlined in bright red ink, or with the smudged, Cy Twombly-like line of a dull pencil waving beneath the words. Finally, it was not unusual to see that occasionally the originally bright inks had noticeably faded with time, now pale upon the page, having lost much of their original luster (indeed, some of the markings had disappeared almost entirely, leaving barely a trace of themselves on the printed paper).



[7] Highlighting and underlining a text, as I had so fervently done over the years with this particular essay, is—if thought about—an odd, if banal, thing to do. *Why do we do it* (and I am certain that many, in one form or another, have done what I have done to Derrida—writing upon him, or alongside him, either by highlighting, or underlining, or marking in his margins)? But what, really, do we expect are markings to mark, to maintain, to hold and highlight? I suppose the immediate answer for me is that—ostensibly, or, on the surface (and what I would tell myself, if asked)—I do this

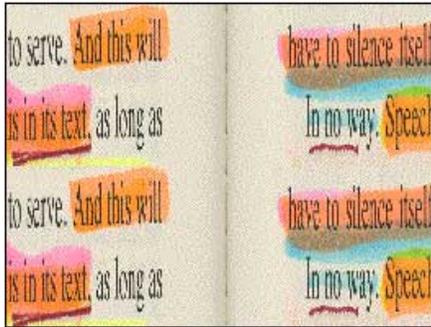


in order to isolate that which I have found particularly important or insightful, perhaps puzzling or provocative, beautiful or moving. Even more, however, I mark the pages in the largely unexamined expectation (or desperate hope) that, in doing so, these markings will aid my memory, mnemonically assisting in the text's retention and recollection. As the colorful pens are drawn over the lines of language, the words will surely inscribe themselves—as if upon Freud's Mystic Writing Pad—into a more enduring substrata of memory and awareness, leaving a permanent mark, or impression, upon me.

[8] But, when narrowing my focus onto Derrida's essay on Artaud, what more might these many markings indicate or reveal? And what might the sheer (almost embarrassing) abundance of the markings—their brightly blended repetitions, their fadings and layerings—symptomatically reveal about these repeated readings, these repeated markings? Or even—following them, as Derrida described, as "a path back into a landscape of writing" (*Writing* 207)—might these many markings of mine finally be seen, quite unexpectedly, to offer visual, colorful evidence of my own performative engagement with Derrida's text, an engagement that may even simultaneously elucidate something of Derrida's own engagement with Artaud?

[9] With this more performative focus in mind, I recently found myself looking quite differently at all the varied markings that I had made upon Derrida's essay over the years.

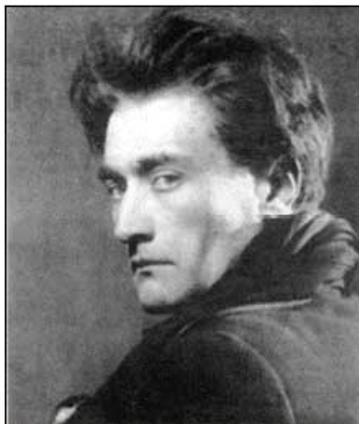
[10] For, with time, the markings themselves have taken on a kind of signifying, even—if examined closely—an aesthetic life of their own, one that I had never really seen before until, that is, they had accumulated to such excess (indeed, in some areas, to such excess that all that *could* be marked, *had* been marked; nothing remained to be highlighted or underlined). Examined in this manner, my markings momentarily lost any well-intentioned, mnemonic purpose that they may have originally had, the marks and colors speaking instead for themselves, *of* themselves, and of that repeated gesture of mine, there, colorfully recorded, of reading in real time, now past time, reaching for my pen, writing upon the writing. Recalling Rimbaud's alchemical colorings of reinvented vowels: "Black A, white E, red I, green U, blue O—vowels / Some day I will open your silent pregnancies" (123), the poet's letters made magically material in their lurid transformations, could Derrida's own colorful words—now vividly manifested and materialized by my multiple markings—be seen to signify something of an inadvertent alchemy of everyday life, of everyday reading?



[11] In repeating once more my efforts to engage Derrida's Artaud essay—returning to the scene of his writing upon the tragedy of representation, the cruelty of Artaud's theater as consciousness, "exposed lucidity," and the rehearsal and repetition of "that which does not repeat itself"—I found myself (as if whisperingly prompted) reflexively reaching once again for something to mark it with—a pen, a pencil, a highlighter. I was to discover, however, that I had apparently exhausted all of the marking options that were at hand. For, at my desk, there were no new colors, nor pens, nor pencils, that I could call upon that would distinguish my most recent reading from the many that had preceded it. The essay was already so heavily marked that any *more* marks that I might make upon it would therefore resemble, or simply repeat, markings that I had already made, defeating the purpose of marking at all—or so it seemed. Estranged as the

markings had thus become (with me, suddenly made self-conscious as marker, indeed, made to see myself marking as I marked), I was no longer quite certain what that purpose might be, nor why I would continue to mark at all. What did I really think that I was doing by doing what I had so clearly always done before, repeating a reading that I had already repeatedly read, marking upon the many markings?

[12] It then occurred to me that what I should do, rather than simply find a different, never-before used utensil with which to mark the essay, was to get a new, never-before marked upon copy of Derrida's essay. To clean the slate, or lift the transparent sheet from the "Mystic Writing Pad," and come to the text, as if for the first time, unencumbered by my earlier, unignorable engagements with the essay. And that is what I finally did. I found a fresh copy of the essay on Artaud, unmarked—no lines or colors upon it, no evidence of me having been there before. One morning, I sat down to read the essay in this newly pristine form. Almost immediately, and without thinking, I reached for my pencil and began to underline particular passages.



[13] **Scene Two:** As indicated earlier, I was revisiting Derrida's essay on Artaud because I had finally decided to write upon these two authors and, in particular, upon this essay. Returning to it now (but prior to any real focus upon my many colorful markings upon it), I outlined the manner in which Derrida directly engages Artaud's own sustained efforts to understand something of his proposed theater by understanding something of his own thinking, the ephemeral, indeterminate and excessive nature of his thought, and this thought's seemingly symbiotic relationship to representation, to theater. For Artaud's fear—pathologically restated in one form or another over a period of decades, and paralleling almost exactly his pathological investigations into theater—was that he had (in Artaud's words) "forgotten *how to think*" (290), that his thought was "crumb[ing]" (94), or that he hadn't yet "*begun to think*" (121). While his desired theater was to offer (like a head on a platter, or at least, as Artaud himself described it, a dreaded trip to the dentist [157]) the cruel space within which thinking itself might finally, fruitfully start, his theater violently *compelling* thought, inducing a labor within which thought (beyond thought's own agonizing repetitions) might at long last breach and reveal itself. If, as is often said, one

of the functions of theater is to *make present*, then Artaud's theater—as discussed by Derrida and others—might now be

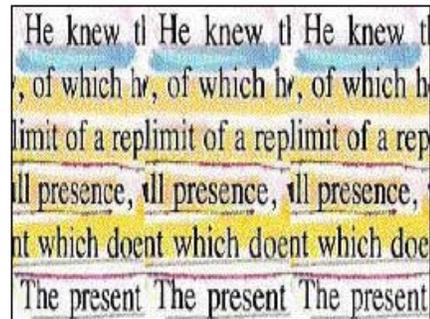
understood to make *thinking* itself present *to itself*. Seen at the incipience of its own conceiving, at the primal moment of thought's own engendering, the coordinated releases of the hieratic/erotic body thus rise and fall, appear and disappear—the flesh and blood of thought "gesturing through the flames."



[14] Still, at such an incendiary vantage, how was this cruel space of Artaud's theater, and the enfevered thinking emerging from it, ever to be fully imagined and materialized, performed and practiced? Indeed, as Derrida was explicitly to ask in his essay, how might *any* conceivable theater be faithful to Artaud's conceivable thought and, quoting Derrida quoting Artaud, "Under what conditions could an authentic 'theater of cruelty' 'begin to exist'?" (*Writing* 235). For Artaud's desired theater, necessarily coupled with the troubled thought *of* that theater, was to arise just prior to or, as Derrida characterized it in his essay, at the very "limit" of the circular turn back to the thought that allowed it *to be* thought, just prior to its fracturing repetition, its rehearsal on the circular stage of thought as theater (giving, perhaps, a whole new meaning to "theater in the round"). Yet, for Artaud, it was the necessary staging of thought that abruptly doubled that thought into a

corrupted dimension of itself and that was—in this inescapable *coup de théâtre*—to cause thought's own immediate betrayal, offering it up merely as a mirror-image of the one thinking it, but extending otherwise no further. As such, the very thought of the thought of Artaud's theater was seen to betray itself by mediately *seeing* itself *being* itself, performing itself (reminding me now of how, when reading and rereading Derrida's Artaud essay, a related kind of doubling had occurred, as I had been made self-conscious as *marker* while reading this essay, seeing myself marking as I marked).

[15] Collapsing, like a house of cards, upon itself, Artaud's seemingly endless efforts to compel thought in theater were, for Derrida, symptomatic of an impossible "gesture" to think outside of thought, to conceive of thought outside of thought's own theatrical stagings and representations. However, having recognized the insurmountable barriers before him, barriers that were to plague his very pursuit of thought, Artaud was still, and *knowingly*, to—as Derrida wrote—"desire the impossibility" of that impossible thought. There, within that ob-scene non-space, *making present* as theater, the very thought of that sight's violent obliteration and dispersal might invisibly arise, in Derrida's words "born in its own disappearance," its impossible sustainability *but* as pure potential, as allegorical, theatrical imagining. Indeed, as Derrida proposes in a subsequent essay on the poet Paul Valéry, this violent sight *can* be seen, but only "as a glance, as the site of a glance. The eye becomes simultaneously the division that opens and the substance of the source, the point of departure and the *point d'eau*. The allegory immediately becomes theatrical. Everything that separates itself from the source comes to be placed before it, a visible object on a stage" (*Margins* 284).



[16] While in Derrida's earlier essay, responding to Artaud's own efforts to think more fully his thought, we are finally brought, *in thought*, to (as Derrida describes it) "conceive of the closure of that which is without end...the circular limit...closure [as]

playing space," the very conception of which arises evanescently as a "visible object on a stage." As if briefly pulling back a stage curtain (or pulling back the lid of a closed eye), Derrida theatrically unveils, but glancingly, something of Artaud's own determined efforts to begin thinking as having already begun, but always within their own absence of beginnings. And it is upon that now absent staged space of thought (a stage from which one cannot presently depart) that thought is in the end—as it was in the beginning, "now, and forever shall be"—the thought of, as Derrida memorably describes it, the "closure of representation." Indeed, it is at this site (or non-site) where—insightfully, fatally—"representation continues" (*Writing* 250).

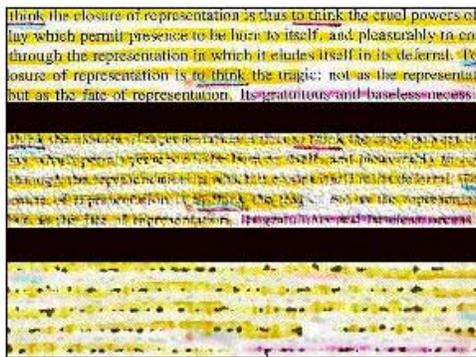
[17] Thinking through this theory of theater (this theater of theory), I was nonetheless led to wonder—based in large part on my own colorful memories of reading Derrida's essay on Artaud so many times, over so many years—if Derrida's own "scene of writing" and the performed *espacement* conceptually engendered there might potentially offer a *de facto* response (if not the purest of solutions) to Artaud's plagued investigations into thought and theater. Even further, could Derrida's essay on Artaud—as if called upon as a last-minute stand-in, or double, to hold off the theater's own closing down, or cancellation—be consequently imagined as *itself* a kind of allegorical staging-ground for such thought, a quasi-space of theater, with the theatrical theory contained therein understood as a quasi-legitimate manifestation of Artaudian theater?

[18] It's true that Derrida had earlier asserted that "fidelity [to Artaud] is impossible" (247), that "there is no theater in the world today

which fulfills Artaud's desire" (248), and that this is so precisely because "the theatre of cruelty is not a *representation*. It is life itself, in the extent to which life is unrepresentable" (*Writing* 234). Nonetheless, perhaps a kind of fidelity, a kind of fulfillment, might finally be partially imagined through the "live" performativity of Derrida's own writings now performatively read, glancingly seen. For, as the saying goes, "the show must go on!" And perhaps it does, going on *there*, in the writing, the gesturing of writing *into* thought, into the space of thought, coupled then by the real-time reading of that gestured thought. "Now you see it, now you don't," signally through the printed flames, the thought of Artaud's theater is brilliantly and ephemerally enacted and embodied upon Derrida's own printed pages. There, the mortal, material language performs dangerously its own alchemical appearance and disappearance, its forms and figures moving in "real time," like actors "dying in front of our eyes" (Blau 134). Indeed, as a kind of *coup de coup de théâtre*, Derrida's written gestures of contracted thought might now, as such, be fleetingly seen as a living and vital vestige of the very Artaudian performance being sought, the only performance, perhaps the only possible performance of this otherwise impossible theater.

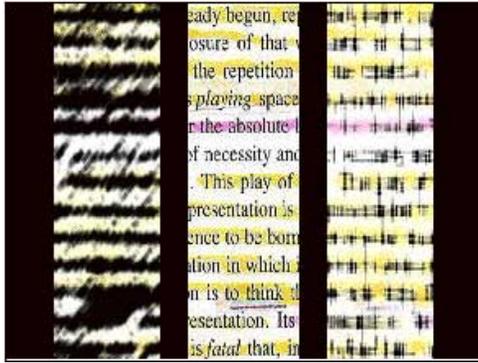
[19] As if responding specifically to Artaud's own tortuous pursuit of such thought and theater, Derrida dramatically ends his essay with the injunction "to think," to commence the very act which Artaud had always insisted that he was unable to commence: to begin to think. But not just any rational thought, not just any reasoned kind of thinking would do, that of the more mundane sort that merely returns familiar reflections, "empty of real thought" (358). Instead, Artaud's desire was to think a thought that precedes, or that exceeds, the one so self-assuredly thinking it, offering up a more expansive, if precarious vantage onto a life being ephemerally lived—"my thought seek[ing] itself," Artaud writes, "in the ether of a new space" (96). In fact, five times in the space of his four final sentences, Derrida repetitively asserts the possibility of such a newly commenced form of thought, having at last—in his concluding lines—positioned himself, and his readers, "to think...", "to think...", "to think...", "to think...", "to think..." For, it would seem that Derrida has finally found a way—while "perform[ing] for us the scene of writing" (229)—to think *through* Artaud, or *for* him, by performing Artaud thinking, indeed, by openly representing Artaud endlessly thinking the "tragic" thought of endless representation. Upon this makeshift stage of print and paper, "in the ether of a new space," Derrida's own written words thus engender—in the writing, in the reading—their own theater of ethereal thought, the violent thought of that theater, and one that might, as Derrida had sought (while never directly saying it himself), "legitimately invoke Artaud's name" (*Writing* 235).

[20] **Scene Three:** Perhaps I can now dare to say directly what Derrida himself would not, speaking for him (as he had spoken for Artaud), by proposing that Derrida's thinking had begun precisely where Artaud's had left off. And that, lo and behold, my own colorful writing upon Derrida's writing was—as it only later became clear—offering evidence of a performed "scene of writing" that "legitimately" manifested something of Artaud's own thought of theater. For, in my most recent return to Derrida's essay on Artaud in order, finally, to fill out further this image or idea of Derrida's alliance of theater and of thought, I found myself—prior to any real writing—preoccupied, as already described at some length, by the abundance of *my* own writing already done upon it.



[21] Momentarily stalled or stymied, or even somewhat blinded by the many multi-colored markings now seen on the pages, my attention was instantly drawn to the luminous lines themselves that were covering over Derrida's language, seeing them in ways that I'd never seen them before (as if I was almost unable to see *through* these lines, as if, instead of marking the text, these markings had virtually erased it, or crossed it out). In fact, if my varied highlightings and underlinings had initially been intended—or so I believed—to delineate areas of particular interest or importance within Derrida's text (while mnemonically aiding in my retention and recollection of them), they would seem to have become now, with time, a curious distraction or sideshow, but one that nonetheless presented its own particular, often aesthetic—even dramatic—appeal. Soliciting a different kind of attention than ever before, the printed pages—with all of my vivid markings now

inducing, as Derrida elsewhere describes, a kind of "hallucination of language" (*Writing* 213)—were seen suddenly as a shifting and layered palimpsest, offering in its visual commotion an alternative, or supplemental form of bricolaged utterance. But how, I was to wonder, was this utterance to be alternatively read, supplementally seen?



[22] Encountering Derrida's text in this unfocused, or *refocused* (or hallucinatory) manner—seeing double through my now doubled vision—I began playing further with Derrida's pages and the many markings upon them, manipulating even more the already manipulated text, fragmenting it, stretching it, repeating it, blurring it, obliterating it beyond all legibility. In part, I no doubt did this as an amusing, visually appealing mode of postponed writing, or, as a half-disguised deferral of thought, those cruel beginnings of thought and thought's necessary writing. However, by treating Derrida's own language so overtly as a kind of printed matter, as a tangible *thing* (recalling what Derrida, via Freud, says of language seen on "the stage of the dream" [*Writing* 241]), I discovered that the patchwork of colors on the page, the wavy lines under the language could be pleasurably magnified and dramatically transformed into a pictographic image. Microscopically enlarged

until the blending tones began to bleed, the layered lines dispersed into their varied curves and crossings, while materializing—as if alchemically—into a kind of concrete poetry seen as a solid and "visible object on a stage," a painterly text performing before me "in the ether" of this "new space."

[23] As a result of my admittedly peculiar, if not reckless, treatment of Derrida's text, I began to see that, as I cut up, distorted and destroyed the writing before me, the archaeology of my own marks was now uncovering new layers of corroborating connection to my emerging awareness Derrida's theater of thought, of Artaud's thought of theater. For, in what had unexpectedly become the performing theater of my own reading of Derrida's essay, colorfully embodied and enacted *there* on the page, I was indeed positioned (as an enchanted, but participating spectator) to witness and behold the tactile evidence of my own time-laden engagements with it. Arising from this multi-colored *mise en scène*, those many marks of mine seen so vividly on the page were now also offering, like a reflecting fun-house mirror, a means to read in real-time—"live"—something of my own dispersal as a reader across past-time, resulting from what Derrida describes elsewhere as the "erasure of the present and thus of the subject" (229). As a phantom having periodically haunted Derrida's text (and now echoing a Rimbaudian reading of it), "I is another," and I was now multiple: "...for we must be several," Derrida insists, "in order to write, and even to 'perceive'" (*Writing* 226).



[24] Clearly, I had left upon Derrida's pages the tell-tale traces of my own dispersed desires finally to complete my reading of the essay, to possess it, to remember it, to have and to hold it, to "get it," and then to close the book upon it. But the book—like a stuck stage curtain—remains intractably open, unveiling as if from within its curtained frame the elaborate stage-setting of Derrida's dramatic text. There upon that stage, the varied props are in place, the stage-lights (as highlights) have been carefully directed, the worded performers are poised to begin (even the whispering prompter is hidden in the wings), with me alone reading, and having read...and then reading again.

[25] But reading and having read *what?* What was witnessed "as a glance, as the site of a glance," and



what was beheld in the theater of this thought, in the thought of this theater? And what was finally remembered through the many marks intended to aid in my recollection, to leave a more permanent impression upon me? For the repetition of my readings, stretched out as they were over several years, was now revealed as a kind of rehearsal for an anticipated, but impossible event of thoughtful culmination, an event of readerly completion forever deferred, a presence forever denied. In fact, those many readings that I had done over the years of Derrida's Artaud essay were, I

now recognize through the staining residue of my own writing upon it, the rehearsals for a performance that would never be completed, that *could* never be completed. For here on the printed page, on this makeshift stage, was a presence that would never present itself (but as colorful absence) while only offering, finally, the need for that reading to continue, to repeat itself, to be rehearsed yet again, and then "tragically" again, and for me—the *many* of me—to keep marking the pages over and over, until they could barely be marked anymore.

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RHIZOMES ISSN 1555-9998 . 230 East Hall Bowling Green State University Bowling Green, OH 43403

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